



Supporting Autistic People in Employment

How to be an Inclusive Employer

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1. Status of the guide

This guide provides general guidance only and is not a complete or authoritative statement of the law. The guide is not a statutory code of practice and does not impose legal obligations on employers.

Terminology

Autism and autistic persons

Through consultation and engagement with autistic people it is understood that there are variations in the preferred terminology relating to autism. For example, in the [National Health Service](#) the medical name for 'autism' is 'autistic spectrum disorder', yet some people object to the use of the words 'disorder' or 'spectrum'.

Within this guidance the terminology used to describe the condition and the people who have it will be **autism**, **autistic person**, or **person who is autistic**.

Neurodiversity, neurotypical and neurodivergent

The word **neurodivergent** is often associated with autism, but it is not the same thing - it is a wider concept. It is also associated with the related words 'neurodiversity' and 'neurotypical'.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that refers to all the diverse ways that different people may process information. It encompasses **everyone** and how each person thinks, learns, communicates, and experiences the world around them, which varies in many ways. Within the term 'neurodiversity', people may be classed as 'neurotypical' or as 'neurodivergent'.

Neurotypical: This word describes those people whose minds function in a way that society deems typical.

Neurodivergent: This word describes those people whose minds function in a way that society deems to be atypical, or in a way that diverges from what society deems to be typical. Autistic people come within the class of 'neurodivergent' people, although they are not the only ones.

A range of other people with conditions such as, but not limited to, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia, may also be described as 'neurodivergent'.

It is important to note that many people who are autistic may also have a co-existing neurodivergent condition, or another physical or mental impairment, and that this will be reflected in each person's unique needs and in the support that employers should provide.



Photo courtesy of Now Group

2. Introduction

According to the 2021 Census, there are currently over 35,000 people in Northern Ireland who identify as autistic. Many are in employment or are seeking employment. As to their experiences in that respect, the [Northern Ireland Autism Strategy 2023-28](#), prepared by the Department of Health, noted that:

- Autistic people can feel anxious and misunderstood within the work environment. They may find it difficult to integrate and manage the communication and social interactions which are often expected and are a requirement of the workplace and relationships with colleagues.
- Employers need to have more understanding of autism and to promote and encourage this within the workplace. There needs to be greater awareness of the 'reasonable adjustments' that could be considered and implemented.

The Autism Strategy did not just identify the need for better understanding of, and the need to better support, those autistic people who are already in employment, such as employees, it also identified various needs in respect of those autistic people who are seeking employment. The strategy noted:

- Interview processes are stressful for many people. For an autistic person, the sensory and communicative expectations and challenges which can be experienced throughout this process can often mean that they are not successful in gaining employment or may prevent them from seeking employment due to the anxiety that this will present.

- There should be more focus and support available to underpin and enhance life skills to support individuals as they manage transition and adapt into careers and employment, for example, completing application forms, preparing for interview.

These observations are corroborated by data from Great Britain as outlined in the [Buckland Review of Autism Employment \[2024\]](#), commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions. The review noted:

- Despite their wish to work, the latest official statistics show that only around 3 in 10 working age autistic people are in employment, compared with around 5 in 10 for all disabled people and 8 in 10 for non-disabled people.

- Autistic people face the largest pay gap of all disability groups, receiving a third less than non-disabled people on average. Autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed after 15 months as non-disabled graduates, with only 36% finding full time work in this period. Autistic graduates are most likely to be overqualified for the job they have, most likely to be on zero-hours contracts, and least likely to be in a permanent role.

To address the various needs that have been identified in respect of autistic people's employment opportunities, this guidance aims to:

- Increase employers' understanding of the common traits of autism.

- Signpost employers to further information and advice on autism.
- Show how autistic people can be supported through reasonable adjustments within the workplace and during recruitment.
- Create and promote positive, inclusive work environments where autistic people can thrive and have equality of opportunity with others.
- Inform employers of their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) to support job seekers and employees who are autistic.

Employers should be mindful of their duties under the DDA, such as the reasonable adjustment duty. Many of the suggestions in the guidance are examples of the kinds of adjustments that employers may be obliged to make. Appendix 1 provides further information on the DDA and guidance on taking positive action lawfully.

It is hoped that this guidance will help employers to recognise and embrace the many positive skills and abilities that autistic people can bring to the workplace, and that employers will respond positively.

Contributors

The guidance was produced by people with lived experience of autism in collaboration with the community and voluntary sector organisations who represent them, together with the Autism Forum, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities, and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health is the lead co-ordinator for implementing the Autism Strategy. The Equality Commission provided expert advice as to the relevant equality law and on good practice and, going forward, will continue to provide such advice to employers directly. The other governmental and voluntary sector organisations listed in Appendices 2 and 3 provide support to employers and to autistic people. The Autism Forum and associated community and voluntary sector organisations, and employers provided valuable comments and feedback.



3. The benefits of employing autistic people

The benefits of employing autistic people are as many and as varied as the benefits of employing people who are not autistic.

There are many misconceptions about the types of jobs that are or are not suitable for autistic people. A common stereotype is that autistic people are best suited to science and technology roles. Although this may be true for some autistic people, the reality is that autistic people are a diverse group, with diverse backgrounds, and they have a wide range of skills, strengths, and interests.

That a person processes information differently to others, or thinks atypically, may be a strength that benefits an organisation by allowing for diversity of thought and diverse ways of thinking.

