

# Welcoming autistic people

## A guide for tourism venues





## Introduction

Autistic people and their families can face barriers that others don't when visiting tourism venues. That's why we (The National Autistic Society and VisitEngland, along with England's Inclusive Tourism Action Group) have created this guide, to help tourism businesses overcome common barriers and welcome autistic people.

England's Inclusive Tourism Action Group comprises a range of leading accessible tourism stakeholders who share the vision for England to provide world-class inclusive tourism experiences that every person with accessibility requirements can enjoy.

### What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people see the world and interact with others. It is a spectrum condition, which means while all autistic people share certain difficulties, being autistic will affect them in different ways. Autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is much more common than most people think. There are around 700,000 people in the UK on the autism spectrum – that's more than 1 in 100. Together with their families, this means autism is a part of daily life for 2.8 million people. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can be autistic. Both men and women can be autistic, although more men are diagnosed.

Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, all can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. They can become overwhelmed by everything around them, which can make the world a terrifying and isolating place.

## Characteristics of autism

### Autistic people can:

- ✓ find it difficult to understand and use language to communicate, and may interpret phrases literally
- ✓ find it difficult to understand and use tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and the unspoken rules of language, like the give-and-take nature of conversations
- ✓ have difficulty recognising people's feelings or expressing their own
- ✓ struggle to make and keep friends and maintain other social relationships
- ✓ find it difficult to understand and predict people's behaviour
- ✓ have a strong need to stick to the familiar and find change and unexpected situations stressful
- ✓ have sensory sensitivities, for example over-sensitivity to loud noises, certain lights and strong smells
- ✓ have intense special interests.

## CHECKLIST

Although almost everyone has heard of autism, only 16% of autistic people and their families think the public understand autism in a meaningful way. This lack of understanding has a daily impact on autistic people's lives.

In 2016 The National Autistic Society conducted research which showed:

- 79% of autistic people and 70% of families said they felt socially isolated
- 50% of autistic people and families sometimes don't go out because of concern about people's reaction to their autism
- 28% of autistic people have been asked to leave a public place because of behaviour associated with their autism.

Many of the barriers experienced are due to lack of public understanding but the nature of some venues – noisy, busy and filled with overwhelming sensory information – can also cause difficulties. Pre-visit information or supporting material can help autistic people and their families to prepare themselves properly for a visit. Investing in training helps owners and staff understand autism, enabling them to feel confident communicating with autistic people or knowing how to react if someone needs help.



## How you can help autistic people pre-visit

People on the autism spectrum thrive on being in a familiar environment with routine and structure. Some may not be comfortable with the idea of change and may have difficulty transitioning from one environment to another. In preparation for visiting a new venue, some parents may wish to visit in advance to check the suitability. They may visit alone or bring the person on the autism spectrum to begin familiarising themselves with the new surroundings ahead of their main visit.

Advance information can be very important for autistic visitors who may be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes before their visit. By providing as much information as possible about your venue, you will manage expectations, reduce anxiety, and assist with planning. Details of the building layout are important for people with a wide range of accessibility requirements but certain environmental elements can be challenging or confusing for an autistic visitor.



### Advance information

- ✓ areas where queuing is required
- ✓ security checks
- ✓ lifts
- ✓ escalators
- ✓ revolving doors
- ✓ narrow staircases
- ✓ fluorescent lighting (which can be uncomfortable and even painful for autistic people)
- ✓ areas under construction or refurbishment
- ✓ noisy and busy areas such as shops and cafés
- ✓ areas with strong smells
- ✓ quieter times to visit
- ✓ parking
- ✓ entrances and exits
- ✓ where the toilets are.

CHECKLIST

### Accessibility guides

The majority of information can be included in your accessibility guide. This is a guide produced by tourism operators to provide potential visitors with important accessibility information about a venue, property or service. The guide enables individuals with accessibility requirements and their family and friends to make informed decisions about where to stay and visit in view of their requirements. This includes not just wheelchair users but people with hearing loss, visual impairment or learning disabilities, older people, families with young children and more. Disabled people look at accessibility guides before deciding to book or visit.

