

Here's What You Told Us...

Willow Holloway

Founder, The Autistic Women's Empowerment Project Vice Chair, Disability Wales Welsh Representative and Chair of Autistic UK

Hello everyone, my name is Willow Holloway and I've been asked to share my experiences of working with the National Autism Team here in Wales. I've been working with the National Autism Team for a few years now, I began just as there was a transition in leadership when Sara Harvey and Wendy Thomas took on the roles of National Leads. Initially this was through my position on Welsh Government's ASD Implementation Advisory Group, and also through attending consultation events. I am extremely focused on equality for autistic and all disabled people and so I attend consultation events of this type whenever I can. This change in leadership mirrored the development that was occurring within my own organisation which is Autistic UK.

Autistic UK is the national user-led organisation which is run for autistic people by autistic people, and I am the person in the organisation that's very focused on campaigning here in Wales. Over the last few years, we've been going through the process of re-structuring to enable our organisation to adapt to new ways of working which has never been more important than now. Throughout this I felt it was really important that as many autistic adults as possible were consulted especially whilst services are being developed to meet our needs and both of the National Leads were very open to this.

Despite being able to do this recording, which has probably taken me about six takes to actually get to the conclusion, I don't communicate easily, and I find networking extremely challenging. Despite this I have felt fully welcomed by all of the [National Autism] Team, not just Wendy and Sara, all the team in the office and the Regional Development Leads. I feel that during the last few years there has been really positive co-production and mutual support between us. My primary focus in all the work that I do as an autistic advocate is to ensure that the autistic voice is heard, and the National Autism Team have been really supportive as far as this is concerned. They invited me to be involved in the development of the engagement strategy, and now I regularly attend National [Autism Wales] Team meetings acting as a voluntary autistic advisor. We're currently focusing on what support autistic people will need as the nation comes out of lockdown.

I feel really privileged to work at a national level here in Wales and I think the highlight of my work with the National Team has to be the fact that even though all my input is voluntary and the role often includes me acting as a bit of a critical friend at times, I still feel that my input is fully valued, I feel listened to instead of feeling like a token attendee who is simply there to tick the box. It actually feels like we're trying to achieve something together. I'm connected to many autistic adults here in Wales and all are really pleased that we now have a line of communication directly to people who can make changes.

The autistic community can be difficult to engage with, but I really am sure that if we all work together then we can begin to find new innovative ways to ensure those who find engaging challenging and are having difficulty overcoming the barriers, that they are also given the opportunity to have their voices heard. Going forward I want to continue sharing my experiences and I would also like to help others to be more involved in the decision making that would guide the delivery of services for autistic people across Wales. I look forward to what we are going to see happen and I wish all the Team good luck for the coming year!