At the same time, it does not mean that autistic people lack the skills and abilities that employers value in neurotypical people, such as reliability, loyalty, honesty, persistence, diligence, objectivity, creativity, or the abilities

to analyse and to think logically, to pay attention to detail, to be methodical, to retain and remember information, to innovate, to solve problems.

Not every autistic person will have all those skills and abilities, but then neither will every neurotypical person, yet employers are not reluctant to employ neurotypical people.

On the other hand, many autistic people will have above average skills and abilities in one or more of these valued traits.

The challenge for employers is to be open-minded and non-prejudicial about this and to treat each job applicant and employee on their own merits, with support from whatever reasonable adjustments may be needed, and to not be reluctant to employ a person merely because they are autistic.

Additional benefits of having an inclusive employment policy that includes employing autistic people, amongst others, is that it shows that an employer:

- Welcomes diversity and promotes equality of opportunity and inclusivity in their workforce.
- Treats all persons with dignity and respect.
- Promotes understanding of the individual needs of employees and accommodates those needs, where reasonable.
- Supports social responsibility towards the broader population.
- Is committed to complying with their legal obligations.



4. What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how an autistic person communicates with and relates to other people. It also affects how an autistic person experiences and interacts with the world around them. As a result, autistic people see, hear, and feel the world differently to other people.

Every autistic person is different, and each has needs and aspirations that are unique to them: many can learn, live, and work independently, whilst others may have more complex needs, learning difficulties or other co-existing health conditions that require specialist support at various stages throughout their lives.

- Note too that women may exhibit the signs of autism differently to men. According to the [National Health Service](#), autistic women may exhibit these traits differently by:

- Being better able to hide the signs of autism by copying people who do not have autism, making it easier for them to 'fit in'.
- Being quieter and better able to hide their feelings.
- Appearing to cope better with social situations.
- Showing fewer signs of repetitive behaviours.

While autistic women may be better able to hide their autistic traits, that does not mean that they will experience fewer difficulties in coping with an employer's working arrangements. It may just be that those difficulties are less apparent.

Employers should be alert to this possibility and do what they reasonably can to make further enquiries as to their female autistic employees' needs. Sections 6 and 7 provide advice on how to do this.

In legal terms, autism is deemed to be a 'disability' under the DDA, even if not all autistic people may consider themselves to be so. Nevertheless, if, viewed objectively, an autistic person is 'disabled' for the purposes of the DDA, then they have legal rights, and their employers have corresponding duties towards them, under the DDA. Refer to Appendix 1 for further information.



5. Common traits of autism

Autistic people may exhibit certain common traits relating to:

- Social communication and social interaction.
- Routines and repetitive behaviours.
- Sensory sensitivity.
- Highly focused interests or hobbies.
- Anxiety.

These traits do not detract from the benefits that autistic people may bring to a workplace, as noted above.

The purpose of the descriptions that follow is to raise awareness of some of the ways that autistic people may experience, react to and cope with the world around them and how it is organised, especially in respect of workplaces and working life, which are usually arranged by and for the expectations of neurotypical people.

Do not infer from the descriptions that follow that autistic people are ‘the problem’, or the cause of their own atypical experiences with the world.

Rather, ‘the problem’ lies with the way the world, including the ‘world of work’, typically operates, is organised, and arranged. The proper solution, consistent with the aims, rights and duties of the DDA, is for employers to accommodate the needs of autistic, and other disabled, people by making reasonable adjustments to working arrangements, such as to employment policies, practices and procedures, or to the physical features of workplace premises.

To do this, it is important to focus on each individual job applicant or employee and to try to understand the experiences of each. This will help you to anticipate their experiences, reactions and needs so that you may provide each with the support that is appropriate, and which may also remove or reduce potential causes of stress and anxiety.

Social communication

Our society and employment environments can be places where there are specific standards and expectations as to how we communicate, behave, and interact with others and there is often an actual or perceived requirement for individuals to comply or conform.

Whilst many autistic people will have exceptionally good language skills, the aspects of communication that we typically take for granted in the workplace, such as by way of tone of voice or facial expression, may be difficult for autistic people to interpret and understand.

Likewise, autistic people often interpret language literally. As a result, communications which include idioms, metaphors, irony and sarcasm may, without the speaker or writer realising it, not be wholly understood by an autistic person: for example, work-related expressions such as ‘give it 110%’, ‘to be snowed under’ or ‘get cracking’.

Autistic people may experience some difficulties:

- Engaging in 'small talk' or other social or spontaneous conversation.
- Recognising and understanding non-verbal communication and cues such as body language, physical gestures, and facial expressions.
- Processing information and answering questions under time-pressure, such as in job interviews or selection tests.
- Understanding the social context of a situation, expectations of their role, and the role of others, and in how they might participate.
- Deploying social skills, such as providing personal space, making eye contact, or providing others with an opportunity to speak and participate in conversation.

Some autistic people may be unable to speak or may have limited speech, this is known as 'non-speaking' or 'non-verbal' autism. It is important that assumptions are not made regarding 'non-speaking' or 'non-verbal' peoples' understanding of what is being said, as they may simply be unable to reciprocate.

Social interaction

The social environment can be challenging for autistic people as they may have difficulty 'reading' other people, i.e. recognising the feelings and emotions of others and in expressing their own feelings and emotions. As a result of this they may:

- Not understand the unwritten social rules that others usually pick up without thinking. For example, they may stand too close to another person or start an inappropriate subject of conversation.
- Appear to be insensitive, as they may not have realised how someone else may be feeling.

