



Guidelines for achieving the Autism Friendly Award

Introduction: An autism friendly community is one that autistic people can call home

Public spaces can prove extremely difficult for autistic people. They can be overwhelming, crowded, unpredictable, loud and bright. And too often, when people feel overloaded by too much information, they encounter a public that simply doesn't understand them and their autism.

The Autism Friendly Award recognises those businesses and amenities that have made adjustments to make it easier for autistic people to visit them. To become Autism Friendly it is crucial for public spaces to view themselves from an autistic person's perspective and to evaluate themselves and their service in terms of five criteria:

- customer information
- staff and volunteer understanding
- physical environment
- customer experience
- promoting understanding.

The fundamental principle of the Autism Friendly Award is that through an understanding of autism and the needs of individuals, autistic people can and should be able to enjoy the facilities and experience offered just as any other person can.

This doesn't mean investing in wholesale, expensive physical alterations: in many cases we realise that the ability to alter the structure of a working environment can be limited. Yet small inexpensive changes can make a massive difference to autistic people.

The following guidelines are intended to help you build your business' application for the Autism Friendly Award, taking you through the background of each Award criteria and including case examples to guide your own approach.

Since every organisation is different, please do not feel restricted by the examples herein. To learn more about autism and the Autism Friendly Award please visit www.autism.org.uk. For Autism Friendly Award enquiries please contact autism.friendly@nas.org.uk.

Until everyone understands



1. Information for customers

The ability to organise, sequence and prioritise can help to plan daily activities and manage our time effectively. Some autistic people however may find organising, sequencing and prioritising difficult. In addition, an autistic person thrives on being in a familiar environment with routine and structure. For these reasons, a visit to a local shop, business or amenity can throw up many challenges. These can be minimised through simple considerations such as making useful information available to allow autistic visitors to effectively prepare and plan any potential visit in advance.

1.1 Statement of intent

A published written statement of intent with regard to autism accessibility should affirm that autism is included in disabilities for which reasonable adjustments will be made.

This could include a published written statement including reference to autism/disability such as a vision or mission statement either in document form or online.

1.2 Useful information and guidance

Accurate and helpful guidance and information relevant to the needs of people with autism should allow an individual to plan their visit, know who to contact prior or during a visit with enquiries, and give a clear idea of what to expect whilst on site.

Depending on the nature of the business, this could include details of key contact personnel, opening times, directions, parking facilities, entrances and exits, maps or floor plans, video or online tours of the building.

1.3 Details of building layout in particular areas that might present challenges for autistic people

There are many environmental elements that can prove challenging or confusing to an autistic visitor. It is helpful to highlight these in advance so as potential visitors are aware of what to expect and can plan pre-visit. These might include: areas where queuing is required; security checks; notice of items such as elevators, escalators, revolving doors, narrow staircases, narrow corridors; noisy and busy areas such as balconies, shops, cafeterias.

This could be included in a single helpful resource, with straightforward text and could include a visual trail of a visit that features photographs of key personnel and elements of the building. Such a resource is best created with the input of individuals on the autism spectrum or trained consultants who will be able to give you an insight into the particular challenges of your site.



1.4 Any additional process by which to promote appropriate information for potential visitors in order to facilitate effective planning and preparation

In terms of your business and delivery of service, additional information with regard expected etiquette or requirements could be extremely useful to a prospective visitor. In parliament buildings this has included highlighting the occurrence and sound of specific alarms and bells; in restaurants, ingredients used and how dishes will look; in theatres, booking details and tour times.

Although this will be specific to each individual business it might include highlighting areas where quiet is required; busy and quiet times during opening hours; tactile displays or exhibits that can be touched and displays or exhibits that must not be touched; specific entry or departure procedures; times and places where visitors might be expected to wait. Particular challenges are best recognised with the input of individuals on the autism spectrum or trained consultants.

1.5 A named person provided as key contact who has a good understanding of autism and the needs of potential visitors, who can be contacted in advance to help in the planning process for a visit

This could include photographs of key personnel on the website and in promotional brochures, contact telephone number, contact email address, details of training undertaken by key contacts, and outline of any system of “Autism Champions” within the staff and volunteer team.

2. Staff understanding

Autistic people may appear to behave in ways that other people do not and in ways that others sometimes regard as ‘unusual’ or ‘strange’. There will generally be a reason for this: it can be an attempt to communicate or a way of coping with a particular situation. For example, an autistic person may flap their hands or make noises in situations of stress or excitement; this is perfectly normal. Understanding autism and knowing how it might affect someone can help you to find ways to help and deal with challenging situations; furthermore, effective training and greater awareness can inform organisational procedure and policy, allowing staff to be confident in their approach to individual requests and situations.

2.1 Training requirements

For most small businesses with fewer than nine members of staff, The National Autistic Society’s Understanding Autism Talks provide an overview and first-hand information of the condition, sufficient to satisfy the staff and volunteer understanding criteria. Understanding Autism Talks are delivered by volunteers. Contact autism.friendly@nas.org.uk to see if there is someone available to deliver a talk near you.

