

Wales  
**TUC**  
Cymru

# **Autism awareness in the workplace**

A toolkit for trade unionists  
**Wales TUC Cymru**

# About the Autism Toolkit and Course for Union Reps

The aim of this toolkit is to provide information to help union officers and reps in Wales to represent members with autism or those who have close family with autism.

The toolkit will help reps to recognise the workplace issues that can impact on people with autism and will give them the information and guidance they need to help tackle those issues. It is also a resource for the Wales TUC's Autism E-Note and Workplace course.

## About the Wales TUC

The Wales TUC exists to make the working world a better place for everyone. We want Wales to become a fair work nation.

With 49 member unions and over 400,000 members in Wales, the Wales TUC has a key role in raising issues that make work fairer.

We support unions to grow and thrive and we stand up for everyone who works for a living. Join us.

## Autism Awareness in the Workplace course

This two-day Wales TUC course has been designed for trade union reps and aims to create greater awareness of autism and neurodiversity in the workplace. The course is aimed at trade union reps from all workplaces and no prior experience or knowledge is required. The course aims to:

- ☑ Create awareness of neurodiversity and Autism Spectrum Conditions.

- ☑ Help reps consider various workplace factors that may negatively impact on workers with an ASC and on workers who may be parents or carers for people with an ASC.
- ☑ Consider practices and environments within the workplace that may be direct or indirect discrimination against workers with an ASC and parent or carers of those with ASCs.
- ☑ Consider best practice for workplaces and unions to tackle the barriers facing workers with ASCs.

Contact [wtuceducation@tuc.org.uk](mailto:wtuceducation@tuc.org.uk) for information about courses running in your area.



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# Autism in the workplace

Autism is a term describing a wide range of conditions that reflect neurological differences among people. These are known as autism spectrum conditions (ASCs).

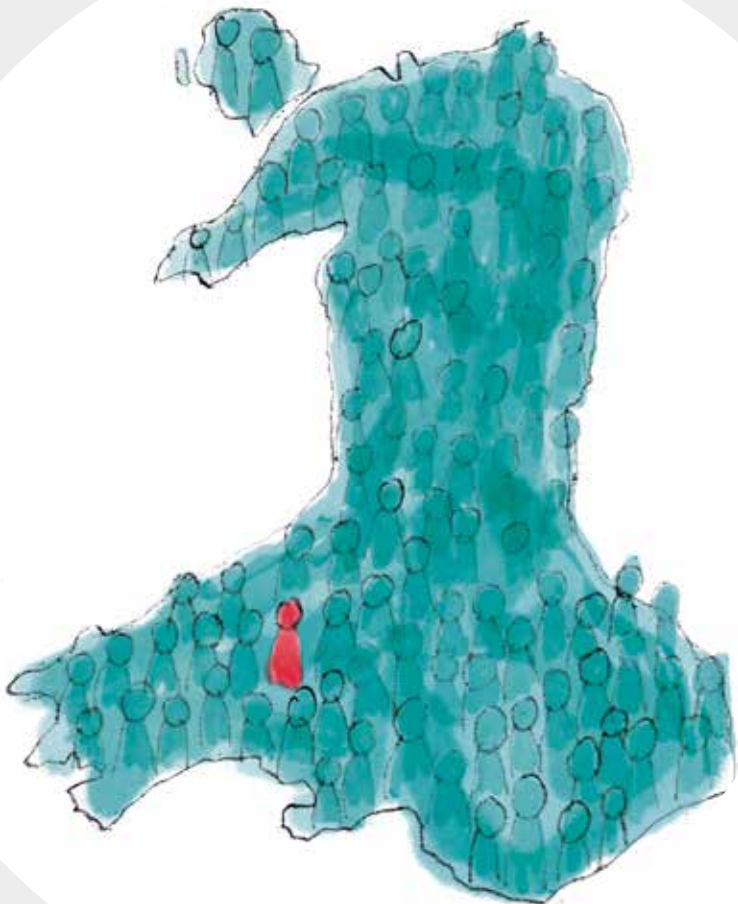
Autism, along with other neurological conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are all examples of 'neurodiversity'.

Neurodiversity is a relatively new term that refers to the diversity of the human brain. This means there is a wide range of difference in how people's brains work. Neurodiversity recognises that some people's brains are wired differently.

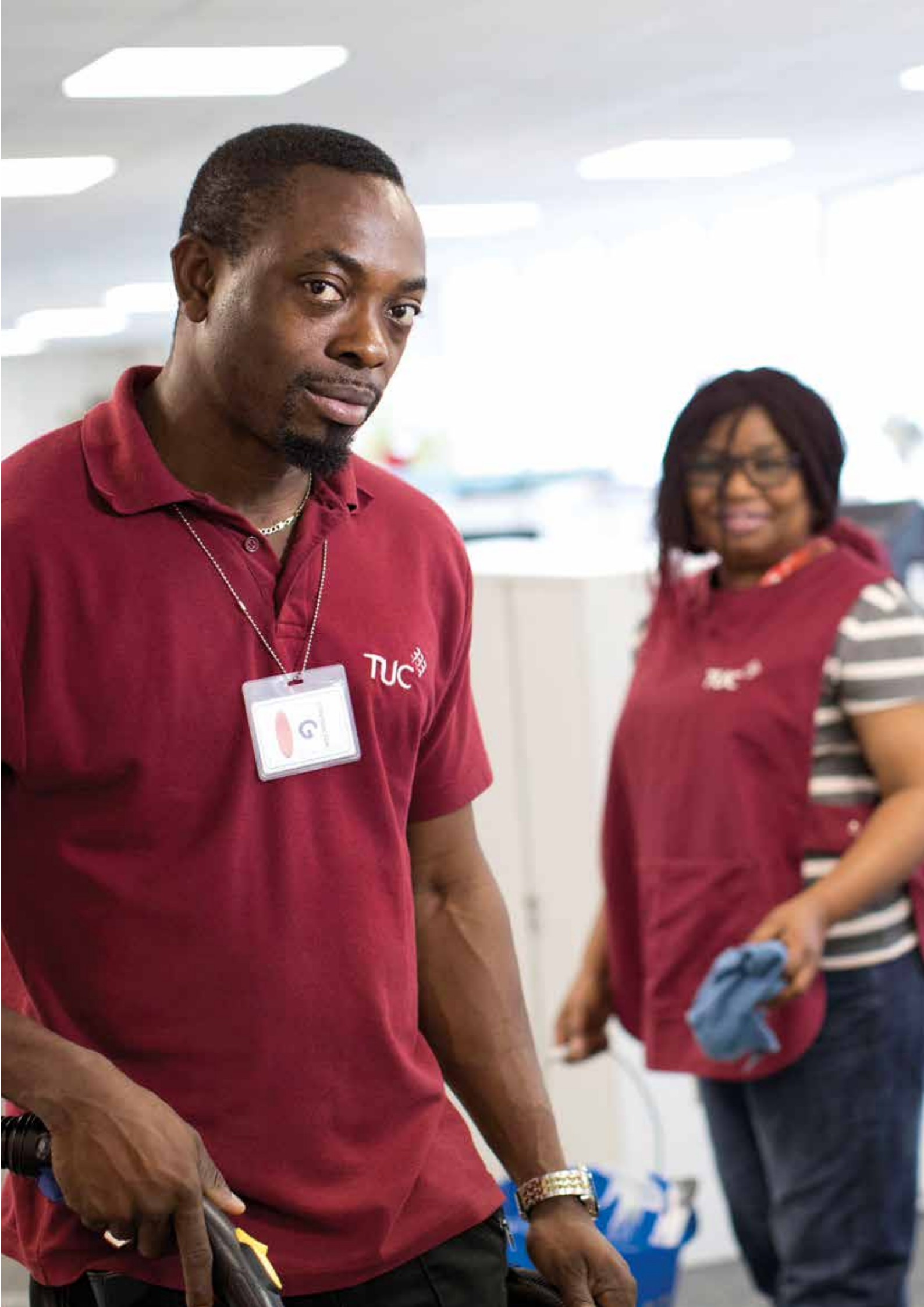
There are an estimated 31,000 people with ASCs in Wales and an increasing number of people in work have a formal diagnosis. There are also many people with the condition who, for a variety of reasons, may not have a formal diagnosis. Many workers are the parent or carer of someone with autism.

Barriers that are placed in the way of workers who have autism spectrum conditions can negatively affect their lives at work. And some are excluded from work simply because of their condition.

Trade unions have a vital role to play in increasing awareness and understanding of autism in the work place and enforcing the rights that protect people.



**There are an  
estimated 31,000  
people with autism  
spectrum conditions in  
Wales. That is equal to  
**1 in 100**  
people**



# Why autism is a trade union issue

Unions have long been at the forefront of the campaign for equality, whether through the struggle for equal pay or maternity rights. People are neurodiverse and so are workplaces. Many union reps will have members in their workplace with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs).

We know that union reps already make a huge difference within the workplace. Evidence shows that unionised workplaces are more likely to have better equal opportunity practises. Union reps have a huge impact in terms of promoting equality and improving employers' policies and practise towards workers with ASCs.

