

A New Path Ahead

Why systemic change is the key to better lives for autistic people

What is this report about?

This report makes one overarching point: that if governments across the UK move towards the use of strengths and support needs assessment for autistic children, young people, and adults across health and public services, this must be accompanied by substantial systemic investment and change. Without this, there will be substitution rather than reform, with needs assessment used to restrict access to diagnosis and support rather than to improve outcomes. This will result in further harm and lost lives.

Why is this important?

At least 1%-1.2% of the UK population is autistic. Like all people, autistic children, young people and adults have strengths and support needs, but face some of the greatest **inequities and harms** of any group in society, including unacceptably high rates of mental health crisis, self-harm and suicide, premature mortality, greater risk of physical health conditions, exclusion from education and the wider community, and one of the lowest employment rates. As well as damaging lives, this leads to increased cost which with early identification of need, and the right support, would be avoidable.

Autistic people face **systemic barriers** deep within society, employment, and public services. These barriers have been present for decades, and include stigma, poor understanding of autism, and poor accountability for autistic people's outcomes at every level from Government to the front line. Although these barriers are acute for autistic people, they also hold back other marginalised groups, including people with a learning disability, and other neurodivergent people.

In England, the unacceptable harms experienced by autistic people have been acknowledged through dedicated legislation: the Autism Act 2009. This has one provision: that the Government must have a **National Autism Strategy**. Since 2009 there have been three strategies, statutory guidance for local authorities and the NHS, and dedicated programmes including Transforming Care – but outcomes for autistic people have not improved because policy has

not addressed the systemic barriers they face. This is also true in other parts of the UK.

Why is this relevant now?

Rising rates of autism diagnosis across the past 20-25 years have come into focus in 2026 due to underinvestment in clinical assessment services, meaning there is unsustainable pressure in the system. To investigate the reasons behind this long-term increase, the Government has commissioned an **Independent Review into Mental Health Conditions, ADHD and Autism**, which will inform the next steps on autism policy in England.

Prior to commissioning the Independent Review, there had been claims of 'overdiagnosis' of autism, but in its **interim report** published in March, the Independent Review has already shown that many different factors have contributed to the long-term increase in autism diagnosis. Despite this, the 'overdiagnosis' narrative has created additional risk for the public perception of autism.

The current National Autism Strategy is out of date with little dedicated implementation by the Government, and the House of Lords made recommendations for a new Strategy last year ('Time to deliver: The Autism Act 2009 and the new autism strategy'). The Government is waiting for the final report of the Independent Review before it develops a new Strategy, but Ministers have not given a timescale for having a new Strategy in place. **Meanwhile, autistic people continue to experience severe harms, and lives continue to be lost.**



What does the report say?

The report shows that:

- Autism diagnosis is fundamentally important, and when provided with post-diagnostic support has important benefits including access to specific health services, adaptation of health interventions such as talking therapies, and bespoke social care packages.
- Support and adjustments for autistic children, young people and adults across public services are also vital, and evidence shows that when implemented, they improve lives, drive economic benefits, and enable more cost-effective spending.
- Cost pressure on public services, and lack of reform, means that autism diagnosis is being used to restrict access to support and adjustments. This is contrary to the law (Care Act 2014, Children and Families Act 2014, Equality Act 2010) but has become 'established practice'.
- The use of strengths and support needs assessment, separately to clinical assessment, has great potential to improve autistic people's lives. A promising approach is being explored by NHS England, based on the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, adapted for autistic people.
- However, with years of underinvestment and no action to address systemic barriers for autistic people, public services are simply under too much pressure to shift from a diagnosis-gated model to a needs-led model. Risks to the public perception of autism associated with the 'overdiagnosis' narrative are creating yet another barrier.
- If the Government and NHS implement strengths and support needs assessment without any other meaningful action, it will simply result in substitution, with needs assessment being used to restrict access to diagnosis and support. This would lead to further harm and lost lives and would represent yet another policy failure for autistic people and their families.
- Instead, the Government needs to invest in systemic change across clinical assessment and wider public services, doing this **at the same time** as introducing strengths and support needs assessment. It is vital that strengths and support needs assessment is not scaled until public services are meeting autistic people's individual support needs and there is evidence of improved outcomes. This will need a long-term plan and investment in systemic change, delivered over at least seven years. A new National Autism Strategy would be the ideal vehicle for this action.

Who wrote the report?

The Autism Alliance UK, the national body for specialist autism charities, led the report, working with an experts

by experience group of autistic adults and parents/carers, and a sector group comprising some of the most respected academics and clinicians working in autism support and research today, as well as the main national autism charities. A group of autistic young people aged between 16 and 25 also reviewed and contributed to the report.

What is the ask?

The Government – and governments across the UK – should work with autistic people and their families, public services, charities, researchers, clinicians, and others to:

1. Increase the capacity and efficiency of clinical autism assessment, while transitioning to a model with wider neurodevelopmental and mental health focus.

This would reduce autism waiting lists to protect lives now, and support accuracy in diagnosis, while building a more efficient and effective assessment model for the future. In England, it would require only a small proportion of existing allocations for Integrated Care Boards: around £443 million for two years falling to £200 million thereafter, or 0.35%/0.16% of ICB Core Allocations.

2. Invest in embedding 'stepped care models' across health and social care services that reflect the diverse needs of autistic people and provide support when it is required, to reduce the escalation of need and the chances of crisis.

3. Invest in addressing the systemic barriers faced by autistic people, focusing on stigma, poor understanding of autism, and poor accountability for autistic people's outcomes.

4. In parallel, co-produce, test and scale an evidence-based, acceptable, standardised assessment of strengths and support needs across education, healthcare, employment, and justice, initially for those waiting for clinical assessment, then broadening to all autistic people. This would build on international models and growing evidence in England. Do not scale this until public services are meeting support needs and there is evidence of improvement in outcomes for autistic people.

MPs should share the message of this report widely. Systemic change is vital not only for autistic people, but also for other marginalised groups and for the success of public service reform.

The full report, with all evidence, references, and contributors, is available at:
www.autism-alliance.org.uk/a-new-path-ahead