

Options Autism: Autism Strategy

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Note on language. Research shows that many autistic individuals prefer to use 'identity-first' language to describe themselves. Proponents of the neurodiversity model, which holds that autism and other neurocognitive variants are part of the natural spectrum of human biodiversity, suggest that identity-first is favoured by those who view autism as a central and defining element of identity, similar to gender or race. In line with the current research and following consultation from our lived experience expert panel, Options Autism have chosen to use identity-first language throughout this strategy.

Throughout the Strategy comments and ideas from our Lived Experience Experts will appear in a different font, as below.

"I prefer identity first language, as being autistic is not separate to me, it is not merely a part of me, but all of me. Identity first language also makes the statement of being proud of being autistic, and that it is nothing to hide, or be ashamed of, or negative."

"As a Mum I do not feel offended by my son being known as an 'autistic individual' because that is what he is.' A person living with autism' sounds quite long winded and as if it is only part of them or is separate to them."

The main objective of the Autism Strategy is to strengthen and continually progress our approach to the provision of care, education and clinical services to autistic individuals in an environment which is conducive to their strengths and needs.

Options Autism is one part of the family of services under the Outcomes First Group. This Autism Strategy informs the wider groups' approach, including Acorn Education and Care and the National Fostering Group, regarding best autism practice.

The strategy recognizes that despite underlying shared traits, autistic individuals are vastly different from one another. Some autistic individuals are cognitively talented, some autistic individuals have a significant intellectual impairment; this strategy has been written to ensure all abilities levels have been considered and included, although some parts of the strategy may be more relevant to specific needs.

The Autism Strategy takes inspiration from positive, optimistic person-centred approaches. Psychological models, such as PBS, PERMA (Seligman) and PACE (Hughes) combined with clear communication standards from Royal College of SLT's principles of 5 good communication, all emphasize the importance of genuine engagement, empathic relationships, increasing an individual's experiences of positive emotions and meaningful achievements.

The Strategy has been created and refined through a review of the current autism literature and consultation from the lived experience expert panel, a clinical multi-disciplinary (Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy and Psychology) team and the OFG advisory board. The Strategy has also been through a focus group of teacher's and teaching assistant to test reliability and acceptability.

The foundation of the Autism Strategy is based upon the principals of Ask, Accept and Develop.

First and foremost the Autism Strategy wants to hear the voices of the autistic individuals in their services. This means above all else we must learn to **Ask**. Wherever possible the autistic individuals in our services will be consulted about their choices and preferences; these choices need to be wide ranging, including supporting individuals to provide meaningful input into their own care and education plans at whatever level is appropriate for their cognitive ability. **Ask** is the top priority of our Autism strategy because we recognise the importance of consulting to the autistic individual above anything else; we listen to their perspectives and our staff will treat the autistic person as a unique individual with their own likes, dislikes, wants and needs.

"As a mum, for him to have more safe choices is very important the older he gets"

Ask can be achieved by including individuals in planning meetings, seeking their views on how they spend their time, their daily choices (such as clothing and food) and further facilitated for individuals with communication difficulties through choice boards and Talking Mats™. Talking Mats™ are a low-tech, visually-based communication approach which use Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) as a means of enabling people with communication difficulties to convey their views and feelings. There is research to support the use of Talking Mats™ in many situations, including to inform annual reviews or help individuals make decisions about the future services they might prefer.

Accept within the Autism Strategy means that our staff will have an understanding of autism that is intellectual, practical and cultural. They will understand the strengths and needs associated with an autism diagnosis, whilst also appreciating each individual's own personal strengths and needs. The Autism Strategy does not seek to cure/treat autism or supports approaches/interventions in which the goal is to attempt to make an autistic individual behave in a more neurotypical way or involves any form of punishment. The focus of **Accept** is to create environments, communication systems and activities which meet the needs of the autistic individual, and enable that individual to thrive and experience positive emotions.

"Accepting is about embracing, and that is very important to me"

Develop within the Autism Strategy means our staff will teach and scaffold the development of new skills, abilities and strategies for the autistic individuals in our services. The teaching and development of new skills will be derived from an individual's personal goals, informed by their family's views and driven to improve their quality of life and their wellbeing. The focus is to enable and empower an individual to increase their independence and flourish.