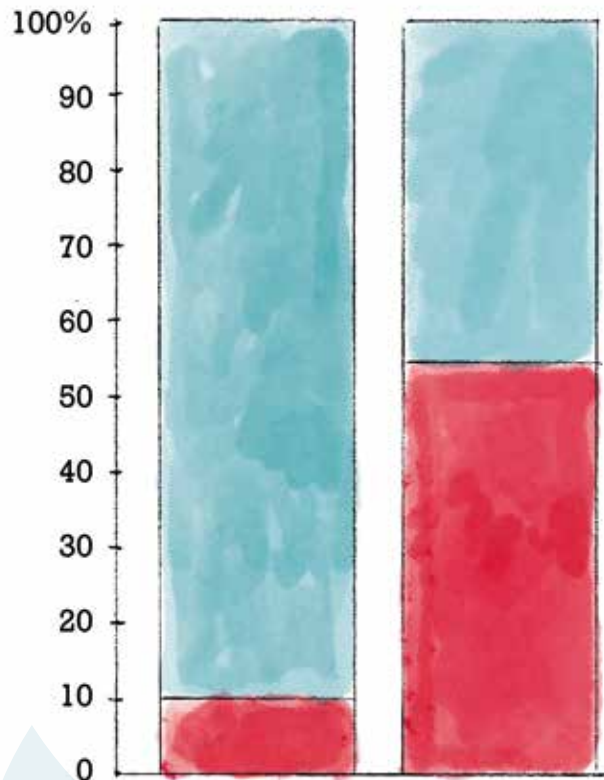
Unions can:

- Help to raise awareness and understanding of neurodiversity more widely among the general public.
- Scrutinise employment practises to help to fight discrimination and reduce barriers to make workplaces more autism friendly.
- Help support carers with requests for flexible working to help them stay in work. Many working carers struggle to get the help they need within the workplace. Unions can provide support, practical help and advice and an advocate for changing workplace practises to suit the needs of carers.

Employers have a duty to prevent workplace discrimination and to make adjustments to ensure

## Glossary

We have included a glossary at the end of this document. This provides full definitions and explanations for terms that you might be unfamiliar with.



Only **10%** of adults with an ASC receive employment support but **53%** say they want it

workers with ASCs or those who care for someone with an ASC are able to work.

But there are also benefits for employers in taking a more proactive approach towards Autism too. By fostering fairer and more inclusive workplaces, employers are more likely to:

- Appeal to a wider selection of applicants when recruiting.
- Nurture a more loyal and dedicated workforce.
- Retain the skills and talents of experienced and skilled workers.

By working with unions employers can make their workplaces better and increase moral and wellbeing among staff.

# Understanding autism spectrum conditions

## What are autism spectrum conditions (ASCs)?

According to the National Autistic Society:

*“Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people.”*

Autism is a term covering a wide range of conditions that reflect neurological differences among people. These are known as ASCs and are an example of ‘neurodiversity’, or differences in the way people’s brains work.

## The autistic spectrum

While people with autism all share some traits, the intensity of the condition can vary significantly. This range of intensity is known as the autistic spectrum.

Union reps will come across people with ASCs who have very different skills, abilities and needs. It is important that each person with autism is recognised as an individual.

## Traits of autism

Common traits that you may recognise in people with ASCs include:

- Differences in communication.
- Differences in social interaction.
- Differences in sensing and perceiving.
- Differences in noticing details vs the ‘big picture’.
- Differences in organising and planning.
- Differences in thinking.

Each of these differences is looked at in more detail below.



**Autism is a term covering a wide range of conditions that reflect neurological differences among people.**



## Differences in communication

People with ASCs communicate differently. How this appears in the real world can be quite diverse.

Common factors are:

- Difficulty understanding communication which is indirect or unclear.
- An efficient communication style – saying exactly what you mean.
- Difficulty understanding the importance of things like posture, gesture, facial expressions or the tone and volume of someone's voice.

## Differences in social interaction

For someone who doesn't instinctively understand important aspects of communication, social situations can be difficult. People with ASCs may interpret language literally or they may find it hard to work out things that others take for granted - such as whose turn it is to speak in a conversation, or whether someone is joking.

In the workplace, this might mean things like not being able to tell if a person is busy, appearing to

dominate meetings, or not being aware if colleagues seem stressed or frustrated.

Many people also struggle with working out unwritten social rules. They may not be aware, for example, of what topics are appropriate to bring up in the workplace or they may not recognise unspoken conventions, such as when it's okay to take breaks.

Some people with an ASC don't have the same need for social interaction as other people. They may not enjoy things like office parties or drinks after work and may prefer to sit on their own during lunch breaks. This is not true of all people with ASCs.

## Differences in sensing and perceiving

People with ASCs can be highly sensitive to certain sensations. Some of the more common differences in perception are:

- Light – a dislike of bright light or difficulty reading letters on a bright computer screen.
- Sound – loud noises can be irritating or painful.
- Smell – being bothered by strong odours like perfume, cigarette smoke or food.



Many people also struggle with working out unwritten social rules. They may not be aware, for example, of what topics are appropriate to bring up in the workplace or they may not recognise unspoken conventions, such as when it's okay to take breaks.

- Balance – difficulty with things like climbing ladders.
- Taste – a preference for unusual food combinations or for foods on a plate to not be touching.
- Sensitivity to touch – dislike of certain textures or fabrics.

These differences are part of the condition, and workers with autism are legally entitled to reasonable adjustments so they are not put at a disadvantage.

Examples of workplace barriers and reasonable adjustments are discussed on page 32. People with autism are also protected by health and safety legislation which requires employers to protect all workers from the risk of injury or harm at work.

### Differences in noticing details vs the 'big picture'

The ability to put small details together to make a bigger picture is known as 'central coherence'. People with ASCs tend to perform differently in tasks and experiments that test the ability to detect patterns, or to focus on details. For example, look at the image below:



On average, it takes people with an ASC much longer to identify what animal is in this picture – and some don't see it at all. They may focus on the

individual lines within the pattern, and not the overall shape.

### Differences in organising and planning

People with an ASC may have noticeable differences in 'executive functioning'. This term refers to various mental abilities such as:

- Solving problems
- Making and carrying out plans
- Focusing attention
- Monitoring and reacting to situations
- Impulse control

Differences in executive functioning can affect people in a variety of ways. A few examples could include:

- People find it difficult to be on time because they may not be able to effectively plan a journey to work or carry out their plan once they've made it.
- People take longer to learn a job involving lots of different and complex tasks.
- Once someone has learned a process, they may find it difficult to learn any changes to it.

### Differences in thinking

It's a common stereotype that people with autism don't like change. This is an oversimplification, but a preference for familiarity, routine and repetition is part of the official diagnosis.

Related to this is the idea of special interests. Many people with ASC have one or more topics which they're extremely interested in. This interest can be narrow: for example, a child might insist on watching the same episode of a cartoon repeatedly. But it can

also be broad: someone's interest might be 'ancient civilizations', and they read lots of books and watch lots of documentaries, join numerous clubs, and arrange holidays to places with ancient monuments.

Sometimes these are referred to as obsessions. This is inaccurate. The word 'obsession' refers to a distressing mental illness, where unwanted thoughts keep coming back despite the person trying to get rid of them. The thoughts may give rise to strong feelings of fear or disgust.

In contrast, many people with an ASC really enjoy their interests. The special interest may be a fulfilling hobby - or even lead to a job.

Like everyone else, people with an ASC can have other mental and physical health problems. These problems may or may not be related to their autism. It may also be the case that their experience of

health issues – and their experience of health care – is different because of their ASC.

Some of these differences may include:

- Different experience of symptoms because of sensory differences – people may be more, or less, sensitive to things like pain, nausea or fatigue.
- Greater risk of 'meltdowns' or 'shutdowns' when a person with autism is ill.
- Reduced access to appropriate healthcare because of difficulty communicating with medical professionals, or coping with the sensory environment of a clinic or hospital
- Challenges with sticking to a treatment regime because of differences in executive functioning.



# Conditions that might occur alongside autism

People with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) are statistically more likely to have certain other conditions. These conditions are not part of the autism spectrum but are described as 'co-occurring' conditions. Not every person with an ASC will have a co-occurring condition.

Some examples of co-occurring conditions include:

## Learning disabilities

The learning disability charity Mencap states:

*"A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life."*

ASCs are not learning disabilities. It is important not to make assumptions about how a learning disability might affect someone and many people with autism do not have a learning disability.

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which affects the ability to develop literacy skills. It affects things like the recognition of letters. It is not related to a person's general intelligence. In adults, the day-to-day effects may include:

- Quickly becoming tired when reading and writing.
- Poor spelling and grammar.
- Difficulty reading maps or following directions.
- Mixing up numbers.

## Dyspraxia

Up to 4 out of every 5 of people with autism also

have dyspraxia. Dyspraxia affects an individual's ability to control their own muscular movements. Someone with dyspraxia may perform physical movements less accurately or more slowly.

Problems that are common with dyspraxia include:

- Difficulty writing or using a mouse or keyboard.
- Increased incidence of slips, trips and falls.
- Increased incidence of accidental injury to self or others.
- Difficulty learning to drive or ride a bicycle.
- Walking more slowly or with an unusual gait.
- Speech differences.
- Digestive problems.
- Increased risk of back ache, neck ache or RSI.
- More than usual tiredness after physical exertion.
- Appearing physically tense, even if the person feels mentally relaxed.

## Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is a neurological condition which can result in:

- Poor concentration.
- Restlessness.
- Impulsive behaviour.

## Mental Health

Autism is not in itself a mental illness or mental health condition. However, people with ASCs are

significantly more at risk of developing certain mental health issues. Some scientists believe that this is due to structural differences in the brain. Others believe that the feelings of isolation, confusion, fear, discrimination, social conflict and stress caused by living in a world designed for people without ASCs is a more likely cause.

People with an ASC might find it more challenging than others to get a diagnosis and treatment for a mental health problem. Differences in communication might make it difficult to explain what they are experiencing. Differences in thinking might mean that the person does not recognise these thoughts and feelings as unusual. In some cases, their symptoms might be overlooked because they appear, on the surface, to be like common traits of autism.

### **Anxiety**

9 out of 10 people with an ASC will suffer from at least one clinically significant episode of anxiety. This is compared with around 1 in 4 of the general population. "Clinically significant" means that their anxiety is serious enough to require diagnosis and treatment by a doctor.

Anxiety is just as unpleasant and potentially debilitating for someone with an ASC. It may also make the 'unusual' behaviours listed above more likely or more pronounced. If someone is self-conscious about their ASC or tries to hide it at work, this can lead to a vicious circle, as they become anxious about seeming anxious.