- Prefer to be alone rather than participating actively in workplace socialising.
- Need to take time out alone if they feel overwhelmed or overloaded by the environment they are in.
- Wish to interact with others but are unsure of how to do this, which may make it difficult for them to form friendships with work colleagues.

Routines and repetitive behaviours

Many autistic people prefer set routines and a structured order to their day. Such behaviours may appear inflexible to others, but for autistic people they may be crucial.

For example, some autistic people may have a strict routine in how they start their day or travel to their place of work. They may choose to wear the same clothes, or eat the same food for a meal, or perform tasks or functions in a specific and methodical way. Each autistic person will have their own ways of coping that they use to manage their day. Imposing changes to an autistic person's routines can be distressing and unexpected change can increase their anxiety significantly.

Sensory sensitivity

Most autistic people will experience some form of sensory sensitivity which may result in them feeling overwhelmed or anxious and, in some cases, pain.

There are two types of sensitivity: hypersensitivity (over-sensitive) and hyposensitivity (under-sensitive). These are usually responses to the levels of light, temperature, or sound, or to touching, or smells.

For some autistic people, noise or sound can prove unbearably loud or distracting.

Highly focused interests or hobbies

Many autistic people will have intense and highly focused interests which they often like to share as important aspects of their wellbeing. Highly focused interests may indicate autistic people's strengths, i.e. the ability to absorb and retain knowledge and information, to ensure its accuracy, and to pay attention to detail.

Anxiety

Autism is not itself a mental health condition, but it is common for autistic people to experience mental health conditions, such as anxiety. As with many people, anxiety can be challenging if it is caused by, or experienced in, situations which are unexpected, uncomfortable, overwhelming, or unfamiliar.



6. Supporting autistic people during recruitment

As noted in the Introduction, it is important to consider how recruitment processes may be made more welcoming and accessible for autistic people, and that they present no barriers that can be avoided.

To assist communication, it is recommended that employers provide the contact details of a named person who an applicant may contact to seek additional information about the post, or clarification regarding the role, or the recruitment process.

Good planning and a willingness to be open-minded and to listen will benefit everyone.

Appendix 1 provides further information on an employer's duty to make reasonable adjustments under the DDA, and on how to take lawful positive action. The duty applies at every stage of the recruitment process.

The following are some examples of practical steps that employers could take to support job applicants who are autistic. It is difficult to be prescriptive about what employers should do for every autistic person, as what may be needed is dependent on the individual needs of each person, and on what an employer can reasonably do in the light of their own circumstances.

Job advertisement and person specification

When developing and drafting job advertisements and a person specification, consider the key skills which are required for the role or duties of the job. These should be written in clear, concise terms providing an accurate explanation of the role.

Where selection criteria are outlined, providing a brief description of what this entails, or why they are required, is particularly helpful.

Communication skills

If 'excellent communication skills' are not a necessary requirement for the role, avoid stipulating this as it may unnecessarily deter an autistic person from applying.

If 'communication skills' are required to some extent, assess what level is genuinely necessary for the role and ask only for that.

Academic or professional qualifications

Where specific qualifications are requested, for example, A-levels, consider what alternatives to these you will also accept, for example other types of qualifications, or relevant employment or other experience, paid or voluntary.

Inform applicants of what you will accept as 'equivalent', for example 'two years' work experience in a similar job'.

Working arrangements

Provide specific information about the working hours required and/or any flexible working arrangements that may be available, for example, alternative working patterns, hybrid working and flexible working hours. Many employees, including autistic persons, may wish to avail of flexible working arrangements, so their availability is particularly important. Providing these, where reasonable, will help employers to meet several legal duties, including those owed to autistic, and other disabled, employees, and to employees who are the carers of others.

Application forms

Include a section in your standard application form that invites all job applicants to disclose any specific requirements they may have in the recruitment process. This will provide an opportunity for an autistic person to alert you to any adjustments that they may need you to make in the recruitment process.

Encourage applicants to provide this information on their application form and advise them how their disclosure of this information will be used by you in the recruitment process. Be mindful how this information is requested as some people may be concerned that it could be detrimental to their application.

For example, advise applicants that the information, if supplied, will not be used to make any unlawful decisions regarding their application, but will be used to help and support them, where reasonable. Also, where applicable, advise that the information, if supplied, will help the employer to operate their 'guaranteed interview scheme' for disabled job applicants who meet the essential criteria.

If the organisation is aware of support services which may be available to assist applicants to complete application forms, or to provide help with the recruitment process, or training on interview skills, signposting applicants to these services would be helpful. See Appendix 3 for a list of such service providers. If support services from third party providers are not available, you may provide these directly, where it is reasonable to do so.

Equal opportunities monitoring

It is good practice to ask applicants to complete a confidential monitoring form which is separate to the application form. Where impairments or conditions are listed on the form, such as tick-boxes, 'autism' should be included as a separate category as it is not specifically a learning disability nor a mental health condition. The Equality Commission can provide further advice. See Appendix 1 for contact details.

Interviewing applicants

Is an interview necessary?

Job interviews can be stressful for everyone, but particularly so for autistic people. For example, where questions are asked by different interview panel members, an autistic person may find this to be overwhelming and overstimulating.

In the first instance, therefore, an employer should consider whether an interview is the most appropriate method of assessing an autistic person for a particular job opportunity.

For example, is an interview the best method of assessment, or would a work trial be more appropriate? If it would be reasonable to assess an autistic person through a work trial, even where all other applicants are assessed through interviews, then that may be a reasonable adjustment that the employer should make.

When considering these matters, take and act on expert advice, such as from a Human Resources professional, or from the Equality Commission. See Appendix 1 for contact details.

