Autism and Education: Good practice guide
Supporting autistic children in your area
A guide for local authorities and schools in England
All children are entitled to an education that enables them to achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes. The Children and Families Act 2014 comprehensively reformed the system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England.

The reformed system was intended to do the following:

• identify children’s needs early and put support in place quickly
• involve young people and their parents and carers in decision-making
• focus more explicitly on outcomes, and help children achieve their potential.

The SEND Code of Practice sets out in detail how these aims should be achieved, and what is required of local commissioners, schools and other organisations.

But the reformed system is not working as it should in many parts of the country.

A report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism found that too many children on the autism spectrum are being let down by the education system and held back from achieving their potential. Families have to fight for support to be put in place, children have to wait a long time for their needs to be assessed and met, and the system often appears to lack accountability for decisions that are made.

We hear from professionals and commissioners that there is not enough information on what ‘good’ looks like. We know that the education system can work well for children and young people on the autism spectrum when there is good local planning, a good understanding of autism, and the right provision available to meet the needs of individual children. Good practice needs to be shared and implemented more widely.

This guide has been produced to share some of the good practice that has been developed by schools and commissioners. We hope it will help you to implement key aspects of the SEND reforms for children and young people on the autism spectrum.

This good practice guide was produced with funding from Axcis Education.
Our survey findings

3 years on from the introduction of significant reforms to the special educational needs system in England, children on the autism spectrum are still being let down by the education system. Fewer than half of children and young people on the autism spectrum say they are happy at school. Seven in ten say that their peers do not understand them and five in ten say that their teachers do not know how to support them.

6 in 10 young people and 7 in 10 of their parents say that the main thing that would make school better for them is having a teacher who understands autism. 70% of parents say that support was not put in place quickly enough for their child. Nearly 70% waited more than six months for support and 50% waited more than a year.

42% of parents say their child was refused an assessment of their special educational needs the first time it was requested. 40% of parents say that their child’s school place does not fully meet their needs.

Only 1 in 10 parents say they are very satisfied with the process of agreeing an education, health and care (EHC) plan for their child. Fewer than 5 in 10 teachers say that they are confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum.

With thanks to Axcis Education for their support of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism’s education inquiry.

This guide shows what schools and local authorities can do to help make sure no autistic child is held back from achieving their potential.
Making autism better understood in the education system

- Sharing autism expertise across schools
- Being inclusive and avoiding school exclusions

Commissioning and planning support

- Local offer for children on the autism spectrum
- Planning the right services for children and young people on the autism spectrum
- Specialist autism provision in a mainstream setting
- Specialist autism outreach teams

Implementing the SEND reforms

- Early years support for children on the autism spectrum
- Helping autistic young people prepare for adulthood
- Post-16 provision for young people on the autism spectrum
Making autism better understood in the education system
Sharing autism expertise between schools

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

Children on the autism spectrum attend different types of schools. More than 70 per cent attend mainstream schools, while others may need the support of a specialist SEND or autism school. There is no single model of education provision that will suit every child or young person on the autism spectrum. The Code of Practice states in paragraph 6.8 that, “Schools should collaborate with other local education providers to explore how different needs can be met most effectively.”

Parents and teachers agree that there is a need for a better understanding of autism in schools. The best schools have high ambitions and aspirations for learners on the autism spectrum: for them to reach their full potential and be included in school and society.

Mainstream schools must do everything they can to meet children and young people’s SEN, and ensure that children with needs engage in school activities alongside pupils who do not have SEN. Schools should review and evaluate the breadth and impact of the support they offer pupils.

One way of doing this is by ensuring that schools work together more systematically to share expertise, especially between special schools and mainstream schools. Schools with a high level of expertise in autism can share this more widely with other schools in their area. This may be through a special school working with mainstream schools in their area, or through 'satellite' schools and classrooms, where special schools bring their expertise into the wider community.

Putting this into practice

• Identify gaps in autism knowledge and understanding at individual schools by carrying out an audit of existing knowledge and skills.

• Identify schools with a high level of expertise and experience to share. In particular these may be specialist schools in your areas, or schools with autism ‘hubs’.

• Bring schools and practitioners together to work collaboratively to meet the needs of all children. This can be done in a range of ways, from meetings between head teachers to training sessions for all staff.