**9 out of 10 people with an autistic spectrum condition will suffer from at least one clinically significant episode of anxiety in their lifetime, compared with around 1 in 4 of the general population.**



# Case study – Time management



Dafydd works at a law firm as a case-handler. He has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.

Since starting work at the firm, Dafydd had a lot of difficulty managing his time. He was consistently behind on his work targets, had lots of late deadlines flagged-up on the internal computer system, and wasn't progressing to handling more complex cases as quickly as his peers.

He was also making mistakes: sending out the wrong correspondence or classifying information incorrectly on the computer. He ended up being placed on a performance improvement plan.

**Dafydd's induction had been very quick, and he was expected to be handling live claims within a week of starting. He was taught how to do this with desk-side coaching in the office, which proved an inefficient way of learning for him as there were too many distractions. When he asked more experienced colleagues for help, he found that each one gave a slightly different answer. Those slight differences left him completely confused.**

There are also prompts on the internal computer system which remind him to do some tasks, but the descriptions of what the person needs to do are only partial. Again he found this completely confusing.

**Reasonable adjustments have involved helping Dafydd to plan and prioritise his tasks, with short one-to-one meetings with his manager every morning. He has also created very detailed charts, lists and flow-diagrams which can guide him through the process. He has one single point of contact who he can go to with questions. And his work targets have been relaxed, to enable him to clear his backlog of work.**



# Case study – Dealing with change



Sue has recently qualified as a radiographer. She has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.

**Sue's Asperger syndrome means that she has a strong preference for predictability and routine. Quick or unexpected change is especially stressful for her.**

The hospital where she works provides a very thorough 6-month induction, during which new workers get to experience lots of different departments. This meant that she underwent a great deal of change when she was still very new to the job. Sometimes change was quite unexpected - to the extent that she became highly anxious.

**She also had many meetings as part of the induction process. She became especially anxious when she didn't know what these meetings were going to be about.**

The adjustments were simple but made a big difference to her. She was given at least 24 hours' notice before changing department, so she never had to go to work wondering what she would be doing that day. Correspondence requesting that she attend meetings is now clearer and states the purpose of the meeting, and she gets to see in advance what will be discussed at her work appraisals. She has access to a quiet space to take time out if she gets anxious and needs a few minutes to implement the stress-management techniques which she has learned.

# The importance of the social model of disability

**The social model of disability is a way of viewing the world. It was developed by disabled people and it has been fully adopted by the Trade Union movement.**

The **social model** considers impairment and disability separately. Impairment is a characteristic or long-term trait, which may, or may not, result from an injury, disease or condition. Disability is the attitudinal or physical barriers that make life harder for disabled people. These can be people's attitudes to difference such as assuming that disabled people aren't able to do certain things, or physical barriers like inaccessible buildings.

The social model aims to remove any unnecessary barriers which stop people living their lives in the way they want to. And in doing so, it creates equality which allows people to live, work and access services in the way they choose. This gives people independence, choices and control over their own lives.

Workers with autism need to be involved in any discussion around adjustments to overcome barriers that may have been identified.

Trade unions support disabled people's call to action: 'Nothing about us without us'.

Using the social model, we can recognise the prejudice and ignorance surrounding autism. We can also see that there are commonly used workplace practises that exclude people with autism or don't take them into account.

Workplace cultures, unwritten rules and forms of communications can make work harder or inaccessible for autistic people. As trade unionists we can use the social model to help us identify and recognise these problems. By doing this we will create more inclusive workplaces for everyone.

Many trade unions have structures for disabled members. If your union does, it may be useful to invite and welcome the involvement of people with autism in these structures.

The other well-known way of understanding disability is through the **medical model**. It sees the impairment as the cause of disabled people's disadvantage and exclusion. For example, an employer who decides that a person can't work for them because they have autism rather than considering how to make the workplace suitable for them, is probably being influenced by the medical model. Unfortunately, the medical mode dominates much political and legal decision making.





# Autism and invisible impairments

Everyone recognises that someone who always uses a wheelchair to get around is a disabled person. But many more people are disabled than those who can be identified by sight alone.

The legal definition of disability includes millions of people who don't look different on the outside. Some of the conditions that many people have that make it difficult for them to carry out day-to-day activities without adjustments are:

- Mental health conditions.
- Conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism and epilepsy.
- Progressive conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis or Motor Neurone Disease
- Chronic conditions such as diabetes and asthma.
- People with cancer, Multiple Sclerosis or HIV are automatically counted as disabled from the time of diagnosis.

Autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) can vary between different people. In many cases, people with an ASC can appear to have no obvious challenges in the workplace and fit in with their peer group in the same way as non-autistic people do.

Because there is no 'visible' impairment, others sometimes fail to understand why a person with an ASC may have a genuine need for, and entitlement to, reasonable adjustments.

In some cases, lack of awareness or ignorance and prejudice may lead colleagues and managers to question if the person with an ASC is 'really disabled'. They may accuse the person with an ASC of using it as an 'excuse' for inappropriate behaviour or somehow gaining an unfair advantage. Such behaviour may deter people with ASCs, who are entitled to legal protection, from seeking the adjustments they need from their employer.

Union reps have an important role in raising awareness of 'invisible disability' in the workplace. They can work to challenge discriminatory attitudes and help members secure the adjustments they need.



**At least**  
**1 in 3**  
**autistic adults**  
**experience severe**  
**mental health**  
**difficulties due to a**  
**lack of support.**

# Myths and facts

<p><b>Autism is one of those 'trendy' conditions that everyone seems to have these days.</b></p>	<p>This is a commonly-heard view, but an inaccurate prejudice which undermines the very real experience of people with autism.</p>
<p><b>Autism is just an excuse for bad or anti-social behaviour.</b></p>	<p>'Bad behaviour' can just be unusual or eccentric behaviour which does not harm anyone. Behaviour that does cause difficulties may be the product of distress, in a situation that does not take into account the needs of a person with autism (e.g. sensory overload, changes to routines, or unkind comments).</p>
<p><b>Autism is a learning disability.</b></p>	<p>Autism is not a learning disability, but it can be accompanied by learning disability.</p>
<p><b>Autism is a mental illness.</b></p>	<p>Autism is not a mental illness. Autistic people may be more vulnerable to developing mental health problems, due to distress caused by social conflict, sensory overload, misunderstandings, discrimination and other factors.</p>
<p><b>Autism is a tragedy.</b></p>	<p>Autism can certainly have a big impact on individuals and families, who can face great difficulty and distress. However, portraying autism as a tragedy can have negative consequences for autistic people and should be avoided.</p>
<p><b>Autistic people are of low intelligence.</b></p>	<p>This is incorrect. Autism is a spectrum and includes people across the range of intelligence.</p>
<p><b>Autistic people are like the character in <i>Rain Man</i>.</b></p>	<p>The character of Raymond in <i>Rain Man</i>, played by Dustin Hoffman, was based on Kim Peek. Mr Peek was a savant. This meant that he could memorise and recall a remarkable amount of information. In fact, a later diagnosis suggested that he was not actually autistic but instead had a different neurological condition. While some autistic people may have special talents or unusual abilities, it is unfair to expect all autistic people to be like this, or to treat their abilities like party tricks.</p>

<p><b>Autistic people are unable to empathise with others.</b></p>	<p>It may be more accurate to say that autistic people empathise differently from the way that neurotypical people do.</p> <p>One theory is that autistic people lack cognitive empathy (the ability to predict others' intentions) but have affective empathy (the ability to share others' feelings) and compassionate empathy (the desire to help others).</p>
<p><b>If there is no cure for autism yet, we should prioritise developing one.</b></p>	<p>Many people would welcome progress in alleviating the more distressing aspects of autism. But many of these could be alleviated by better support services, an end to prejudice and discrimination, and an acceptance that humanity is neurologically diverse.</p> <p>Many people with autism want support and inclusion not a cure.</p>
<p><b>There are medications, therapies and treatments for autism.</b></p>	<p>There are no medications to treat autism.</p> <p>People may use medications to treat conditions that may be associated with autism.</p> <p>There are various therapies, treatments and support promoted to people with autism and their carers. Some are helpful but others are unproven or even harmful.</p>



# Living with autism spectrum conditions

This section looks at some of the behaviour associated with ASCs which may seem unusual or challenging to people who are unfamiliar with the condition.

It's essential to remember that people with ASCs, like everyone else, have reasons for doing what they do.

## Distress: 'meltdowns' and 'shutdowns'

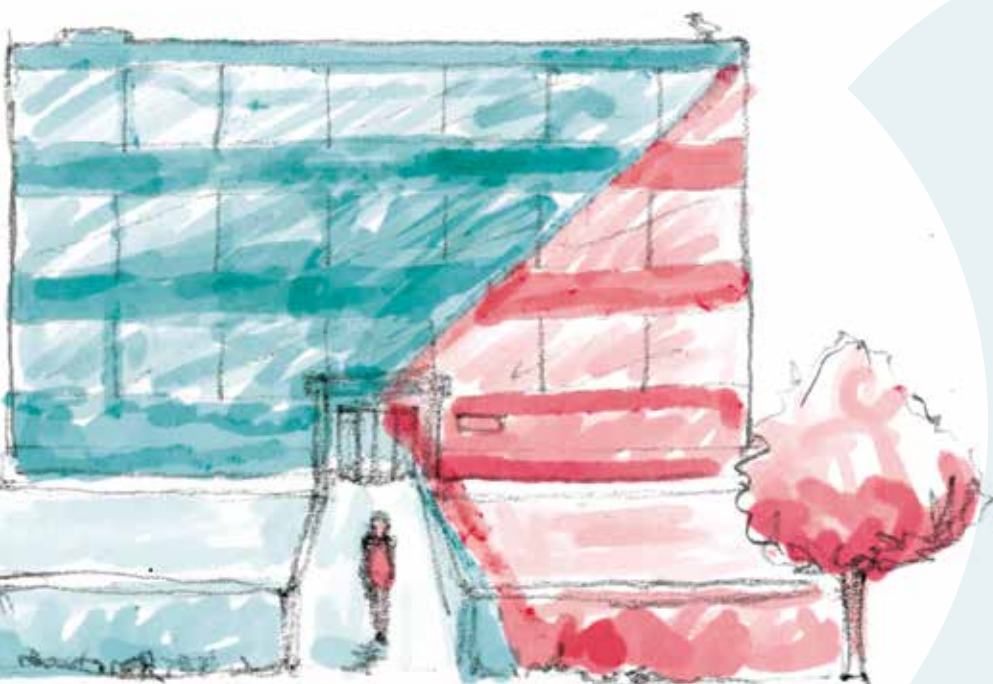
It's an unhelpful myth that adults with ASCs are prone to 'tantrums' or to 'kicking off' at work. However, 'autistic meltdowns' are a recognised phenomenon. They happen when a person is severely over-stimulated, and their brain is receiving more input from their senses than it can process.

