



Autism: A Guide for Practitioners within Housing and Homelessness Services



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Contents

- Foreword 3
- Introduction 5
- Purpose of this Guide? 6
- Why is it important? 6
- What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? 7
- Equality Act 2010 7
- How can you use this Guide? 7

- Part One - Housing and Autism Practice 8**
 - 1: Early intervention 9
 - 2: Homeless Application and Assessment 13
 - 3: Duty to help to Prevent Homelessness 17
 - 4: Duty to help to Secure 21
 - 5: Duty to Secure 25
 - 6: Tenancy/Housing Sustainment 29
 - 7: Important Housing Terms Explained 33

- Part Two - Autism 35**
 - What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? 36
 - What are the signs and characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder? 37
 - Other co-occurring conditions: 38
 - What this means in practice? How can I help? 39
 - Communication (verbal and non verbal) 39
 - Social Interaction 41
 - Social Imagination 42
 - Intense Interests 43
 - Sensory Processing 44
 - Repetitive Behaviours / Self-regulatory Behaviours 48

- Appendices 50**
 - Top Tips to engaging with individuals 51
 - What challenges may autistic people face and how can I help? 52
 - Acknowledgements 53
 - Further Reading & References 54
 - Glossary 55

Foreword

I welcome this amended Guide which highlights the issues some people with autism face when applying for housing for the first time, or the obstacles they can encounter within their tenancies. The Guide, and the associated training which will be available, provides housing practitioners with practical solutions for dealing with issues which are sometimes seen as anti-social behaviour. The Guide builds on a 'person-centred' approach, putting individuals at the heart of the decision-making process; helping to identify issues early on to address possible conflict.

Increasingly, through Welsh Government funded training, the housing sector is following trauma informed approaches to create psychologically informed environments. Doing so makes it possible to address the sometimes complex needs of tenants who may be at risk of homelessness, allowing them to access and maintain stable accommodation and live independent lives.

Evicting people from social housing makes no sense. Once they have been made homeless they are likely to be moved into less secure accommodation or even temporary accommodation, which in the worst case scenario is a bed and breakfast hotel. They risk losing contact with informal and formal support networks which makes a bad situation worse.

This approach is corrosive; we need to invest in vulnerable families. Not shift them from a secure stable home into insecure unstable temporary accommodation. Supporting families to make a success of their tenancies and remain in their communities is what we should be trying to achieve.

What we need in Wales is good quality, stable housing. This is the foundation of thriving communities. The Guide and the principles it promotes will help us achieve these goals and I recommend its use to all housing practitioners.

Julie James AM,
Minister for Housing and Local Government

This refreshed Housing Guidance is timely following the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. Following a survey commissioned by Welsh Government in 2015 of over 1000 autistic people, parents and carers and professionals of the issues facing autistic people in accessing services and leading fulfilled lives, concerns over Housing emerged as a consistent theme.

This refreshed Guidance attempts to address those concerns by providing Housing professionals working within any sector in Wales with the tools and advice and increased awareness of autism.

I am particularly pleased that the National Autism Team has co-produced the Guide with autistic advisors, housing professionals and professionals working with autistic people as well as parents and carers and NAS Cymru. A large Task and Finish Group provided oversight of the work chaired by Cymorth Cymru and a smaller Writing Group met several times to write and produce the document over a period of 12 months.

We are grateful to Welsh Government for funding and supporting this important piece of work.

Councillor Huw David,
Spokesperson for Health and Social Care, Welsh Local Government Association

The refreshed Guide for professionals working in the housing sector is taking a new approach by the National Autism Team. The Guide will be available in hard copy with "inserts" that can be easily refreshed and replaced, rather than the traditional hard copy bound Guide. It will also be available on line where people can review and print off files that they need.

The first part of the Guide has been produced in easily accessible "Chapters" that reflect the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, supplemented by "Hints and Tips" sections.

The second part provides a comprehensive guide to autism, further information about the condition and how professionals may adapt their practise to make sourcing housing advice and guidance that much easier for autistic people. This section, like the whole Guide was co-produced with autistic advisors. I am pleased to endorse the Guide which I am sure will be used by professionals in health as well as other sectors.

Dr Tracey Cooper,
Chief Executive, Public Health Wales

Introduction

This guide is a response to issues raised by autistic people and professionals through a consultation facilitated by the National Autism Team on behalf of Welsh Government in 2015 and reports commissioned by Shelter Cymru, that highlight the challenges faced by autistic people in relation to housing and the higher proportion of homeless people who are autistic.

Use of language

The team that co-produced this guide have given consideration to our use of language, understanding that it evokes strong responses and should be sensitive to the autistic community. We acknowledge that there will be no “one size fits all” policy that will fit with everyone’s wishes, as we know there is much debate around preferred terminology.

We have decided on the use of identity first language rather than person first language, i.e. ‘autistic’ rather than ‘has autism’, after considering recent research, “Nothing about us without us.”¹, the views of the autistic community, and of the autistic advisors on the Autism Housing and Homelessness Guide Task and Finish Group.

Language throughout the guide will reflect this decision. However, we feel it is of utmost importance to endeavour to respect personal preference around language in individual instances and would advise anyone consulting this document for guidance to do the same.

¹ Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community, Kenny et al; 2015

Purpose of this Guide?

This guide has been written for professionals, across public, private and the third sector who engage with autistic people and their carers/families within a housing context, this includes, but is not limited to :



This good practice guide is prepared in line with the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. It could also be applied in other settings and to other conditions and disabilities. This guide has been produced co-productively with several housing professionals, autistic people and colleagues working with autistic people across Wales.

Why is it important?

A diagnosis of autism does not necessarily mean a person is unable to cope with living independently, but they may require additional consideration in the choice of housing; in the way the property is managed; and that the tenant is supported.

Without appropriate support, autistic people may face specific difficulties in housing and may be at higher risk of homelessness. As the social model of disability suggests, reducing the barriers autistic people may face in the housing sector could mean they reach the best possible outcome in housing and consequently their overall well-being.

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

An autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which affects the way a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them.

The ways in which people are affected varies from one individual to another.

*“Once you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”
Dr Stephen Shore*

The second part of this guide provides practitioners with more detail about autism.

Equality Act 2010

Public Sector organisations in the UK are prohibited from discriminating against any of the protected characteristics contained within the Act.

The protected characteristics are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

The Equality Act 2010 Guidance states: ‘A disability can arise from a wide range of impairments which can be; developmental, such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), dyslexia and dyspraxia’.

Section 20 of the Act places a duty on public organisations for reasonable adjustments to be made to prevent discrimination against anyone with a disability. You should be mindful of all of the above characteristics; however, this guide suggests some things to consider in your practice which could help you make reasonable adjustments in relation to autism.

How can you use this Guide?

The intention is for this Guide to be used practically and easily. It is split into themed chapters following the themes and elements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, and the good practice developed by the housing and homelessness sector over the period prior to and since its implementation.

Top tips can be found at the end of each chapter which can be printed out for ease of reference and used by practitioners at all levels.



**Part one :
Housing and
Autism
Practice**

Early intervention

What is it?

Early intervention is a way of working with people at an early stage to prevent crises from occurring and to increase their resilience to cope/manage with difficult situations in the future.

The homes and the communities that families live in are a vital part of their lives. Housing providers have an important role to play in helping to ensure that people who need support are able to access and receive it as early as possible when issues occur. They also have huge influence over the community environment where people may be supported to overcome their difficulties. Housing providers are well placed to be among the first to spot signs of difficulties with debt (non-payment of rent), antisocial behaviour, and even challenges like domestic abuse. It is the early identification of such challenges and the work done to mitigate these challenges that constitutes early intervention. Any such support may help people to retain their accommodation and sometimes prevent them from having to access statutory services when the situation has exacerbated.

How might this work in practice?

Interventions to assist people may be delivered in a variety of ways. When a housing provider/landlord identifies that a tenant may be experiencing challenges they may initially contact them by letter. Some may email, text, make a phone call, or arrange a house call. Each of these methods of communication will be to attempt to make contact with the person in order to begin to tackle the identified issue. It would be helpful to ask and note the individual's preferred method of communication.

An autistic person may struggle with any of these methods of contact for a variety of reasons (refer to Part Two for further information), for example, a house call is often a good way to make contact and discuss any potential issues face to face. Although this may bring its own challenges for an autistic person, it will allow the housing officer to identify potential reasons for the challenges identified and suggest ways in which the person might be supported.

This support might be something that the housing officer would provide themselves or it could be a referral for specialist support. This could include finance or debt advice, support with mental health issues, support from a domestic abuse specialist, or signposting to community groups or activities.

Many people will not respond to the first contact and housing officers should be encouraged to make contact in a variety of ways until engagement has occurred. It is important to be sensitive in how engagement is carried out – for many autistic people their home is an extremely important 'safe space'. This should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.

Where does it happen?

There are several things to consider when intervening to support a person to maintain their accommodation. It may be that a formal diagnosis of autism has not been made, but being in someone's home can alter their environment and have an effect on their behaviour.

You should not only consider what is happening in the individual's home when you become part of it, but also whether the behaviours or practices of your organisation are contributing to, or exacerbating, issues.