Where an interview is deemed to be necessary

Where the employer decides to proceed with interviews, then to assist an autistic person to prepare there are a number of good practices which an employer should consider.

In general, the more information that an employer can provide in advance of an interview to applicants, the more beneficial it will be to an autistic person's preparations for the interview, and it may help to reduce stress and anxiety, and increase their opportunity to perform better.

Before setting the interview arrangements, consider the following matters.

Format – individual or group interviews?

Group interviews are those in which all applicants, or a group of applicants, are asked to participate in a group activity or discussion. Given that many autistic people may find social interaction with others to be difficult, they may find group interviews to be particularly challenging, if not impossible, to participate in.

Before proceeding with group interviews, consider the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the group interview?
- Does it measure what it is intended to measure, for example, a particular competency?

- Is that competency genuinely needed for the job in question?
- Is it the only way to measure that competency efficiently?
- Are there alternatives that would be reasonable to use instead?

If you decide to proceed with a group interview for all other candidates, you should, where it is reasonable to do so, adjust the process for any candidate who is an autistic person and who requests an adjustment. In that scenario, consider whether you can assess that applicant against the selection criteria by using other means, such as by way of a conventional individual interview, or through a work trial.

Physical considerations

The physical aspects of the interview arrangements, including location, may present barriers to some autistic people. These should be anticipated and reduced or removed, where possible.

- Consider if there is potential to conduct the interview via a virtual platform, for example, via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. May an autistic person select this as their preferred medium?
- Consider if there is appropriate signage in the building providing directions or advising of unexpected noise, for example, electronic doors or public announcement systems.
- In the 'invitation to interview' letter:
 - Include directions to the location where the interview or assessment will take place. Include a photograph of the building, if possible.
 - Advise where nearby parking or access to public transport may be located.
 - Advise how many members will be on the interview panel, and if known at this stage, provide their names.

- Provide clear instructions for arrival. This could include providing information on where to go on entering the building, for example, Reception, and on how to introduce themselves to the receiving person; for example, 'Upon arrival, please tell the Receptionist your name and that you are attending a job interview for the position of [insert job title].'
- Offer an applicant an opportunity to visit the building in advance of the interview or assessment to familiarise themselves with the location and environment. This would enable them to view the interview room and may help them to identify whether any small adjustments are required, for example, to the lighting.

Many of these measures will benefit all candidates.

Drafting interview questions

Planning how an interview will be conducted can turn the process from being a potential barrier for autistic people into a fair opportunity.

When drafting interview questions, consider the following:

- Avoid asking questions with multiple parts. Each part of a multi-part question should be asked separately.
- Avoid idioms and abstract language, such as 'pull up a chair'. Many autistic people interpret language literally and may not understand what is meant.
- Avoid jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms for similar reasons.
- Hypothetical or abstract questions, such as 'Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' can be difficult for an autistic person to answer as they may be unable to project themselves into the future. Avoid questions of this type unless it is necessary to assess the ability of a person to do the job in question at the present time.

- Open ended questions, such as 'Tell me about yourself', may also prove problematic for some autistic people. They may find it difficult to talk about their experiences, may not understand the concept of 'selling themselves' and may simply tell the truth and provide a direct answer which is factual, rather than expanding and elaborating on their good points and strengths.
- Clear and concise interview questions directed at obtaining specific information about a person's qualifications, experience, and skills, are likely to work best.

Conducting the interview

In addition to the above, there are other factors to consider and potential adjustments to make when conducting the interview. These may include providing autistic people with:

- Additional time to process and answer the questions.
- The interview questions in writing, before the interview commences, for example, 30 minutes beforehand, or during it.
- Although the interview panel should always consist of two or more members, arrange for one member only to ask the interview questions, for example, the chairperson, with all members assessing and marking the candidates in the usual way.
- Allowing the candidate to answer the interview questions in writing.
- Allowing the candidate to be accompanied by someone (such as a support worker) who can rephrase questions or duties to make them more easily understood.

Selection and aptitude tests

Selection or aptitude tests, sometimes called 'situational strengths tests', whether conducted online or otherwise, can be challenging for autistic people.

For example, the time constraints under which such tests are often conducted may present significant barriers. Tests that are in the multiple-choice question format may also present barriers.

Before deciding to proceed with selection or aptitude tests, these potential barriers should be given thoughtful consideration. You should consider the following:

- What is the purpose of the test?
- Does it measure what it is intended to measure, for example, a particular competency?
- Is that competency genuinely needed for the job in question?
- Is it the only way to measure that competency efficiently?
- Are there alternatives that would be reasonable to use instead?

If you decide to proceed with a selection test for all other candidates, consider adjusting the process for any candidate who is an autistic person, for example, by:

- Allowing the autistic person additional time to complete the test.
- Allowing the autistic person to answer questions in another format, for example, by way of providing answers in a short, written narrative format rather than in a multiple-choice format.
- Waiving the test for the autistic person and assessing them by another means, for example, a work trial.

When considering these factors, take and act on expert advice, such as that which may be provided by the designer of the test that you propose to use.



7. Supporting autistic employees in the workplace

The following considerations may assist in providing support to an autistic employee, bearing in mind that the support required may vary from person to person.

New employees induction

If possible, invite new employees to visit the premises before their contractual start date to introduce them to their future colleagues and to give them an idea of what to expect, especially regarding the physical features of the premises.

Regardless of whether that invitation is accepted or not, provide new employees with a thorough and clear induction on the commencement of their employment. This is an opportunity for the employer to learn more about their new employee and for the latter to ask questions and to learn more about the workplace.

