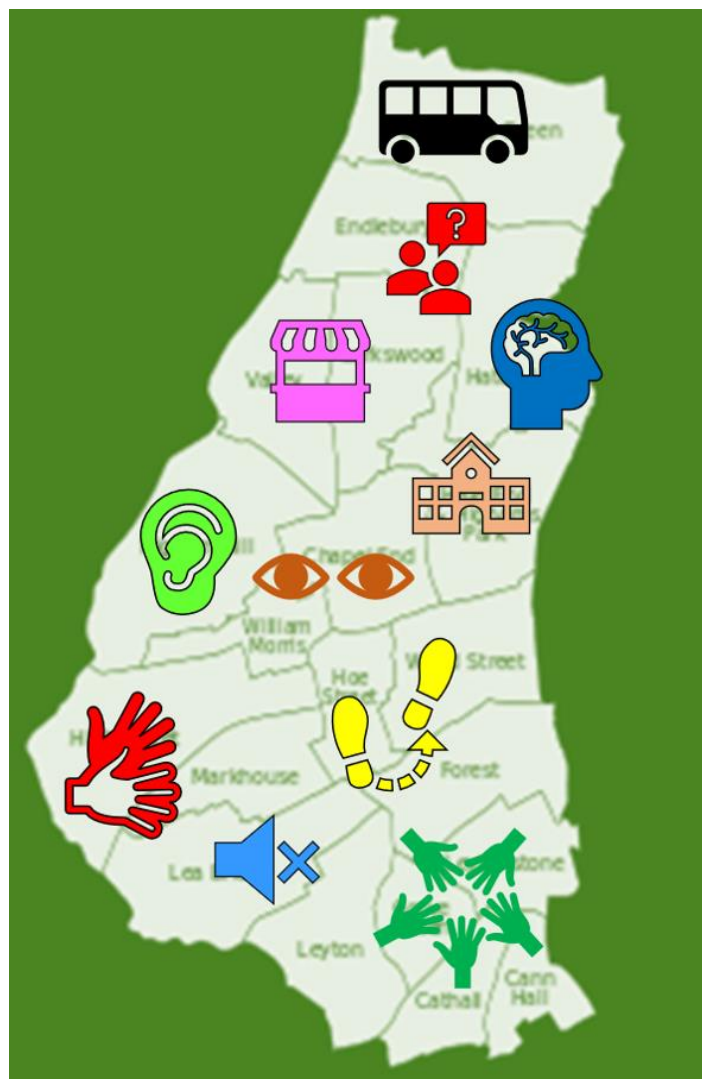


# Waltham Forest All-Age Autism Strategy 2021-2026



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## FOREWORD

The All-age Autism Strategy sets out a clear vision to become an autism-friendly borough. We believe that autistic people living and working in Waltham Forest should be able to live fulfilling and rewarding lives within a society that accepts and understands them.

Autism touches the lives of many people and can affect all aspects of life, from education to healthcare to employment and social and personal lives. Our strategy aims to make a real difference to the lives of autistic residents of all ages, and their carers in Waltham Forest.

By working with partners, providers and our communities, we can develop and design services, spaces and a culture that will achieve improved outcomes and better inclusivity.

This strategy takes a lifespan approach, including children, young people, adults and families, and carers. We recognise that increasing awareness and acceptance of autism in the wider community and in our staff, and increasing knowledge and understanding is the key to succeeding in this.

Through our engagement we have heard from residents about some amazing projects and practices and we want to develop these further and make improvements in a range of areas. We want to keep hearing from the public with new ideas, success stories, and with feedback on how we are doing with the strategy.

This strategy represents the start of a journey that the Council, our partners, and the community need to take together.

Cllr Williams and Cllr Limbajee

# INTRODUCTION

## Autism and autism-friendly

Autism affects the way that a person interacts with and experiences the world around them. Autism affects at least 1% of the population, although it is likely that this is underestimated. This equates to around 2800 residents in Waltham Forest.



The Autism Act (2009) and relevant strategies have increased autism awareness, but autistic people continue to be disadvantaged in areas including health outcomes, education, employment, and the criminal justice system.

We want to become an autism friendly borough so that Waltham Forest is welcoming, inclusive and accessible. We want to reduce inequality and maximise life chances for autistic residents.

## What does autism-friendly mean to you?

Throughout the engagement that has taken place to produce this strategy, an important message that has been raised throughout is that everyone is different and there can never be a one size fits all approach. Autism is a broad spectrum and people need, want, and enjoy different things. Being an autism-friendly borough will mean different things to different people and will change throughout a persons lifetime.

From what you have told us 'autism-friendly' crosses over all parts of a person's life including; practical things; like accessing services or finding a home, social things; like going to cafes/shops or taking part in activities; and personal life things like education and employment or relationships. Here are some of the words we heard from you:



## The Strategy

The all-age autism strategy has been co-produced with colleagues across different Council departments, our partners in health, policing, and local organisations, and our residents. The Strategy comes with an implementation plan which will be reviewed regularly and updated each year. A period of engagement was held internally and externally to tell us what should be in the strategy and what was important to the people of Waltham Forest. Due to restrictions relating to the Covid-19 pandemic this has been predominantly virtual and online.

### Principles

- Autistic people and their families and carers are at the centre of everything we do
- Focus on people's strengths to overcome barriers and thrive in the community
- Guidance, information and support are easily available to all
- The right support at the right time
- Strong awareness/acceptance of autism across the borough
- Autistic people are welcomed in an inclusive borough
- Delivering the actions in the strategy will require action and leadership from all stakeholders

### National Context

National policy including The Autism Act (2009), Think Autism strategy: (2018) and the NHS Long Term Plan (2019) and research have highlighted the need to reduce inequalities experienced by autistic people- these include, low numbers of people in employment, increased risk of lower educational outcomes, being socially isolated, increased mental health issues, early mortality and increased risk of being involved with the criminal justice system.