“There is a wide range of information available on appropriate interventions for pupils with different types of need, and associated training which schools can use to ensure they have the necessary knowledge and expertise to use them.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 6.26
Case study: 
**Swiss Cottage School, London**

**Contact:** Jacqui Ver Loren Van Themaat, the autism lead at the school – [Jacqui.verloren@swisscottage.camden.sch.uk](mailto:Jacqui.verloren@swisscottage.camden.sch.uk)

Swiss Cottage School is a maintained special school for children with a range of complex needs. It is a Teaching School and leads an alliance of schools that are working together to help all children achieve their potential. Its philosophy is that **every teacher is a SEND teacher, and every school leader is a SEND leader.**

Swiss Cottage School, Development and Research Centre hosts **professional learning communities** for teachers, teaching assistants and support staff to share knowledge and experience on how to improve teaching and outcomes for pupils who are on the autism spectrum or have other special educational needs.

Professional learning communities are groups of practitioners who are committed to understanding what works best for children and young people and putting it into practice in their schools. They help teachers develop their observation and assessment skills, improve their classroom strategies and reflect on the needs of specific children and of children on the autism spectrum (or with other special educational needs) more generally.

The school’s Development and Research Centre also supports Initial Teacher Training programmes. This includes sessions on autism and classroom strategies, contributing to other schools’ professional learning days, and supporting SEND reviews.

“Every teacher is a SEND teacher, and every school leader is a SEND leader.”
**Case study: Essex Autism Hubs**

**Contact:** [autism@livingwellesssex.org](mailto:autism@livingwellesssex.org)

Autism Hubs are based in four special schools across Essex. They have been commissioned by the local authority to share expertise about autism through outreach support to primary and secondary schools and academies in each ‘quadrant’ of the county. Each Hub has a wide range of expertise in meeting the needs of young people on the autism spectrum.

**The Hubs do the following:**

- deliver school-to-school support
- use highly skilled practitioners to deliver a tailored service for each school
- work with senior leadership teams to develop ‘autism-friendly’ schools
- provide advice, support, training and development for all school staff working directly with young people and their parents/carers
- work in partnership with practitioners including specialist teachers, educational psychologists and other professionals to help them fully include young people with a diagnosis of autism
- provide an opportunity for young people to have a voice in how their needs are met.

**Case study: LVS Oxford**

**Contact:** [enquiries@lvs-oxford.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lvs-oxford.org.uk)

LVS Oxford is a secondary school in Oxford for young people on the autism spectrum. The school offers workshops for SENCOs, teachers and teaching assistants at mainstream schools across Oxfordshire on the challenges faced specifically by girls on the autism spectrum.

The needs of autistic girls are often misunderstood and overlooked, and these workshops help mainstream schools understand how to provide effective support to autistic girls, both educationally and emotionally.

The workshops aim to help school staff understand what it feels like to be a young person on the autism spectrum, and how to support girls with mental health challenges. They have been well attended and the information provided has been welcomed by neighbouring schools.

**Useful resource**

Autism Education Trust, *What is good practice in autism education?*
Being inclusive and avoiding school exclusions

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

As part of its commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UK is committed to inclusive education of disabled children and young people, and the progressive removal of barriers to learning and participation in mainstream education.

The Children and Families Act 2014 secures the general presumption in law of mainstream education for children and young people with SEND, and the Equality Act 2010 provides protection from discrimination for disabled people. The Schools Admissions Code of Practice requires children and young people with SEND to be treated fairly.

The SEND Code of Practice states that leaders of early years settings, schools and colleges should establish and maintain a culture of high expectations that requires everyone who works with children and young people with SEND to include them in all the opportunities available to other children and young people, so they can achieve as much as possible.

Government figures show that children and young people on the autism spectrum are three times more likely than children with no special educational needs to be excluded from school. Being excluded can have serious consequences for children’s mental and emotional wellbeing and hurt their long-term prospects.

Children and young people on the autism spectrum need school provision that understands their needs and accepts their differences. Schools can often prevent exclusions by improving their understanding of autism and providing tailored support. This means being prepared to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of individual children, to avoid situations where a child’s unmet need results in them behaving in ways that schools find unacceptable.

Putting this into practice

• Ensure school staff understand autism and the reasonable adjustments that can help autistic children learn.
• Be prepared to make those reasonable adjustments - in advance - both to the school environment and to behaviour policies, to prevent children on the autism spectrum being put at a disadvantage relative to children with no special educational needs.
• Recognise and understand that behaviour is a form of communication, and behaviour that appears challenging and disruptive may be an indication that a child’s needs are not being met.
• Recognise that while a child’s educational attainment may be good, they may still need support for a range of issues associated with their autism, such as difficulties with social interaction or sensory differences.