How does it happen?

Early interventions happen when housing officers or other professionals identify that there may be an issue with a person sustaining their accommodation effectively. At this point, support providers put steps in place to engage with and assist the person.

All parts of an organisation have an important role in raising concerns identified within a household. This includes departments such as maintenance, environmental health, housing management, etc. It is important to note that discussion and appropriate information sharing across departments is key.

Housing management officers should see areas of concern as an opportunity to work differently with an autistic person. Recent developments across the housing sector such as a greater understanding of "Psychologically informed environments" and "Trauma informed approaches" give the tools to intervene in different ways, for example, anti-social behaviour may previously have resulted in eviction proceedings but now would lead the housing management officer to look for alternative solutions. Officers should consider reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable such as re-decorating in neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc to enable an autistic person to sustain their current tenancy and improve their wellbeing without having to conform to a neurotypical environment.

Housing management officers need to be aware that at times of transition (grief, job loss, new carer, etc) an autistic person could be more vulnerable than a neurotypical person and so swift support should be provided at these times. They should be curious and investigate issues that have not yet been picked up so that support can be offered, for example, if anti-social behaviour is a new issue, the officers should ask why and address the root cause which is better than enforcement.

Good Practice Example :



Wales and West Housing Early Intervention

B had a very bad perception of the Housing Association from his previous experience of interacting with them. He felt that the Housing Association told him what to do in his accommodation rather than allow him to make decisions about his property.

One of the first times the housing officer met with B it was over a complaint about a neighbour's dog barking. B was told that the neighbour would be given 10 days to resolve this issue. B felt that this was not acceptable or reasonable and it led to an argument between B and the housing officer rather than a reasoned conversation.

Working in a different way and finding out "what matters" to the tenant has enabled issues like this to be dealt with differently.

B is a very intelligent gentleman and he sees his autism as making him evolutionary superior. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge this and speak to B as at least an intellectual equal.

This has drastically changed B's reaction to conversations as housing officers don't "talk down" to him anymore but relate to him on his level.

On one visit the housing officer noticed a Marvel poster in the property and found out that B has a very keen interest in comic book characters and films.

A new way of recording has allowed this information to be shared with other staff within the Association and enables repairs staff, for example, to find common ground with B and strike up a conversation with him rather than a repairs visit being confrontational as it might have been in the past.

B is now keen to have conversations and will talk about the latest film or computer game and often calls the housing officer up to do this.



Top Tips for :

Early Intervention

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible. **Providing advance notice** of any changes would be recommended.
- Bear in mind that for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e. 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Provide clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- You should maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.

Further information is available in Part Two of the guide.

Homeless Application and Assessment

What is it?

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 places a duty on Local Authorities to undertake an assessment of need for anyone who applies to them for housing help and who may be homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days.

The assessment must include the circumstances that caused the person to be homeless or to be threatened with homelessness.

The assessment must also consider the support needs of the person (or anyone else in their household reasonably expected to live with them) to retain their current (or next) accommodation.

How might this work in practice?

A typical assessment can be undertaken in the housing options office or over the telephone. Generally, an individual would be asked questions in an interview style conversation to establish if they were homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days. If they are **not**, then general information and advice would be offered. If they **are**, then a full assessment would be required.

If, on the day of applying to the Local Authority (LA) for help, there is a reason to believe that the person may be vulnerable in some way, then the LA should provide temporary accommodation whilst they carry out an assessment and decide how they might help the person.

Where does it happen?

Many Local Authorities carry out assessments in their own offices.

This environment could be threatening for an autistic person.

Environmental factors should be considered when working with people.

These may often include:

- Often, centrally located buildings can mean navigating busy areas
- Fluorescent lighting within the offices
- Noise from office equipment
- Lots of people in the office environment

Amongst many other potential factors which will be unique to each autistic person.

Reasonable adjustments should be considered to accommodate the needs of autistic people when carrying out assessments. These may include carrying out the assessment in the person's own home, using a private interview room where noise is minimised, providing more time for the assessment, and other environmental factors.

Remember it is not always necessary to complete an assessment in one sitting.

In some cases, the autistic person may prefer to 'get it all done' to avoid the stress of a repeat visit; in others it may be more appropriate to break it down into



'manageable chunks'. Remember that what is reasonable may differ greatly and professionals may need to consider this in evaluating their own expectations. Wherever possible the input of the autistic person or those who support them should be sought and considered.

How does it happen?

There are two main areas to consider :

1. Conducting the assessment itself

The person conducting the assessment should be aware that autistic people may not be forthcoming about their situation. Therefore, providing details in advance on what is expected of the person at the assessment will be helpful (i.e. what do you want, what do you need, what can we help with. It is also important to provide key facts – where will it take place, who will be there, what will be expected of them, when will it be finished (time expectation)). Additionally, the person conducting the assessment needs to be aware of the tone of voice and body language of both themselves and the applicant when conducting the interview.

2. What you consider during the assessment

The support needs of each autistic person will be unique to them and you should not consider all autistic people as being the same. The assessment should take into account how their autism affects them in their day to day life. If someone copes well with their condition it does not mean they do not have problems in processing their circumstances in the real world, it merely means that they have effective coping mechanisms to deal with their circumstances as they are at the time. The assessment should consider what impact change and uncertainty around housing and security will have in relation to an autistic person and what support may be needed in order to cope with this change and uncertainty.

Good Practice Example :



Denbighshire County Council Person-centred Homeless Assessment Form

Denbighshire County Council Homelessness Prevention Team have modified the assessment form they use when speaking with people who come to their service, in order to enable them to get better information.

Their new assessment form purely acts as prompts for a conversation rather than a list of often irrelevant or even offensive questions which many people don't understand why they are being asked:

- ***What information do you feel that we need to know about you and your household?***
(Mental health needs, physical health, mobility – can they manage stairs? Prescribed medication, pregnancy, etc. Does anyone in your household have any specialist housing needs?)
- ***Is there anything that you need support with?***
(Reading/writing, form filling, substance misuse, debts (CAB referral?). Does the person require a Supporting People referral?)
- ***What support do you already have in place to help you?***
(Family, friends, agency involvement, Children Services, etc. If physical difficulties, is there Occupational Therapy involvement?)
- ***Any risks involved?***
(Criminal convictions, pending charges, open to Probation services? Are they banned from any areas? Are they fleeing violence or do any areas pose a risk to them or a family member? Risks and barriers to Health and Wellbeing)

Since using this format they have found that interviews flow far better and they are able to obtain useful information which helps them to make better decisions.

This method of questioning is very beneficial if the person being interviewed is autistic as it enables the case worker to lead the conversation and use follow up questions to uncover vulnerabilities or support needs which may not have come out in more traditional assessment forms.



Top Tips for :

Homeless Application and Assessment

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible. **Provide advance notice** of any changes would be recommended.
- Bear in mind for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e. 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Provide clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- You should maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- **Ask** the person if they would prefer to complete the assessment in one session, or agree an alternative approach, such as multiple meetings, if practical to do so (NB: once the process has started the section 62 duty must be completed).
- **Observe** the person and try to learn which sensory issues they may have - the more you can **learn and understand**, the easier it will be to support them.
- If they are **upset**, distressed or behaving in a challenging way, consider whether this is being caused **by sensory issues**. Dim lights, reduce noise levels to see if there is improvement.
- **Be aware** that they may only be able to utilise one sense at a time. For example, not looking at you does not mean not listening to you.
- When you've identified **issues which trigger** sensory problems, try to avoid these where possible and advise others where appropriate.
- If meltdown/shutdown occurs – **stay calm and speak softly** to the individual **using direct short sentences** and offer a quiet place to recover if required (i.e. turn off bright lights, close blinds, reduce noise etc), end meeting at this stage if required.
- **Ensure** that the person knows where they can **get help to understand** written official communications and include signposting at the start of the letter. **Practitioners should ask themselves** : 'Will the person I'm working with understand this letter?'

Duty to help to Prevent Homelessness

What is it?

The duty to help to prevent homelessness is embedded in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

The Code of Guidance for the Housing (Wales) Act sets out broad ways of preventing homelessness, as follows:

- To remain in their current accommodation;
- To delay a need to move out of current accommodation in order to allow a planned move into alternative accommodation;
- To find alternative accommodation; and/or
- To sustain independent living.

The principles of prevention can be adopted throughout a Local Authority's (LA's) work, and not just in the application of specific legal duties.

It is also crucial to note that interventions, however small, can have a significant impact on individuals. LA's, Private Rented Sector (PRS) and social landlord providers, and everyone involved in services, have the ability to take action to prevent homelessness.

How might this work in practice?

A series of typical interventions can be found in the Code of Guidance (Code s12.174 & Housing Act - s64²). Prevention activity can be small or made on a much larger scale, and each should be tailored to the needs of the individual. These are often referred to as "reasonable steps" and can be written into a Personal Housing Plan (several agencies may be involved in delivering these reasonable steps to help the individual).

Where does it happen?

