



Social Care, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee Review Scoping Report (DRAFT)

Working Title: 'Making the Council more autism friendly'

1. REVIEW OBJECTIVES

Background to the review

The aim of this review is to consider how the Council can improve its customer service to support its local residents with autism. Subject to any findings, the review could make practical, feasible and supportive recommendations to promote inclusion when accessing our universal services.

Autism is being increasingly recognised within our society, with many organisations now being obliged to have appropriate awareness and support in place. Many changes have been introduced but work is still underway to help transform people's attitudes, understanding and perceptions of autism. This review is concerned with understanding how the Council can make reasonable adjustments to assist autistic people to access our universal services fairly.

The review will hear from expert witnesses explaining the current work in progress and how further initiatives could enhance the way the Council works to become more autism friendly. This review could also afford the Committee an opportunity to meet with autistic people and parents of autistic children to hear their perspective. It will

also review the impact of various initiatives in the private and public sector and will consider whether the Council has a supportive culture when autistic residents approach Council services.

At the Committee meeting on 23 October 2019, it was unanimously agreed to review autism. At this meeting, the Committee agreed to progress a review for its next topic, and it is considered this would be a sufficiently targeted review, that could take place over the span of a number of committee meetings.

Subsequently, at a meeting on 27 November 2019, the Committee considered the draft scoping report. Members also provided further helpful steers regarding the review, including agreeing the possibility of additional witnesses sessions and a broadening of the scope to include autism friendly access to children's and adults services (all-age), along with all other universal council service provision. This has been reflected in the indicative timetable at the end of the scoping report.

Terms of Reference

The following Terms of Reference are suggested for the review, subject to any changes agreed by the Committee:

1. To understand the different types of autism and how residents' lives can be impacted by autism, including the direct views of local residents with experience of autism;
2. To understand national legislation and guidance about autism and consider how the Council is currently complying with this;
3. To assess the work already taken across front-line services and other all-age council services areas, to be aware of and support autistic people when they access our services;
4. To review autism friendly actions and initiatives across the voluntary, private and public sector to improve customer experience when accessing services;
5. To consider feasible, practical ways the Council could, going forward, make its front-line services more autism friendly;
6. To influence or propose any emerging Council plans, guidance or policies with respect to autism;
7. Subject to the Committee's findings, to make any conclusions, propose actions, service and policy recommendations to the decision-making Cabinet.

2. INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

Context

Around 700,000 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum, according to the National Autistic Society. Autism is different for everyone. It is not an illness but a developmental disability which impacts the way people act, interact with others and

perceive things. Autism is not something that can be “cured” but methods and strategies can be used to try and manage it.

Key information

Autism is a spectrum condition meaning that people can have different types or vary in terms of the level of their autism. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. The features of autism can include having difficulties in social interactions, resistance to change and having distinctive behaviours. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, autistic people can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

For some autistic people many things can be overwhelming and taking part in everyday activities can be difficult. People with autism can be perceived to be acting a certain way which may cause misunderstandings.

The Autism Act

To avoid people being lost in the system and not being effectively diagnosed with autism, campaigners campaigned for legislative protection to support people with autism. In light of this, a number of autism charities worked together to campaign for the Autism Act to ensure that legal duties were set on adult services to encourage them to provide support and assistance to those that required it.

The Act was implemented in November 2009 and stated:

“The Act says that there has to be a Government strategy for improving services for autistic adults, underpinned by legally binding guidance to councils. It also has a built-in review – every five years or so – when the strategy and the statutory guidance are updated.”

Since the introduction of the Act, and as a result of proactive campaigning, the Government's Autism Strategy will now also cover children's care.

The introduction of the Act evidences the progress that has been made, with autism now simply even being recognised. However, notwithstanding all of the positive progress made to date, autistic people still face judgement and misunderstanding. Attitudes and perceptions of autism needs to be improved through further education, awareness and training.

Autism Friendly Award and Initiative

Although 1 in 100 people in the UK are autistic, when families and carers are taken into account, approximately 2.8 million lives are directly affected by autism. It was with this in mind that the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award was introduced to recognise the contributions businesses and organisations made to support people with autism. It was also hoped to encourage other businesses and organisations to invest in making services more autism friendly. It was emphasised that changes did not need to be costly, but small steps could make significant differences.

According to research conducted by the National Autistic Society:

79% of autistic people and 70% of families said they felt socially isolated;
50% of autistic people and their families sometimes avoided going out due to concerns about people's reaction to their autism.

A number of initiatives have already taken place in the Borough to support autism, including the recent introduction of a quiet shopping hour in the Uxbridge INTU on the first Saturday of each month. Other support offered by current services in the Borough includes:

- *Attention Hillingdon* - a project running across 80 nurseries, playgroups and children's centres offering intervention support services to develop listening and attention skills.
- *Centre for ADHD and Autism Support (CAAS)* - supports, educates and empowers individuals with ADHD and/or on the autism spectrum, their families and the community. Through raising awareness they change perceptions and break down barriers. They offer a wide range of support services to families across North West London.

Other initiatives across the country have been introduced to make services autism friendly. However, one that has been particularly well received is Wigan Council's introduction of an Autism Friendly Wigan Passport. The passport is a small document that autistic people can use to access services around the Borough. This includes access to surgeries, council services, leisure facilities and supermarkets and shopping centres. This helps to tailor communications and provide the best support for people with autism.

Making the London Borough of Hillingdon more autism friendly

It is proposed that the Committee reviews the existing customer service environment across front-line and key services in respect of people with autism, e.g. housing, libraries, receptions, benefits etc... This would also involve access to children's and

adults' social care services thereby ensuring that the Committee's review covers all age groups.