### Local Context

The engagement that we have carried out to date as well as existing knowledge in the system indicates that many of the inequalities we see nationally in health, education, employment, and the criminal justice system are currently experienced within Waltham Forest. We have been told that there are some good things happening in Waltham Forest, such as some employers with good employment practices, targeted social care support providers, some mainstream schools offering inclusive education and businesses running quiet times. However, positive experiences aren't consistent, and we have heard that too often people don't have the information and advice they need. There is not always the support for young people in mainstream schools, a lack of peer support for autistic people and families, not enough employment opportunities, and a lack of community awareness and acceptance and not enough activities for different ages, needs and interests.

A gap analysis highlighted the below findings that we hope this strategy and plan will address:

- Inconsistent offer across education settings
- Lack of a system wide understanding of autism and of local need
- Improvement is needed to increase early identification
- There are gaps in training amongst professionals in a range of areas
- Existing provision needs to be more joined up and refreshed regularly to reflect need and would benefit from a move to outcomes-focused performance management
- Lack of available data and a need to improve data sharing
- A need to develop and increase low-level support and intervention

# PRIORITIES

Through our discussions with residents and local professionals a set of priority areas have been agreed. These are based on the views and feedback we have received that have helped to develop an understanding of what needs to change or improve to make Waltham Forest an autism-friendly borough. It is recognised that over the five years of this strategy other areas may arise and can be added as part of the live implementation plan.

There are some areas of work that straddle more than one priority. In addition, there are some themes that cross all priorities:



## **Communication**

Communication should be consistent, strong and regular across the different agencies and with service users and their families. It should happen across the professionals, parents, schools, and all other people involved in an individual's life in a valuable way.

In addition to communication specific to individuals work needs to be done to strengthen the routes of communication about ways to get involved such as the engagement on this strategy.

## **Council Role**

The Council needs to lead by example with making changes, influencing other agencies, businesses, education settings and the community. The Council should share practices that contribute to the aim of becoming an autism-friendly borough and encourage take up of ideas.

Autistic people and autism should be considered in wider Council strategies and changes that are made such as the Dementia Strategy, Public Services, Corporate Strategies and large changes to public spaces.

## **Intersectional issues**



The strategy needs to recognise that an autistic person may, like many other people in the borough, have another need such as English not being a first language, a disability, mental health and wellbeing, or financial concerns.

Cultural identity and diversity needs to be explored further to reflect our diversity in the borough.



## 1. Starting out well

Recognising autism can be challenging, it may present in different ways and autism is a broad spectrum. More information and training is needed in recognising signs of autism in different ages, genders, and cultures. Recognising autism as early as possible and delivering early intervention is important. It should be recognised that not everyone wants a diagnosis and support and adjustments should be available without diagnosis or whilst an individual is waiting for assessment.



*“Knowledge is power”* - Professionals should receive training on recognising autism and what to do next including referral pathways and support that can be delivered prior to diagnosis. Information should also be available to the community to help autistic people and their families recognise their own needs and where they are on the spectrum and help them to explore their identity as autistic people. People told us that they would like easy access to information as early as possible on things like;

- What to expect, what good looks like, and what is available locally
- National and local data in a transparent format
- Where to get support and advice from professionals and peers
- Positive stories and successes
- Clubs or businesses that offer things like quiet sessions or altered environments
- Information and support specific to those who are diagnosed later in life

There were a lot of helpful suggestions about where information could be made available including:

- Council websites, Local Offer, the hub, local news, in libraries, health services, schools, on community notice boards, through faith groups, shopping malls or cafes, residential homes and supported living accommodation, community hubs, social media, local networks
- Having an autism webpage bringing relevant information into one place with helpful links

It was recognised that not everyone accesses information in the same way or at the same time. Information and things like training and courses need to be available outside of work hours.

### What good looks like:

- Parents are given the information to engage and children and able to engage
- Clear and accessible information for autistic residents parents, carers and professionals.
- Autistic residents and their families are empowered to make informed decisions for their child
- Diagnosis as early as possible, where it is wanted
- Professionals working with children and adults are trained and knowledgeable on recognising signs and making referrals where necessary
- Recognising the different experiences and differences of autistic for boys and girls and the impact this has on under-diagnoses
- Recognising the different experiences around autism in different cultures
- Clear signposting for new parents wanting to raise concerns about their child's development
- Clear pathways to assessment and intervention

## 2. Fair access to quality education and learning



All schools and education settings need to be inclusive across staff, other children and environments. The engagement told us that in some places there is some fantastic practice going on but this is not consistent across all schools and settings. All settings need to be equipped to give a fair offer. In one session it was fed back that a positive school experience made it feel 'like I had my child back'. Staff in schools should have training but this should not just be limited to teachers.

Staff need to be equipped to spot signs and know how to offer support and understand signs of stress. It would be useful to look at sensory differences as part of training to improve understanding. Behaviour policies in schools and education settings should be reviewed to ensure they are helpful not uncooperative and using the right language. More opportunities for flexible schooling should be explored so that more children can attend mainstream settings, it was recognised that this is a national and policy-related issue. There were concerns about finding and moving to secondary schools. New places and the size of secondary schools can be daunting and some feel there is not as much support is available at this stage.

Schools would benefit from having an autism champion in their senior leadership team and have a policy or strategy to confirm their approach.

### **What good looks like:**

- Improved communication between settings across primary, secondary, post 16 settings to build full picture of individual support
- Schools, the LA, and Parents work together to ensure the best opportunities in education for children and young people
- Professionals in schools are knowledgeable of the variety of ways autism may be presented
- Transitions are supported by good planning and support for individuals and carers/parents
- Strong workforce that celebrates and accepts personalities and behaviours rather than labels
- Sufficient places in the right school for the individual to meet the need such as resource provisions, special school places and supportive mainstream schools. Reasonable adjustments are made to ensure placement is suitable
- Develop whole school policies and approaches to autism so all in a school community including an inclusive ethos and adapted behavioural policies for children with SEND that require reasonable adjustments, not just those with a diagnosis
- Schools consider a whole-life approach including educational, social, and independence skills)
- Schools consider their environments and make appropriate adjustments  
Innovative ideas are explored such as more flexible options for schooling



### 3. Supporting families and networks

Waltham Forest benefits from some fantastic networks and support groups and we have had some great feedback about these. We were also told that many people did not know where to go for support or felt they needed something else more suited to their needs. More promotion of existing networks and groups is needed and we want to try and develop this area further so that everyone has somewhere to go for support and sharing experiences.