VisitEngland and VisitScotland provide a free to use website for the easy production and publication of accessibility guides. You can produce a guide by answering a series of questions on your venue's accessibility, uploading useful photos and adding any further information. You will be given a unique web link to promote your guide, which you can add to your website and share across social media channels. Go to [www.visitengland.org/accessibilityguides](http://www.visitengland.org/accessibilityguides).

The Roman Baths and Pump Room in Bath has produced an accessibility guide, which can be downloaded from their website ([www.romanbaths.co.uk/accessibility](http://www.romanbaths.co.uk/accessibility)), which includes lots of information useful for autistic visitors.

## Visual stories

In addition to your accessibility guide, consider providing a visual story. Visual stories are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. ZSL London Zoo worked with The National Autistic Society to produce an excellent visual story for a visit to the zoo (<https://www.zsl.org/sites/default/files/document/2014-02/visual-story-final-version-2337.pdf>). It includes a visual trail of a visit with photographs and straightforward text highlighting aspects that may be challenging or confusing for an autistic visitor. Touch Autism provides a free tool to help you create a visual story: <http://touchautism.com/app/social-stories-creator-library/>.

Video, imagery and virtual tours can give visitors a clear idea of what to expect, helping them make important choices to ensure the best visit. Tools such as Google's Street View and iRoam by Access Social can help you capture all aspects of your venue. The British Museum allows visitors to explore their galleries with Google Street View [www.britishmuseum.org/with\\_google.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/with_google.aspx).

You can create 360° photos using Google Street View. Go to [support.google.com/maps](http://support.google.com/maps). Find out how easy the Museum of English Rural Life found it to use Google Street View at <https://medium.com/merl-rm-blogtest/putting-our-museum-on-google-streetview-265e464218e3>.

## My experience: Jane and Megan

Jane tells us what it's like to visit attractions with her autistic daughter Megan.



“Going anywhere new with Megan can be a challenge. Unfamiliar sights, sounds, tastes, textures and smells make her really anxious. This can cause us problems on a visit so I spend a lot of time preparing her in advance.

The best attractions for us are those which have lots of photographs and videos on their website that we can look at together and I often print photos off so that we can take them with us. Sometimes we will do a ‘practice run’ to a venue so that Megan can begin to get used to a place before our actual visit. A few venues have visual stories which explain very simply what she can expect when she visits and the difference having one of these makes is unbelievable.

For me as a parent, being able to find the information I need is important too. Megan gets really distressed if we have to queue so details such as whether tickets can be bought online or whether there is table service in restaurants is really helpful for us.

When we get it right it's as if we are visiting somewhere Megan knows rather than somewhere new, which makes it a far more enjoyable visit for our whole family.”





## At the venue

### Assessing your environment for sensory sensitivity

For people with sensory sensitivity, many tourism venues can be challenging. But sensory-proofing your offer needn't be difficult.

Before you assess the level of sensory impact that visitors to your venue might experience, it's a good idea to invite them to help you. You could contact the autistic visitor audience through The National Autistic Society, a local special school, parent support group, or parent carers' organisation. As experts in how the condition affects them, a person on the autism spectrum will give you valuable insight and specific feedback about your venue and the kinds of adjustments you can make to ease sensory stress.

### Sensory considerations

- ✓ provide a range of lighting and sound levels
- ✓ consider alternatives to noisy hand dryers in public toilets, particularly in accessible toilets
- ✓ highlight lower arousal options
- ✓ reduce highly polished, uneven or cambered surfaces.

CHECKLIST

The degree to which an autistic person might be affected by different types of sensory input will vary hugely, so you may wish to consider inviting a few different people to help you assess your tourism venue.

