



THE FULL SPECTRUM

Making London Autism Friendly

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Recommendations	3
Introduction	4
Problems Autistic People Face	6
What makes an Autism Friendly City?	8
What are the benefits of an Autism Friendly City?	10
What can be learnt from elsewhere?	11
Autism Friendly London: What is already in place and what is the Mayor doing?	14
Autism Friendly London: What should the Mayor be doing?	18
Conclusion	24

Executive Summary

Autism is a hugely diverse and complex condition that affects thousands of people across London. It is currently estimated that there are around 88,000 autistic people living in London¹. A much wider group of people will live with, work with or come into contact with autistic people day in, day out, across London. Given that autism affects so many people in London, it should be vital to strive for an autism friendly city. An autism friendly city should be a place that is not only accessible for autistic people but enables them to lead fulfilling and independent lives. This will not only benefit autistic people and their families and carers, but will also benefit wider society, so that London can become a more inclusive and cohesive environment for those on the autism spectrum.

Autistic people face many problems and difficulties in their day-to-day lives as a result of their condition. The National Autistic Society summarises the five core features of autism as: anxiety in social situations, anxiety with unexpected changes, sensory overload, processing time and meltdowns.² There are many areas where these features can be problematic in London, such as transport, employment and accessibility. The statistics show the harsh reality with research suggesting only 16 percent of autistic adults are in full-time paid work³, over half of autistic people avoid public transport due to fears of disruption⁴ and 79% of autistic people feel socially isolated.⁵

Autism is a spectrum condition. This means autistic people have varying and complex needs, from 24-hour care to simply needing clearer communication and a little longer to do things at work and school. This means that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting autistic people but instead we need to have an environment that enables autistic people to make the best choices for themselves. It is vital to improve the understanding of autism across the board to enable this accessibility and flexibility. Different organisations and cities have trialled platforms and awards to identify and accredit autism friendly businesses and facilities. This could be helpful in London to improve accessibility for autistic people. Other cities across the UK are involving autistic people in their work to become more autism friendly and it is about time London made a focussed effort to do the same. The Mayor of London has a wide remit through the London Assembly, Transport for London, Metropolitan Police and London Fire Brigade and should use his position to make London more autism friendly. The Mayor should make a concerted effort to highlight and tackle the issues autistic people

¹ The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Brugha, T. et al (2012). *Estimating the prevalence of autism spectrum conditions in adults: extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey*. Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care

² *I get too much information but some people don't have enough*, National Autistic Society, https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi_campaign_report_final_290316.ashx?la=en-gb

³ *The Autism Employment Gap*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi%20employment%20report%2024pp%20web.ashx?la=en-gb>

⁴ *Autistic people worried by public transport*, TFN News, 2018, <http://thirdforcenews.org.uk/tfn-news/autistic-people-worried-by-public-transport>

⁵ *Hidden Crisis: Autistic People four times more likely to be lonely than general public*, National Autistic Society, 30th April 2018, <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/news/2018-04-25-hidden-crisis-autism-and-loneliness.aspx>

face in London. The Mayor could make tangible changes such as promoting an autism friendly award, introducing improved mandatory autism awareness training, taking a lead of multi-agency working, amending his strategies and introducing a platform so that autistic Londoners and visitors to London can find autism friendly services.

Recommendations

We recommend to the Mayor of London that he should:

- **Promote the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award across London;** to push businesses to become autism friendly around London and help autistic people access services more easily.
- **Introduce mandatory autism awareness training for all roles within the GLA group;** not just public facing roles. This includes the Metropolitan Police, TfL and the London Fire Brigade to increase understanding of autism and the issues autistic people face.
- **Take a lead on a joined-up, multiagency approach to making London autism friendly.** Working with Borough Councils, CCGs, charities and businesses to ensure that London is an environment where service providers are able to deliver the necessary support. This should be underpinned by an all-age London-wide autism strategy
- **Amend his strategies where necessary to include specific provision for autistic people.** The Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy and London Plan in particular make no mention of autism. Specifically referencing autism could help to highlight the issues autistic people face and work towards alleviating them.
- **Work to introduce a platform where the autistic community in London can locate autism friendly businesses and facilities.** These could be places with an autism friendly award or nominated as an autism champion. The Mayor could work with existing platforms or create a new one.