Once mutual expectations are known, and appropriate reasonable adjustments identified, it is good practice to ensure that all information, including any agreed adjustments, is recorded, whether that be in a 'support plan', 'disability passport', or another corporate document.

This is important for enabling that information to be kept under review, and to be amended when appropriate, such as when circumstances may change. Such reviews should be conducted regularly.

At this stage, useful factors to consider and questions to ask include:

Work environment and physical adjustments

- Where the employee will work.
- Whether the employee may need a bespoke, designated workstation, rather than a 'first come, first served' one, for example, 'hot-desking'.
- Whether the employee may need a quiet space, always or occasionally.
- Whether the employee would like to wear headphones or ear defenders.
- Whether the lighting is adequate or too bright or too dim.
- Whether the proposed workstation is appropriate to any other sensory sensitivity that the employee may have, for example, smells.

Social and communication preferences

- Who the employee will work with.
- Whether the employee is content for colleagues to be informed that they are an autistic person.
- The employee's preferred method of communication, for example, email and/or discussion, face-to-face, or virtual?

- Any set routines that the employee may wish to follow in respect of any of the above.

Workplace policies and expectations

- The standards of behaviour expected towards co-workers and customers as set out in any codes of conduct, or employment policies.

- What the dress code is.

- Working hours and/or flexible arrangements.

Emergency procedures

- Emergency procedures for example, fire drills and real fire alarms.

- Emergency contacts for example, family members, employment support workers.

Breaks and leave

- Periods for tea, lunch, or other rest breaks.

- Entitlements to annual and other leave and any associated procedures.

- The process for reporting and taking sick leave.

Pay and benefits

- Pay arrangements, including claiming expenses.

The new employee should be provided with clear and concise information on their job duties and associated tasks. They should be given structured guidelines or information to advise them as to:

- Their job duties and the tasks they are set.
- Why they are doing it.
- What the result or outcome will be or is expected to be.
- When it should be completed.
- How it should be prioritised.
- Who they may seek advice or guidance from.
- Who to report to.

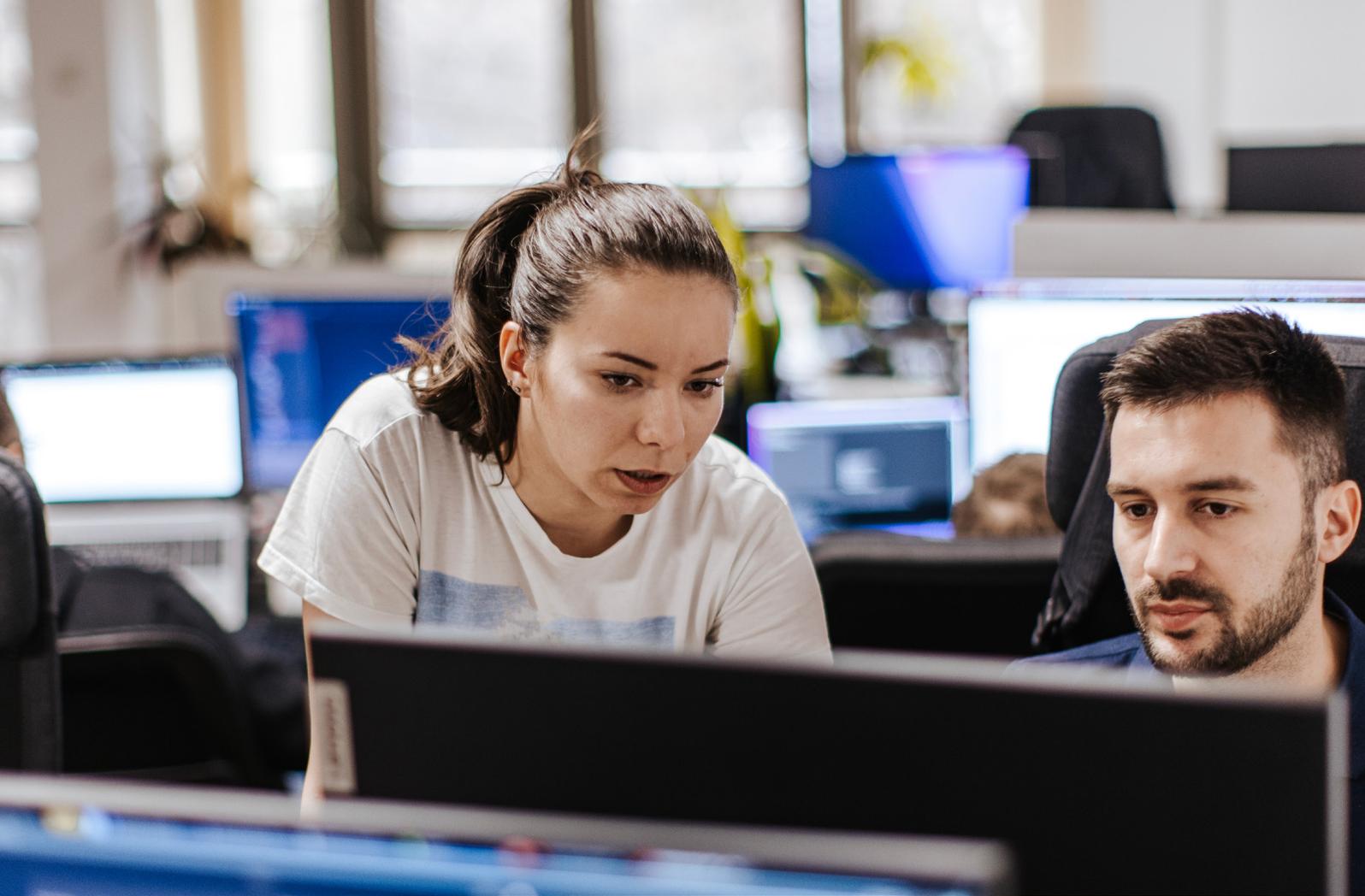
Where reasonable, such guidelines could be outlined in a 'job card' giving visual cues as to each stage of the job.