It was recognised that there is real value in peer to peer support. This could involve carers and parents offering support and lived experience on things they have already been through to those who are new to each stage of life as well as being able to share information and ideas about local activities or contacts. As networks are developed autistic people and their carers/families can organise group activities and develop friendships. Some areas for development included networks and groups for autistic adults and older people, for different cultures and languages, ensuring siblings are supported, and having an autism forum. There should be a mix of online networking and in person and different groups in the community could act as champions help to raise awareness in the community.

#### What good looks like

- Support networks and groups are accessible to all that need it and are able to meet their needs
- Support networks and group share knowledge and experiences and offer peer to peer training/knowledge sharing of a variety of issues
- Support networks and groups are promoted and publicised in a range of places and are well-known across our diverse community
- Suitable respite options are available including child care and short breaks
- There are befriending options in the borough
- Support is available when it is needed no matter what time and in different formats



## 4. Keeping autistic people safe from harm



Staying safe can mean out in the community but also online. Parents shared concerns about autistic young people being vulnerable to things like grooming, exploitation, abuse and radicalisation and that it would help if lessons around this type of things could be tailored to autistic people.

Services need to consider how they deliver lessons and training such as Prevent and healthy relationships and make adjustments to ensure messages are clear to autistic people.

Professionals working throughout the criminal justice system should know how to respond to autistic people, how to help them out in the community and have awareness and understanding of how an autistic person may present.

We know that there are some previously unidentified young people becoming known to the health and social care system through the criminal justice route. It is recognised that lack of opportunities and activities can increase the vulnerability that autistic people may have in relation to criminal exploitation and gangs.

In addition to the risk of being victims of, or becoming involved in criminality we also need to look at how we can support autistic people to stay safe in their community in terms of the physical environment around them. This can be supported by clear and simple signs, places of safety and people in community roles knowing how to help.

### What good looks like:

- Autistic people are protected from vulnerabilities to criminal exploitation, radicalisation and online exploitation
- Training and information on areas such as radicalisation, gangs, healthy relationships and online safety should be delivered in a way that is appropriate for autistic people. Additional training and advice is available when required.
- Professionals in the criminal justice system including enforcement officers are aware and understanding of autism and know how to communicate and respond
- Environments are safe for those with sensory needs
- Autistic people are supported to develop emotional resilience
- Barriers such as no recourse to public funds are removed



## 5. Mental health and wellbeing

Studies have found that autistic people are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population. This is particularly present in certain conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD and impulse control conduct disorders. This could be in part due to there being a lack of support that is delivered in a targeted way for autistic people, and lack of support to develop coping skills, social isolation, and inequalities faced by autistic people.



It is also recognised that delayed assessment and diagnostic appointments for children who may have autism potentially lead to unnecessary interventions and/or exacerbations of potential mental health needs. There needs to be more knowledge about how things may need to work different for an autistic person in mental health services.

### What good looks like:

- Low level interventions are available and easy to access
- Young people are supported to build emotional resilience
- Where needed professionals develop transition planning, health action plans, and health passports
- Reasonable adaptations to enable autistic people to access mental health services



## 6. Employment opportunities

“Employment should be for the many not the few”



Employment was a regular theme in many of our engagement sessions. People told us they felt it was difficult to find work or that autistic people close to them find it hard to find work.

There are some positive examples in and out of the borough of employers making reasonable adjustments, offering opportunities and supporting autistic people at work but more needs to be done to mainstream this offer.

Employment opportunities should be sustainable. Although internship programmes and work experience are valuable opportunities however there should also be longer-term options and progression routes. It is not just the job itself that needs to be considered, there are things that can be done around support with travel to workplaces, job skills training including how to find work, and building relationships with local employers.

There needs to be increased awareness amongst our employers locally and public sector agencies should be leading by example. Work needs to be done with businesses to ensure they are able to supply opportunities.

### What good looks like:

- Sustainable employment opportunities are available to autistic people
- Autistic residents are supported to find and retain employment
- Business and employers are equipped to offer opportunities, support and reasonable adjustments
- Reasonable adjustments and adaptations are considered at work as well for the job search and interview processes
- Employment is for the many, not the few

## 7. Improving access to quality and inclusive services

Waltham Forest needs to have a variety of activities and clubs that our autistic residents can feel comfortable enjoying. For some, these activities need to be tailored to their needs, however many autistic children and adults want to access mainstream activities and be able to enjoy these alongside other people their age, with or without additional support. Many ideas about activities came up demonstrating the diverse range of interests our residents have. From sports and nature to puzzles and video games, and just somewhere to go to socialise with people, a broad range of activities is needed. Provision needs to reflect different interests, age groups, and being with or with family/carers. Even with the activities available there are still barriers to enjoying these and these need to be addressed:

- Long and unruly queues
- Not feeling accepted in the community/by other people
- Activities and locations not being autism-friendly
- Activities that are not equipped to have autistic people join in terms of staffing
- Separation anxiety
- Getting there

There are already some successful examples and ideas to improve social inclusion such as designating access to shops or activities for autistic people, having safe spaces to meet indoors and outdoors that a widely known, and autistic people having a more visible presence such as through creating blogs, videos, or sharing drawing.

Although becoming an autism-friendly borough is important in terms of community interaction and day to day lives there still needs to be specialist provision and support for those that need it. This should be high-quality and accessible in a timely way.

As well as specialist provision autistic people will at times need to access non-specialist services such as housing of benefits. For an autistic person, accessing services might be particularly challenging, such as contacting call centres or filling out a form. All staff should have awareness of autism and know how to respond and should be accepting and helpful.

Autism should be considered in wider Council strategies in their development stages and also in changes that are happening around the borough such as road layouts, redesigns on public spaces and buildings and organising events. This should not be limited to the Council and other agencies like health and the police should make changes too and should try to influence private sector organisations. It should include physical environments as well as staff.