Introduction

This report will explore ways in which London can become more autism friendly and what more the Mayor can do, as well as GLA bodies, to ensure that autistic people can live fulfilling and independent lives in London. An autism friendly city should be one where people on the autism spectrum are able to travel on public transport, shop for food and clothes, take part in sports and leisure activities, visit cultural institutions, visit tourist attractions, eat in restaurants and be supported appropriately by healthcare, social care and emergency services.⁶ Although this report focusses on autism, many of the findings and recommendations within it could be applicable to any neurodivergent person.

There are around 700,000 people on the autism spectrum in the UK, which equates to more than 1 in 100 people¹. If you include their families, autism is a part of daily life for around 2.8 million people across the UK⁷. According to latest figures, there are roughly 88,000 autistic people living in London⁸, but they fall behind non-autistic Londoners on several indicators, for example National Autistic Society research suggests only 16 percent of working-age autistic people are currently in full time employment⁹. This report will focus on five main areas for improvement:

Accessibility
Community, Awareness & Understanding
Support
Employment
Working Together

Awareness of autism and the issues autistic people face has massively increased in recent years and the Autism Act passed through Parliament in 2009 has helped to make a difference to the lives of many autistic people¹⁰. There is still plenty of work yet to be done as the National Autistic Society are running a campaign ten years on from this Act being passed. Awareness is the first step but beyond that, understanding and support is vital. Many people may be aware of autism but do not fully understand what autism and its implications mean.

Autistic people face a multitude of issues and this report coincides with recent research on diagnosis waiting times by Liberal Democrat former Health Minister Sir Norman Lamb MP, in consultation with the National Autistic Society and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism. Children and adults face waits of more than 2 years for an autism assessment and over 3 years for a diagnosis in some

⁶ *Could Liverpool become the world's first truly autism-friendly city?*, Autism Together, <https://www.autismtogether.co.uk/liverpool-launches-ambition-to-be-one-of-first-autism-friendly-cities/>

⁷ *Autism Facts and History*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/myths-facts-stats.aspx>

⁸ The NHS Information Centre, Community and Mental Health Team, Brugha, T. et al (2012). *Estimating the prevalence of autism spectrum conditions in adults: extending the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey*. Leeds: NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care

⁹ *The Autism Employment Gap*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi%20employment%20report%2024pp%20web.ashx?la=en-gb>

¹⁰ *Autism Act 2009*, Legislation.gov, 2009, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/15/contents>

areas of England, according to new evidence. The struggles that autistic people face can be exacerbated by not knowing they have autism.¹¹

Keeping the Mayor of London's wide remit in mind, the report will also explore what more the Metropolitan Police, London Fire Brigade and Transport for London can do to educate their employees or make their services more autism friendly.

An important point in this report will be to emphasise that these changes are in the interest of everyone. Autistic people form a sizeable proportion of the population and are more likely to have higher unemployment rates, higher and disproportionate representation in our criminal justice system, and higher rates of mental health problems than their non-autistic counterparts.

The intended outcome of this report is to develop recommendations that can make a simple but tangible positive difference to the everyday lives of autistic people in London. Relatively modest changes could make a big difference to the lives of autistic people, particularly in London where challenges can be substantial and diverse.

¹¹ *Autism Diagnosis Postcode lottery exposed*, National Autistic Society, 18th July 2019 <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/news/2018-07-18-autism-diagnosis-postcode-lottery-exposed.aspx>

Problems Autistic People Face

Employment

One of the key areas where autistic people face challenges is employment. A National Autistic Society report published in 2016 cited a figure of just 16 percent of autistic adults in full-time paid work and 32 percent of autistic adults in any kind of paid work.¹² In comparison and in stark contrast, 80 percent of non-disabled people were in some form of work. The Mayor of London could use his position to advocate better inclusion and accessibility for autistic people to be employed across London, including within the GLA group where he is a major employer. Improving employability would not only empower autistic people more but it would make workplaces more cohesive as workplaces benefit from a diverse workforce.¹³

Travelling

It was discovered by the National Autistic Society that over half of autistic people avoid public transport due to fears of disruption.¹⁴ This is a huge problem for autistic people as it affects their daily lives for all manner of things from employment to leisure activities. The rail network inevitably suffers from delays which can be particularly challenging for autistic people; with more awareness and understanding people can make the experience of travelling a lot more manageable for autistic people.¹⁵ By ensuring transport network staff understand the issues autistic people may face and implementing small changes to the infrastructure such as improved signage, transport systems should run more smoothly when they work for everyone. As transport in London is something that affects everyone in the capital, the Mayor needs to make as much effort as possible to make sure it works for everyone.