Employees after induction

In addition to ensuring that identified reasonable adjustments are kept under review, employers should also:

- Provide timely notice of any anticipated changes in the work schedule or to the work environment to assist the employee to prepare for and adapt to the change. For example, meetings or work priorities being rescheduled.
- Appoint a colleague to be a mentor for an autistic employee. A mentor can be a familiar point of contact for the employee to help them to discuss and obtain assistance with any issues which may arise, and to be an advocate on their behalf.

- Provide autism awareness training to all your staff. This is additional to the general equal opportunities and anti-harassment training that should be provided to all staff as a matter of general good practice. This promotes understanding and underpins the provision of support within the work environment and beyond.
- Where practicable, for example, where enough staff may make it worthwhile, allow autistic and other neurodivergent employees to form a staff network from which you may obtain feedback or proposals that might benefit all.
- Where appropriate or necessary, engage help from external support organisations that offer job coaching, mentoring or support to autistic people in employment. Refer to Appendices 2 and 3 for further information.
- Arrange regular 'one to one' meetings to enable constructive discussion and feedback on the employee's role, performance and needs. These should be pre-arranged to enable the employee to prepare.
- Be alert to changes in your employee's behaviour, for example, how an autistic employee reacts to changes or unexpected distractions in the working environment.



8. Line managing an autistic employee

A supportive line manager is key to successful employment for both the autistic employee and for the employer. Effective communication is central to this.

Begin by having an introductory meeting with the employee to assure them that you are there to support them.

Establish whether a 'support plan' or 'disability passport', or equivalent document, in respect of the employee has been agreed with the Human Resources department. Establish what it requires of you as the line manager.

Other steps that line managers may take include:

General leadership and awareness

- Leading by good example.
- Learning about autism through awareness training, or by reading guides and websites written by experts. See Appendix 3 for a list of resources.
- Doing this regularly to keep abreast of developments and current information.
- Not making prior or stereotypical assumptions about the employee, their abilities, or their needs; assess the employee on their own merits and ask them about their needs.
- Remember that each person is an individual. Get to know the person and their capabilities, strengths and needs.

Clear communication and expectations

- Be clear about expectations, both yours and the employees.
- Give clear, direct, and precise explanations and instructions.
- Where possible, use the employee's preferred method of communication.
- Avoid information overload as this can be difficult to process.
- Avoid using idioms, like 'flying your kite', as many autistic people interpret such phrases literally, and this can lead to misunderstanding.

Promoting diversity and inclusion

- Show respect and acceptance for difference and promote diversity.
- Hold regular 'one-to-one' meetings to provide structured opportunity for discussion and feedback. Where reasonable, allow the employee to be accompanied by a companion for support.
- Plan ahead with the employee's needs in mind:
 - This will help to give the employee a structured and predictable routine.
 - It may also reduce or avoid potential and foreseeable causes of stress and anxiety. For example, give the autistic person advance notice of fire drills, especially if they are hypersensitive to noise, and consider how they may react to real fire alarms, such how to ensure they are safe if they sometimes wear headphones to cope with the usual ambient noise.

Handling stressful situations

- Where unduly stressful situations occur unexpectedly, give the employee time and space to recover and to reduce their anxiety.

Individual approach

- Establish who to contact in the event of emergencies, for example, family members, employment support workers.

Many of these strategies are applicable to managing any team or individual but will help considerably to create a positive employment experience for an autistic person by, for instance, anticipating their reactions and needs, and by removing or reducing the potential causes of stress and anxiety.

Further guidance and advice on recruiting and managing a person who is autistic can be sought from the organisations who are listed in Appendices 2 and 3.

Appendix 1

Autism and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The **Disability Discrimination Act 1995** (DDA) is the equality law in Northern Ireland that prohibits **disability discrimination** against **disabled people** who are in work, or who are seeking work.

The DDA and its duties apply to every aspect of employment from recruitment through to termination of the contract and everything in between, such as pay, training and career development, performance, and attendance management.

Is autism a ‘disability’?

Yes. The DDA, as amended by the **Autism Act (NI) 2011**, recognises that a life-long condition like autism is a disability because of the considerable way in which it may hinder an autistic person from:

- Taking part in normal social interactions.
- Forming social relationships, and/or in.
- Concentrating on, learning, or understanding information, or how other people communicate or behave.

As noted elsewhere in this guide, it is important for employers to recognise that an autistic person may also have conditions that co-exist with their autism and that may interact with it. Those may also be ‘disabilities’ for the purposes of the DDA, for example, learning disabilities, mental health disabilities or physical disabilities.

What is disability discrimination?

Disability discrimination may occur in several ways, the best known of which are:

- Direct discrimination.
- Harassment.
- Victimisation.
- Failure to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments.

Direct discrimination

This occurs where an employer treats a disabled person **less favourably** than other people **because they are disabled**.

For example, it would be direct discrimination for an employer to reject a job application from an autistic person for the sole reason that the applicant is autistic.