“All schools have duties under the Equality Act 2010 towards individual disabled children and young people. They must make reasonable adjustments, including the provision of auxiliary aids and services for disabled children, to prevent them being put at a substantial disadvantage. These duties are anticipatory - they require thought to be given in advance to what disabled children and young people might require and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent that disadvantage.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 6.9
Case study: The National Autistic Society's Robert Ogden School - Inclusive Learning Hub

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Robert Ogden School is a specialist autism school in South Yorkshire for children and young people with complex and significant needs. Thirty per cent of pupils had been permanently excluded from both mainstream and special schools before they came to the school. Many of these young people have difficulties in relating to a school environment and working alongside others.

These pupils need a different and more flexible approach than other children who attend the school.

The Inclusive Learning Hub at Robert Ogden School is designed specifically for children with very challenging behaviour and pathological demand avoidance (PDA). The aim is to create circumstances in which children can stay in school who might otherwise be excluded. The Hub reintegrates those who have often been excluded from education into school life at the pace of each individual student.

Students who are unable to access learning in the classroom and follow a tailored and very individualised curriculum that is closely related to their interests and abilities.

The Hub consists of two teaching areas where children are taught individually, following a particularly child-led approach as the educational tool to encourage compliance and participation but balancing this with each student's educational aspirations.

This resource provides opportunities for pupils to be included in educational activities that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to access. It is a learning environment where pupils have the opportunity to succeed, feel safe and build their self-esteem.

The basic principles the school follows are a non-confrontational approach to managing behaviour, proactivity in avoiding stressful situations for pupils, a high level of consistency with each pupil, and giving every pupil some degree of responsibility in relation to their own learning using a highly personalised timetable.

Staff in the Hub understand and accept the individual needs and challenges of each student, and work in collaboration with the families to rebuild each student’s confidence and enable them to stay in education.

Case study: Passmores Academy, Harlow, Essex

Contact: passmores@passmoresacademy.com

Passmores Academy is a secondary school in Essex. It has a much higher than average number of pupils with a special educational need or disability. The school’s philosophy is to include these pupils as much as possible, rather than supporting them separately, and to focus on developing tolerance and empathy across the school community as a whole.

SEND provision at the school is part of wider ‘inclusion provision’ that supports students who have difficulties in accessing learning for a range of reasons.

Students receive an individualised programme of support, negotiated by the school with the student and their parents, to help them work to their full potential. For autistic young people, this can include positive behaviour support, speech and language support, social communication group work and targeted social skills development.

There is enhanced provision for a small number of students each year who are on the autism spectrum and academically able, but who need a high level of support. The focus is on meeting the social, emotional and sensory needs of these students.

The school explicitly aims to avoid exclusion, and exclusion rates are low. Instead of a school behaviour policy, there is a ‘relationships charter’. The intention is to consider each student’s circumstances, and support the student in dealing with these circumstances rather than excluding them. The principal recognises the potential for long-term damage to children if they are excluded from school, and under his leadership the school prioritises young people’s wellbeing.
Commissioning and planning support
What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The Children and Families Act 2014 requires all local authorities to publish a Local Offer setting out in one place information about what is available across education, health and social care for children and young people in their area with SEND. This should include services for children who do not have education, health and care plans, as well as for those who do.

The Code of Practice is clear that the Local Offer should not simply list existing services. It should help local authorities and partner organisations to improve what is available, by identifying where the gaps are and how services can be made to work better. This can only be done by directly involving children on the autism spectrum and their parents in developing and reviewing the Local Offer.

Each local authority’s Local Offer must include what is available not just in the area the authority covers but also services in surrounding areas that are likely to be used by children and young people on the autism spectrum.

The Local Offer should be easy to understand and free from jargon. It should be comprehensive, covering support across education, health and social care from age 0 to 25 and how to access it. The information it contains should be kept up-to-date. And it should be clear about how decisions are made and who is accountable for them.

The Code of Practice sets out a long list of things that the Local Offer should include information about, including how to request an assessment for an EHC plan, post-16 education and training, home-to-school transport, suitable childcare provision, and other things.

“The Local Offer should not simply be a directory of existing services... The process of developing the Local Offer will help local authorities and their health partners to improve provision.”
SEND Code of Practice, para 4.3

Putting this into practice

• Establish a representative group of children and young people and their parents to plan and review the content of the Local Offer. Publicise this group widely, through the local Parent Carer Forum and beyond, to make sure it is as diverse as possible.

• Make sure other young people and families know about the Local Offer and how they can comment on it.

• Make sure the Local Offer covers all the information listed in paragraph 4.30 of the Code of Practice.