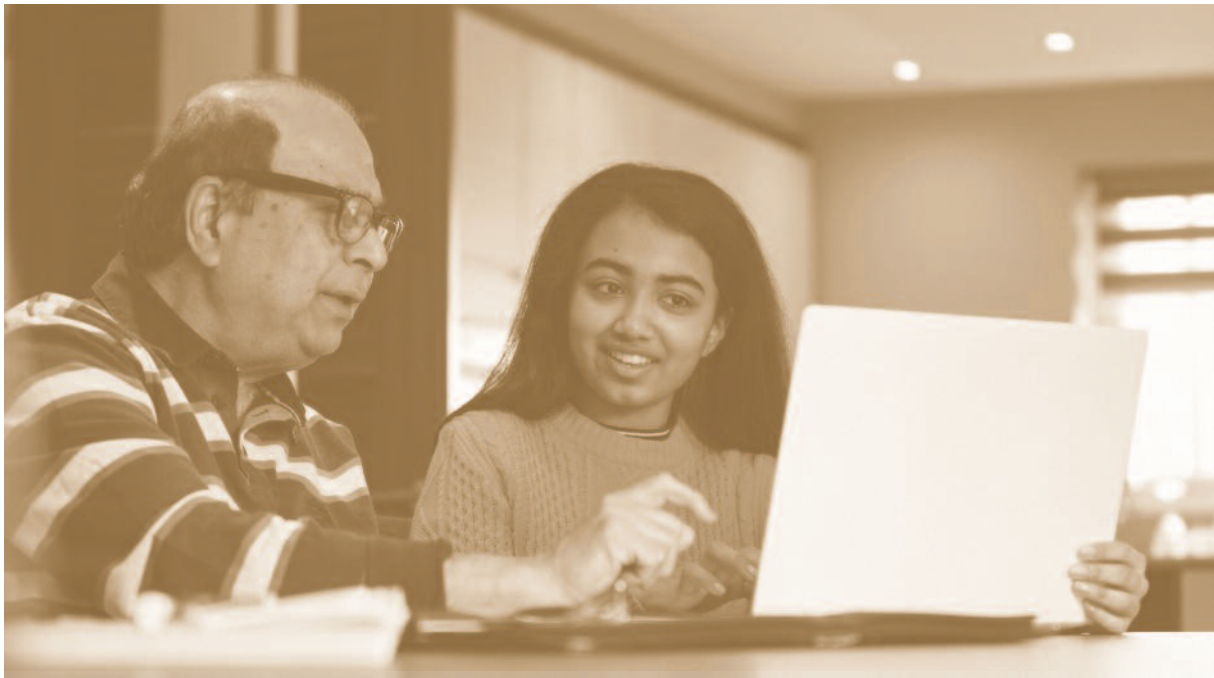
Statutory prevention begins with the commencement of a "s66" duty. However, all organisations should be aware that prevention can take place at any stage and can start with something as simple as a conversation which demonstrates that you care. Prevention activities can take place anywhere, but the majority will be focused around LA buildings, particularly Housing Options' offices.

The physical environment is crucial in order for prevention to be successful. Targeted interventions have the best chance of having the greatest impacts because they will be focused on an individual's needs and strengths. For autistic people, it is vital that physical environments are set up to minimise distraction and enable people to have conversations and build relationships with their case workers. This is crucial to the effective delivery of prevention interventions.

The Equal Ground Standard³ sets out good practice examples on how you could create a person centred environment.

² <https://bit.ly/2xmZXFt>

³ <https://bit.ly/2FMIIR>



How does it happen?

When the LA carry out their “s66” duty to help to prevent someone from becoming homeless they should work with the individual to deliver steps which meet the specific needs of the person to achieve a better outcome. It is important to consider whether other services should be brought in alongside housing to enable the person to avoid homelessness.

Any work which the LA intends to carry out, along with any support provision, is usually written into a Personal Housing Plan which should be explained to the person and given to them for their reference. The LA will then carry out the actions outlined in the plan.

Housing management officers should see areas of concern as an opportunity to work differently with an autistic person. Recent developments across the housing sector such as a greater understanding of “Psychologically informed environments” and “Trauma informed approaches” give the tools to intervene in different ways, for example, anti-social behaviour may previously have resulted in eviction proceedings but now would lead the housing management officer to look for alternative solutions. Officers should consider reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable, such as re-decorating in neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc to enable an autistic person to sustain their current tenancy and improve their wellbeing without having to conform to a neurotypical environment.

Housing management officers need to be aware that at times of transition (grief, job loss, new carer, etc) an autistic person could be more vulnerable than a neurotypical person and so swift support should be provided at these times.

They should be curious and investigate issues that have not yet been picked up, so that support can be offered, for example, if anti-social behaviour is a new issue asking why and addressing the root cause is better than enforcement.

Good Practice Example :



Wales and West Housing “what matters” conversation

G was living with his mum in the front room of her house and only had access to very dated amenities. Mum was moving on and G had to move out of the family home. When the housing officer first met with G he found it very difficult to converse with him and G didn't laugh at his jokes. G stated that he didn't need “support”, the word support had very bad connotations for G. The terminology used was very important and G received “assistance” going forward.

G had no income of his own as he had always been provided for by his parents. He didn't even have a bank account for any new benefits to be paid into. Although G promised the housing officer that he would set up a bank account, he failed to do so.

As the housing officer continued to meet with G and got to know him, he was made aware that G had Asperger Syndrome. The housing officer obtained leaflets about a range of basic bank accounts and left these with G. On the next visit the housing officer found that G had read the leaflets and opened his own account. This helped the housing officer understand that G responded better to written information rather than verbal instructions. It also led the housing officer to a change in practice, enabling people to open accounts or make benefit claims rather than just taking the person's word for it that they will do it. G was assisted to make a benefit claim in order to receive income and pay his rent. G was then given a step by step written guide to help him pay his rent from his income. G had sustained his tenancy for over 4 years with very little need for further assistance. When G's benefit claim switched to Universal Credit he mistakenly thought from things he had heard about “not signing on” that he wouldn't need to go to the Job Centre any more. G took things literally and needed things explained to him in a specific way.

G had no phone of his own but is able to access “assistance” by going to a nearby extra-care scheme and letting the staff know that he wanted to meet with the housing officer. Any assistance was then based on demand from G but the housing officer worked hard to understand what had led to this demand. When the housing officer needed to meet with G he was very clear in his correspondence about this and when he would be meeting him. Keeping to an appointment time was very important to G.

This information was also shared with other staff within the organisation who may have also been setting up appointments with G.



Top Tips to :

Prevent Homelessness

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible, **providing advance notice** of any changes is recommended.
- Bear in mind for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Provide clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- Endeavour to maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- **Ask yourself** if the intervention is tailored and specific to the needs of the autistic person.
- **Make sure you listen**, understand and consider the person's individual needs.
- **Consider** whether other services could be brought in, alongside housing, to ensure this individual is not made homeless.
- **Ask and observe** the person and try to learn which sensory issues they may have - the more you can **learn and understand**, the easier it will be to support them.
- **Consider if they are upset**, distressed or behaving in a challenging way, whether this is being caused **by sensory issues**. Dim lights or reduce noise levels to see if there is improvement.
- **Be aware** that they may only be able to utilise one sense at a time. For example, not looking at you does not mean not listening to you.
- Having identified **issues which trigger** sensory problems, try to avoid these where possible and advise others where appropriate.
- **Stay calm and speak softly** if meltdown/shutdown occurs – **use direct short sentences** and offer a quiet place to recover if required (i.e. turn off bright lights, close blinds, reduce noise etc), end meeting at this stage if required.
- **Ensure** that the person knows where they can **get help to understand** written official communications and include signposting at the start of the letter. **Practitioners should ask themselves** : 'Will the person I'm working with understand this letter?'

Duty to help to Secure

What is it?

The duty to help to secure accommodation is also embedded in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

This means that if a person is homeless and they approach the Local Authority (LA) for help, the LA must help them to secure accommodation. This could mean looking for accommodation in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), registering for local social housing or referring the person for supported accommodation.

It may also mean helping by providing resources to help the person secure accommodation such as bonds, rent in advance, support in looking for and obtaining accommodation, advice on income maximisation, etc.

These are known as reasonable steps and it is how the LA carries out its duty.

How might this work in practice?

Usually, a case worker will work with the individual to discuss what they need and want. The case worker will generally develop a Personal Housing Plan (PHP) which will outline the steps the LA will take to achieve a successful outcome.

This plan usually takes the form of a written document which is produced with the individual at the LA office, or produced by the caseworker and sent to the individual following the initial meeting.

How does it happen?

It is important to ensure that the individual understands what they need to do in order to help their case.

The PHP is fundamental to this, so the individual needs to understand and be able to access the information in their PHP. They also need to understand and be clear about the steps that the LA is taking on their behalf.

Additional support could be provided to enable the person to do this and the case worker should refer the individual for this support should they need it.

It is important to understand that the support required may not always be asked for by the autistic person. It may need to be identified and offered to them.

It will also be important to understand what other additional support an individual may need in order to secure accommodation and provide for this.

Any specific accommodation needs which arise due to autism should be considered and incorporated into the plan.

It would be helpful for caseworkers to make a note that they have considered this.



Where does it happen?

As with any work done in line with a duty to help to prevent homelessness, much of the work with the individual will be carried out at the LA's offices.