### **What good looks like**

- Public-facing services and departments understand autism and how to respond and understanding of autism is improved
- Local facilities and services are accessible and welcoming such as the Town Hall Campus
- Specialist provision is of high-quality and accessible in a timely way. Support is outcome-based.
- Service users are happy with the method of accessing services that they use e.g. commissioned services, direct payments, etc.
- Events, public spaces and services are inclusive, involving diverse group in designing them
- Barriers to accessing and engaging with services are explored and resolved before individuals are removed from lists

## 8. Taking a lifespan approach



In all of our lives we experience change, for an autistic person this can be even more challenging. Our response to autism needs to consider autistic people of all ages, from young children to older adults, and the transition periods they will experience along the way. We are committed to ensuring autistic people of all ages have access to information, advice and support. Work needs to be completed to better understand the barriers that specific groups face such as older people.

The engagement gave us an opportunity to hear from autistic people and carers of autistic people across a range of ages and stages of life. We heard that there is particular anxiety around the transition to secondary school, leaving education, moving onto adult services, and experiencing additional health concerns for older adults. These points can be supported by available information on what to expect, a consistent offer for all ages that is age appropriate, and support from peers who have lived experience of each stage.

Approaching the senior years can mean changes in housing, health, and daily care. Autism needs to be considered in throughout our response for older people through our services, our strategies such as the Dementia Strategy, and our information and advice. It is recognised that for some older adults they may not have received a diagnosis when they were young, and may still not have one or want one. However this group still needs to be supported, particularly at this challenging time in their lives.



#### **What good looks like:**

- Autistic residents, parents, and carers are informed about what to expect from the next stage including moving schools, adolescence, preparing for adulthood, moving away from home, and getting older.
- Transition points are planned for to avoid a sudden drop-off of services and access to age-appropriate support.
- Existing responses such as Ageing Well, 15 minute Neighbourhoods, and Preparing for Adulthood consider Autism in their development and delivery.
- Life history moves with the person

## **9. The right home and housing**



Everyone should be able to access to the right home for them and, where needed, these should be long term homes. There is a need to expand the local response to provide options that suit different people. This may include things like expanding Shared Living or Respite options. Suitable autism friendly accommodation is basic need and people have told us that some families struggle with obtaining suitable housing that takes autism into account.

Local authorities are required under the Equality Act to take into account the needs of disabled people when considering housing provision. This includes the needs of young people and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

#### **What good looks like:**

- Appropriate housing is accessible for all
- Support is available to go through process for obtaining appropriate housing with responsive, understanding staff
- Autistic people get the same opportunities to live with who they want, where they want in quality housing
- There is a robust respite and shared lives offer



## **10. Inclusive Communities**

Being part of the community and enjoying a social life is important. Everyone should be able to do every-day things in a way that suits them and feels comfortable. There are many small changes that can be made to places the community use to make them more autism-friendly. Some of the examples we have heard that can make a big difference include:

- Quiet areas or quiet times including in outdoor spaces
- Considerate lighting and regular checks for things like flickering lights
- Minimising unnecessary noise
- Spaces to take a break or be alone
- Multiple entrances/exits
- Alcoves and storage spaces with no door on busy corridors for momentary respite
- Access to windows
- Removing hand dryers from public bathrooms
- Wider and lighter doors
- Clear and simple signs



These are all things that can benefit not only autistic residents but the wider community as well. These changes can be made in different types of places that people visit from public buildings and schools, to shops and businesses, to the streets and outdoor spaces. Several people raised that public transport can be a challenge. Better signposting, awareness training for transport staff and simple information would help make this easier.

The physical environment is not the only way to make our community spaces autism-friendly, the people of our community can also make a difference. Professionals and the public need to be aware of autism but also accepting and welcoming, regardless of if an individual identifies themselves as autistic or not.

Professionals should be trained in recognising potential signs of autism and know what to do to help and where to signpost or refer when needed. This needs to be at all touch points such as health visitors, school staff, early years professionals, health professionals, and others. In addition to professionals it would be useful for the public to understand signs and where to go to help people recognise their own needs or their family members and help embed a culture of acceptance of autism in Waltham Forest.

Some ideas about how greater awareness can be developed included information on autism online and in community spaces, training, public awareness sessions and events that celebrate positive stories of autistic people, and awareness raising with local businesses.

#### **What good looks like:**

- The community are aware and accepting of autistic people and autistic people are made to feel welcome and an important part of our community
- Different communities and cultures are knowledgeable and accepting about autism
- Waltham Forest has autism-friendly environments such as toilets without hand dryers, quiet spaces/times, etc
- Professionals in public services and local businesses are knowledgeable and welcoming

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on autistic people due to the restrictions this has placed in everyday life. Particularly challenges that people have told us about included difficulty with social distancing or limitations to services. We hope to learn from the experiences we have heard about and mitigate these risks in any further restrictions on future similar issue.

There have, however, been some positive outcomes that have grown out of the new way of living we have found ourselves in. There has been an improvement in digital support that can be accessed from home and at different times which can help autistic people and carers that are in work or education. There have also been practices such as time out spaces in schools and workplaces for everyone which can be particularly helpful for an autistic person.

The development of the strategy has also been affected. We recognise that virtual engagement does not suit everyone and that may mean some people have not yet had a chance to tell us their views. We also recognise that it will take time to build up our networks and relationships throughout the borough and therefore we may not have reached everyone. We will continue to build throughout the life of the strategy, and hope to involve more people as we review progress and add to our implementation plan moving forward. We hope that in future this can be face-to-face. As well as affecting the production, some of the issues raised have been further exacerbated by the pandemic such as waiting lists, social activities and face to face support.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY**

Feedback and ideas from the survey and sessions told us that the strategy needs to include concrete actions that can be measured and/or officially completed. Monitoring should be built in from the start with regular review alongside autistic people and carers. There should be Council-wide and cabinet level responsibility for the strategy across the spectrum.

Approval of this strategy is sought at Cabinet level but also at several other multi-agency groups to ensure robust buy-in and commitment.

The strategy and implementation plan will be owned by the multi-agency Autism Group with oversight from the Improving Life Chances Board. Regular updates will be required at senior level meetings. Autistic residents, parents, carers and professionals will be asked to review progress each year and to consider any additional actions that should be included.