¹² *The Autism Employment Gap*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi%20employment%20report%202024pp%20web.ashx?la=en-gb>

¹³ *What are the benefits of diversity in the workplace?*, The Undercover Recruiter, <https://theundercoverrecruiter.com/benefits-diversity-workplace/>

¹⁴ *Autistic people worried by public transport*, TFN News, 2018, <http://thirdforcenews.org.uk/tfn-news/autistic-people-worried-by-public-transport>

¹⁵ *Let's make public transport autism friendly*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/media-centre/news/2018-05-29-public-transport-open-letter.aspx>

Awareness/Understanding

Although 99.5 percent of people in a YouGov poll reported that they have heard of autism¹⁶, there is still a severe lack of understanding about autism amongst the general public. The National Autistic Society's report "*I get too much information but some people don't have enough*" explores why the public needs to understand autism better. The damning statistic that 28 percent of autistic people have been asked to leave a public space because of behaviour associated with their autism particularly highlights the lack of understanding of autism¹⁷.

A lack of public awareness and more specifically understanding, is one of the simplest yet most damaging sources of problems for autistic people. The recent *Too Much Information* campaign, delivered by the National Autistic Society¹⁸, aims to increase public understanding of the five core features of autism. The five features are:

- anxiety in social situations
- anxiety with unexpected changes
- sensory overload
- processing time
- meltdowns

These core features can manifest themselves differently with each autistic person, to varying degrees with an array of triggers. The diversity of autism can make it difficult for widespread understanding. Understanding this diversity helps to create a more cohesive society that works better for all. The Mayor should use his high-profile position to spearhead understanding of autism in London.

¹⁶ *More People in the UK are aware of Autism*, YouGov <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2015/04/13/more-people-uk-are-aware-autism>

¹⁷ *I get too much information but some people don't have enough*, National Autistic Society, https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi_campaign_report_final_290316.ashx?la=en-gb

¹⁸ *I get too much information but some people don't have enough*, National Autistic Society, https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/tmi_campaign_report_final_290316.ashx?la=en-gb

What Makes An Autism Friendly City?

According to Autism Together and Autism Adventures, an autism friendly city is one in which autistic people can *'travel on public transport, shop for food and clothes, take part in sports and leisure activities, visit cultural institutions, visit tourist attractions, eat in restaurants and be supported appropriately by healthcare and emergency services'*¹⁹. Additionally, it is vital that in an autism friendly city, autistic people are supported appropriately by social care. These are all basic activities and functions that are accessible to most of the public. Although there is an increased awareness of autism, many people still do not understand the diversity and complexity of autism and how these activities and functions may be problematic for autistic people. It is the five core features of autism (anxiety in social situations, anxiety with unexpected changes, sensory overload, processing times and meltdowns) that means these activities often become challenging.

To help businesses understand the issues which autistic people face daily and to help them address them, the National Autistic Society have established an 'Autism Friendly Award'. The idea of this is to recognise businesses who have made a particular effort to ensure they are accessible to autistic people. In the most part this involves making small changes that make a massive difference to the daily lives of autistic people, though the actual changes will differ between settings. This award has an Autism Friendly toolkit which sets out a helpful five-point checklist for businesses to set out the fundamental principles of being autism friendly. All autistic people are different and not all of these changes will help every autistic person, meaning that improving understanding is the single biggest change that businesses can make.

National Autistic Society's Five Point Autism Friendly Toolkit:²⁰

- Customer Information – Providing appropriate information to help support autistic people and their families' visitor or customer experience.
- Staff Understanding of Autism – Developing staff understanding
- Physical Environment – Making appropriate and reasonable adjustments within the limits of the physical environment.
- Customer Experience – A willingness to be flexible and providing a clear way for autistic people and their families to provide feedback.
- Promoting Understanding – Committing to helping increase wider public understanding of autism.