The physical environment is crucial in order for prevention to be successful. Targeted interventions have the best chance of having the greatest impacts, because they will be focused on an individual's needs and strengths. For autistic people, it is vital that physical environments are set up to minimise distraction and enable people to have the conversations and build relationships with their case workers. This is crucial to the effective delivery of prevention interventions.

The Equal Ground Standard sets out good practice examples on how you could create a person centred environment⁴.

Housing management officers should see areas of concern as an opportunity to work differently with an autistic person. Recent developments across the housing sector such as a greater understanding of "Psychologically informed environments" and "Trauma informed approaches" gives the tools to intervene in different ways, for example, anti-social behaviour may previously have resulted in eviction proceedings but now would lead the housing management officer to look for alternative solutions. Officers should consider reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable such as re-decorating in neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc to enable an autistic person to sustain their current tenancy and improve their wellbeing without having to conform to a neurotypical environment.

Housing management officers need to be aware that at times of transition (grief, job loss, new carer, etc) an autistic person could be more vulnerable than a neurotypical person and so swift support should be provided at these times. They should be curious and investigate issues that have not yet been picked up, so that support can be offered, for example, if anti-social behaviour is a new issue asking why and addressing the root cause is better than enforcement.

⁴ <https://bit.ly/2FMIIIR>

Good Practice Example :



Cardiff in-house homelessness support provision

C is a 60 year old male who has multiple health needs which affect his ability to take in and retain information in traditional forms (letters, action plans, benefit updates online). He was living in temporary accommodation due to domestic abuse within his family. C had been looking for private rented accommodation but had not been successful and was struggling to cope with the temporary accommodation due to his support needs. I tailored my support to his individual needs generally working in the following way:

Before meeting C it was important to thoroughly research his case and gather information from his initial assessment. This information could be verified in the first meeting but allows the first contact to be more conversational and focus more on C's needs and aspirations. We needed to identify and secure private rented accommodation, set up and then maintain this tenancy, maximise benefits including UC and PIP, and ensure that direct payments of UC were paid to the landlord.

The action plan drawn up contained both long and short term goals, which included setting limited time, achievable targets, building a rapport and helping C to stay motivated and increase confidence. Complex tasks (applying for benefits for example) were broken down into smaller parts so as not to overwhelm him.

Any written communication was provided in as straightforward a manner as possible and was always followed up with a call or visit to make sure that it had been understood. I arranged for C to receive long-term floating support and ensured this was in place before closing his case.

C is now in a secure, sustainable tenancy, with support in place, and is making links with his local community through his mosque. Long term, sheltered accommodation will become available in the future should C's support needs increase. Floating support is in place to support C through the next few months of his tenancy.

At the beginning of my involvement, C was under a lot of stress and had no confidence that he would be able to sustain a private rented tenancy. The work we did has allowed him to live comfortably and independently whilst addressing his previous arrears. C gave positive feedback at sign off:

"I am very happy with the support and what you have done for me. Thank you very much."



Top Tips for :

Duty to help to Secure

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible, **providing advance notice** of any changes is recommended.
- Bear in mind for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Be aware** as a practitioner when considering accommodation options, that requests may require careful consideration due to particular issues facing the person (e.g. noise sensitivities, busy environments, lighting etc., - see *Part 2 of this Guide*).
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting beforehand.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Remember** to use literal and specific questions.
- **Be aware** that an autistic person may struggle to identify their own needs or advocate for themselves, so practitioners should feel confident to offer assistance.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Consider** reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable (e.g. re-decorating in neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc).
- **Remember** that some autistic people may prefer to be given a list of options to consider, others may prefer to be given a single clear recommendation, so **a tailored and personalised approach is needed**.
- Remember that the Personal Housing Plan (PHP) should provide **clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- Be aware that it is helpful to **allow the person time** following the appointment/meeting to process any written information and documentation you provide.
- Recognise that **shared accommodation may not be suitable**, as this may cause distress to the autistic person.
- Endeavour to maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- **Ensure** that the person knows where they can **get help to understand** written official communications and include signposting at the start of the letter. **Practitioners should ask themselves** : 'Will the person I'm working with understand this letter?'

Duty to Secure

What is it?

If the duty to **help** to secure accommodation ends unsuccessfully, the Local Authority (LA) must decide if there is still a final duty to secure accommodation. This will involve considering whether the individual is in one of the priority need category groups, has a local connection to the LA and has not become homeless intentionally (where intentionality is investigated). The duty to secure accommodation is also embedded in the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

How might this work in practice?

If the duty to secure accommodation is owed to the individual, then the LA will notify them that this is the case and the person will also be accommodated on an interim basis whilst settled accommodation is found. The LA will work with local housing providers to ensure that suitable accommodation is offered to the individual and is available for at least 6 months.

Where does it happen?

As with any work done in line with a duty to help to prevent homelessness, much of the work with the individual will be carried out at the LA's offices.

The physical environment is crucial in order for prevention to be successful. Targeted interventions have the best chance of having the greatest impacts, because they will be focused on an individual's needs and strengths. For autistic people, it is vital that physical environments are set up to minimise distraction and enable people to have the conversations and build relationships with their case workers. This is crucial to an effective delivery of prevention interventions.

The Equal Ground Standard sets out good practice examples on how you could create a person-centred environment⁵.

How does it happen?

Caseworkers should note how they have considered autism as a factor in assisting the individual and ensure that the person understands what is happening with their case. This may include providing an outline of the process in writing and explaining it orally, as well as allowing the individual time to process the information and potentially providing advocacy for the individual in order to understand the process.

As with securing any accommodation, the needs of the individual should be considered. The Suitability of Accommodation Order (***Suitability of Accommodation*** *The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (Wales) Order 2015*)⁶ describes what a suitable offer would look like. There may also be additional things to bare in mind when considering the needs of autistic individuals. These may include closeness of support services, facilities and neighbours, layout of the accommodation, access, soundproofing etc.

⁵ <https://bit.ly/2FMIIR> ⁶ <https://bit.ly/321HV9X>

Good Practice Example :



GOFAL Housing Advice Pontypridd

M is 28 and was living with his dad but was about to be homeless as his dad was moving out of the area and M did not want to go with him.

M did not want to pursue the option of supported accommodation and wanted to live independently. He was referred to the support service by Housing Options. They were satisfied that M was priority need.

M had been diagnosed at the age of 4 with autism and had also been diagnosed with ADHD, OCD, anxiety, depression and insomnia. He had taken medication over the years and had received support from mental health services. However, at the time of interview and during the support he declined any referral back to the Community Mental Health Team as he felt he was managing fine and wanted to be as independent as possible.

During the assessment, care was taken not to overload M with all the advice and information generally given, as it was apparent the situation was stressful enough without adding to this. It was decided to give the information required to make choices and understand the process in order of priority for completion. M was always telephoned to ensure he understood things and encouraged to write things down if he needed to, so that he could ask the next time he saw the support worker. Only one task was dealt with on each visit. M was always seen by the same support worker because continuity is essential for building relationships and trust with people, especially those who are autistic.

M worked for 12hrs a week while living with Dad but had no other income, so it was clear from the start that on a wage of £60 a week the tenancy was going to fail very quickly. It was explained that he would not be able to afford his own tenancy unless a claim for benefit was submitted, this, however, was not easy, as it was something he had never needed to do and had not really thought about when choosing to live independently.

M's job was hugely important to him, so it was essential that any benefit claim requested was able to incorporate him continuing to work. Working was the only time he saw people other than at home, and was part of his routine, so it was essential that the property he was allocated was within walking distance of his job as he would not go on public transport.

continued . . .

Good Practice Example :



GOFAL Housing Advice Pontypridd continued . . .

Another appointment was given to M to go over again the reasons why he needed to claim benefit and then he was supported to do this over the phone. A request was made by the support worker under the work permitted rule guidelines. In order for the completion of the benefit to be processed a one to one appointment was requested which M managed well as it was explained prior to attending and whilst there.

It was essential to obtain and submit bank statements ahead of submitting to housing benefit (before allocation of property). M was not forthcoming as he did not understand why they were required. This needed to be explained in simple terms several times, however by the time we had to submit the housing benefit forms M was ready to obtain them.

When M was allocated his property, a referral was submitted immediately for Tenancy Support and requested that this could continue with the same support provider to ease the transition and to initially do some joint working. The reason behind this was for M to feel less anxious about leaving the current support worker. As neither M nor his family had the financial means to purchase any essential items for his new home, a Discretionary Assistance Fund application was made. This provided him with white goods for his new home.

The utilities were set up, change of address with DWP was made, support to change address with GP, employer etc. was also provided.

The role of the agency is to provide housing advice and crisis re-settlement. Without a referral into tenancy support this would have failed if M had received no ongoing support. Care was taken when withdrawing support in this case and telephone contact continued in order to provide reassurance and to discuss any concerns M may have had.

To date the tenancy has been a success.