• Keep the Local Offer under review, and ensure that there is enough provision for all the children and young people on the autism spectrum in the area. This includes making use of local data on levels of need and asking for comments from young people, parents and representative organisations. These comments should be published regularly, along with the local authority’s response to comments and details of action they intend to take.
Case study: Surrey Local Offer

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The starting point for developing the Local Offer in Surrey was that it should be co-produced with parents and other partners. The local authority established a steering group of partners, with a central voice for parents, to oversee the development of the Local Offer and keep it under review. It is provided on a stand-alone website, to emphasise that it represents a partnership, rather than being part of the local authority’s main site.

Surrey stresses to all stakeholders that the Local Offer is an engagement tool which is central to the effective operation of the SEND system. The website tries to leave as much information on originators’ own sites, to ensure that information is up-to-date and that the task of the council’s own information management remains manageable.

The Local Offer budget helps to support an infrastructure for offline participation, such as Family Voice Surrey, the local SEND parent carer forum, and a SEND children/young people’s rights and participation team.

There is a dedicated delivery team, shared with the Family Information Service/Directory, which has detailed knowledge of the SEND domain and services, and provides a telephone service (non-IT channel) and a ‘Live Chat’ facility to answer general SEND questions.

The team has worked in partnership with experts in specific subjects, including parents, to generate high quality content. They produced packages of autism-related information, working with Family Voice Surrey and the National Autistic Society, within the programme sponsored by Surrey’s joint Autism Strategy. Work is also in progress with health partners.

There is an ongoing programme of user-testing where scenarios are tested with different groups of users, including young people.

The Local Offer is promoted locally via practitioners, who are encouraged to use the site when working with parents. The local authority has employed a social media expert – who is also a parent of children on the autism spectrum, living in Surrey – to widen families’ engagement with the Local Offer. This is proving to be very effective.

Useful resource

The National Autistic Society has produced a guide for local authorities, Local voices, local choices, on the most effective ways of engaging and consulting with children and young people on the autism spectrum.
Planning the right services for children and young people on the autism spectrum

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The Code of Practice states clearly that local areas should use local data to understand and predict the need for services, and that education, health and social care services should work together effectively to plan services to improve outcomes for children. That means ensuring that there are sufficient services available to meet current and future needs. This should be done through joint commissioning arrangements, and these arrangements should underpin an area’s Local Offer.

The Code of Practice states that joint commissioning arrangements should be made between the local authority and relevant clinical commissioning groups. These arrangements must set out the education, health and social care provision reasonably required by children and young people with SEND aged 0-25, both with and without EHC plans – and this should be based on local information and data. Local organisations are free to decide how to make this system work at a local level, and to design local services to fit the specific needs of the population they serve. But it should be clear how specific types of provision will be made, and by whom.

To inform commissioning decisions, local authorities and their partners should draw on all local data-sets, as well as qualitative information about the likely education, health and social care needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum.

Relevant data-sets include: population and demographic data, autism prevalence data, numbers of local children who have an EHC plan or receive SEN support, the local area’s use of out-of-area placements, the outcomes of children’s developmental assessments (including the two-year-old check), information about where children on the autism spectrum are educated, and employment rates for young autistic people leaving education.

The aim should be to improve outcomes both for individual children and strategically within an area.

Putting this into practice

- Identify all relevant data-sets and use these as the basis for identifying gaps in existing provision and planning future provision across education, health and care services.
- Bring together commissioners from health, care and education to agree shared priorities for commissioning services to meet the full range of needs that autistic children and their families have.
- Using that data, commission a wide range of provision, including help for children who need to access services quickly – for example, because they need emergency mental health support or quick access to short breaks. Services that can be accessed quickly are often not widely enough available to meet the need for them.
- Ensure that it is clear to all local partner organisations, and to parents and families, who is responsible for delivering each service and also how decisions are made about meeting the needs of each individual child.
- Base all commissioning decisions on the most up-to-date evidence of which interventions work best to help children and young people achieve the best possible outcomes.

“Partners must agree how they will work together. They should aim to provide personalised, integrated support that delivers positive outcomes for children and young people, bringing together support across education, health and social care from early childhood through to adult life.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 3.7
Case study: West Berkshire

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The local area SEND inspection report for West Berkshire highlights the effective way in which the local authority and four clinical commissioning groups work together, based on shared high aspirations for children with SEND in their area, to commission and fund services to meet children’s needs. Agencies work together to support children’s changing needs, and good forward planning means they are able to respond to changing circumstances, such as an increasing need for mental health support.