If the person's working environment is appropriate, there is no reason why this should ever happen at work. If it does, it is a sign that the person's environment needs to be reassessed. It can also be

a sign of workplace bullying. Unfortunately, some people use the fact that people with ASCs can be made very uncomfortable by apparently 'harmless' things to provoke a reaction.

'Autistic meltdowns' are more common in children. Children have not yet learned to control their emotions as well as adults, their senses are naturally more sensitive, and they are likely to be in an over-stimulating environment, such as school or day-care, for a lot of the time. All too often, these episodes are seen as the child's fault. This is simply wrong. But they will need the presence of a trusted adult to help them cope, and if a worker is caring for a child with an ASC, your understanding of this aspect of the condition will be very important to them.

'Shutdowns' are related to 'meltdowns'. The person's brain can't cope with any more sensory input, so simply stops taking any more in. At best they may function on autopilot and appear distracted. At worst they may find themselves unable to talk



**28%**  
have been asked  
to leave a public  
place because  
of behaviour  
associated with  
their autism.

or move. As with 'meltdowns', if this happens at work it's a serious warning sign that someone's environment is inappropriate.

### **Routines and rituals**

A sense of routine can be important for someone with an ASC. Routine can help with executive functioning and ritual can be soothing. It may be difficult for others to understand why a person needs to take their break at a very precise time each day, or to have their work space laid out 'just so'. But these things can really help someone with an ASC feel comfortable.

Just as a person's special interests are different from obsessions, a person's rituals are not the same as the compulsions that form part of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). People with OCD often hate their compulsions and feel trapped by them, while for someone with an ASC they can be helpful and enabling.

### **Stimming**

'Self-stimulatory behaviour' or 'stimming' is the name given to a range of small repetitive actions that people with an ASC sometimes do. Some of the most common are: flapping hands, twirling hair, playing with jewellery, fiddling with small objects, jiggling a foot, stroking a piece of clothing or gently rocking in place.

These behaviours are usually harmless. Rarely, people may 'stim' in more detrimental ways, such as picking at scabs or biting lips, especially if they are under-sensitive to pain. This is not the same as self-harming in which the person deliberately seeks to feel pain.

# Strengths and benefits of having a team member with an ASC

The ability to get - and keep - a job and progress in work is a key route out of poverty and provides opportunities for social inclusion. Adults with autism are significantly under-represented in the workplace.

Employers may not be aware of the strengths that people with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) can bring.

- **Punctual and reliable:** People with ASCs often enjoy routine and structure and therefore make punctual and reliable employees. Once a routine is in place, they can be very good at sticking to it. This can also be beneficial when breaking down tasks.
- **Diligent:** With differences in social interaction, many people with ASCs are often strongly focused on their work and not easily distracted. With a strong desire to complete a task once it's been started and the ability to concentrate for long periods, they are less likely get bored or feel the need for variety.
- **Polite:** Although the communication style of many people with an ASC can appear to be abrupt or to the point, they rarely intend to

offend. Most people with an ASC put a lot of effort into learning strategies which can result in them coming across as polite, thoughtful and considerate.

- **Independent and perceptive:** People with ASCs are often able to see creative solutions to long-standing problems and are less likely to be put off tackling such problems by other people's views on the difficulty of the issue.
- **Eye for detail:** Some people with ASCs have an exceptional ability to spot mistakes and find creative ways to fix them.
- **Highly logical:** People with an ASC often think in a more logical way than neurotypical people. They are often able to create orderly processes in their roles and to follow complex procedures correctly.
- **Insightful:** The different way people with an ASC think and see the world around them often allows them to notice details or patterns that other people might miss.



People with ASCs are often able to see creative solutions to long-standing problems and are less likely to be put off tackling such problems by other people's views on the difficulty of the issue.

# A guide to the law: rights for workers with autism

People with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) are defined as disabled people for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010. Under the Act, a person is considered to have a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. ASCs should qualify as a mental and/or physical impairment.

Not everyone with an ASC will identify themselves as disabled, but they would be defined as disabled for the purposes of the Act.

The Equality Act is based on the medical model of disability. The trade union movement has for many years supported the social model of disability, which is the reverse of the medicalised approach contained in UK law. The social model sees the disability not as a 'defect' of the individual but in the barriers put up by society.

The social model is also used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been ratified by the UK government but which has not led to a change in the definition of disability contained in UK law. TUC guidance is therefore obliged to use the language of the medical model because this reflects what is found in the law.

The Equality Act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability. This protection applies to workers. This means it gives the right not to be discriminated against to people such as contract workers and office holders as well as employees. It also covers job applicants. The following actions by an employer are unlawful under the Equality Act:

## Direct discrimination

Treating a disabled person less favourably than other employees. For example, if an employer gives a bonus to all workers other than the autistic worker.

## Indirect discrimination

The application of a provision, criteria or practice that has disadvantages for autistic people compared to those who are non-autistic, and where the provision, criteria or practice cannot be justified as meeting a legitimate objective. For example, if a promotion application process included a social skills test that is irrelevant to the job being applied for and therefore disadvantages an autistic applicant.

## Discrimination arising from a disability

This occurs when an autistic person is treated less favourably because of something connected with their disability. For example, if an employer dismissed an autistic worker because they rocked on their chair at work even though they performed adequately in their job.

## Harassment

Engaging in unwanted conduct related to the worker's autism which has the effect of violating that person's dignity or creating a hostile environment for the autistic worker. For example, making jokes about autism or imitating an autistic worker in a derogatory fashion.

## Reasonable Adjustments

Employers are required to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled worker would otherwise be at a substantial disadvantage compared to a non-disabled colleague. The requirement covers "provisions, criteria and practices", "physical features" and "provision of auxiliary aids".

Once it has been established that the adjustment is reasonable, failure to comply is a breach of the law and cannot be justified.





What defines “reasonable” is:

- Whether the adjustment is effective in removing the obstacle.
- Whether the adjustment is practical.
- The costs of the adjustment in relation to the resources of the organisation.
- The availability of financial support.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission Codes of Practice and its Guidance for Employers and Guidance for Workers present a clear account of what the law means in practice and lists a range of possible adjustments that fit the criteria. These are available from [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

There are also examples and case studies of reasonable adjustments provided in this toolkit in the addressing workplace barriers section on page 32.

In every case it will be essential to discuss reasonable adjustments with the member concerned. Each case will have unique aspects and an approach based on preconceptions about ASCs is unlikely to be suitable for identifying the specific adjustments needed.

Access to Work funding may be available for some measures. Access to Work is a government fund that finances a range of different adjustments to enable disabled people to obtain or remain in work, see [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work).

# Welsh Government's approach to supporting people with autism

The Welsh Government has responsibility for autism policy and the delivery of autism support services in Wales. The section below summarises the laws and policies that have been introduced in Wales that affect the services provided, and the additional responsibilities that many Welsh public sector employers have towards people with autistic spectrum conditions (ASCs).

## Autism Spectrum Action Plan Wales

Wales was the first country in the world to create an all-age strategy for autism. The most recent plan was published in 2016.

The Plan outlines actions to:

- Introduce a 26-week waiting time target for children from referral to first appointment.
- Transform education support for children.
- Implement a national assessment pathway for children.
- Improve employment opportunities for people with autism.
- Support organisations to become autism-friendly.
- Raise awareness of information and resources.

Autism guidance is being issued for housing providers and other key organisations to enable them to become autism friendly and tailor services.

An advisory group monitors the Plan's implementation and it will also be independently evaluated.

You can find more information here [www.gov.wales/topics/health/nhswales/plans/asd](http://www.gov.wales/topics/health/nhswales/plans/asd)

## The Integrated Autism Service (IAS)

The Integrated Autism Service (IAS) is being rolled out across Wales and is expected to be completed in 2019. The IAS will improve access to support. New specialist teams in every region will aim to give people the chance to receive a diagnostic assessment without needing to be referred by a healthcare professional.

The new national service will also provide a range of advice and support such as helping to develop daily living skills (paying bills, shopping, cooking), coping with anxiety, and accessing other services such as healthcare or employment support.

## Welsh Government code of practise on autism

Welsh Government are also developing a new code of practice which will place a series of statutory requirements on public bodies, setting out how councils, health boards and other organisations should have services available to meet the identified needs of autistic people, their families and carers. This code of practice aims to regulate services across Wales and make them more consistent.

## Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales)

If you work in a devolved public sector job in Wales, you will be covered by this duty.

This duty means that public authorities in Wales must consider how they can positively contribute to a fairer society in their day-to-day activities through tackling unlawful discrimination and advancing equality of opportunity.

NHS Wales, local governments and other public bodies are under a duty to consider equality when making decisions on service delivery and employment.