# APPENDIX

## Background

In April 2020, Waltham Forest Council Cabinet signed up to the aim of becoming an autism-friendly borough. The All-age Autism Strategy has been developed to support this aim and ensure meaningful change takes place. The delivery of this strategy will be supported by the Implementation Plan which will be renewed each year.

We want to become an autism friendly borough so that Waltham Forest is welcoming, inclusive and accessible. We want to reduce inequality and maximise life chances for autistic residents.

As our aim focuses on the borough as a whole it is important that as many people as possible are involved in its development and delivery. For several months the Council has sought the views and ideas of our autistic residents, families, residents, partners and staff to help build the strategy and implementation plan. It is only through this engagement and co-production that we can really achieve our aim. There have been virtual sessions, an online survey, engagement with agencies, schools and different services in the borough and each of these have provided a broad view of where Waltham Forest is now, where we want to get to, and how we can begin the journey of getting there.

We want to thank everyone who has taken part in the engagement in the many different ways. We have had lots of valuable feedback and ideas for the future and want to continue to grow and continue to learn from our residents and professionals.

## Autism; Prevalence and Context

Autism affects the way that a person interacts with and experiences the world around them. Autism affects at least 1% of the population, although it is likely that this is under-estimated, particularly in non-males. This equates to around 2,770 residents in Waltham Forest.

The Autism Act (2009) and relevant strategies have increased autism awareness, but autistic people continue to be disadvantaged in areas including health outcomes, education, employment, and the criminal justice system.

National policy including The Autism Act (2009), Think Autism strategy: (2018) and the NHS Long Term Plan (2019) and research have highlighted the need to reduce inequalities experienced by autistic people- these include, low numbers of people in employment, increased risk of lower educational outcomes, being socially isolated, increased mental health issues, early mortality and increased risk of being involved with the criminal justice system.

To address these inequalities, Think Autism (2018) strategy had a focus upon

- Building communities that are more aware of and accessible to the needs of people with autism.
- Promoting innovative local ideas, services or projects that can help people in their communities; and
- Ensuring advice and information about services is clear and accessible for people.

Autistic children and young people often need educational support particularly during transition between educational stages, including into further or higher education. We know that autistic children are more likely to be bullied, feel socially isolated and that many currently access specialist schooling even when they have no additional learning disability.

We have been told through the engagement delivered that there are some good things happening in Waltham Forest such as some employers with good employment practises, targeted social care support providers, some mainstream schools offering inclusive education and business running quiet times so that autistic people and their families are able to shop. However, positive experiences are not yet consistent and we have heard that too often people don't have the information and advice they need, there is not always the support for young people in mainstream schools, a lack of peer support for autistic young people adults and their families, not enough employment opportunities, and a lack of community awareness and acceptance.

### **Summary of the local offer and gaps**

Based on the engagement to inform this strategy, and professionals sharing knowledge, we know there is a lot of positive things happening in Waltham Forest. In addition to statutory services and specialist provision people have told us about some local good practice relating to employment, some existing support groups and networks that have helped them, valuable day opportunities, a review in progress of therapies, the SEND Outreach provision for schools, and some positive early years work and support. The useful links section above can help you to find out more about what is on offer locally.

However, a gap analysis and your feedback have highlighted some areas where there are gaps or improvements to be made to current provisions and responses. The offer for autistic residents can vary dependent on age, level of need, and stage of the diagnostic process.

For children the following areas have been highlighted as gaps or areas for improvement:

- Delays and gaps within speech and language therapy and occupational therapy
  - a review of Therapies as a whole is in progress and will be included within the Implementation Plan.
- Delayed assessment and diagnostic appointments for children who may have autism which can have an impact on mental health – additional capacity funded by NELFT has helped to reduce this and work continues in this area
- Some felt the respite offer was not sufficient for them, in particularly a gap was highlighted around the 16-25 year old age group as adult provision may not be appropriate or of interest and the childrens provision may seem to young for them.
- People fed back that PBS Training is valuable but not always available
- A loss of Teaching Assistants has impacted children in school settings
- We heard that parents feel there is not enough specialist ASD provision in some secondary schools
- Further consideration is needed around possible training for schools in autism such as AET and SCERTS training
- Previously unidentified young people becoming known to system via other service engagement: criminal justice / A&E etc
- Uncoordinated approach to transitions
- Young people can arrive late and previously unknown into the system resulting in CETR and more high cost and intensive solutions required

Some of the above also applies for autistic people of any age. In addition, for adults we identified these areas:

- Better support is needed for people to manage significant life events, and changes and make robust crisis and contingency plans for the next stages of their lives e.g. changes in health or living situation (e.g. health deterioration or death of carer who is supporting at family home)
- Specialist Supported Housing – There is a need to explore our local supported housing base to determine if we offer local, bespoke supported accommodation to provide for both complex needs and a stepped offer to adults who want to move to greater independence
- Adult Support Options - Consideration needed of Peer Support / outlined on WF portal
- Service User Engagement - Quality improvement and service planning presently does not include participation of people with autism.
- Numbers of adults being diagnosed with ASD needs to be determined, and engagement to look at what appropriate post diagnostic support options would constitute for this group. The number of referrals and waiting list times to be reviewed to determine requirement for pre-diagnostic support. Engagement to determine what this group defines this should be

We know that there is more work to be done to identify system issues and come up with quality solutions. We hope that the delivery of this strategy will help us to develop a better understanding and identify any new or unknown issues, and that that residents and professionals across the borough can work together to make Waltham Forest an autism-friendly place.

## **Delivery**

### **Approach**

Many councils, organisations and businesses have committed to becoming 'autism friendly' an approach developed to ensure that autistic residents and/ or customers are able to access services, business and the wider community. Autistic people are individuals; they do not all experience the world in the same way or have the same needs. However, there are changes that any venue, premises or organisation can make to become more autism-friendly and therefore accessible. Facilitating access in this way reduces the inequalities experienced and will improve outcomes for individuals.