Examples of effective joint working include integrated therapy services, a comprehensive autism training package for professionals from a range of backgrounds, and the creation of an Emotional Health Academy.

The West Berkshire Emotional Health Academy began in April 2016 as an early intervention service to support individual children and young people with a wide range of mental health needs, including mental health needs of autistic children. The service works closely with schools, and alongside CAMHS, and partnership with local head teachers and GPs is key. In its first year, the Emotional Health Academy supported more than 600 children, provided training to more than 200 school staff, and worked with 28 schools on a weekly basis.

Useful resource

The National Development Team for Inclusion has produced a guide for commissioners of services for children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism whose behaviours challenge services.
Specialist autism provision in a mainstream setting

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The Code of Practice says that all children and young people are entitled to an education that enables them to make progress so that they achieve their best, become confident individuals living fulfilling lives, and make a successful transition into adulthood.

Where a pupil is identified as having special educational needs, schools should take action to remove barriers to learning and put effective special educational provision in place. This applies regardless of whether or not a child has an education, health and care plan.

Mainstream schools must use their ‘best endeavours’ to make sure that a child with SEND gets the support they need. This means doing everything they can to meet children’s needs. It includes ensuring that children and young people on the autism spectrum engage in the activities of the school alongside all other pupils, and designating a teacher to be responsible for coordinating SEND provision. Schools must also publish a SEND information report on their arrangements for admitting children with SEND. This should include the steps they are taking to make sure that autistic children are not treated less favourably than others.

In addition to mainstream and special schools, some mainstream schools have special ‘bases’ or units specifically for children and young people on the autism spectrum. These units have higher adult-to-child ratios than mainstream classrooms, and are staffed by teachers with additional qualifications and expertise. Schools benefit from the additional skills and capacity the units bring, and from a more inclusive community.

Putting this into practice

• Make the quality of teaching for pupils with SEND, and the progress they make, a core part of each school’s performance management arrangements.

• Demonstrate the school’s commitment to improving outcomes for children on the autism spectrum, and with other types of special educational needs, by making the progress of these pupils a central part of professional development for all teaching and support staff.

• Consider a dedicated autism hub in your school to provide more specialised support for children on the autism spectrum, within an overall inclusive environment.

• Carry out regular reviews of the breadth and impact of support for children on the autism spectrum, or with other types of need, that schools in an area can offer or access.

• Ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, with high expectations for every pupil and potential areas of difficulty identified and addressed from the outset.

“School leaders should regularly review how expertise and resources used to address SEN can be used to build the quality of whole-school provision as part of their approach to school improvement.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 6.3
Case study: National Autistic Society Cullum Centres, Surrey

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The National Autistic Society's Cullum Centres help children and young people on the autism spectrum get the support they need to thrive in a mainstream school setting. They are purpose-designed and built specialist centres that are fully integrated into four mainstream schools in Surrey, funded by the Cullum Family Trust.

The centres provide autistic children with specialist support from trained staff, access to therapies such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, and a calm setting where they can retreat when needed.

Pupils spend the majority of their lesson time in the mainstream school itself, and the time separated from their peers is minimised. The role of the centres is to give each young person specialist and individualised support to help them become a full member of the school community. They are not places to send children to keep them separate from their peers, but specialist resources that children on the autism spectrum can use to help them thrive in mainstream classes.

Before admission to a Cullum Centre, the local authority carefully assesses potential pupils to be sure they will fully benefit from the support that is provided there. Once there, pupils are helped to understand how their autism affects them and how they can develop strategies to cope with the barriers they face, inside and outside the classroom. The support offered aims to build each child's social skills and confidence, with members of the therapy team assisting in sensory processing and communication skills. All staff are trained in how to support children on the autism spectrum, and they receive ongoing training to develop and update their skills.

Case study: Fir Tree School, West Berkshire

Contact: Michelle Pearse, Head of AS Unit, mpearse@firtree.newburyacademytrust.org

Fir Tree School in West Berkshire is a mainstream primary school that includes a purpose-built teaching unit for children on the autism spectrum. It consists of two fully equipped classrooms, a sensory room and therapy room, as well as a 'calm room' and its own outdoor area.

Pupils are supported by dedicated unit staff to access the curriculum within mainstream classes. Each child has their own personalised programme of support, and they can access resources in the unit as and when necessary.

Additional support is provided by external professionals including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and educational psychologists. Children also have access to intervention programmes such as social and emotional skills and life skills.