In practice this means:

- Carrying out equality impact assessments.
- Publishing and reviewing strategic equality plans.
- Publishing equality and employment information on issues like differences in pay.

It also means ensuring that staff receive appropriate training and that equality issues are considered in relation to areas such as procurement and public engagement.

### **The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014**

This act changes the way that people access social services support. Under the Act, changes have been made to the way that people's needs are assessed and the way that services are delivered. The intention is to give people more of a say in the

care and support they receive. There is an emphasis on promoting a range of services and help within the community to reduce the need for formal, planned support.

People will still need to be assessed around their needs and their eligibility in order to decide what their care and support needs are. For adults, the assessment will help to find out what people want from their lives and look at what help they may need to achieve this.

The Act seeks to ensure that services are available to provide the right support at the right time, that more information and advice is available, and that assessment is simple and proportionate.

Carers have an equal right to be assessed for support.

Local authorities can provide more information to those receiving support and to carers.

# A guide to the law: rights for parents and carers

Figures from Carers UK state that 1 in 7 workers in the UK are likely to be working whilst having additional caring responsibilities. This includes many workers who are parents of autistic children and those with caring responsibilities for adults with autistic spectrum conditions (ASCs).

## The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 protects carers from discrimination in certain circumstances. A parent or carer of someone with an ASC is protected from unlawful discrimination or harassment at work because of their caring responsibilities. This is because a parent or carer of someone with autism is 'associated' with someone with a 'protected characteristic' – in this case, disability. It is worth emphasising again, that while many people with an ASC do not consider themselves to be disabled, the law will be relevant to them.

An example of unlawful direct discrimination in the workplace might be if someone is turned down for a job or a promotion due to their caring responsibilities.

The Act also protects carers of a disabled person from discrimination when shopping for goods, asking for and using services, and using facilities like public transport.

## The right to request flexible working

Since 2014, anyone who has worked for an employer for at least 26 weeks has the right to request flexible working arrangements.

An employee must apply in writing and follow a set procedure. A union rep can help with this. An application for flexible working may include a request to change hours, times or location of work. For example, it could include things like asking for term-time only working or working from home.

Unfortunately, the right to request is only that: a right to request. Your employer does not have to grant your request, but they must give it due consideration and must give 'business reasons' for rejecting an application.

It may be possible for the employee to challenge a rejection as discrimination. This is often the case when the person who has made the request is a woman with young children. Women still tend to have primary caring responsibilities so a refusal to allow flexible working is likely to put them at a disadvantage and could amount to indirect sex discrimination.

## Parental leave

The law allows working parents, or others with a formal parental responsibility, who have worked for their current employer for at least 12 months, up to 18 weeks' leave for each child up to the age of 18.

Leave must be taken in blocks of a week, (unless the child is disabled, in which case leave can be taken in blocks of less than one week - including one day) for up to four weeks in a year.

The leave is unpaid unless your employment contract states otherwise, and your employer can insist that you give 21 days' notice of your intention to take leave. Your leave entitlement is per child, so if you have more than one child who matches the criteria above you are entitled to more leave.

If you are returning from parental leave of four weeks or less you have the right to return to your original job. In other cases, if your original job is no longer available, then you are entitled to a similar job with at least the same status and conditions.

Some employers will provide a better entitlement than the legal minimum, including allowing employees to take parental leave in longer or shorter blocks and paying for part or all of your parental leave. Check your terms and conditions.





**If you include families, autism is part of daily life for 125,000 people in Wales.**

### Emergency leave

As an employee, you are entitled to take a 'reasonable amount' of time off during your working hours for emergencies or other unforeseen matters that arise which affect your dependants.

Leave can be taken for a variety of reasons, such as:

- To assist when a dependant falls ill, gives birth or is injured or assaulted.
- To make arrangements for the provision of care for an ill or injured dependant.
- Following the death of a dependant.
- To help a dependant in emotional distress.
- When your dependant's care arrangements unexpectedly end or are disrupted.
- To deal with an incident involving your child at school.

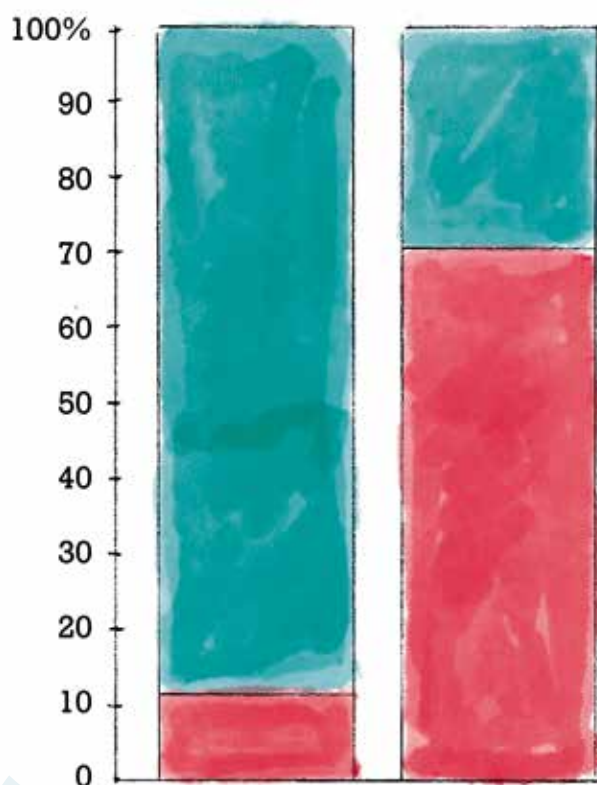
You must tell your employer why you are absent and for how long you expect to be absent, as soon as reasonably practicable.

A dependant could be a spouse, partner, parent, child or someone who depends on you for care. The law provides a detailed definition of who counts as a dependant.

There is no legal right to be paid for emergency leave but some employers may provide paid time off as part of the terms and conditions of employment. An employer who dismisses an employee because they took, or sought to take, emergency leave will be acting unlawfully.

The law also protects employees from detrimental

treatment arising from emergency leave. This includes forcing an employee to take annual leave to deal with emergencies, insisting on overtime working to make up the time, or withholding a bonus or promotion because they have taken time off.



**Only 11% of carers who have children with autism work full time, and 70% say the lack of appropriate care facilities stops them working.**

# Recognising autism in the workplace

Not everyone with an ASC has a formal diagnosis. As your awareness of ASCs develops, you may find yourself recognising the traits and characteristics in other people or even in yourself.

As a union rep, members who think they may have an ASC might approach you for signposting and support.

Sometimes members seeking support for individual cases (e.g. grievance or disciplinary), may disclose that they think they have an ASC. If you think that someone you are supporting as a union rep may have an ASC, it's important to address this sensitively.

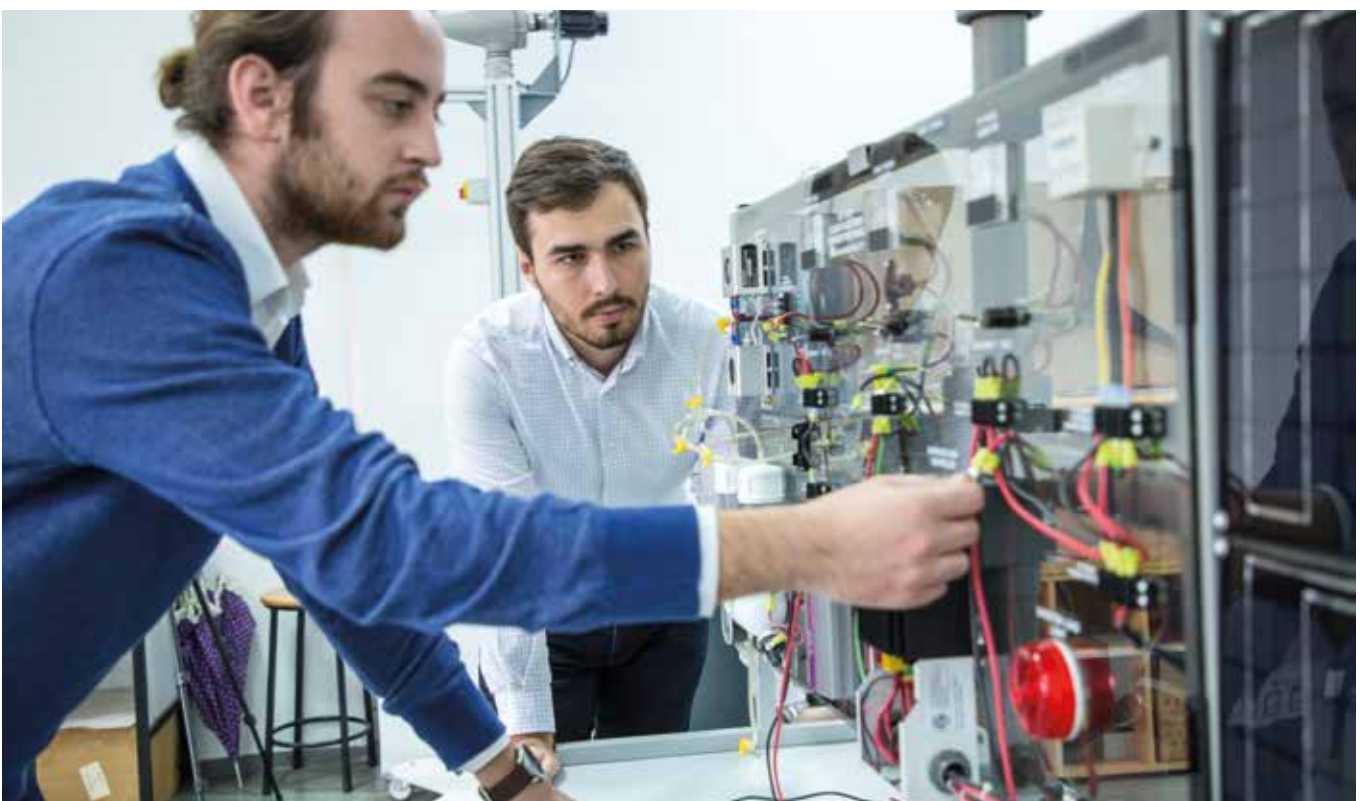
Be aware that some people may choose not to be assessed for a diagnosis. They have a right to that choice. Others may welcome the understanding that a diagnosis can bring.