¹⁹ *Could Liverpool become the world's first truly autism-friendly city?*, Autism together, 2016. <https://www.autismtogether.co.uk/could-liverpool-become-the-worlds-first-truly-autism-friendly-city/>

²⁰ *I get too much information but some people don't have enough*, National Autistic Society, P3, <https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/get-involved/tmi/afa/afa%20individual%20toolkit%20web.ashx?la=en-gb>

Autistica, the UK's leading autism research group points out that an issue with the term "autism friendly" is that it can often imply a one-size-fits-all approach²¹. Due to the diversity and complexity of autism, what may be a positive change for one autistic person may be a negative one for another.^{22 23} The National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award is a tailored award to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and to ensure the award is appropriate for autistic people using the business. This is why raising awareness and understanding of the diverse needs of autistic people is so important so that the public, businesses and the government do not think there is one simple approach to help every autistic person but to have a broad and flexible outlook on helping solve autistic issues. The best approach is through improving understanding, allowing access to a range of environments and options to meet different needs to allow the diverse autistic community to make informed decisions.²⁴

Awards and accreditations such as the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award are proving to be valuable to autistic people as they provide an indication for businesses to measure themselves against when trying to be more autism friendly. Although there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to making life autism friendly, awards help to give some basic security that a business is at least understanding the diversity of autistic issues.

²¹ Harper, G. et al. (2019) *Autistica Action Briefing: Sensory Needs & The Built Environment*, <https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Autistica-Action-Briefing-Sensory-Needs-The-Built-Environment.pdf>

²² Nicolaidis, C. et al. (2015) *Respect the way I need to communicate with you: Healthcare experiences of adults on the autism spectrum*. *Autism* 19(7), 824-831. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4841263/>

²³ Tavassoli T, et al. (2015) *Measuring Sensory Reactivity in Autism Spectrum Disorder: Application and Simplification of a Clinician-Administered Sensory Observation Scale*. *J Autism Dev Disord* 46, 287-293. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26340959>

²⁴ National Autistic Taskforce (2019). An independent guide to quality care for autistic people. <https://nationalautistictaskforce.org.uk/independent-guide-to-quality-care-for-autistic-people/>

What Are The Benefits Of An Autism Friendly City?

An obvious question to ask when talking about autism friendly cities is *why would we want to work towards creating an autism friendly city?* The benefits are twofold; not only will making an autism friendly city have an obvious positive impact on the lives of the autistic community but it will also be beneficial for the wider population. For example, improving signage and accessibility will not only benefit autistic people but also a variety of people across society

Much of what helps to create an autism friendly place is not simply creating autistic specific spaces or facilities but increasing understanding of the issues autistic people face. The National Autistic Society described what businesses need to do to achieve their Autism Friendly Award as *“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 and just a little understanding can go a long way.”*²⁵ For example, one simple action businesses could take to help autistic people deal with challenging or confusing environments is to provide clear information about these in advance on their website, or include information about a designated quieter space people could use. This is something the UK parliament has adopted. This means potential visitors are aware of what to expect and can plan pre-visit to ease anxiety and the likelihood of being overwhelmed. Advanced notice of areas where queuing is required, security checks and items such as elevators, escalators, revolving doors, narrow staircases, narrow corridors; noisy and busy areas such as balconies, shops, cafeterias could be very useful to an autistic person. This could be included in one simple resource with clear text and photos²⁶. Such a resource would be best created with the involvement of autistic people. Although such a resource might not be appropriate for all people on the autism spectrum, having the option available could be very helpful. Creating choice and improving understanding of autism helps to create a more harmonious and integrated society.

²⁵ *About our Autism Friendly Award*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/autism-friendly-award/about.aspx>

²⁶ *Autism Friendly Award Guidelines: 1.3 Details of Building Layout in particular areas that might present challenges for autistic people*, National Autistic Society, 23/7/2019, <https://www.autism.org.uk/~media/nas/professionals/afa-guidelines-2019.ashx?la=en-gb>

What Can Be Learnt From Elsewhere?

Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority has produced a “Making Greater Manchester Autism Friendly”²⁷ Strategy which has been created through close collaboration with autistic people, their families and the Greater Manchester Autism Consortium.

