



# In Focus

## World Autism Awareness Day, 2 April 2016

### Overview

On 18 December 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [Resolution 62/139](#),<sup>1</sup> officially designating 2 April of every year, from 2008, as World Autism Awareness Day. The Resolution also “encourages Member States to take measures to raise awareness throughout society, including at the family level, regarding children with autism” and subsequently calls on member states, organisations of the United Nations, international organisations and civil society to “observe World Autism Awareness Day in an appropriate manner”. The theme established by the United Nations for World Autism Awareness Day 2016 is ‘[Autism and the 2030 Agenda: Inclusion and Neurodiversity](#)’, with the aim to “look ahead to 2030 and reflect on the new Sustainable Development Goals [affecting disabled people, such as ‘Quality Education’ and ‘Reduced Inequalities’] and their implications for improving the lives of people with autism”.

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### What is Autism?

According to the [National Autistic Society](#), autism is a “lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people”.<sup>2</sup> Autism is a spectral condition, therefore, “while all autistic people share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways”. Consequently, there are [three main areas of difficulties](#) for individuals with autism: social communication, interaction and imagination. For those with autism, difficulty with social communication can include finding it challenging to understand facial expressions, tone of voice, sarcasm and common phrases. The National Autistic Society also explain that those with autism can also find it difficult to interact socially and may “prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking out the company of other people”. Lastly, autistic people can face difficulties with social imagination, for example, finding it hard to: understand and interpret other people’s thoughts, feelings and actions; cope in new or unfamiliar situations; and understand the concept of danger. Although the National Autistic Society note that to date, “the exact cause of autism is still being investigated”, they state that “research suggests that a combination of factors—genetic and environmental—may account for changes in brain development”. As a result, they identify a range of interventions that are used to enable learning and development in individuals with autism, including [counselling](#) and the [provision of visual supports](#).

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### Prevalence in the United Kingdom

According to the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#) (NICE), “it is estimated that around 1.1 percent of the population have autism”. They also [note](#) that there has been a “25-fold increase in the diagnosis of autism in the last 30 years”. In addition, NICE [note](#) that amongst those diagnosed with

autism, approximately 50 percent have a learning difficulty. As a result, approximately 70 percent of individuals with autism “also meet diagnostic criteria for at least one other (often unrecognised) mental and behavioural disorder”, whilst 40 percent “meet diagnostic criteria for at least two disorders, mainly anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder”.<sup>3</sup>

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## Policy Developments

On 26 March 2015, the Department of Health published [statutory guidance](#) to support the implementation of the [Adult Autism Strategy](#). The guidance contains information on a number of areas which section 2 of the Autism Act 2009 requires to be addressed by NHS organisations and local authorities, including: the training of staff who provide services to adults with autism; employment for adults with autism; and working with the criminal justice system. In the same month, the Department of Health published the consultation paper, [No Voice Unheard, No Right Ignored—A Consultation for People with Learning Disabilities, Autism and Mental Health Conditions](#), seeking views on improving the lives of people with mental health needs, learning disabilities and autism. In the foreword of the consultation paper, the then Minister for Care Services, Norman Lamb, stated that the Government wanted to see four things: people in charge of their care and personal budgets; inclusion and independence for people with learning disabilities, autism and mental health conditions in the community; the right care in the right place, with an emphasis on “real person centered planning with the individual themselves at the heart”; and very clear accountability and responsibility throughout the system, to prevent people “falling through the gaps between services”.<sup>4</sup>

In [response](#) to the consultation, the Government stated in November 2015 that their aim was to “make sure that the rights, incentives, responsibilities and duties in the system ensure that change is delivered everywhere”. As a result, they announced a set of proposals clustered into three phases. They were as follows:

- Early actions that seek to sustain momentum generated, chiefly through the use of existing powers and building on work currently underway
- Further changes, including proposed legislative changes that cannot be achieved via existing powers (and which relate principally to the Mental Health Act 1983), and
- A third phase, which explores more radical solutions to longer-term issues, as well as ongoing monitoring and review, and a commitment that the Government will intervene further, including through legislation if necessary, if the improvements sought continue not to be realised in practice.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, [Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2007: 62/139 World Autism Awareness Day](#), 21 January 2008

<sup>2</sup> National Autistic Society, ‘[Autism](#)’, accessed 21 March 2016

<sup>3</sup> National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, [NICE Support for Commissioning for Autism](#), January 2014

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health, [No Voice Unheard, No Right Ignored—A Consultation for People with Learning Disabilities, Autism and Mental Health Conditions](#), March 2015

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health, [Government Response to No Voice Unheard, No Right Ignored—a Consultation for People with Learning Disabilities, Autism and Mental Health Conditions](#), November 2015

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