This review of service access can establish current practices, along with a gap analysis to identify areas for improvement. It is intended that the review will hear from expert witnesses in the autism area to consider ways in which services can be made more autism friendly. Examples, though not necessarily being recommended at this time, could include introducing more autism friendly signage such as pictures and calming colours in service areas, reducing bright lights, having autism friendly hours and creating open spaces in libraries to allow more space to read and relax and stocking autism friendly books.

Remit and related Cabinet responsibilities

This review would fall fully under this Policy Overview Committee's approved remit set out in the Constitution and also cut across the Cabinet Member portfolios of:

- Social Services, Housing, Health and Wellbeing;
- Education and Children's Services

Discussions on draft or emerging recommendations may be undertaken with Cabinet Members as per the Protocol on Overview & Scrutiny and Cabinet Relations approved by full Council on 12 September 2019.

Further information

NHS website, "What is autism" (online) accessed on 4 November 2019:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/what-is-autism/>

Dimensions website, "Free autism friendly training for libraries" (online) accessed on 30 October 2019:

<https://www.dimensions-uk.org/get-involved/campaigns/dimensions-autism-friendly-environments/autism-friendly-libraries/free-autism-friendly-training-libraries/>

Kent County Council website, "Autism Spectrum Disorder Select Committee Report" (online) accessed on 31 October 2019:

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/documents/s14884/ASD%20Report%20FINAL.doc.pdf>

National Autistic Society website "Autism Friendly Award guidelines" (online) accessed on 30 October 2019:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/autism-friendly-award/guidelines.aspx>

National Autistic Society website "What is the Autism Act?" (online) accessed on 30 October 2019:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/not-enough/what-is-the-autism-act.aspx>

Intu Uxbridge website, “ National Autistic Society- Quiet Hour” (online) accessed on 30 October 2019:

<https://intu.co.uk/uxbridge/events/national-autistic-society-quiet-hour>

Living Autism website, “How to create an autism-friendly environment” (online) accessed on 4 November 2019:

<https://livingautism.com/create-autism-friendly-environment/>

Coventry City Council, “Autism friendly libraries” (online) accessed on 30 October 2019:

https://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/126/libraries/3218/libraries_-_core_services

Southampton City Council, “Autism Friendly Chill Out Sessions” (online) accessed on 30 October 2019 :

<https://www.southampton.gov.uk/libraries/library-activities/autism-friendly-chill-out-sessions.aspx>

3. EVIDENCE & ENQUIRY

Lines of Enquiry and Witness testimony

Lines of enquiry will be worked up prior to witness sessions.

A possible gap analysis exercise could be undertaken in which services are asked to complete surveys identifying areas that are being met. This information would then be analysed and areas of improvement identified.

Potential witnesses could include:

- Testimony from LBH Officers;
- Testimony from Hillingdon Autistic Care & Support (HACS);
- Testimony from autistic people and parents of autistic children to gain the user perspective;
- Testimony from the Cabinet Member;
- National autism experts.

Emerging conclusions or themes for development

These will emerge and become apparent as the review progresses.

4. REVIEW PLANNING & ASSESSMENT

As Policy Overview Committees now operate under a multi-year work programme, the Committee has scope to undertake a more detailed review.

It is advised that witnesses attend in 'themed' sessions to better focus questions and discussion. A draft time-frame & milestones are set out below and can be extended or reduced as the Committee sees fit:

Meeting Date	Objectives	Possible witnesses / activity
27 November 2019	Consider and agree Scoping Report	Committee recommended an updated scoping report - to be circulated to Members.
15 January 2020	Hold Witness Session 1 - Adult Autism	Review of the current statutory framework for adults and how this is being delivered in Hillingdon.
Outside Committee	Possible Member Briefing on Adult Autism (based around current Adult Autism training offer)	
Outside Committee	Member site visit to two libraries in the Borough - Uxbridge and Eastcote Library to take place on 25 February 2020	
Committee deliberations were suspended temporarily during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A virtual committee briefing was held on 18 June in advance of an expected formal meeting in September.		
23 September 2020	Committee to receive an update on the review so far and review minutes from Member site visits.	
21 October 2020	Hold Witness Session 2 - Children's Services/ Transitions/preparation for adulthood	Council Officers - Children's Services
Outside Committee / Informal	Gap analysis survey undertaken (survey by Democratic Services with front-line services)	
26 November 2020	Hold Witness Session 3 - Wider Council services	HACS / voluntary sector Representative from the National Autistic Society Local authority exemplars Feedback from gap analysis

Outside Committee / Informal	Informal meeting with people with autism / parents to understand views (with officers and in appropriate setting)	
19 January 2021	Consider initial recommendations to evaluate further	Cabinet Member may wish to be invited at this stage.
9 February 2021	Findings and recommendations	Clarification from officers, if required
25 March 2021	Consider Draft Final Committee Report	Delegate authority to finalise text to Chairman and Labour lead.
Cabinet - TBC	Report presented to Cabinet (target date)	Cabinet considers and decides whether to agree recommendations to be actioned / become council policy.
TBC	Monitoring of implementation of any recommendations	

** Specific meetings can be shortened or extended to suit the review topic and needs of the Committee*

Financial Assessment

This review is not expected to require a financial assessment at the scoping stage.

However, as the review progresses, Committees should seek to ensure any recommendations are feasible, cost-effective or indeed can save the Council money. Any early findings or recommendations by the Committee which may result in a call on Council budgets should be discussed at the earliest opportunity by the Chairman, with the relevant Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Business Services and Leader of the Council to assess viability.

This is in accordance with the approved Protocol on Overview & Scrutiny and Cabinet Relations approved by full Council on 12 September 2019.

Resource requirements (for review)

None identified - officer support from Democratic Services.

Equalities impact

This review will seek to strengthen the Council's efforts ensuring equal access by residents to council services.