The strategy sets out four key areas for improvement, under which there are actions set out for the next three years;

- Access - Making sure public services are accessible,
- Community - Placing autistic people at the heart of our communities.
- Health and Support - Improving health and social care so autistic people stay healthy and receive the support they need.
- Employment and Transition - Improving employment opportunities as well as the transition to adult services for young people.

The strategy was commissioned by the Greater Manchester Autism Consortium (GMAC) - a partnership of;

- Adult services from the 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester.
- The 10 Clinical Commissioning groups (CCG).
- Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership.

This group has been coordinated by the Greater Manchester Autism Consortium project which is run by the National Autistic Society. The strategy was launched in March 2019 and implementation groups have now been set up involving autistic people and professionals to take forward the actions. While this means there is not much evidence to measure its success yet, this will need to be monitored as the strategy continues. The Mayor of London could work towards creating and facilitating a strategic consortium/collaborative approach to autism support and services across London, similarly to what is happening in Manchester. Although this could take a different shape to Manchester’s model due to London’s huge size and diversity, the Mayor has a leadership role to play in bringing people together across London.

²⁷ *Making Greater Manchester Autism Friendly Strategy*, Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership, <http://www.gmhsc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/GMHSCP-Autism-Doc-FINAL.pdf>

Liverpool

In Liverpool, an 'Autism Champion' scheme has started and is having a positive impact on the lives of autistic people²⁸. To become an autism champion, businesses must sign a charter designed by the autism community, asking businesses to ensure that at least ten percent of their public facing staff receive autism champion training, make reasonable adjustments to the physical environment and practice, provide autism friendly specific sessions/days where possible and commit to a review every three years to ensure that the required standards and skills have been maintained.²⁹ 20 businesses and organisations around the city have signed up as champions ranging from Merseyside Police to Costa Coffee and can all be found online on an interactive map to improve awareness, understanding and access³⁰. This is something the Mayor of London could facilitate, just as he recently facilitated businesses around London giving access to free drinking water. He could advertise businesses who are autism champions or have earned an autism friendly award.

Bristol

Bristol airport achieved the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award.³¹ The airport received the award after a project to improve assistance for passengers with hidden disabilities and recognises Bristol Airport and OCS Group for providing assistance that improves the experience at the airport for autistic passengers, their families and caregivers. The Airport offers a Hidden Disabilities card and lanyard to help autistic passengers to progress through the terminal. The card acts as a discreet sign to airport staff that passengers may need additional support as they travel through the airport. This will let staff know that holders may need more time to process information, help in avoiding crowded places or extra assistance when reading information screens.³²

Official accreditation is something London airports could take inspiration from and look to adopt. Travelling is a common area where autistic people struggle and London, with its five major commercial airports would really benefit from its airports being more accessible for autistic people. Although some London airports have some provision for assisting autistic people, London City, London Southend and London Luton all lack either a quiet route or zone for autistic people which many other airports include.³³

²⁸ *Why Liverpool is bidding to be an autism friendly city*, Robin Bush, The Guardian, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2016/jul/12/liverpool-autism-friendly-city>

²⁹ *What is the Autism Champions Scheme?* Autism friendly Liverpool, <http://www.autismfriendlyliverpool.com/how/>

³⁰ *Liverpool Autism Friendly Champions*, <http://www.autismfriendlyliverpool.com/>

³¹ *Bristol Airport gains autism friendly award*, Bristol Airport, 2018, <https://www.bristolairport.co.uk/about-us/news-and-media/news-and-media-centre/2018/2/autism-friendly-award>

³² *Bristol Airport Helps Passengers With Hidden Disabilities*, Bristol Airport, March 2017, <https://www.bristolairport.co.uk/about-us/news-and-media/news-and-media-centre/2017/3/hidden-disabilities-card>

³³ *Autism and UK airports, what help can you expect in the country's terminals*, Airport Parking & Hotels, <https://www.aph.com/community/holidays/autism-airports-help-revealed/>

Glasgow

Glasgow Council has been working on making the City autism friendly. They are initially focussing their efforts around shopping centres, transport hubs, museums, cinemas and key operational staff. There is an interactive map available online, so people know where to access autism friendly services and venues.³⁴

The Glasgow Film Theatre is Scotland's oldest independent cinema and it has become the first cinema in the UK to achieve the Autism Friendly Award³⁵. They made reasonable adjustments to accommodate autistic adults and children. By creating monthly screenings with the volume slightly lowered, stair lights remaining on, house lights dimmed and a chill out zone provided as well as training 'autism facilitators' to answer any questions at the end of the films. This has inspired other venues in the City such as Glasgow Science Centre who have introduced autism friendly hours³⁶. If institutions in London were to introduce such changes, perhaps this could have a snowball effect as more and more venues introduce this feature.