Examples of ways to become autism friendly include awareness training, having autism champions, adjusting physical environments, and tailoring information and advice. Some businesses have quiet hours when lights and music is subdued to reduce sensory stimulation. Becoming Autism friendly ensures councils, other public sector providers and businesses can improve their reach and increase resident/ patient/ customer experience and outcomes.

This will require input and commitment from all areas that affect the lives of residents and will therefore need input from across the Council and across the borough.

The Strategy will be delivered through the Implementation Plan which will steer the actions and hold leads to account. The Plan will be monitored by an ongoing, multi-agency group including carers. We hope to bring autistic residents on board in helping to hold Waltham Forest to account and to continue to develop new actions each year.



## Autism Definition

The National Autistic Society defines autism as:

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.

Waltham Forest would like to build our own definition of autism written by autistic residents in our borough. Some of our autistic residents have helped us to start this.:

*"I don't mind having Autism but it makes me struggle with learning things. I wouldn't say it's fun but I am who I am and I am happy who I am."*

*'Autism is group of letters that makes up a word and gives me super brains and makes everyone annoying.'*

**If you would like to help us build our description further by coming up with your own description of autism please send them to us know at:**

**[strategic.commissioning@walthamforest.gov.uk](mailto:strategic.commissioning@walthamforest.gov.uk)**

## Key Contacts and Links

### Waltham Forest Adult Social Care

Autism can be diagnosed at any age and there is support for adults and carers of all ages. Transition into adulthood can be a particularly difficult time. For more information on accessing adult social care help please see: <https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/service-categories/get-social-care-help>

### Waltham Forest SEND Service

SEND is the service for children and young people with special educational needs and/or learning disabilities aged 0 to 25 years.

<https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/content/special-educational-needs-and-disability-send-service>

### North East London

NELFT provides an extensive range of integrated community and mental health services for people living in the London boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Barnet, Havering, Redbridge and Waltham Forest

<https://www.nelft.nhs.uk/services-waltham-forest/>

### National Autistic Social

The National Autistic Social are the UK's leading charity for people on the autism spectrum and their families. Since 1962, we have been providing support, guidance and advice, as well as campaigning for improved rights, services and opportunities to help create a society that works for autistic people.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

### The Local Offer

The local offer is a guide to all the services that are available for children and young people in Waltham Forest with special educational needs and/or disabilities aged from birth to 25.

<https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/service-categories/local-offer>

### Waltham Forest Parent Forum

Waltham Forest Parent Forum is a friendly, voluntary group of parent/carers of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities aged 0-25 in Waltham Forest.

<https://www.walthamforestparentforum.com/>

## All-age Autism Strategy Implementation Plan

This implementation plan will be maintained through the Autism Delivery Group. It will continue to be a live document where new actions can be added, and close actions are removed. There are some actions listed as year one that will focus initially of scoping discussions with delivery timescales to be agreed as part of this process. The strategy delivery lead will plan the Autism Delivery Group agendas for first year to set time for discussions on each of the topics laid out within this plan and for appropriate review points of the plan. Actions are able to be re-prioritised as required. The group will meet monthly for the first three months of the strategy, and quarterly moving forward after that. It should be recognised that achieving the activity set out here is not a single project and cannot all be delivered immediately. It will be the responsibilities of all partners and stakeholders to make this work.

	Action	Lead	Timescale
<b>Overarching actions</b>			
1	Identify system-lead officer to manage the delivery of the strategy, facilitate discussions with wider teams and agencies, and hold individuals/agencies to account for their actions. Identify senior level chair.	Through governance process of approval	By September 2021
2	Develop an understanding of the data currently available, what other data would be useful and how these can be used constructively.	Strategy delivery lead to work with Autism Delivery Group	Year 1
3	Recognise that engagement for the strategy has been virtual-only and additional engagement should be considered when possible. This should in particular consider language barriers, cultural barriers and trying to increase the participation from autistic residents.	Strategy delivery lead	Q1 - Year 1
<b>Starting out well</b>			
4	Delivery of the Therapies Review	Childrens Commissioning	In progress
5	Delivery of the Early Years Principles to take autism into account	Early Years	In progress
6	Identify opportunities to increase training on early diagnosis with; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health Visitors</li> <li>GPs</li> </ul>	NELFT	Year 1 – and ongoing

7	Training provided to early years settings and schools on how to support individuals either pre-diagnosis or who do not want/need a diagnosis	Early Years	Approach in place in Y1, delivery ongoing
8	Improve the take-up of the 2-year-old check	SEND Service	Review of position at end of Y1
9	Improve access to information for autistic residents, carers and families including accessible formats such as for people without English as a first language, neurodiversity, disabilities through: - Review of the Local Offer - Review of SENDIASS	Commissioning/SEND	In progress Year 1
10	Identify any areas for improving identification and diagnosis for older children including primary and second school age.	Autism Delivery Group	Year 1
11	Review of best practice to support adults receiving a diagnosis for autism as an adult and develop recommendations	Commissioning (with NELFT and partners)	Year 1
12	Review of pupil place planning	Education	Year 1
<b>Fair access to quality education and learning</b>			
13	Improvement work to ensure annual reviews / EHCP / Statement reviews are delivered within the required timescales and resourcing to carry this out	SEND Service	In progress
14	Delivery of deep-dive into Education response for Autism – consultant/agency to be identified for delivery	Education working group / Commissioning	In progress - 2021
15	Annual training available for all education setting staff on autism, content should be developed in partnership with autistic people.	SEND Outreach Early Years Outreach provision for EY (with involvement from other professionals)	Clear offer from September 2021, delivery ongoing. Review at end of Y1
16	Introducing conversations at the point of decision when a child is going to be home-educated on Autism. Using information available such as regular school refusal. Ensure there is a clear process for referrals to CAMHS that are not coming through supported by a school such as for home-educated children and self-referrals.	BACME Service  CAMHS	Year 1  Year 1