The best way to avoid this is for employers to treat disabled job applicants and employees fairly, giving each a fair opportunity to show and to be judged on their merits. To ensure this, employers must comply with any duty they may be under to make **reasonable adjustments** to address a disabled person's needs during recruitment exercises, or in the course of their employment.

Employers may also take **positive action** by treating disabled people **more favourably** than people who are not disabled. Employers are encouraged to do this.

Harassment

Harassment is offensive behaviour that, whether done deliberately or not, may cause its victim to feel physically and/or emotionally hurt, anxious or distressed.

Harassment that is related to an autistic person's autism is unlawful, for example, if an autistic employee is bullied by a co-worker who makes fun of their behaviour, that is disability-related harassment.

Employers should take action to prevent such behaviour from occurring in their workplaces. All employees should be informed strongly that they are expected to behave appropriately towards others in the course of their work.

The Equality Commission provides guidance on preventing harassment – see [Harmonious Workplaces](#).

Victimisation

This occurs where an employer treats a disabled person **less favourably** than other people **because they previously complained that they had been discriminated by the employer before**.

For example, it would be victimisation where a line manager provides an autistic employee with an unfair annual appraisal report in retaliation for the employee having previously complained that the line manager had harassed them.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments

The DDA is most notable for imposing a special duty on employers to make **reasonable adjustments** for disabled people. The goal of the duty is to **'level the playing field'** to enable disabled people to enjoy the same opportunities as all other people to obtain and remain in work.

A failure to comply with the reasonable adjustment duty is unlawful disability discrimination.

As a preliminary, there is one general adjustment that it would be reasonable for all employers to adopt: **change your attitude**, if necessary, by **adopting positive attitudes towards disabled people** and by **abandoning negative biases against them**. Be open-minded and understanding and be willing to listen and learn.

Beyond that, the duty operates by requiring employers to change how they normally do things, or to provide things that they do not normally provide to others. The DDA expressly suggests the following examples:

- Making adjustments to premises for example, installing suitable lighting at workstations.
- Allocating some of the employee's duties to another person.
- Transferring the employee to an existing vacancy.
- Altering the employee's hours of work or training.
- Changing the employee's place of work or training for example, allowing an autistic employee to work from home, or in a quiet place in the employer's premises.
- Allowing the employee time off to receive medical treatment, assessment, or rehabilitation.
- Providing training or mentoring to the disabled person or to others for example, autism awareness training for co-workers.
- Acquiring or modifying equipment or software for example, providing ear defenders to an autistic person to block out noise.
- Modifying instructions or reference manuals for example, taking extra time to explain things, or changing how things are explained using clearer language.
- Providing a reader or interpreter for example, in a job interview, allowing the candidate to be accompanied by a support worker who can rephrase questions to make them more easily understood.
- Modifying procedures for testing or assessment for example, allowing extra time in a recruitment interview or aptitude test, or changing the format of the interview or test, or waiving the interview or test.

- Providing supervision or other support for example, appointing a co-worker to be a mentor for an autistic person.

Multiple illustrations of the kinds of adjustments that may be suitable for autistic people are outlined throughout this guide.

What an employer may need to do in practice may vary from person to person depending on each disabled person's individual needs and on the employer's own circumstances, including whether help is available from elsewhere.

To help employers to comply with the reasonable adjustment duty in respect of the various needs that different disabled people may have, it would be good practice to try to anticipate those needs in advance and to prepare processes to address them.

For example, under the Northern Ireland Autism Strategy 2023-28, the Northern Ireland Civil Service plans to:

...work in partnership with key stakeholders including people who have a lived experience of autism to review and implement a new reasonable adjustment process and develop a range of supporting resources for managers.

The Equality Commission provides guidance on making reasonable adjustments.

- [Disability Code of Practice – Employment and Occupation](#) (pdf) at Chapter 5

- [Recruiting People with Disabilities](#)

Positive Action

May I treat disabled people more favourably than others?

Yes. The DDA allows employers to treat disabled people more favourably than people who are not disabled. Doing this is called taking **positive action**.

The positive actions listed below are lawful provided they are offered to people with disabilities generally, rather than only to people with specific impairments, for example, autism, learning disabilities, sensory disabilities or other.

Examples of positive action:

- Providing vocational training opportunities solely to people who have disabilities,
- Using work trials as an alternative method of assessing whether applicants with disabilities have the skills and competencies needed for a job, i.e. as an alternative to other traditional methods of making these assessments, such as interviews or tests,
- Offering guaranteed interviews to all disabled applicants who meet the minimum selection criteria for the job,
- Ring-fencing a number of vacant posts to be filled only by disabled people.

The Equality Commission provides [guidance on taking positive action](#).

Appendix 2

The Government's employment support services

The Department for Communities provides advice and support to employers and to people with disabilities, including autism. The following section provides summary detail on the support available.

Employer Services

The Department for Communities offers a dedicated single point of contact approach to supporting employers with their employability needs. Dedicated Account Managers offer free recruitment advice and signposting services across employability programmes, tailored recruitment to promote vacancies on JobApplyNI, interview support and job matching, the delivery of small and large Job Fairs, and bespoke events such as Meet the Employer.

Should any employer require support because of autism or any health condition or disability, Employer Services can provide advice and guidance on the support available. Contact information can be found by visiting: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/contacts/employer-services>

Employability Programmes and Services

The Department for Communities provides support to people with autism to progress towards, move into and stay in employment, and provide access to specialist advice:

Workable (NI) offers a flexible range of long-term support to help people with disabilities, including autism, to keep working. Support is tailored for individuals to meet their specific needs in the workplace and will include a 1-2-1 support from a Job Coach for the individual, their colleagues and employer.