Shops and businesses up and down the country are taking similar steps to become more autism friendly. As the nation's capital, it's vital that London plays its part. The Mayor has a crucial strategic role to play in making sure this happens across the London economy.

³⁴ *Autism friendly city Centre*, Glasgow City Council, <https://www.glasgowcitycentrestrategy.com/project/autism-friendly-city-centre>

³⁵ *Glasgow Film theatre becomes first cinema in the UK to scoop the Autism friendly award*, Glasgow Film, 2017, <https://glasgowfilm.org/latest/news/glasgow-film-theatre-becomes-first-cinema-in-the-uk-to-scoop-the-autism-friendly-award>

³⁶ *Autism friendly Hours*, Glasgow Science Centre, <https://www.glasgowsciencecentre.org/discover/our-experiences/autism-friendly-hours>

Autism Friendly London: What Is Already In Place & What Is The Mayor Doing?

The Mayor of London has been relatively quiet about the specific issue of making London more autism friendly. Although there are some positive provisions within the draft London Plan that could assist people with learning disabilities, most notably the accessible design approach, autism is not a learning disability and there is no specific mention of autistic people or autism within the report³⁷, despite the large number of Londoners on the autism spectrum. Autistic people's health inequality has been identified at a national level in the Department for Health and Social Care's mandate to NHS England³⁸ and the NHS England Long Term Plan. Public Health England also published the Autism self-assessment framework exercise in June this year that shows adult diagnosis waiting times for autism have almost doubled in the last two years.³⁹ Despite this recognition on a national level, worryingly there is no specific mention of autism in the London Health Inequalities Strategy despite autistic people representing a large section of society who are often disadvantaged.⁴⁰ The Mayor should amend his health inequalities strategy to reflect the high level of inequality autistic people face.

Naturally it is a concern to the thousands affected by autism that the Mayor is making productive steps to make London better for those with autism, so we asked the Mayor directly:

“What are the Mayor’s plans to make London a more autism friendly city?”⁴¹

The Mayor’s response was:

“A range of initiatives across City Hall are contributing to making London a more autism-friendly city. My draft London Plan; Transport Strategy; and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy promote inclusive design, fundamental to creating public spaces which those with autism can access confidently. TfL is examining barriers to travelling for neuro-diverse customers by piloting a Design for the Mind audit of Euston Station. Our work on creating a Dementia-Friendly London, including improved signage, also benefits those on the autistic spectrum. The Healthy Schools London Awards require schools to meet the needs of disabled children including provision for pupils on the autistic spectrum. The Young Londoner’s Fund and Team London’s grants support projects helping

³⁷ *Draft London Plan*, Mayor of London, 2018, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/draft_london_plan_-_showing_minor_suggested_changes_july_2018.pdf

³⁸ *NHS Mandate 2018-2019*, Department of Health and Social Care, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-mandate-2018-to-2019>

³⁹ *Autism self-assessment framework*, Public Health England, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/autism-self-assessment-framework-exercise>

⁴⁰ *The London Health Inequalities Strategy*, The Mayor of London, September 2018, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/health_strategy_2018_low_res_fa1.pdf

⁴¹ *Andrew Boff AM, Question at MQT*, 20/6/19, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/12287>

young people with on the autistic spectrum to increase independence at home, at school and in their communities. The Sycamore Trust in Havering said mayoral funding gave their organisation a new lease of life after local cuts forced them to significantly reduce their provision.”

Although there is some provision for autistic people in the Mayor’s strategies and initiatives, autism is almost exclusively only mentioned under umbrella terms; there is a real lack of specificity when it comes to addressing the issues autistic people face. The Mayor of London could and should make specific mention of the issues autistic people face in his relevant strategies and attempt to address them. Furthermore, the Mayor should take a lead in bringing London Borough Councils and other organisations together with the aim of making London more autism friendly.