### Low arousal environments

Maps can identify areas of sensory activity, allowing visitors to choose whether to avoid an area or exhibit. If appropriate, offer alternative routes – 'quiet trails' – through your venue, avoiding potential triggers.

Try to identify less busy periods, often mid-week afternoons or term times. Alternatively, consider offering quieter sessions just for visitors on the autism spectrum. These could be a monthly event, opening for an hour or two later or earlier than usual. This would allow lighting to be adjusted, sound to be decreased or turned off, strong smells to be reduced eg in the café and gift shop, and a more relaxed environment, so that visitors who do experience sensory challenges feel they will meet with understanding and acceptance. The Deep attraction in Hull holds 'Quiet Days' and 'Tranquil Tuesdays' throughout the year for autistic visitors.



- ✓ map areas of sensory activity
- ✓ offer quiet trails
- ✓ identify less busy periods
- ✓ offer quieter sessions.

## CHECKLIST

### Helping autistic visitors manage responses to sensory triggers

There are lots of things tourism venues can do to help visitors manage their response to sensory input. Loaning ear defenders for noisy environments allows the autistic person to regulate the amount and volume of noise they're exposed to. Providing sensory activity packs for children helps parents focus on visitor experience elements which provide a positive experience, and distract from those with negative impact. Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books, provides both ear defenders and sensory backpacks containing multi-sensory props.

Despite best efforts, sensory overload may still occur, perhaps as the result of an unexpected event, resulting in a response known as a meltdown, defined by The National Autistic Society as "an intense response to overwhelming situations." This loss of control can be very upsetting for the autistic person and anyone witnessing it.

If possible, each venue should put aside a chill out space or quiet room. These areas provide a safe space to have a meltdown and a place to de-escalate and calm down before or after a meltdown. This should be a low arousal environment, with adjustable lighting and comfortable seating, ideally situated away from the main bustle of the visitor destination. Eureka! The National Children's Museum in Halifax provides a chill out room with soft furnishings and sensory lighting such as bubble tubes.

When making any adjustments, listen to the needs of your autistic visitors. Research shows that this particular audience is intensely loyal to any venue where they feel included and welcomed.

- ✓ ear defenders
- ✓ sensory activity packs
- ✓ chill out/quiet room.

## CHECKLIST

### My experience: Gillian and Sam

**Gillian tells us what helps her son Sam enjoy tourism venues.**

"My son Sam has autism. New surroundings, queuing and sensory overload can all be a challenge to him. Alton Towers provides a number of services to make our day out run as smoothly as possible. We registered Sam's details along with proof of eligibility and received a unique code to access supporting services at all Merlin attractions. We then book online for our day trip, which reduces queuing when we arrive as they have prepared his wristband and Access Pass, and his carer goes free.



Sam gets tired as it is a long day and can also feel overwhelmed, anxious and scared. We visit at off-peak times, avoiding the opening hour rush, and the wristband enables us to avoid the long queues. We hire a wheelchair from Alton Towers to give him a seat and a 'safe zone' and take him to the beautiful sensory gardens for a peaceful break.

The website has full details of the park so I take along pre-prepared images in a 'visual story' to familiarise him with what is next. I find it very useful to talk to the trained staff who are really helpful and assist in any way they can to give Sam the best possible day out."



**TOP  
TIPS**

## Top tips for interacting with autistic people

The National Autistic Society surveyed over 7,000 autistic people and their families to find out what they wanted the public to understand about autism and how they wanted them to change their behaviour to be more autism-friendly. This is what they said:

### 1 Be patient and give the person space during a meltdown

A meltdown is when an autistic person gets overwhelmed by everything around them, and may begin to shout, scream, cry or lose control.

Spare a moment. First things first, try not to judge. Be patient, calmly ask if they're OK and give them some time and space to recover. That really is all it takes to help.