Many people with an ASC aren't diagnosed until later in life, and they may have experienced years of encountering barriers, feeling different, isolated and excluded and not knowing why.

It is important that trade union reps know their limitations as non-health professionals and have the right information to signpost colleagues to appropriate advice and support when required.

Routes to diagnosis are changing and vary in different parts of Wales. Official diagnosis of an ASC can only be done by a suitably trained specialist. NHS Direct Wales can provide specific up-to-date details for your local area.

Remember that even if no-one has identified themselves to you as having an ASC, it is very likely that the people in your workplace and your members will be neurologically diverse.



# Addressing workplace issues - examples of adjustments

Employers have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to remove barriers for disabled workers. Under the law, that includes people with an autistic spectrum condition (ASC).

Below are some examples of the barriers that workplaces can create, and some ideas of adjustments that employers could make to help address these.

Many factors will be involved in deciding what adjustments to make. ASCs affect people differently,

and it should be remembered that workers with ASCs may often need different changes, even if they appear to have similar conditions.

Employers should always seek to discuss the adjustments with the individual, otherwise the adjustments may not be effective. An employer should not seek to impose adjustments that have not been discussed and agreed and they should take steps to ensure that the progress of any agreed adjustments is carefully monitored to ensure adjustments are fully implemented and effective.

Issue	Factors to be considered	Potential Adjustments
<p><b>Environment</b></p> <p>The sensory environment can have a huge impact on someone with an ASC. It may be that they need adjustments to the working environment. Some of these adjustments will be simple, others may require a little more creativity. The most important thing is to ensure that the worker with an ASC has control and is involved in any changes.</p>	<p>Are there too many 'sensory stimuli' – lights, sounds, smells, moving objects – for the person? Remember that because of heightened sensitivities, people with an ASC may be aware of things that others aren't.</p> <p>Is the person able to control their environment? Can they adjust lights, window blinds, computer screens, temperature?</p> <p>How predictable is the working environment? Does the person have their own workspace which is the same every day? Are they notified in plenty of time if any changes need to be made?</p> <p>Is there a clear difference between the person's individual workspace and shared areas? Are shared areas also appropriate to the person's sensory needs? If not, are there alternatives?</p> <p>Does the person need somewhere quiet to go and relax? Can they access it when they need it?</p>	<p>Having a desk-space which is near a window to allow for natural light, rather than harsh artificial lighting.</p> <p>Not working near noisy machinery. People with ASC may have a very different experience of 'noisy'. Some people with an ASC can hear the internal fan of a computer or the hum of a fridge in a nearby room very clearly, which people without ASCs may not notice at all.</p> <p>Keeping clear of strong smells. This could include working in a fully no-smoking environment or requesting that colleagues not wear strong perfumes or after-shaves.</p> <p>Adjustment to uniform or dress-code policy. Some people with ASCs have very strong reactions to certain types of fabrics or clothing styles. For example, clothes which are too tight or too loose.</p> <p>Providing noise-cancelling headphones so that people can concentrate without being distracted by background noises that they find hard to block out.</p> <p>Special screen-filters that block some of the UV light emitted by computer screens, which may make text harder to read.</p>



Issue	Factors to be considered	Potential Adjustments
<p><b>Work tasks</b></p>	<p>Does the person fully understand all the tasks they have to do? Have they had enough training? Is there a clear job description?</p> <p>Are the tasks meaningful to the person? Do they understand the purpose of them?</p> <p>Does the task make good use of the person's strengths, skills and interests?</p> <p>Is there a clear procedure for completing tasks? If not, is there an opportunity for the person to develop one for themselves?</p> <p>Does the worker have enough time to complete the work required of them bearing in mind any effects of their condition? Are deadlines realistic?</p>	<p>A written document that outlines the person's tasks on a daily or weekly basis.</p> <p>A clear procedure for the completion of certain tasks.</p> <p>Mutually agreed, managed and realistic output targets.</p> <p>Recognition that some people may produce excellent quality but not as much quantity of work.</p> <p>Specific 1:1 and tailored training – especially if the role involves using flexible thinking.</p>
<p><b>Working with others</b></p> <p>In workplaces where there is a lack of understanding about differences in communication and social understanding there can be barriers for people with an ASC in working effectively with others.</p>	<p>Is communication clear, direct and effective? How does the person know what they are supposed to be doing? How is that understanding checked?</p> <p>Does the person feel able to ask questions about their job? What if they have to ask more than once?</p> <p>Do the person's colleagues and managers understand that person as an individual?</p> <p>Do they have a clear understanding of other people's roles as well as their own? Have they been told who to approach for help?</p> <p>Is the person fully accepted where they work?</p> <p>How can they be involved in the team in a way that's right for them?</p>	<p>Instructions coming from one person – manager or supervisor.</p> <p>A workplace mentor to help with any questions.</p> <p>Frequent, timetabled meetings with a supervisor as an opportunity to receive feedback and for them to ask any questions.</p> <p>Autism awareness training for all staff.</p> <p>A recognition of the person's comfort zone with social chit-chat.</p> <p>Workplace support to help put in place any necessary communication strategies.</p>

## Using a collective approach to address common workplace barriers

Many employers believe they do not need to make any changes until a worker identifies themselves as having autism and requests an adjustment. However, there are many general changes that an employer could make to the workplace to create a better working environment more generally which could also help to improve accessibility for neurodiverse people.

Such general changes could include:

- A quiet room or space for relaxation and a reduction in sensory overload.
- Neurodiversity and autism awareness training for all staff.
- All instructions and policies to be communicated clearly and accurately.
- All changes in working practices to be negotiated with the union, and proper notice given before they are introduced.
- Paid time off for trade union reps to attend trade union training and events about autism and neurodiversity.

Such general changes may often be beneficial to many people in the workplace whether or not they have an ASC.

It is also helpful, from a trade union perspective, to approach issues as a collective. Such general changes are not a replacement for individualised reasonable adjustments and do not remove an employer's duty to provide individual reasonable adjustments for disabled workers.

# Case study – Anxiety and meltdowns



Sam works as a data analyst, performing complex statistical investigations on specialist software. They have a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome and chronic anxiety.

When they first started in the role, they found that certain things raised their anxiety levels. Some of these were linked to the barriers around communication and social understanding that they experienced in his workplace. For example, having to ask colleagues or managers for help with work.

**Other triggers were sensory. For example, noise levels in the office or their phobia of thunderstorms. Changes to their schedule and difficulty knowing how to start tasks also caused a lot of stress.**

When their anxiety reached unmanageable levels, Sam experienced 'meltdowns' at work. They would behave in ways that others deemed inappropriate for the workplace, and colleagues became concerned for their safety.

**Because of Sam's differences in communication and social understanding, they found that conventional ways of dealing with workplace stress – talking things through with their manager – did not help and in fact made them feel worse.**

Working together with a specialist autism employment support service, strategies were developed to allow them to communicate with their manager when their stress levels were high. These included putting stickers on documents to show where they needed help with their work, and a chart on the wall which they could use to monitor their anxiety.

**This meant that both manager and colleagues could help before things became impossible for Sam to manage alone.**



# The trade union approach

The most effective approach for a trade union will be to negotiate with the employer to persuade them to adopt a social model approach to disability.

The trade union approach can be put in practice by discussing all the steps that can be taken to make the employer's premises, services, provisions and practices free of the barriers that may disadvantage disabled people. This will also make the organisation accessible to many other groups of people, as well as creating a positive workplace environment and a more committed workforce.

It is also helpful to encourage employers to recognise that neurodiverse people such as those

with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) bring a distinct range of skills to their work that can be of benefit to an organisation. The provision of autism awareness training and other steps to raise awareness more widely in the workplace have an important role to play in increasing understanding.

As part of looking at how employers can remove barriers, unions may identify the kind of obstacles that could impact adversely on workers with ASCs and suggest changes that could address these barriers. These could include both physical changes and changes to working practices.

Review key policies and practices within a workplace

## **Make union events, communications and meetings autism friendly - tips from the TUC's *Guide to Autism in the Workplace* by Janine Booth:**

- Meetings should have a clear agenda and run to time.
- Procedures should be clear and members should know when and how to raise the issues.
- Keep good order in the meeting.
- Consider the venue that you use for union meetings. Choose a venue to ensure:
  - Minimum background noise.
  - Adjustable light levels.
  - No strong smells.
- Consider the location of your venue. Can you help with transport if it is hard to access?
- Offer help with childcare/carers' costs so members with autistic dependants can attend.
- Ensure that union materials are clear and accurate.
- Use a variety of formats – graphics, cartoons, videos.
- Do not allow union meetings to become dominated by jargon and cliquy banter.

# The most important thing you can do, always, is to listen to the person and try to understand the issues they are facing.

to see whether these take into account the needs of workers with ASCs, consulting with autistic members and negotiating with employers to amend or establish new policies and practices where needed. These policies and practices could include:

- Recruitment procedures.
- Performance related pay and bonuses.
- Performance management and capability policies.
- Health and safety.
- Equality and diversity policies.
- Flexible working policy/working hours.
- Family-friendly policies.
- Autism/neurodiversity policies.
- Emergency leave policies.
- Bullying and harassment policies.
- Training policies.
- Sickness, absence and disability policies.
- Occupational health.
- Return to work policies.
- Grievance and disciplinary policies.
- Redundancy and redeployment.