Top Tips for :

Duty to Secure

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible, **providing advance notice** of any changes is recommended.
- Bear in mind for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Be aware** as a practitioner when considering accommodation options, that requests may require careful consideration due to particular issues facing the person (e.g. noise sensitivities, busy environments, lighting etc., - see *Part 2 of this Guide*).
- **Consider** reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable (e.g. re-decorating neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc).
- **Recognise that shared accommodation may not be suitable**, as this may cause distress to the autistic person.
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting beforehand.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Remember** to use literal and specific questions.
- **Be aware** that an autistic person may struggle to identify their own needs or advocate for themselves, so practitioners should feel confident to offer assistance.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Remember** that some autistic people may prefer to be given a list of options to consider, others may prefer to be given a single clear recommendation, so **a tailored and personalised approach is needed**.
- Remember that the Personal Housing Plan (PHP) should provide **clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- Be aware that it is helpful to **allow the person time** following the appointment/meeting to process any written information and documentation you provide.
- Endeavour to maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- **Ensure** that the person knows where they can **get help to understand** written official communications and include signposting at the start of the letter. **Practitioners should ask themselves** : 'Will the person I'm working with understand this letter?'

Tenancy/Housing Sustainment

What is it?

Tenancy sustainment keeps people in their homes and reduces the level of evictions overall, thereby reducing the 'supply/demand' of people experiencing homelessness. It can take place at various different stages, but typically either:

- a) in non-supported housing, or;
- b) in housing with access to support.

Both 'areas' of tenancy sustainment are similar, but the second type is generally more intensive, as it tends to work with individuals who have experienced homelessness and the impact this has on maintaining future tenancies.

For those living in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), without support (extremely common), tenancies may fail due to rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, environmental health concerns, family breakdown, or even 'retaliatory evictions' from unsympathetic landlords.

All too often, the early signs of tenancy failure (late payment of rent, early hoarding, lack of cleanliness, etc) are not recognised by the landlord straight away. The longer it takes to identify and tackle these early warning signs, the more difficult it will be to keep someone in their home.

For those renting from a social landlord, tenancy failure can happen for the same reasons as above. However social landlords, with their close links to support services, should become aware of problems faster, and take steps to address those problems before individuals become homeless.

Some behaviours, such as obsessive interests in specific hobbies or communication difficulties, may inadvertently lead to a risk of homelessness such as hoarding, uncleanliness or Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB).

How might this work in practice?

Interventions for tenancy support/sustainment vary from case to case, just as with prevention. There is no exhaustive list as what can help one person stay in a tenancy may not work for someone else.

However, there are common approaches to be had, such as: providing financial literacy support; helping with access to welfare; and linking into specialist support providers to address mental health problems, substance misuse etc.

Where does it happen?

The physical environment is crucial in order for a tenancy to be sustained.

When supporting a person in shared accommodation, for example, care must be taken to ensure that people are compatible and are able to safely pursue their interests. A property that is far away from support networks and people who

Where does it happen? continued . . .

share similar hobbies may not be appropriate for an autistic person. You should also consider the presentation of the environment in relation to audio and visual distractions, and the impact this may have on an autistic person. It would be unlikely that a tenancy would be sustained if these circumstances are not considered and addressed.

Support may be provided in any location but is normally undertaken within the person's home. Familiar surroundings and avoiding environments which overload the senses may provide the best chance of maintaining engagement with workers. However, for those autistic people with no current link to housing support, a new tenancy sustainment officer needs to consider the home and personal space of the autistic person, which should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them. Some people may prefer to meet in a neutral place.

How does it happen?

Housing management is provided by, or on behalf of, a landlord. The main role of a housing officer is to ensure landlord functions (repairs, rent collection, starting and ending tenancies etc.) are fulfilled. It is often through routine contact with the tenant when conducting housing management that some of the early warning signs may become obvious. You should make the first contact count, and act on any concerns as soon as they are identified.

Having a good relationship with the tenant may be all that is needed to overcome some early tenancy sustainment concerns, but where problems develop and grow unchecked, it is important that appropriate help and support is offered as soon as possible to avoid a future crisis.

Support for individuals is generally either attached to the tenant (floating support) or to the accommodation (fixed support). Essentially, the type of help and support that someone can get will be the same. However, if someone moves home, they can continue to receive floating support with the same support worker, whereas fixed support is likely to end as soon as someone leaves the accommodation. Flexibility which allows the same worker to continue supporting the individual (where appropriate) will help maintain the relationship and promote continued engagement with support.

Housing management officers should see areas of concern as an opportunity to work differently with an autistic person. Recent developments across the housing sector such as a greater understanding of "Psychologically informed environments" and "Trauma informed approaches" gives the tools to intervene in different ways. For example, anti-social behaviour may previously have resulted in eviction proceedings but now would lead the housing management officer to look for alternative solutions. Officers should consider reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable such as re-decorating in neutral colours,

How does it happen? (continued)

sound proofing rooms, etc to enable an autistic person to sustain their current tenancy and improve their wellbeing without having to conform to a neurotypical environment.

Housing management officers need to be aware that at times of transition (grief, job loss, new carer, etc.) an autistic person could be more vulnerable than a neurotypical person and so swift support should be provided at these times.

They should be curious and investigate issues that have not yet been picked up, so that support can be offered, for example, if anti-social behaviour is a new issue asking why and addressing the root cause is better than enforcement.

Good Practice Example :



Swansea Council's Tenancy Support Team provides support to people with a range of needs and works in partnership with a range of support providers.

The team triages all requests for support and identifies who the most appropriate support provider may be and the urgency with which support is required.

Threats of homelessness are always prioritised for support, as are cases of tenants who need help to set up their new home. Cases are matched to support as appropriately as possible, especially where it is known that a specialist service or worker has specific skillsets and knowledge.

The team also works closely within the council's Move on Strategy and aims to provide the most appropriate accommodation match to someone's individual circumstances when they are moving on from (fixed) supported accommodation. The monthly meeting of the Move On panel ensures the support needs are accurately identified and support is in place as soon as someone moves into their home, ensuring that the tenancy has been best chance of successful sustainment.

Also see good practice example from Wales and West.



Top Tips for :

Tenancy / Housing Sustainment

- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication.
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- Try to **agree** a date, time and place to meet **and stick to it** wherever possible, **providing advance notice** of any changes is recommended.
- Bear in mind for many autistic people their **home is an extremely important 'safe space'** and this should be given appropriate consideration when attempting to engage with them.
- **Explain** the length and purpose of the meeting beforehand.
- **Avoid** using jargon, idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Remember** to use literal and specific questions.
- **Consider** reasonable adaptations which could make a property suitable (e.g. re-decorating neutral colours, sound proofing rooms, etc).
- **Recognise** that shared accommodation may have its challenges and could cause distress to the autistic person.
- **Be aware** that an autistic person may struggle to identify their own needs or advocate for themselves, so practitioners should feel confident to offer assistance.
- **Remember** that housing management officers need to work in a trauma informed way.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information **and check** that they've understood (i.e 15 seconds) and follow up after the meeting/conversation.
- **Remember** that some autistic people may prefer to be given a list of options to consider, others may prefer to be given a single clear recommendation, so a **tailored and personalised approach is needed**.
- Remember that the Personal Housing Plan (PHP) should provide **clear and simple** written lists of specific things that need to be done.
- Be aware that it is helpful to **allow the person time** following the appointment or meeting to process any written information and documentation you provide.
- Endeavour to maintain **one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- Note that if a PRS landlord thinks that their tenant may be autistic and getting into difficulty they can access support to maintain the tenancy.
- Be aware that autistic people with support needs may reach a point where intensive support is no longer needed but may still want to access support when issues arise.
- **Ensure** that the person knows where they can **get help to understand** written official communications and include signposting at the start of the letter. **Practitioners should ask themselves** : 'Will the person I'm working with understand this letter?'
- Give advance notification/warning before maintenance activities are about to start, or something is about to end.

Important Housing Terms Explained

Priority Need

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 identifies who has priority for accommodation. This includes anyone who is vulnerable as a result of “a special reason”, as well as some younger people and households with children. A full list of priority need categories is included in the legislation.

Local Authorities should not apply blanket policies when deciding whether a person is/may be vulnerable. Being vulnerable due to some special reason is not restricted to the physical or mental characteristics of a person. What matters is the severity of the circumstances, or combination of circumstances. In order to be classed as vulnerable, individuals need to be less able than others to fend for themselves and more likely to suffer more harm if street homeless.

The burden of proof rests with the Local Authority (LA), but individuals would be expected to co-operate in providing evidence to help the LA make its decision.

The Equality Act (2010) requires public bodies to provide reasonable adjustments to those who have a protected characteristic under the Act, which deems autism to be a disability. If the LA suspects the individual seeking assistance might be autistic, then they should make reasonable adjustments accordingly.

It is important to note that failure to attend appointments, return phone calls, carry out designated tasks, or respond to correspondence could be due to underlying difficulties with executive functioning (organising and planning), social difficulties, anxiety and more, rather than being labelled as a “failure to co-operate”.

Vulnerability

The Housing Act defines “vulnerable” within this context as someone who is less able to fend for themselves if they become street homeless, who would suffer more harm as a result of being street homeless than someone who does not have a disability.

The Welsh Government’s view is that the “ordinary homeless person who becomes street homeless” should not be equated to a person who has been sleeping rough for a long time, with the associated social, mental and physical health problems.