The teacher in charge of the unit ensures that staff throughout the school have a good understanding of autism and other special educational needs. Support and training for mainstream staff is delivered regularly by autism unit staff.
Specialist autism outreach teams

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The Code of Practice states that, where a pupil makes less than expected progress at school, despite SEN support and evidence-based interventions that are matched to their needs, the school should bring in specialists. It is a school’s responsibility to meet children’s needs, and to access additional support and input from specialist outside agencies when their own resources have been used.

Specialist autism outreach teams should be available to provide advice and training to staff in mainstream schools, to enable them to support children on the autism spectrum as fully and effectively as possible. Teams may consist of specially trained teachers and qualified communication support workers, who may be supported by a specialist educational psychologist. Their role is to advise on early identification of needs and on effective support strategies and interventions.

Support should be tailored to the individual needs of each young person. Outreach staff should work with school staff to ensure that pupils are fully included socially and as learners. The team may be involved with assessing individual needs, assisting in planning interventions, and advising on teaching and behaviour programmes. This benefits schools in the area by helping with training and working out specific strategies for individual children.

Any involvement of outside specialists should be discussed and agreed with a child’s parents or carers.

Putting this into practice

• Ensure that a school has done everything it can within its own resources, both financial and in terms of its own knowledge, to support a child.

• Involve specialists as soon as it is clear that a child is not making progress, despite the provision of SEN support in school, so that children receive the additional support they need as quickly as possible.

• Make sure that the local authority works with all schools in an area to agree what specialist outreach services are needed, and how schools can access them.

“Where assessment indicates that support from specialist services is required, it is important that children and young people receive it as quickly as possible. Joint commissioning arrangements should seek to ensure that there are sufficient services to meet the likely need in an area.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 6.60
Case study:
Calderdale Autism Outreach Team

Contact: cyps.sis@calderdale.gov.uk

The Calderdale Autism Outreach Team offers support and advice to mainstream schools and early years services to help children of all ages on the autism spectrum succeed in their education, take part in social activities and achieve their potential. The team is part of the Specialist Inclusion Service, and operates in school term times. It works in partnership with health and social care services across the borough.

The team consists of specialist teachers, speech and language therapists, and outreach workers. Specialist teachers provide support to children and young people to help them make progress with their education, and support their social and emotional development. Training, advice and support are also available to parents and carers, as well as schools.

Members of the team have specialist knowledge and understanding of autism, and use that knowledge consistently to inform all aspects of practice and proactively shape assessments and support plans for autistic young people.

The team is accredited by the National Autistic Society for the high level of knowledge and support it offers to children and young people on the autism spectrum, and to the schools who work with them.
Implementing the SEND reforms
Early years support for children on the autism spectrum

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The changes in the SEND system introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 should make a positive difference to a child’s life from the very earliest point that the child’s special educational needs are observed and identified.

However, there is currently significant variation in SEND provision across early years settings. In addition, the number of children in early years settings is rising, as the population increases and free nursery places are made available for two- and three-year-olds.

Although children on the autism spectrum are often not diagnosed until they are over the age of five, the Code of Practice is clear that providers of early years education must have arrangements in place to support children who are likely to need special educational provision when they reach compulsory school age.

The Code of Practice states that early years providers should be prepared to identify children who may have special needs, and it is clear about the benefits to children of the earliest possible identification of their needs, and the link between early identification and long-term outcomes for this child.

Early years settings are expected to have in place a clear approach to identifying children with special educational needs and providing the support they need.

Putting this into practice

- Listen to parents’ concerns and enable them to participate in decision-making.
- Take the SEND Code of Practice into account in all decisions about young children. Early years providers should cooperate with the local authority in ensuring that the authority meets its duties to children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- Recognise that everyone who works in early years is responsible for identifying children who may have SEND.
- Train early years staff to understand autism, and how autism affects young children.
- Use the integrated review process to ensure that every early years setting works effectively with local health providers to pick up children’s needs.
- Establish local pathways from autism diagnosis to EHC assessment, so that when an assessment is requested, it is not refused for children who have a diagnosis of autism – on the grounds that, if a child is on the autism spectrum, they may need special educational provision, as the Code of Practice specifies.

“Parents know their children best and it is important that all practitioners listen and understand when parents express concerns about their child’s development.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 5.5
Case study:
Enfield Advisory Service for Autism

Contact: admin@enfieldasa.org.uk

The London Borough of Enfield’s local area SEND inspection pinpointed identification of children with SEN before they start school as something the local area does well. Nearly all local families are engaged with early years services.