The most important thing you can do, always, is to listen to the person and try to understand the issues they are facing. Remember that they may have had bad experiences in the past and may need to feel reassured that you support them and take their concerns seriously.

## Tips for reps from autistic members:

- ☑ "Ask about the best way of communicating with the member (phone, email or face to face)."
- ☑ "If supporting a member during a case agree to set intervals for updates and stick to these even if there is no news. Not receiving any updates can cause extra anxiety."
- ☑ "Don't be afraid to ask questions to find out what is the best way you can provide support."
- ☑ "Help us get as much information in advance as possible – seeing questions in advance of any meetings/hearings can be very helpful."



# What can union reps do?

Disclosure of an autism spectrum condition (ASC) in the workplace can be very difficult. People may fear that they will be labelled and that others will perceive them as less capable than before.

In some cases, people with ASCs report that

qualities once considered strengths become regarded as symptoms after disclosure. For example, someone described as diligent, driven and independent before disclosure becomes viewed as rigid, obsessive and aloof once their condition is known about.

Unions can raise awareness of ASCs in the workplace and challenge discrimination.

Some people may be happy to disclose and discuss their condition.

Often, if people are experiencing difficulties or discrimination, they may feel more comfortable speaking to someone else in the workplace, such as a trade union rep.

A trade union rep can provide confidential advice and support.

It is important that trade union reps feel confident communicating with members with ASCs.

This toolkit aims to give reps a greater understanding of ASCs, some suggestions on communication tips, and some case studies and examples of reasonable adjustments.

However, because every person with an ASC is different, the most important thing you can do is to listen to the individual.

Unions can provide individualised representation to members with ASCs and can represent members collectively.

Like all workers, people with ASCs can benefit from the collective power and voice of trade unions.

Unions are democratic organisations. They can provide structures for workers with ASCs to make themselves heard. Unions can bring members together to challenge discrimination and unfair treatment at work.





## 10 ways union reps can make a difference

1. Raise autism awareness at meetings with management.
2. Set up a learning event or discussion at a union meeting. Invite a guest speaker from an autistic people's organisation.
3. Attend the Wales TUC's accredited course for union reps - Autism Awareness in the Workplace.
4. Make your union meetings and communications more autism friendly. Guidance on meetings can be found on p37 above and on communication on p42 below.
5. Consult with autistic members to review workplace policies and negotiate changes to make them more autism friendly.
6. Ensure that your workplace has an autism or neurodiversity policy or that autism and neurodiversity issues are addressed in your workplace equality policy.
7. Support individual members with autism, parents, and carers of those with autism to get the specific adjustments they need.
8. Display autism awareness information on the union noticeboard, on the intranet or in communal areas such as canteens.
9. Encourage employers to sign up to the national "Positive about working with autism" employer charter scheme at [www.asdinfo.wales.co.uk](http://www.asdinfo.wales.co.uk)
10. Ensure that your union's structures and activities for disabled members are well-publicised and autism friendly and that members with autism feel welcome to get involved.

# Communication tips for union reps and colleagues

- ☑ Everyone with an autism spectrum condition (ASC) is different. This is particularly true when it comes to communication, interaction and thinking styles.
- ☑ It's ok to ask the person directly how they like to be communicated with.
- ☑ Some people with an ASC enjoy social conversation. If you are working with someone who doesn't, don't take it as a reflection on you or your colleagues.
- ☑ Keep communications clear and efficient. Think about exactly what you want to say and what you need the person to understand. Don't assume that something is obvious unless you've clearly stated it in words.
- ☑ Use language that's direct and unambiguous. Many people with ASCs have difficulty understanding metaphors and figures of speech. Explain slang or professional jargon if you have to use it. People with an ASC may find it more difficult to 'pick up' specialised language.
- ☑ Many people with an ASC find that sensory distractions make it hard to communicate in some circumstances. Turn off any background TV or radio and keep distractions to a minimum.
- ☑ Many people with an ASC find making eye contact uncomfortable. Some people may try to compensate for this difficulty by offering too much eye contact or having a fixed gaze.
- ☑ Some people with an ASC can find it difficult to ask for help. It's OK to sensitively offer help if you think someone is experiencing difficulties. Be specific: if someone looks lost, "Would you like me to show you where the staff room is?" is usually more helpful than, "Are you ok?"
- ☑ Someone with an ASC may not immediately recognise a rhetorical question and may offer an answer even if one is not expected.
- ☑ People with ASC may have difficulty understanding body language and tone of voice. For example, when we say something sarcastic, it's our expression and tone of voice that tells others that we don't really mean what we say. People with an ASC can find it hard to understand this instinctively. Affectionate teasing can also be misunderstood and be inadvertently hurtful.
- ☑ It sometimes takes people with an ASC a little longer to get their thoughts in order and to express what they want to say. Be patient and avoid the temptation to speed things up by saying things for them.
- ☑ Recap at the end of a conversation or a meeting to check that the person has understood. It may be difficult for the person to question you, so explicitly invite them to – e.g. "Is there anything you'd like to ask?"



# Case study – Unions making a difference



Mo works in a ticket office for a railway company and has a young daughter who has autism.

His daughter needs a very stable and predictable home routine, but Mo's roster meant that one week he was doing early shifts, the next week late shifts. His daughter was very distressed.

He applied for 'flexible working' to have regular hours, but his manager was hostile. She grudgingly agreed to a short period of fixed hours but undermined it from the start.

A trade union representative accompanied him to all the meetings and challenged the manager's attempts to put him back on the round-the-clock roster.

**Union members organised a petition of his workmates supporting Mo's fixed-hours arrangement. This directly challenged the manager's claim that Mo's colleagues would be opposed to him working regular hours.**

The case was reported to the union branch, and members indicated that they would have been willing to take industrial action in support of Mo.

**When the manager failed to follow the policy and tried to cancel the fixed-hours arrangement, the union appealed to a higher-level manager, and got Mo's hours restored to what he needed.**



Working alongside unions is the best way for employers to gain a better understanding of their workforce

# What can employers do?

## Introduce an autism policy

Establish an autism and neurodiversity policy or include autism and neurodiversity into a broader equality policy. Give workers with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) and those who have caring responsibilities for people with ASCs the opportunity to contribute to the development of any such policy.

## Training for managers and staff

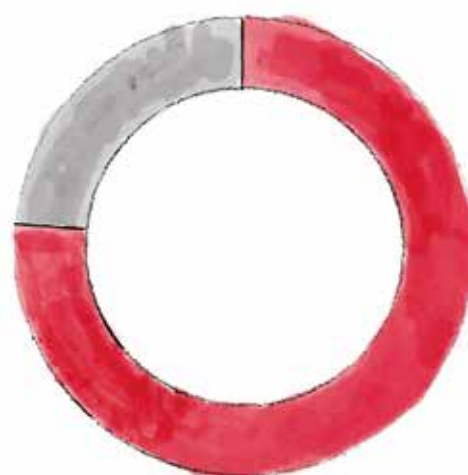
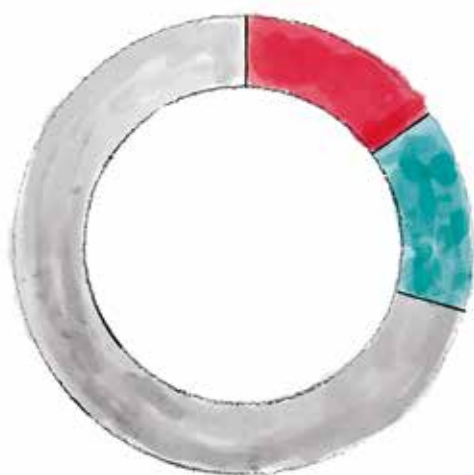
Employers should provide training for all levels of management and HR to ensure understanding and awareness of ASCs in the workplace. Employers should commit to a training budget to provide

training for all staff to raise general levels of awareness and understanding.

## Work with unions

Employers should work proactively with unions to ensure all workplace premises, policies and practices are autism friendly and that all changes are made in consultation with unions. Unions can provide joint-awareness briefings to management and rep groups. Working alongside unions is the best way for employers to gain a better understanding of their workforce and to be compliant with relevant legislation.





**Only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time paid work. 16% are in part time work. 77% of those who are out of work say they want to work.**

### Seek out best practice and make use of available resources

Use online resources available at [www.ASDInfoWales.co.uk](http://www.ASDInfoWales.co.uk) including:

- advice on interviewing a candidate with autism.
- advice for managers.
- advice for co-workers.

Make sure that managers have access to resources on neurodiversity and are familiar with good practice employer case studies. ACAS has excellent resources and examples at [www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity](http://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity).

### Publicise the company's positive approach

Use marketing, media and networking opportunities to let others know about the changes the company

has introduced and the benefits that the changes have brought. This can help to raise the profile of workplace issues for people with an ASC and to tackle some of the stigma on the issue.

Employers should sign up to the *Positive about working with autism* charter at [www.ASDInfoWales.co.uk](http://www.ASDInfoWales.co.uk). The charter is a public declaration of support for people with ASCs and has been signed by some of the biggest employers in Wales. Organisations can also work with charities and campaigners to push for greater support for people with ASCs.

### Engage with employment support schemes

The Welsh Government has committed to supporting people with ASCs to find and keep work as part of its action plan on autistic spectrum conditions. Employers should seek out opportunities to work with government support schemes that offer practical help.

# Case study – Unwritten rules



Cerys works as a tutor for a vocational training organisation. She has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome.

**Cerys interacted well with her learners, but found other aspects of workplace communication difficult, especially when it came to interacting with colleagues. She felt that people saw her as rude and abrasive, though that was never her intention. She was simply being direct and efficient in her communication.**

She sometimes annoyed colleagues by interrupting them when they were busy or in private meetings. They thought that it should have been obvious that they were unavailable because of their body language or their position in the office, but Cerys didn't instinctively understand those signals.