Autistic people can be more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, pain and temperature extremes, and may struggle with interaction with the general public. Therefore, formal diagnosis of autism should give the LA reason to believe that the person may be vulnerable. In this case, the person should be provided with interim accommodation whilst the LA work with them to help find settled accommodation. It is important to note that any decision regarding priority need/vulnerability rests with the LA. It should be noted that the applicant can request a review of a LA’s decision when the applicant is not placed in priority need.

Important Housing Terms Explained (continued)

Failure to cooperate

When ending any duty with an individual, the LA must consider whether the person has unreasonably failed to co-operate with the LA. This could take the form of repeatedly failing to provide information, failing to attend appointments without providing a reason, refusing to take calls from the case worker and other support workers without providing a reason.

Failure to cooperate applies to each duty separately. For example, ending a prevention duty does not exclude the individual from entering a different homelessness duty if a change in circumstance arises in the future.

Unreasonable failure to cooperate is a decision which may be challenged by the applicant or their representative. Before considering whether an individual has unreasonably failed to cooperate, decision makers should consider what the applicant has been asked to do, and whether their autism has altered their ability to process certain information. Decision makers should avoid comparing the person with other autistic people, especially in relation to their ability to engage. Each case is different and should be treated as so, and if instructions are not clear, explicit and written down, an autistic person may find it difficult to maintain suitable engagement.

Intentional homelessness

The Housing Act Wales (2014) specifies that Local Authorities are no longer required to investigate homelessness. However, the LA may choose to investigate whether someone is homeless in some circumstances. A person can be found to be intentionally homeless if they have deliberately done (or failed to do) something which has resulted in the loss of accommodation which would have been reasonable to continue to occupy.

Acts or omissions in good faith are not treated as deliberate. There must be no other good reason to evidence why the person is intentionally homeless. Decision makers should consider the impact of how autism affects the applicant in relation to acts in good faith, particularly concerning communication and rigidity of thinking as previously defined. People should be made aware of the consequences of giving up their accommodation without good reason, which is why working together with the individual is so essential to prevent things from getting to this critical stage.

Acts or omissions following communication based upon sarcasm, ambiguity or implied meanings may not be interpreted in the same way by an autistic person. It is always important to investigate why the person has become homeless and whether additional support needs would have stopped the person from "making themselves homeless". Some autistic people may have made the decision to live "off grid" to minimise disruption to their lives, as a result of their autism. This should be taken into consideration before reaching the conclusion that someone may be intentionally homeless.



Part two : Autism

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

What is it?

An autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which affects the way a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them. The ways in which people are affected varies from one individual to another.

*“Once you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”
Dr Stephen Shore*

Always ask an individual for their preferred method of engagement and communication. It is estimated that 1 in 100 people in the UK are diagnosed with autism. This guide provides suggestions on how you could help . . .

Autism is . . .

- A neurodevelopmental condition
- A hidden disability
- A lifelong condition which affects people from all backgrounds
- A spectrum condition that effects each individual in different ways

Autism is not . . .

- A mental health condition nor learning disability
- Easily identifiable
- Shown in the same way in every autistic person, each person is individual
- A condition that you grow out of when you reach adulthood
- Always diagnosed in childhood

Autism is also known as :

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Aspergers Syndrome
- High functioning
- Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)
- Childhood Autism
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD-NOS)

NB: diagnosticians may use a range of descriptive terms such as classic autism, core autism, childhood autism etc, which can be confusing.



PDD – NOS	AUTISTIC DISORDER	ASPERGERS DISORDER
Impaired social interaction	Impaired social interaction	Impaired social interaction
OR	AND	AND
Impaired communication	Impaired communication	Impaired communication
OR	AND	AND
Restricted repetitive and stereo-typed patterns or behaviours, interest and activities	Restricted repetitive and stereo-typed patterns or behaviours, interest and activities	Restricted repetitive and stereo-typed patterns or behaviours, interest and activities

What are the signs and characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism is often still regarded as an ‘invisible disability’.

Autistic people experience the world differently and can have difficulty instinctively understanding what other people are thinking and feeling.

Autism is a ‘spectrum disorder’, this means that it affects people in different ways across a range of abilities, strengths and difficulties.

This neuro-diversity affects a person’s ability to instinctively understand other people, and it varies according to whether or not a person is capable of spoken language, eye contact, or whether they speak a lot and like to be around other people.

Some autistic people “mask” or “camouflage” their autistic traits and thus autism presentation can differ for many reasons, including gender and cultural factors.

It is also common for autistic people to experience:

- issues with processing sensory information
- other conditions, such as ADHD, anxiety, depression or a learning disability
- repetitive behaviours
- a preoccupation with an intense/special interest

Autistic people are likely to be vulnerable to exploitation, and often experience stigma, abuse and hate crime. They may be more vulnerable to abusive relationships and may not have a good support network.

They can also experience difficulties throughout their lives in:

- education
- employment
- health
- housing
- intersectionality – autistic people may belong to other marginalised groups (i.e. high rates of LGBTQIA+) which can complicate their situation and increase potential vulnerability.

Other co-occurring conditions:

Autistic people may have additional distinct health conditions that are not directly a part of their autism, but which are shown to occur in higher numbers in the autistic population. Some common co-occurring conditions include, but are not limited to:

- Anxiety
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Dyspraxia
- Dyslexia
- Epilepsy
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) /DCD Developmental Co-ordination Disorder
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Sleep difficulties/disorders
- Eating Disorders
- Ehlers-Danlos

It is important to recognise that autistic people are not excluded from other mental health and physiological conditions and often experience these at higher rates than non-autistic people.

What this means in practice? How can I help?

Autistic people are affected in a variety of ways and to varying degrees, which is why autism is referred to as a spectrum. It is important to remember that the autism spectrum is broad, and therefore different autistic people may display either all, or only some, of the characteristics described in the following sections.

Communication (verbal and non verbal)

People usually use a variety of methods to communicate with others, from speech to body language. Autistic adults may have significant differences in the way their communication has developed. This varies from one individual to another, and some may have little to no verbal communication. Some autistic people can develop language very quickly and can be very articulate, but may experience a delay in processing through verbal communication.

An autistic person may:

- have a delay in processing
- have delayed development of speech or no speech
- often use words and phrases out of context
- not respond when spoken to
- be better at using language than understanding it or vice versa (where their expressive and receptive language can be very different)
- not understand or misunderstand figurative language
- not understand the to-ing and fro-ing of a conversation
- repeat words and phrases other people say
- not appreciate the need to communicate information
- find it difficult to pick up on tone of voice, the meaning of gestures or facial expressions
- not recognise that different language should be used for different relationships (e.g. friends, family, professionals, strangers).

"It's exhausting because it's like you're doing math all day"

Kevin Pelphrey, Yale Child Study Center



Top Tips for :

Supporting Communication

- Endeavour to **maintain one point of contact** in the organisation for the person.
- **Ask and note** the person's preferred method of communication.
- Establish if the individual prefers to be known as an autistic person or person with autism.
- Use a **clear, calm voice**.
- Ensure you **have the person's attention, say their name** before speaking to them.
- **Minimise sensory distractions** such as noise, bright lights and busy rooms.
- Ask specific questions and **keep things short and straightforward**.
- Explain things clearly, **avoid jargon**, always **check** you have been understood, and **follow up** after the meeting/conversation.
- **Avoid** using idioms, metaphors and similes.
- **Allow** the person some time to process information and check that they've understood (i.e. 15 seconds).
- **Use facts to explain** things, avoid analogies and **never use sarcasm**.
- **Don't rely** on body language, gestures and tone of voice.
- **Use pictures** to help explain things.
- **Do not overload** the person with lots of verbal information.
- Consider using **clear and simple written lists** of specific things that need to be done.
- **Allow time** to express their view and be patient. Increased anxiety may reduce the ability to communicate verbally.

Social Interaction

Autistic people may find it difficult to evaluate social situations, be around other people, understand the unwritten rules of behaviour, and create or maintain relationships. Together this might make it hard for someone on the spectrum to make and keep friends.

An autistic person may:

- sometimes appear aloof and indifferent to other people
- struggle with physical contact while others may seek it for sensory reasons
- passively accept social contact and show some signs of pleasure in this
- approach other people but in an inappropriate and/or repetitive way, paying little or no attention to the responses of those they approach
- try hard to be sociable though they may still find it difficult to understand non verbal communication, including facial expressions
- appear socially skilled but this ability may falter in times of change and/or stress

Often autistic people would like to make and keep friends though they may need help and support to achieve this.

Top Tips for :



Supporting Interaction

- If necessary, **provide appropriate support in social interactions** so that an autistic person can gain valuable social skills and independence.
- **Provide opportunities to engage** in a variety of activities using knowledge you may gain from the person's interests, skills and strength.
- **Provide opportunities to reflect** on social interaction with an autistic adult to ensure they develop their social understanding.
- **Speak clearly and avoid** irony, sarcasm, figurative language and implied instructions.
- Good practice would be to **obtain information** on the tenant, further information available in the Wales and West example.
- **Do not assume** that an autistic person will understand the concept of things they have not experienced i.e. being homeless or going to court (link with social imagination).