Pathways for children on the autism spectrum are clearly defined. Educational psychologists, CAMHS and speech and language therapists work together to support the communication needs of children on the autism spectrum in early years settings, and this is making a positive difference.

Specific guidance and support is offered by the Enfield Advisory Service for Autism and the Making A Positive Start (MAPS) group, which provides a series of information sessions about autism, and about the support that is available for autistic children and young people in the borough. This is aimed at parents and carers of children who are under the age of six and recently diagnosed.

Case study:
Bristol Early Years

Contact: Dawn Butler, Early Years Manager: Inclusion, dawn.butler@bristol.gov.uk

Bristol Early Years is a partnership between the City Council and the Early Years Teaching School Alliance.

The Early Years Service funds the Bristol Autism Team to provide support, guidance and advice to early years practitioners in settings throughout the city, helping them ensure that children with an autism diagnosis are able to access fully their early education.

The team offers good practice strategies and resources for staff, as well as home visiting to support parents. It also offers support for parents at annual reviews and multi-agency meetings, training for early years practitioners in setting up and using communication systems where needed, support for early years settings when applying for additional funding, support for children who are transferring to the next phase of their education, and access to autism training.

Useful resources

The National Autistic Society’s EarlyBird programme provides advice and guidance to parents and carers of children under the age of five, offering strategies to encourage interaction and communication and to analyse and manage behaviour.

The Council for Disabled Children has produced a SEN and Disability in the Early Years Toolkit that supports early years providers in implementing the SEND reforms.
Helping autistic young people prepare for adulthood

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

The Code of Practice is clear that preparation for adulthood should begin early – from when a child’s special educational needs are first identified – and should not be left until the teenage years. As young people get older, they should be involved increasingly closely in decisions about their future.

Early years providers and schools can support children and help prepare them for the future by helping ensure they are included in social groups and enabled to develop friendships, as well as by supporting them to achieve their academic potential.

From year 9, high aspirations about employment, independent living and community participation should be developed through the school curriculum and through extra-curricular provision. Local authorities must ensure that, for young people with an EHC plan, the annual review at Year 9, and every year after that, includes a focus on preparing for adulthood. Transition planning must be built into the revised EHC plan and should result in clear outcomes being agreed to prepare for adulthood. These outcomes should be ‘ambitious and stretching’.

For teenagers, preparation for adult life needs to be a more explicit element of their planning and support. Discussions about their future should focus on what they want to achieve and the best way to support them to make it happen.

Schools should seek partnerships with employment services, businesses, housing agencies, disability organisations and others, to help children understand what is available to them as they get older and what they can achieve.

The Code of Practice states, “It can be particularly powerful to meet disabled adults who are successful in their work or who have made a significant contribution to their community.”

Every Local Offer should include provision to help children and young people prepare for adulthood and independent living.

Putting this into practice

• Ask individual young autistic people about their interests, strengths and motivations, and use this as the starting point for planning support around them.
• Use the curriculum and extra-curricular provision to help young people understand what is available to them as they get older, and what it is possible for them to achieve, whether that be academically, vocationally or socially.
• For young autistic people who have an EHC plan, use the annual review at year 9 to identify post-16 pathways that will meet their needs and lead to the outcomes they want to work towards. Keep this under review with the young person.
• Recognise that health and social care professionals may have an important role to play in helping young people make the transition from childhood to adulthood, and involve them in planning.
• Make sure that young people on the autism spectrum are informed of their right under the Autism Act statutory guidance to a community care assessment.

“Health workers, social workers, early years providers and schools... should seek to understand the interests, strengths and motivations of children and young people and use this as a base for planning support around them.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 8.5
Case study:
The National Autistic Society’s Helen Allison School - careers strategy

Contact: Cathy Riggs, Deputy Principal, cathy.riggs@nas.org.uk

Helen Allison School is an autism-specific school in Kent for children and young people aged 5-19, run by the National Autistic Society.

The school believes that every child should leave school equipped for life in modern Britain. Young people are supported from an early age to identify suitable educational routes and to develop the skills employers want, to match the needs of local businesses. The school works with a range of businesses and services in the community to secure independent careers guidance and set up opportunities for work experience in real settings in the area where students live.

From an early age, students’ learning is related to career opportunities: all lessons and schemes of work have learning mapping to careers. The school enhances its provision by offering access to a range of activities including employer talks, trips to local Careers Fairs and links with universities. For pupils who struggle to engage with new people, online tools are available to help them think about the opportunities available.