Businesses with 10 or more staff may require a greater level of training. The National Autistic Society, with over 50 years of learning from first-hand experience, has an unmatched practical knowledge of



autism and you can find out more about our full range of Training and Consultancy at www.autism.org.uk/professional/training-consultancy.aspx.

In addition, all businesses should consider the following points when evidencing how they satisfy our Staff and Volunteer Understanding criteria.

2.2 Policy and training procedure

There should be a clear policy for new members of staff joining the organisation. It should be explained that you are an Autism Friendly business and the things you have done to become autism-friendly explained to them as part of their induction. Any written procedures or guidelines in place for staff regarding dealing with enquiries or issues involving disabled people should make reference to autism.

2.3 Considerations to specific staff roles within the organisation

Training should recognise different roles within an organisation and the specific circumstances in which they might encounter autistic visitors. Appropriate descriptions and examples relevant to the work that they do should be provided and they should understand how the training is relevant to their role and what would be expected of them in each circumstance.

2.4 Further training

Please let us know about any staff and volunteers who go through further training and ongoing learning or have a greater knowledge and understanding of autism to enable them to fulfil their role effectively. This could include staff representatives or 'champions' who act as a 'go to' for colleagues.

3. Physical environment

Autistic people may experience some form of sensory sensitivity, occurring in one or more of the five senses – sight, sounds, smell, touch and taste. People with sensory sensitivity may also find it harder to use their body awareness system. This system tells us where our bodies are, so for those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms avoiding obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out 'fine motor' tasks such as tying shoelaces. Public spaces can often be the hardest for autistic people. They can be overwhelming – crowded, unpredictable, loud and bright. A consequence of this overload of too much information could be 'stimming' – hand flapping, making noises, spinning or rocking - to deal with the anxiety, or even a meltdown.

A meltdown is 'an intense response to overwhelming situations'. It happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (e.g. shouting, screaming, crying), physically (e.g. kicking, lashing out, biting) or in both ways.



Working within the limits of your physical environment to make appropriate and reasonable adaptations – such as identifying a quiet area that may be used by autistic people and their families - goes a long way to reducing anxiety. Key to identifying areas that may provoke anxiety is consulting with visitors on the autism spectrum. This will give you an idea of the range of challenges that your site may hold but don't worry: whilst there will be some changes that you can make others will inform the remaining criteria in your Award application. If a particular area is well lit, or liable to be noisy for instance, you may choose to record this in the information that you provide to visitors in advance.

In considering your physical environment – both internal and external – you might include parking spaces, entry procedures, queuing, security process, clear signage, symbols to support written signage as appropriate, help and information desks with trained staff and volunteers, an option of a quiet room within the building/facility and if appropriate, compliance with disability legislation, etc.

Remember where possible to:

- consult with autistic visitors
- work within the limits of your site to make appropriate and reasonable adaptations
- identify quiet spaces and make staff aware that these are designated chill-out zones should visitors require them
- consider your site in relation to all sensory requirements, which you can find out more about at <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/sensory-world.aspx>.

4. Customer experience

An autism-friendly working culture should make visitors feel welcome: there should be a willingness to be flexible to reasonable individual requests, a clear avenue for visitors to feedback on customer experience and an established process for evaluating, responding and acting on that feedback.

Whilst promoting good customer care and helping to create a positive customer experience, engaging with feedback will give you an excellent idea of what you are doing well and what is working. Every autistic person is different and the best way to ensure you can accommodate different needs is to take a flexible approach and a culture of acceptance of difference. Remember – you are making an ongoing commitment that will overwhelmingly generate more positive experiences. This will help you track those experiences, reinforcing your efforts as well as informing possible adaptations for the future.

In considering how you satisfy this criteria you may wish to include any relationships developed and maintained with organisations representing people with autism in the community such as local charities, support groups or schools; any methods employed to collect views and feedback from individuals with autism and the systematic process to review, respond and act on said feedback.



5. Promoting understanding

Fundamental to creating and maintaining our autism-friendly spaces is increasing understanding amongst the wider public who populate them. Our research has consistently shown that whilst most members of the public have heard of autism, peoples' understanding of what it actually means is still worryingly low. This lack of understanding has a direct impact on the experiences of autistic people and their families when trying to access public places and the kinds of experiences that others take for granted.

We need to challenge the myths, misconceptions and assumptions that make autistic people feel so isolated and make society seem at times so unwelcoming. Even a small amount of understanding can help transform perceptions and improve autistic people's experiences; we expect all autism-friendly organisations to encourage to share their understanding with their wider visitor base.

This might be through fundraising for the National Autistic Society; taking part in World Autism Awareness Week; sharing information through open days, notice boards and drawing on the experiences and voices of local people and groups who are on the autistic spectrum.

In completing this criteria you should outline how you plan to promote greater understanding over the next year. If you are looking for ideas or ways that your organisation can get involved in raising awareness, you can find out more at <http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/world-autism-awareness-week.aspx>