**She offended others by making personal observations or commenting on their work and didn't realise that they would be embarrassed.**

The adjustments put in place to help Cerys have been all about learning. She has worked with an employment support specialist to improve her understanding of the unwritten rules of communication. And her colleagues have also received autism awareness training to improve their understanding of her differences.



# Workplace and branch activities

## Activity: The Social Model of Disability

### Aims

This activity will help you:

- understand how the social model of disability works in practice.
- give examples of potential barriers to participation.
- suggest ways of removing barriers.

Emma has recently qualified as a radiographer. She has Asperger syndrome (an autism spectrum condition).

In Emma's case, differences linked to her Asperger syndrome means that she has a strong preference for predictability and routine, and quick, unexpected or unexplained change is especially stressful for her and can cause anxiety.

The hospital where Emma works provides a very thorough 6-month induction, during which new workers get to experience lots of different departments and see how other specialisms operate. This meant that she underwent a great deal of change when she was still very new to the job and sometimes the change was quite unexpected as she was given very little or no notice – to the extent that it caused her to become quite anxious.

She also had many meetings which had to take place as part of the induction process – with managers, mentors and the occupational health department, for example – but it wasn't always made clear what the purpose or nature of the meetings were. She became especially anxious when she didn't know what these meetings were going to be about or what they were for.

### Task 1

Make a list of the potential barriers.

### Task 2

Discuss ways that these barriers could be removed and report back to the group.

**Resources:** Information about the social model of disability on pages 16 of this toolkit

# Information and signposting

## [www.asdinfowales.co.uk](http://www.asdinfowales.co.uk)

The national site for Wales for autism spectrum conditions.

## [www.asc-cymru.org](http://www.asc-cymru.org)

Autism Spectrum Connections Cymru (ASC Cymru) is a Welsh charity which provides specialist autism services.

## [www.autism.org.uk/wales](http://www.autism.org.uk/wales)

National Autistic Society Cymru

## [www.autismeurope.org](http://www.autismeurope.org)

Autism Europe

## [www.autisticuk.org](http://www.autisticuk.org)

Autistic UK

## [www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity](http://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity)

ACAS information and resources on neurodiversity.

## [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/commission-wales](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/commission-wales)

Equality and Human Rights Commission Wales. Information on the Public Sector Equality Duty and guidance on reasonable adjustments.

## [www.theautismdirectory.com](http://www.theautismdirectory.com)

The Autism Directory is a large searchable database of information about services, including autism-friendly places.

## [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

Access to Work is a government fund that finances a range of different adjustments to enable disabled

people to obtain or remain in work. Access to Work funding may be available for some reasonable adjustments.

## [www.janinebooth.com](http://www.janinebooth.com)

The website of trade union activist, author and poet Janine Booth, who wrote the TUC's Guide to Autism in the Workplace.

## Routes to diagnosis

If you think you may have an ASC and are looking for more information, you may find a test available online called the AQ50 test. Whilst this doesn't offer a diagnosis it can act as an indicator and a catalyst for your GP to refer you to a specialist.

Routes to diagnosis are changing and vary in different parts of Wales. Official diagnosis of an ASC can only be done by a suitably trained specialist. NHS Direct Wales can provide specific up-to-date details for your local area.

[www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk)

# Glossary

## **ADHD**

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Difficulty with concentrating for a long time, sitting still, controlling impulses and thinking through decisions before acting on them. People with an autism spectrum condition are statistically more likely than average to also have ADHD.

## **ASC**

Autism spectrum condition. (See below, autism spectrum).

## **Asperger syndrome**

A form of autism that affects the way a person communicates and relates to others. People diagnosed with Asperger syndrome often have fewer problems with language compared to those with other forms of autism. They are less likely to have a learning disability as a co-occurring condition.

## **Autism spectrum conditions**

A group of related neurological developmental conditions, including autism, Asperger syndrome and “pervasive developmental disorders not otherwise specified”. The conditions feature atypical brain connections leading to atypical development. These can range from very significant to very mild differences in thinking, perceiving and communicating.

## **Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)**

Another term sometimes used for autistic spectrum condition.

## **Central coherence**

Refers to a person’s ability to see the ‘big picture’ in a mass of details. For example, someone with strong central coherence might see a forest, while someone with weaker central coherence might see lots of

individual trees.

## **Classic autism**

One of the diagnostic terms you may hear. It is usually used to differentiate a diagnosis from Asperger syndrome.

## **Cognition**

The mental actions or processes of learning, thinking, reasoning, experiencing and sensing. The term cognitive empathy refers to the ability to know what another person thinks, believes or intends (as opposed to how they are feeling emotionally).

## **Co-occurring conditions**

Some people with an ASC may also have other conditions such as ADHD, dyscalculia, dyslexia or dyspraxia. As these conditions are not on the autism spectrum they are often referred to as ‘co-occurring conditions’.

## **Devolved public sector job**

A job in a public sector organisation that operates in a policy area that has been devolved to Wales. For example, this includes all NHS Wales and local government roles. It does not include jobs working for HMRC or the Ministry of Defence – as they are run by the UK government.

## **Dyslexia**

A condition which can affect a person’s ability to process and remember information they see and hear. This can affect the acquisition of literacy skills such as spelling and letter recognition. It is not an autism spectrum condition, although people may have both an ASC and dyslexia.

## **Dyspraxia**

A condition which affects a person’s motor skills

or muscular control. It is not an autism spectrum condition, though many people who have an ASC also have dyspraxia.

### **Echolalia**

Repeating words or phrases that the person has just heard. Some people with autism spectrum conditions do this, especially as children.

### **Equality Act (2010)**

The legislation which prohibits discrimination against people with certain “protected characteristics”. This includes autism spectrum conditions, defined as a disability under the Act.

### **Executive functioning**

Things like forward planning, decision making and carrying out planned actions. Some people with autism spectrum conditions find this difficult.

### **High functioning autism**

A slightly misleading term, as it does not describe how well people function in day-to-day life. Someone with ‘high functioning autism’ is simply someone who has a diagnosis of an ASC but does not also have a learning disability. See also low functioning autism.

### **Hypersensitivity**

Increased sensitivity to certain things is common for people with ASCs. They may be uncomfortable with, for example, loud noises, strong smells, bright or flickering lights.

### **Hyposensitivity**

Decreased sensitivity is also common for people with autism spectrum conditions. Examples may include weak vision or finding it difficult to focus visually on objects, not noticing smells, or a poor

sense of balance.

### **Neuro-**

When added to other words, ‘neuro’ refers to the physical brain, for example in words like neurodiversity and neurotypical.

### **Neurodiversity**

Recognising that there is a wide range of difference in how people’s brains work. The ‘neurodiversity movement’ advocates for better understanding and inclusion of people with conditions like ADHD, autism spectrum conditions, dyslexia, dyspraxia and mental health conditions.

### **Neurotypical**

Sometimes used, especially by people within the neurodiversity movement, to refer to people with more ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ brains. The opposite is neurodivergent.

### **Non-verbal**

Communication without using words, for example posture, gesture and facial expression. Sometimes people who don’t speak aloud are referred to as ‘non-verbal’, though if they communicate with language in other ways (e.g. by typing or using sign-language) the correct term is non-speaking.

### **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

A mental health condition which causes intense anxiety and strong compulsions to complete certain repetitive actions such as hand-washing or checking that doors are locked. People with autism spectrum conditions are statistically more likely to also have OCD.

### **Para-verbal**

The ways in which people speak, for example their

tone, pitch and volume of voice.

### **Pathological Demand Avoidance Disorder**

A diagnosis which is considered part of the autism spectrum. It refers to having a fear of the demands of day-to-day living as well as the more usual traits of the autism spectrum.

### **Savant**

At one time, people with autism spectrum conditions were often believed to have near-superhuman talents, in areas such as mental arithmetic, spatial logic or the ability to draw complex plans or play sophisticated music after a single exposure. In fact, savant abilities are extremely rare. People with ASCs do, however, often develop exceptional abilities related to their special interests.

### **Self-stimulatory behaviours**

Behaviours which people with an autism spectrum condition may use, to help with sensory processing, stay calm in stressful situations or express their mood. Common examples involve flapping hands, rocking gently in a seat or twirling their hair.

### **Sensory processing**

The way we perceive the world around us. People with autism spectrum conditions often have different sensory processing to others. They may experience hypersensitivity, hyposensitivity or both.

### **Special interests**

Many people with autism spectrum conditions have at least one subject or topic which they're especially interested in. This could be anything, and many people love collecting information related to their special interests.

### **Spectrum**

A scale with two extreme points. It is not limited to specific values but can vary infinitely between the two extreme points.

### **Stimming**

A common name for various types of self-stimulatory behaviours (see above).

### **Verbal communication**

Speaking and understanding the spoken word. Some people with autism spectrum conditions have difficulty with verbal communication, especially when they are stressed. They may prefer to communicate in other ways, such as by typing or writing things down.

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*TUC guide to Autism in the Workplace* by Janine Booth

*"You don't look disabled": supporting members with invisible impairments – Advice from the TUC*

*TUC Guide to Equality Law 2011*

*Disability and Work – A trade union guide to the law and good practice*

*Disabled Workers – A TUC Education Workbook*

*Sickness absence and disability discrimination: TUC negotiator's guide*

*TUC Know Your Rights – Time off and flexible working for carers*

*Epilepsy in the Workplace – A TUC guide* [www.worksmart.org.uk](http://www.worksmart.org.uk)

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This publication is also available in the Welsh language.

All TUC publications can be provided for dyslexic or visually impaired readers in an agreed accessible format, on request, at no extra cost.

This toolkit will be regularly updated, so we would welcome any comments or suggestions on how it could be improved. Please let us know if you notice anything that is out of date, unclear, or that you think may need correcting or updating.

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