Access to Work (NI) assists people who are in paid employment or are starting a job, through the provision of practical support, and by helping to meet the additional costs associated with overcoming work-related obstacles that may result from having a disability. It also helps employers who wish to recruit or retain people with disabilities in employment.

Practical support can include:

- Communication support at interviews.
- Advice on adapting premises.
- Special aids.
- Assistance with travel to work.
- Providing a support worker.

Condition Management Programme is a voluntary programme funded by Department for Communities and delivered by multidisciplinary health care professionals in the five Northern Ireland Health & Social Care Trusts.

It aims to give people in work, and benefit claimants, strategies and supports to manage their health condition(s) and make progress towards making a return to, remaining in, or entering work.

Work Psychology Services. Employment Assessments are conducted by occupational psychologists who specialise in disability, neurodiversity, and employment. The assessment can help employers and employees to identify a person's abilities and strengths and how the disability and/or neurodivergent condition, such as autism could affect employment, so that they can get the support they need to find and retain work.

Further information on these programmes and services can be found at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/employment-support-people-disabilities-or-health-conditions/work-schemes>

Local Jobs and Benefits Offices

Teams are available within local Jobs and Benefits Offices to offer specific help and advice to members of the public. This may be general benefits or employability advice, linked to financial support or entitlements, or can be more specialised to personal circumstances including disability and health conditions.

Contact details and locations for each Jobs and Benefits Office are available online via <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/jobs-and-benefits-offices>

More Information & Contact Details

The Department for Communities regularly refreshes its employability offering. For more detail and contact information on the support available to employers and those with disabilities or health conditions, please visit:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/employment-training-and-careers/looking-work>

Appendix 3

Other organisations who can provide autism-related employment support, training services, advice, or information.

Access Employment Limited

Address: 32-34 Pound Street
Larne, BT40 1SQ
Telephone: 028 2827 4992
Website: <https://accessemployment.co.uk>

Appleby Trust/Print it

Telephone: 028 3751 8247 (Armagh)
028 4066 9576 (Banbridge)
028 3831 6263 (Lurgan)
Website: www.applebyprintit.co.uk

Autism NI

Address: Donard, Knockbracken Healthcare Park
Saintfield Road
Belfast, BT8 8BH
Telephone: 028 9040 1729
Website: <https://autismni.org>

Cedar Foundation

Address: 1 Ravenhill Reach Close
Belfast, BT6 8RB
Telephone: 028 90461834
Website: <https://www.cedar-foundation.org>

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

Website: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/neuroinclusion-work>

Clanrye Group

Address: Slieve Gullion Courtyard
89 Drumintee Road
Newry, BT35 8SW
Telephone: 028 3089 8119
Website: <https://clanryegroup.com>

Compass Advocacy Network (CAN)

Address: 32 Lislagan Road
Ballymoney, BT53 7DD
Telephone: 028 27523053
Website: <https://compasspeople.org>

Disability Action

Address: Portside Business Park
189 Airport Road West
Belfast, BT3 9ED
Telephone: 028 9029 7880
Website: <https://www.disabilityaction.org>

Employers for Disability NI

Address: Banbridge Enterprise Centre
Scarva Road Industrial Estate
Banbridge, BT32 3QD
Telephone: 028 4062 4526
Website: <https://efdni.org>

Mencap NI

Telephone: 0808 808 1111 (NI Helpline)
028 9069 1351 (Belfast)
028 8225 9249 (Omagh)
0283 026 7077, or 07827 331027 (Newry)
028 7126 2227 (Derry / Londonderry)
NI Helpline: helpline.ni@mencap.org.uk
Website: <https://northernireland.mencap.org.uk>

National Autistic Society

Website: <https://www.autism.org.uk>
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/employment>

Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE)

Telephone: 028 7137 7709
Email: info@niuse.org.uk

NOW Group

Address: 15-17 Grosvenor Road
Belfast, BT12 4GN
Telephone: 028 9043 6400
Website: www.nowgroup.org

Orchardville

Address: Lagan Village Tower
144-152 Ravenhill Road
Belfast, BT6 8ED
Telephone: 028 9073 2326
Website: www.orchardville.com

Specialisterne NI

Address: The Skainos Centre
239 Newtownards Road
Belfast, BT4 1AF
Telephone: 028 9073 9601
Website: www.specialisterneni.com

Stepping Stones NI

Address: 39 Seymour Street
Lisburn, BT27 4SY
Telephone: 028 9266 7124
Website: www.steppingstonesni.com

Triangle Housing Association

Address: 60 Eastermeade Gardens
Ballymoney, BT53 6BD
Telephone: 028 2766 6880
Website: www.trianglehousing.org.uk/prosper

Ulster Supported Employment Limited (USEL)

Address: 182-188 Cambrai Street
Belfast, BT13 3JH
Telephone: 028 9035 6600
Website: www.usel.co.uk

This guidance was made in partnership with:

- **Autism NI**
- **National Autistic Society**
- **ARC (Association for Real Change)**
- **Specialisterne**
- **Autism Initiatives**
- **NOW Group**
- **Barnardo's**
- **Cedar Foundation**
- **Orchardville**
- **Mencap NI**
- **Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment.**



For further information and guidance, please contact:

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Equality House, 7-9 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast, BT2 7DP

Telephone: +44 028 90 500 600

Email: information@equalityni.org

Web: www.equalityni.org