Social Imagination

Difficulty arises in social imagination due to inflexibility of thought and/or behaviour, a need for routines, and an inability to imagine what happens next. Autistic people may also have intense interests and fascinations around certain objects or subjects.

An autistic person may:

- become distressed if a familiar routine changes
- have difficulty in planning and organising
- struggle to follow lengthy instructions or directions if they are not written down
- find transitions difficult
- be reluctant to deviate from one way of doing things
- find it hard to work out what other people are likely to do and cannot make sense of why other people do what they do
- find it hard to understand what is expected of them and find it difficult to work out what information is important/relevant to give to you
- be unable to take someone else's perspective or point of view
- not always be able to realise that some things they say could offend others
- often pay particular attention to unusual details and struggle to see the bigger picture
- find it hard to imagine what other people are thinking and so can appear to be less socially skilled and come across as naïve and on occasions rude.

Intense Interests

Everyone has their favourite pastime or activity that they enjoy and tend to engage in frequently, but this interest does not interfere with their day to day life.

Some autistic people may enjoy a repetitive activity or show repetitive behaviours.

This might be something as simple as flicking the fingers, or an object or something more complex like following a certain routine travel route.

They may also have rituals, or have a repetition of a sequence of unusual bodily movements (possibly related to anxiety).

It is important that we recognise and respect how important intense interests are the lives of autistic people such as trains, movies, literature, gaming, autism, etc.

“Special interests save lives.”

Carly Jones MBE

“My favourite characters are like loved ones. They are always there for me, I can never disappoint them. They will never reject me or surprise me, and I can never say or do the wrong thing. When I’m lonely and exhausted and overwhelmed, they comfort me, asking for nothing in return.”

Emma Durman

Top Tips for :



Managing an individual’s intense interest

- **Be tolerant.**
- **Support the person** to use these as motivators or rewards when other activities are completed, but **never use withdrawal** of an intense interest as a punishment/consequence.
- **Do not make fun** of or criticise their interest.
- If the interest is interfering with learning or daily activities, **encourage engagement** in activity only at specific times.
- Look for ways to expand the special interest into a useful activity.
- **Use the special interest as a focus** when supporting the adult and to encourage more meaningful engagement. Remember that while you may not immediately recognise the value of an intense interest, it can be an important, even necessary part of the autistic person’s life.

Sensory Processing

Our bodies and the environment send our brain information through the senses. We process and organise this information so that we feel comfortable and secure. This helps us to understand the world and respond appropriately. Our sensory processing systems allow us to receive, register and pay attention to sensory information. We then process this information to make sense of it, prioritise it, and decide if a response is needed. This response may be an emotion, thought or behaviour.

Sensory processing differences for autistic people could include

- Over (Hyper) or Under (Hypo) sensitive
- Filtering sensory information
- Level of arousal
- Sensory defensiveness
- One sensory input at a time
- Attaching a meaning to a sensation
- Two or more senses being linked (synaesthesia)

These different sensory perceptions can sometimes cause pain, distress, anxiety, fear, or confusion and can result in behaviours that may appear challenging. Some examples are provided below:

Hypersensitive	Hyposensitive
Dislikes dark and bright lights	Moves fingers or objects in front of the eyes
Looks at minute particles, picks up smallest pieces of dust	Fascinated with reflections, brightly coloured objects
Covers ears	Makes loud rhythmic noises
Resists touch	Likes vibration
Avoids people	Spins or runs around in circles
Avoids smells	Smells self, people and objects
Moves away from people	Seeks strong odours
Places body in strange positions	Rocks back and forth
Difficulty walking on uneven surfaces	Bumps into objects and people
Turns whole body to look at something	Lack of awareness of body position in space

Taken from 'Sensory Issues in Autism' by the Autism and Practice Group, East Sussex County Council

For autistic people the brain tries to process everything at once without filtering out the less important things, for example: background noise, wallpaper, people moving about, and the feel of clothes on their skin. This results in sensory overload. When this happens, you may find the individual either having a 'meltdown', or even 'shut down', which is beyond an autistic person's control, as it is an involuntary response. The natural response to a threat is 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze'. A 'meltdown'; is the body fighting the stimuli, a shutdown; is the body freezing in response, and flight; is the desire to get away from the situation.

'Meltdown'

"It literally feels like my head is imploding. Building up to it gets overwhelming, but an actual meltdown is just like... like your brain is ceasing to exist. Of course, it doesn't actually, but I lose control of my muscles and ability to talk, I can't modulate my voice or really send any signals from my brain to my body to calm down. It's as though my brain, as a last-minute thing, sends a bunch of energy to the rest of my body, but there's no instructions for how that energy should be used, so it just goes all over and is out of my control."

Shayna G

'Shut Down'

Some autistic people describe that they sometimes enter 'shut down' after a 'meltdown' – kind of during recovery mode. It is important to understand that the autistic person may be unable to communicate, move, or interact with you, or the environment. They may feel incredibly vulnerable in this state and hypersensitive to touch. You should reduce sensory input including keeping communication as brief and calm as possible.

"Shutdowns are hard for me, I become extremely hypersensitive to sensory input, to people in my environment, I even lose my verbal ability. It's hard for my loved ones too, because they want to comfort me, but any social demand, like speech, is unwelcome, and physical touch, like hugs or a tap on the arm can be excruciating. If an autistic person is consistently stressed and overwhelmed for a long period of time, they can enter an extended shutdown sometimes referred to as 'autistic burnout'. This can drastically reduce an Autistic person's ability to function for weeks, months or even years."

Emma D



Top Tips for :



Relating to sensory issues

- **Ask and observe** the person and **try to learn** which sensory issues they may have — the more you can learn **and understand**, the easier it will be to support them.
- **Be aware** that if they are upset, distressed or behaving in a challenging way, **consider** whether this is being caused by sensory issues. In this case, dim lights or reduce noise levels to see if there is improvement.
- Be aware that they may only be able to utilise one sense at a time, for example, not looking at you does not mean not listening to you.
- **Remember** that when you've identified issues which trigger sensory problems, try to **avoid these where possible** and **advise others** where appropriate.
- **Have a quiet time/ space** so that they can relax and regain their composure.
- Note that sometimes ear defenders, sunglasses and other sensory reducing equipment can help.
- If meltdown occurs, remember to **stay calm and speak softly** to the individual using direct short sentences and offer a quiet place to recover if required.
- If shut down occurs, remember to offer the Autistic person **a safe, sensory friendly environment to recover**, or ideally **make adjustments** to the current environment (i.e. turn off bright lights, close blinds, reduce noise etc).

Anxiety is one of the most debilitating issues experienced by an autistic person

Most individuals experience anxiety at one time or another. For some, this is a chronic issue that affects every aspect of their lives. For others, it may occur in relation to specific events or activities or it may come and go throughout a person's life.

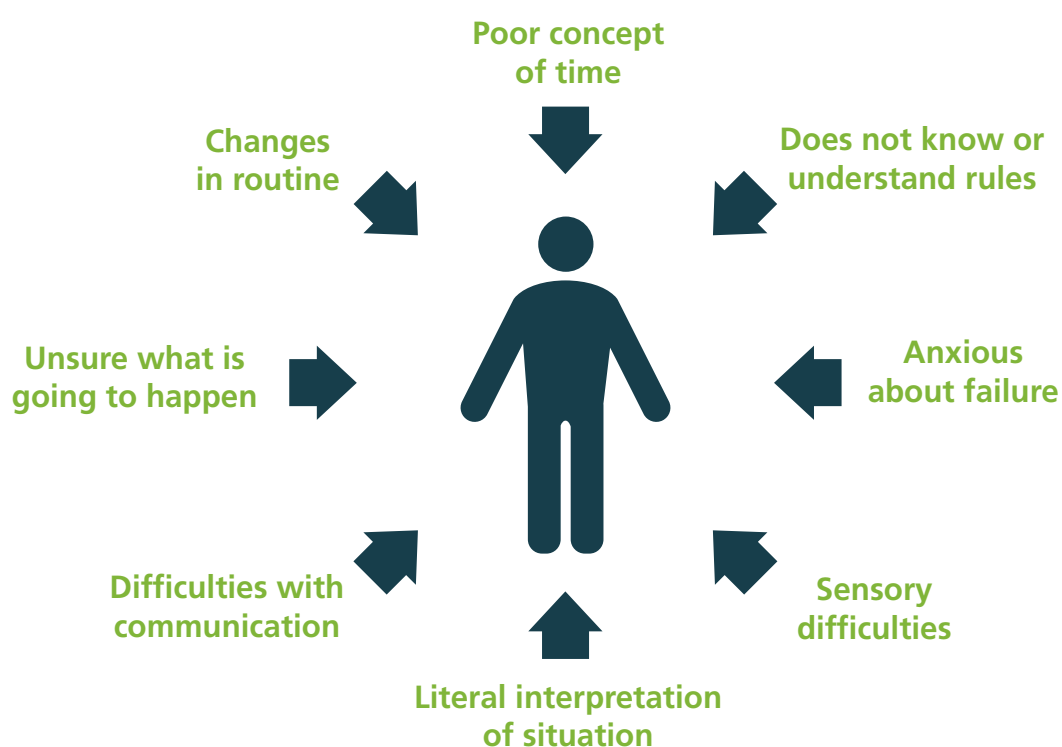
Anxiety is often the cause or trigger for other behaviours that impact the autistic person's daily life. They may engage in behaviours that are a way of communicating their anxiety or be caused by them avoiding anxiety provoking situations or people, or by eliminating anything that is not predictable.