17	Utilise data from the Fair Access Panel and going into AP to understand this as an indicator or point of referral	BACME	Introduce from Year 1
18	Audit via self-assessment of how autism-friendly schools are through assessing quality of the SEND Information, whether this is co-produced with parents, through SENCOs.	Parent Forum Rep to create first draft to be reviewed by Autism group - SEND to take forward	Year 1
<b>Supporting Families and Networks</b>			
19	Dedicated campaign through the month of Autism Awareness Week including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sharing journey and success stories on the Hub and other webpages/media platforms</li> <li>- Sharing stories and things to celebrate in newsletters (schools, Council, local provider newsletters, provider newsletter)</li> <li>- Display information in public spaces such as lifts, children and family centres, provisions, council buildings</li> </ul>	Hub lead Engagement with comms Dept	March - annually
20	Delivery of quality carers support across adults and children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Carers Strategy Delivery and Action Plan – utilise existing governance etc for this – annual progress report</li> <li>- Carers Development Group</li> <li>- Add links to useful links page</li> <li>- Carers Week</li> <li>- Ensure young carers receive support including siblings – all inclusive offer including siblings</li> <li>- Young Adult Carers Protocol</li> <li>- Ensure regular feedback on what is useful is captured</li> <li>- Parent Peer Support Group now set up</li> <li>- Explore what is the options around Carers Card – challenges around local picture being lots of microbusinesses – central point?</li> <li>- NHS – part of the diagnostic pathway including pre-diagnosis ensure that parents are being referred to local support services such as Carers Support Service, Young Carers, Parent Forum, etc.</li> <li>- Strengthening referral pathways from places like NHS Wood street</li> </ul>	Carers First / WF Carers Lead  Other organisations e.g. the limes, community orgs.  Carers / Parents	Ongoing

21	Information sessions and training for families on different topics e.g. sensory differences	Parent Forum NELFT	Discuss approach Q1 Y1
22	Develop mechanisms to share recommendations and information on local activities	Autism group to develop options for mechanism e.g. social media page, etc	Y2
23	Explore options around a local peer-led autism support group through linking with the National Autistic Society	Commissioning	Year 1
24	Further promotion of the Carers support services including Carers First, Young Carers Service and Parent Forum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local offer</li> <li>- SEND front-facing staff</li> <li>- Schools</li> <li>- SENDIASS</li> <li>- Day Opportunities</li> <li>- Annual promotion through Carers week</li> </ul>	Parent forum SEND staff SEN Success (for Schools) SENDIASS provider Carers First WF Carers Lead	Ongoing – discussion Y1
25	Improve access to appropriate provision through promotion, availability, gap analysis including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure there is regular feedback from service users and families to enable the market to respond to needs and interests of their potential clients</li> <li>- Review approach to publicising available provision such as through the Local Offer Review, considering previous tools such as fairs, and identifying commonly used methods of communication</li> <li>- Review the available provision of respite, particularly for 16-25 year olds</li> <li>- Enabling parents to feel safe to leave their children – discussions with parents on what would make them feel safe</li> <li>- Ensure SEND frontline staff are able to signpost to local provision and information</li> </ul>	Carers first / Young Carers Lead– identifying and signposting to local provision  Short breaks Officer  Commissioning (LD/Childrens leads)  Providers  SEND Service	By Y2
26	Create links with the Local Area Link Workers role for this agenda	Strategy delivery lead / Link Workers Leader	October – November 2021



Keeping autistic people safe from harm			
27	Use National Autistic Society guidance to make reasonable adjustments for both suspects and victims of crime, for instance in the length of appointments or interviews, environmental differences and the process of arrest and improve autism awareness.	Police lead YOS lead Appropriate adult services	By Y2
28	Sessions and interventions in schools are delivering in a helpful way for autistic children and young people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Workshops in schools on safe and healthy relationships</li> <li>- Sessions on online safety</li> <li>- Existing sessions such as prevent training are tailored where needed for autistic children and young people</li> <li>- Expand education deep dive remit on identifying other interventions like this that may need to be adapted</li> </ul>	PSHE lead	Discussion within Y1 – delivery timescales to be agreed following initial discussions
29	Autism training courses for local law enforcement – explore options around national programmes that can be signed up to by WF Police.	Police-lead	Discussions commenced within Year 1
30	Identify and evaluate best practice solutions such as sunflower lanyards, autism passports, autism cards - Implement relevant solutions locally including promoting information to ensure they are recognised	Strategy Delivery Lead via Autism Delivery Group	By Y2
31	Training for carers around keeping autistic people safe in regards to exploitation, radicalisation, safeguarding, etc.	Prevent CSE lead / Safeguarding Lead To deliver open session for parents/carers	Discussions to take place by end of Y1
32	Review capability of provider market in supporting individuals who are at risk of becoming, or are involved in the criminal justice system	Lead required – to be agreed	Identify lead by end of Year 1
Mental Health and Wellbeing			
33	Develop a plan to ensure that the right reasonable adaptations are in place so that adults can access mainstream MH services	NELFT	Year 1
34	A gap analysis is required to understand the need for targeted services	NELFT	Year 1- Year 2
35	Ensure children can access mainstream MH services in a way that is right for them	NELFT/DCO	Ongoing

36	Analysis of what development and training is required for professionals to achieve the above actions	NELFT	Year 2
37	Early Years development of the offer for 0-5s: explore AET options and other solutions.	Early Help / Early Years	Year 1
38	Mindfulness sessions in schools to be explored for WF schools	Education lead	Year 2
39	Strengthen emotional resilience within young people and support parents to develop emotional resilience in their children – explore how this can be delivered and achieved. Building on existing offers such as good beginnings.	CAMHS / EP / Early Help	Year 2
40	Develop low-level support offer e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EP drop-ins</li> <li>• Parenting groups in Children and Family Centres</li> <li>• Explore other options and ideas</li> </ul>	Parent Forum EPs Early Help Commissioning	Year 1 - Year 2
41	Look at what is available at the point of diagnosis and pre-diagnosis, e.g. literature, signposting to understand if it is helpful and where it needs to be tailored to people with autism/LD. Facilitate sharing tools and approaches with places that people are likely to go to for help at an early stage to support early intervention.	CAMHS with partners	Year 2
42	Encourage schools to take up offers like MH charter, mindfulness sessions, other things that schools can sign up to.	SEND Outreach Providers / Education	Year 2
43	Establish a functional DSR in CYP which is able to identify CYP at an early stage to prevent escalation to crisis and reduction of inappropriate admissions to Tier 4  Look at multi-agency working in specialist provisions for those with or without and EHCP – initial action to develop terms of reference	Commissioning  DCO	In progress  Year 1, Q1
<b>Employment Opportunities</b>			
44	Identify lead to continue to work of the employment strategy. Part of this should include working with autistic adults to understand the barriers to employment and co-design solutions and mitigations.	Autism Group to explore next steps.	Q1, Y1
45	Understand scope and remit of the Opportunities Programme with a view to ensuring it is accessible and inclusive for people with autism	Strategy Delivery Lead	Q1, Y1