### 2 Notify people of changes to services

The world can be an unpredictable, confusing place for autistic people, and that can make having a set routine crucial for getting by. So when something unexpected still happens, it can feel like the whole world is spinning out of control. Give some warning. The best way for an autistic person to deal with unexpected changes is to, well, expect them! So if plans do change, let them know in advance.

### 3 Help to alleviate social anxiety

Trying to understand what others mean and how to behave can be exhausting and stressful for autistic people, causing many to end up feeling excluded and isolated.

Take an interest. Invite them to join activities as much as they feel they want to. Listen to their concerns, and if they're struggling, just offer some support. Patience, understanding and positive communication can go a long way.

### 4 Give people plenty of processing time

Sometimes autistic people feel like they're getting 'too much information' and need a few moments to filter through it all. This is called processing time. Give a minute. Ask one question as simply as you can, and just wait. If you still don't get a response, try re-phrasing it or writing it down instead.

### 5 Take steps to reduce sensory overload

Autistic people can be sensitive to lights, sounds, smells and sights. This can lead to an overload – and a meltdown. Make some space. Lots of little things can add up to an overload of sensory information. Which means little things from you can cut this down. Try to avoid talking over each other, turn down your music, or even just offer to dim glaring lights.



## Autism Friendly Award

The National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award recognises businesses and venues that are committed to improving autistic people's access to their sites and services. A bit of understanding can go a long way to helping autistic people and their families enjoy tourist attractions and the unique experience they offer just as any other person can.

This doesn't mean investing in expensive alterations or training your staff to be autism experts. Small changes can make a massive difference to autistic visitors.



To become autism-friendly it is crucial for public spaces to view themselves from an autistic person's perspective. Businesses are required to evaluate themselves and their service in terms of five criteria:

- customer information
- staff understanding
- physical environment
- customer experience
- promoting understanding.

We provide guidelines and case studies to take you through the background of each award criteria to direct and help build your business' application.

Reviewing your premises and the services you offer from the perspective of an autistic person will help you to identify the challenges stopping them from regularly using your business.

Each venue that achieves the Autism Friendly Award will be opening their doors to the 2.8 million autistic people, their families and friends in the UK, helping to make the UK a more autism-friendly place.

Venues that achieve the Autism Friendly Award receive:

- the Autism Friendly Award logo for use on documentation and websites
- a certificate and window sticker to promote your autism-friendly status
- recognition from The National Autistic Society's far-reaching social media accounts
- promotion on The National Autistic Society website, a leading source of autism information with over two million visitors every year
- a listing in the Autism Friendly Award directory
- promotion to local families through an extensive network of services and volunteer branches.



Current award holders include Chelmsford Museum, Glasgow Film Theatre, Old Royal Naval College, Roman Baths and Pump Room, Eureka! and Windsor Castle, with many others working towards it.

**“Applying for the Autism Friendly Award provided an ideal opportunity to look afresh at our facilities from the viewpoint of autistic visitors, to make sure that we offer the warmest possible welcome. The award will make even more families aware of what a brilliant and stress free day they can have at Eureka!”**

Trizia Wells, Eureka! The National Children’s Museum

For more information about the Autism Friendly Award, visit [www.autism.org.uk/autismfriendlyaward](http://www.autism.org.uk/autismfriendlyaward) or contact The National Autistic Society at [autism.friendly@nas.org.uk](mailto:autism.friendly@nas.org.uk).



The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, challenge attitudes and build a society that works for autistic people.

We transform lives by being a trusted source of support and practical advice for autistic children and adults, as well as their families and carers. We challenge attitudes by campaigning through our national branches and working with businesses and policy-makers to change laws and deliver better services.

Since 1962, we have made progress on both fronts, but we know there is much more to do, because the status quo isn't good enough for autistic people. With your support, we can change it.



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This guide was produced by The National Autistic Society in partnership with VisitEngland and England's Inclusive Tourism Action Group.



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