Some of the behaviours you might see are

- increase in repetitive behaviours or involuntary movement
- restlessness and over activity
- becoming withdrawn and resisting any interaction with others
- avoidance
- limited attention span
- low mood
- becoming distressed
- self injurious behaviours
- using alcohol to cope with anxiety

Being aware that someone is anxious is the first step in trying to help. The causes of anxiety are numerous, some are obvious, and some are not, which makes it very difficult to eliminate them.

Here are just a few examples that may cause anxiety:





Top Tips for :

Supporting with anxiety

- **Adapt your communication** appropriately to meet the individual's preferences.
- **Provide structure** to the individual's appointment or visit.
- Consider changing the environment to **reduce sensory impact**.
- Give **clear, explicit** instructions/details of what you and they will do.
- Undertake things as planned, **be on time** for meetings and don't make last minute changes where possible.
- **Give advance notification/warning** before maintenance activities are about to start, or something is about to end.

Repetitive Behaviours / Self-regulatory Behaviours

The term repetitive behaviour is used to describe specific types of behaviours that are sometimes seen in autistic adults. These behaviours may appear odd or unusual to those who do not understand their function.

Some repetitive behaviour is sensory seeking and is sometimes referred to as self-stimulating behaviour, also known as 'stimming'. This behaviour may involve any or all of the senses in various degrees. Some repetitive behaviours are obvious while others are more subtle and hard to detect.

Tactile (touch)	scratching, clapping, feeling objects, playing with strings, hair twisting, toe-walking
Vestibular (movement)	rocking, spinning, jumping, pacing
Proprioceptive (body position)	teeth grinding, pacing, jumping, banging against hard objects
Visual (looking)	staring at lights, blinking, gazing at fingers, staring at the corners of ceiling
Auditory (hearing)	tapping fingers, snapping fingers, grunting, humming
Olfactory (smell)	smelling objects, sniffing people
Gustatory (taste)	licking objects, placing objects in mouth

Why repetitive behaviours?

Some of the possible reasons for using repetitive behaviour are outlined below:

- self-regulation, which helps the individual become calm and overcome situations of stress or upset
- demonstrating excitement
- providing the person with an escape route when they are overwhelmed or wound up
- enjoyment, some autistic people find the behaviour pleasurable even if causing injury to themselves
- a way of avoiding a task or activity

Some people learn to monitor their behaviours so they can engage in them in 'safe' environments (e.g. at home). It is important to understand that these repetitive behaviours are something that the person needs to do - do not force them to stop unless it becomes dangerous to themselves, or others.

Top Tips for :



Managing repetitive behaviours

- Try to **be tolerant**.
- If the behaviour is causing, or likely to cause, the person harm, ask to be referred to an Occupational Therapist who might be able to help reduce or change these behaviours.
- Any increase in these behaviours is often an indication of raised anxiety levels.
- For acute increases in this behaviour, **be a detective**. Try and **work out** what may be causing anxiety **and assist** with the cause.
- **Don't reprimand** the person for their behaviour — any attention is likely to increase the behaviour.
- **Read the other sections in this guide**. Implementing advice about managing anxiety and behaviours may reduce stimming behaviours.



Appendices



Top Tips for :

Engaging with individuals

- Explain what is going to happen, when and why. State clearly what is expected and explain any consequences.
- Be predictable. Try and use the same room, follow the same routine and keep appointments to time.
- Reduce sensory stimulation in the environment, choose a quiet area, dim lighting.
- Say what you mean, don't use idioms or metaphors. Don't rely on tone of voice, facial expressions or body language to emphasise a point.
- Always address the person by name at the start of each sentence especially if there are other people present.
- Keep instructions short and be specific. Avoid using abbreviations and terms such as 'regularly' or 'often' as these can be confusing.
- Do not keep repeating requests or questions. Allow time for the individual to process the information and follow up to check understanding.
- Offer a structured approach to all tasks, break down large tasks into smaller parts. Utilise visual planners, diaries and lists where possible.
- Many autistic people may avoid eye contact, don't assume this means they are not listening. Sitting alongside, instead of opposite may help.
- Be understanding and patient, many autistic people experience high levels of anxiety.

What challenges may autistic people face?

How can I help?

These things might challenge me ...	These things might help me ...
Direct eye contact	Look to the side of my face or over my shoulder when you are interacting with me
Direct communication	Address what you are saying to a nearby wall rather than directly to me
More than one person talking to me, other people's conversations	One person talking to me at a time
Perfume, aftershave or other scents	Neutral odours
Patterned clothing	Plain clothes
Bright coloured clothing	Dull coloured clothing
Strip lights	Uplighters
Bright or white light, bright sunshine	Red or green bulbs
Kettles, engines, traffic sounds, phones	A quiet environment
The toilet flushing, running water, fans	Quiet personal care
Different people responding to me in different ways	Consistency
Being bombarded by a lot of information	One thing at a time
Unpredictability and chaos	Knowing what is happening next

Acknowledgements

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- AutSide
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- Chartered Institute of Housing
- Community Housing Cymru (CHC)
- CSP - Housing Solutions
- Cymorth Cymru
- Housing Networks Project
- Learning Disability Wales
- Mi-space
- Monmouthshire County Council
- National Autistic Society Cymru
- National Autism Team
- Powys Integrated Autism Service
- Rent Smart Wales
- Residential Landlords Association
- Shelter Cymru
- Swansea Council
- Tai Pawb
- Torfaen County Borough Council
- TPAS
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- Western Bay Integrated Autism Service

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- AutSide
- Cymorth Cymru
- Housing Networks Project
- National Autism Team
- Shelter Cymru
- Swansea Council
- Welsh Government

Further Reading & References

ASDinfoWales –

<https://bit.ly/30bevV3>

Autism: A Guide for those who support adults following a diagnosis -

<https://bit.ly/2xxK2Ek>

Housing Act 2014 –

<https://bit.ly/2xtRcJM>

Code of Guidance for Local Authorities on allocation of accommodation and homelessness -

<https://bit.ly/2LFZsit>

Shelter Cymru – Accessing and sustaining social tenancies exploring barriers to homelessness prevention -

(Dr Jacqueline Aneen Campbell, Adam Golton, Rebecca Jackson & Richard Evans)

<https://bit.ly/2kAaxUu>

Shelter Cymru – Piecing together a solution: Homelessness amongst people with autism in Wales

(Dr Jacqueline Aneen Campbell, Senior Research Officer, Shelter Cymru and Beverley Winn, Cardiff University) -

<https://bit.ly/2JbfBur>

Autism Network – Housing with support: the options for autistic adults

(Clarissa Manuel-Jones) -

<https://bit.ly/2xsc5Fn>

Autism - The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population

(Alasdair Churchard, Morag Ryder, Andrew Greenhill and William Mandy) -

<https://bit.ly/2KWOnKj>

Glossary

Auditory (hearing) : tapping fingers, snapping fingers, grunting, humming

Gustatory (taste) : licking objects, placing objects in mouth

LA : Local Authority

Neurotypical : *Someone without a diagnosed neurodevelopmental condition.*

Olfactory (smell) : smelling objects, sniffing people

PHP : Personal Housing Plan - *Where a person is homeless or threatened with homelessness and eligible, a local authority should draw up a 'personalised housing plan' (PHP) based on its assessment of her/his need. The plan should contain the steps to be taken to prevent or relieve the applicant's homelessness.*

PIE : Psychologically Informed Environments - *Psychologically informed environments go hand in hand with trauma informed approaches. It refers to the need to ensure that environments are set up to be calming, relaxing and welcoming, to ensure that people are able to engage. A lack of physical barriers, decent levels of privacy, and similar, are recommended.*

PIP : Personal Independence Payment - *PIP is a benefit that helps with the extra costs of a long-term health condition or disability for people aged 16 to 64. It is gradually replacing Disability Living Allowance (DLA).*

Proprioceptive (body position) : teeth grinding, pacing, jumping, banging against hard objects

PRS : Private Rented Sector - *is a classification of United Kingdom housing tenure as described by the Department for Communities and Local Government.*

Tactile (touch) : *scratching, clapping, feeling objects, playing with strings, hair twisting, toe-walking*

TIA : Trauma informed approaches - *Trauma informed approaches go hand in hand with psychologically informed environments. It refers to a way of working which takes into account individuals' backgrounds and potential trauma in their past, and means practitioners should work in a responsive, flexible and proactive way rather than following rigid processes.*

UC : Universal Credits - *a payment to help with your living costs. You may be able to get it if you're on a low income or out of work.*

Vestibular (movement) : rocking, spinning, jumping, pacing

Visual (looking) : staring at lights, blinking, gazing at fingers, staring at the corners of ceiling

WHQS : Welsh Housing Quality Standards - *The Standard was developed by the Welsh Government to provide a common target standard for the condition of all housing in Wales.*

NOTES