All pupils have extended work placements, some based on traineeship models. To enable this, the school has worked with local businesses and professionals and has put in place two projects, one with a local NHS Trust and clinical commissioning group, and the other with the Royal British Legion. This has also enabled the school to make employers more aware of autism and how reasonable adjustments can be made.

Case study:
The National Autistic Society’s Transition Support Service

Contact: transitionsupport@nas.org.uk

The National Autistic Society’s Transition Support Service is a free support service for young people aged 14 years and over and their parents and carers looking for information and advice on the transition to adulthood. Confidential advice is provided over the telephone or by email.

The service offers:
- explanation of young people’s rights and entitlements throughout the transition process
- assistance with exploring options so that informed decisions can be made
- guidance and support on specific issues such as finding suitable provision, making a complaint or appealing against a decision.
Post-16 provision for young people on the autism spectrum

What does the SEND Code of Practice say?

Further education and sixth form colleges must put support in place for young people on the autism spectrum or with other special educational needs. They must ensure that young people with SEND have access to a wide range of study programmes and support, and that young people (and their parents, where appropriate) are fully involved in discussing the support they require.

Where this is available, colleges should use information from a young person’s previous school about their needs. They may also undertake their own assessments of a young person’s needs, and curriculum staff should work with specialist support services to identify where a young person might be struggling because of their autism. Access to these specialist services may be through partnerships between colleges and other local organisations, or by employing practitioners to help autistic students to make progress.

While there is no legal duty on colleges to have a SENCO, they should ensure they have a named person with responsibility to oversee SEND provision to make sure that support is effectively coordinated. The Code of Practice says that colleges should record details of additional or different provision being made to meet a young person’s special educational needs and their progress towards achieving specified outcomes.

Putting this into practice

- Ensure that colleges are fully involved in transition planning so they can prepare to meet each student’s needs, and be prepared to meet both existing needs and any needs that may emerge once a young person has begun their programme of study at college.
- Provide support that is based on evidence of good practice, personalised for each individual.
- Keep the needs of each autistic student under regular review, and involve students closely at all stages.
- Ensure that colleges have access to specialist skills and expertise to support the learning of students who are on the autism spectrum.

“Support should be aimed at promoting student independence and enabling the young person to make good progress towards employment and/or higher education, independent living, good health and participating in the community.”

SEND Code of Practice, para 7.13
Case study:  
**Woodlands, The National Autistic Society’s Sybil Elgar School**

**Contact:** [Sybil.elgar@nas.org.uk](mailto:Sybil.elgar@nas.org.uk)

Woodlands 16-22 Campus is part of the Sybil Elgar School, an outstanding Ofsted rated autism-specific school in west London for children and young people aged between 4-22 run by the National Autistic Society. It is separate to the main school, as it is located in Acton.

Post-16 students benefit greatly from being on campus and from being able to access facilities and sessions at local colleges, with the individual support they need, as well as educational courses and therapies at Woodlands. The facilities at Woodlands include a multi-sensory dance and drama space, a café, and a kitchen set up as a teaching space. Students have the opportunity to go out and about in the local community and to use public transport.

Students participate in a curriculum that prepares them for adult life. The Academic Life Skills programme focuses on improving independence and communication, and gives students the opportunity to gain external accreditation. In addition to this, students can choose art, drama, dance, or music and movement – performing arts are a particular strength.

A transition link worker works with each student and their family to explore all their options post-19, and ensures that all students move on to an appropriate placement when they leave Woodlands.

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Case study:  
**Ambitious College, London**

**Contact:** [admin@ambitiouscollege.org.uk](mailto:admin@ambitiouscollege.org.uk)

Ambitious College is the first specialist day college in the country that is dedicated entirely to supporting young people aged 16-25 with complex needs associated with autism. It is located on two campuses in different parts of London, and is run by the charity Ambitious about Autism.

Both campuses of the college are co-located with mainstream general further education colleges. This allows Ambitious College to extend the range of facilities on offer to students, and enables their mainstream partners to become more confident about supporting young autistic people.

The aim is to enhance the life skills and employability skills of each young person who goes there. Ambitious enables students to gain the knowledge and skills they need to transition successfully to adulthood and to live, work and contribute in their community. They follow the four pathways developed by Preparing for Adulthood: employment, independent living, community inclusion and health.

The college offers students opportunities to follow vocational courses, attend local further education courses with support, participate in community activities, and improve their literacy, numeracy or communication skills. It also offers transition programmes into independent living and into supported or open employment.

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**Useful resource**

*Finished at School*, produced by Ambitious about Autism, provides information about supporting young autistic people make the move from school to college.
The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for the 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.