46	Where can we learn from special schools on linking in with employers to share best practice, contacts, etc	Education	Year 2
47	Kickstart: explore opportunities where this be adapted to encourage YP with SEND to get involved and work with employers on this	Adult Learning Services/Employment – Autism Delivery Group lead	By Year 2
48	Expand offer of careers advice in schools particularly in mainstream but that is appropriate for CYP with SEND	Education lead to be identified	Year 2
49	Links with related strategies and leads including: Think work Programme and Employment Strategy, Post 16, and PFA strategy to ensure that autism is considered within these	Commissioning / Adult Learning / SEND / Education	Ongoing involvement
50	Seek commitment from LA, NHS and Police on recruitment	Identify lead from each agency needed	Year 1
51	Improve access to travel training or similar opportunities for 14+ and consider how supported internships can be used without requiring independent travel. Engage with DWP on exploring further. Further explore the barriers to employment for adults and solutions that have worked elsewhere / good models in and out of borough. What has helped other autistic residents get into work. Different sets of circumstances to consider. More work with employers	Transport Team Commissioning Internship providers  Autism Delivery Group	Year 1-3
52	Improve promotion of employment options within day services	Lead needed to facilitate and promote	Identify lead Y1
53	SEND Strategic Group to explore potential opportunities to increase access to careers advisors available to all YP	SEND Strategic Board	Year 1
54	Council HR to promote conversations from managers with new employees on what they need as a person regardless of need. Build on learnings from Families Hour sessions.	LBWF HR	From October 2021
55	Council e-training to include follow up question on any barriers to accessing the training	LBWF HR	In progress

Improving access to quality and inclusive local services			
56	Develop the role of departmental or agency champions, defining their role and capacity and utilising existing leads where possible such as SENCos.	Commissioning	Year 1, Q1
57	Consider how to implement and localise the national autism charter including local businesses	Autism Group	Year 2
58	Explore how we can improve peer learning /team to team learning across officers and agencies	Autism Group	Year 2
59	Consider references to autism awareness in non-social care specifications as appropriate	Procurement	Year 1
60	Local providers of activities can access training to enable their mainstream offer to be inclusive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who can offer training/awareness sessions</li> <li>- Who can identify and link providers with training</li> <li>- How can organisations be supported to identify funding and resource for this</li> </ul>	Development required	Year 2
61	Review requirements and opportunities for training frontline staff in autism awareness and support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Considering those who do not reach care act level needs</li> <li>- Housing professionals</li> <li>- What strategies/techniques can they use to assist better</li> <li>- Health and Wellbeing agenda – especially for those who do not have formal social care intervention</li> <li>- MH mainstreaming – professionals in this area</li> </ul>	Improving Life Chances Board	Year 1
62	Ensure the reviewing and designing of forms and other literature for services are made as simple as possible and work with local autistic residents to support this process where advice is needed	Comms / Frontline services	Ongoing
	Develop ideas/suggestions around how forms can be made simpler with an example	Autism Group	Year 1
63	Take into account the needs of neurodiverse residents when designing and reviewing processes to ensure they are simple to follow and assistance is available when required.	Corporate teams e.g. change, service design.	Year 1-3

Taking a lifespan approach			
64	Engagement with the development of the wellbeing network.	Commissioning	Align with Wellbeing network timescales
65	Deliver desktop assessment of our existing services for adults and older people - what are people using, quality, etc	Lead required	Year 1-2
66	Develop befriending/support group for older adults – Identify links with existing Befriending services within LBWF	Lead required	Year 2
67	Improve planning for when parents and support networks are no longer able to support or pass away	ASC lead required	Year 2
68	Actions to be developed for improving child to adult transitions through the Preparing for Adulthood Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consideration of the wants and needs of a young person at an early point in transition</li> <li>- Linking into other services such as housing – link to Housing section actions...</li> </ul>	SEND Service	Align with PFA Strategy timescales
69	Ensure information is available on SEND Trusts such as through the Local Offer and local carer networks/support services	Carers First Parent Forum Local Offer Review Carers Strategy Delivery Group	Year 1
The right home and housing			
70	Maintain links with the Housing for Vulnerable People Strategy to ensure the needs of autistic people are included	Housing / Commissioning	Year 1 involvement in development – ongoing
71	Arrange a review of how accessible information is on Housing including where to go for help	Housing	Year 1-2
72	Ensure front-facing roles have information on effective communication with autistic residents and understanding needs – autism group to consider whether a best practice sheet would be useful	Autism Group Liaise with Housing	Year 2
73	Maintain links between adult social care and housing to ensure that the needs of service users with autism are factored into housing decisions	ASC Lead / Housing Lead	Ongoing

Inclusive communities			
74	Delivery of annual stalls and events/information sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Annual events and campaigns during Autism awareness week from different agencies and organisations</li> <li>- Agencies to consider specific themes within their remit such as criminal justice, local businesses</li> <li>- Continue to develop the awareness of autism and neurodiversity within the Council – work underway as part of the families hour outputs</li> </ul>	Autism group to explore other options and recommend to agencies  Strategy delivery lead to facilitate and track	Year 1 – ongoing approach
75	Develop an information sheet that can be circulated to businesses with ideas on making environments more autism-friendly. Explore options for having an autism-friendly logo or poster that public-facing businesses such as cafes, shops, etc can display	To be co-produced, Autism Strategy lead to facilitate and work with business growth	Year 2-3
76	Autism Group to influence mainstream events such as borough-wide Council events to support event planners to produce autism-friendly events	Autism Group	Year 2