Greater London Authority

When asked what the GLA is doing to support autistic adults in 2016, the Mayor responded:

“My Diversity and Social Policy team are working with Disabled People's Organisations including Transport for All, Inclusion London and the Alliance for Inclusive Education to make London an inclusive city for everyone including people with autism. I launched the world's first Global Disability Innovation Hub located in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park at the National Paralympic Day and Liberty Festival on September 3rd 2016.”⁴²

Autistic People in fact do not qualify for the Paralympics unless they also have a learning disability. The Mayor’s answer highlights the need to increase understanding of autism and improve autism friendly services across London

Similarly, when asked what the GLA is doing to ensure public spaces are more autism friendly in January 2019, the Mayor responded:

“Inclusive design is promoted in my draft London Plan and my Transport and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion strategies. It is fundamental to creating public spaces that everyone can use confidently and independently, including those with autism. My officers will be involving members of my new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group in guiding and promoting my commitments to equality in London, to ensure that engagement with Disabled Londoners, including those with autism, is at the heart of this work. Good customer service is also vital. For example, TfL continues to work with Valuing People, a forum for people with learning disabilities and autism, to make transport services more inclusive across a range of issues.”⁴³

⁴² Fiona Twycross AM, Question at MQT, 14/9/16 <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2016/3527>

⁴³ Andrew Boff AM Question at MQT, 17/1/19 <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/0449>

Transport for London

TFL says they are “building a programme of work to improve how well we are able to design for the mind. This will eventually lead to new standards and guidance and by looking at lighting and signage, it will make travelling in London more accessible for those with autism, learning difficulties, mental health issues and dementia”.⁴⁴

“TfL delivers Disability Equality Training to Underground staff which includes invisible disabilities such as autism. TfL runs Steps into Work, a skills and work experience and skills programme, for people with learning disabilities and autism.”⁴⁵ It is vital that the Mayor monitors this to ensure this delivers change for autistic people.

Metropolitan Police Service

The Metropolitan Police Service has developed an autism card and passport given that autism is one of the hardest disabilities for officers to recognise and deal with due to its complex nature and presentation. Producing the card invites the officer to review their bespoke passport detailing causes of individual distress/discomfort and what can be done to assist them.⁴⁶

This passport system is brand new and is being rolled out in the coming months. The Mayor of London should monitor the implementation of this to ensure this delivers real support for autistic people across London.

Autism awareness is part of the Certificate of Knowledge in Policing (CKP), which every new officer must complete. Autism awareness also features within the six days of Safeguarding and Vulnerability training that is a key part of the initial recruit foundation course for both Police Constables and Special Constables. There are an additional seven days of interactive continuation training during an officer’s probation period and this too contains elements on vulnerability and autism.⁴⁷

Although there is good provision of autism training in the Metropolitan Police, it could be useful for the Mayor to work with groups such as the National Autistic Society to make sure the emphasis is on understanding autism rather than simply being aware. The CKP is also being phased out at the end of the year so it is vital that the Mayor monitors this to make sure there are no gaps in police training under the new system.

⁴⁴ Accessibility, Making London a City for All, TFL, 11/03/19, <https://madeby.tfl.gov.uk/2019/03/11/transport-accessibility/>

⁴⁵ Andrew Boff AM Question at MQT, 17/1/19, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/0447>

⁴⁶ Andrew Boff AM Question at MQT, 17/1/19, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/0447>

⁴⁷ Andrew Boff AM Question at MQT, 20/6/19, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/12278>

London Fire Brigade

*Firefighters are trained in mental health awareness including autism and, where appropriate, can fit alternative smoke alarms to avoid 'sensory overload' caused by standard alarm sounders.*⁴⁸ The Mayor of London could look to work with partner organisations in developing a better understanding of autism within the London Fire Brigade as many of the symptoms of autism could be exacerbated when involved in a scenario where it is necessary for the fire brigade to intervene. This could also impact on evacuation strategies as autistic people may not be viewed as needing assistance when some autistic people might need support.

Individual London Boroughs

London is a unique city within the UK, due to its immense size, diversity and international draw. London has a current estimated population of 8.8 million.⁴⁹ The next most populous city within the UK is Birmingham with a population of 1.1 million people⁵⁰. London also has a complex make up of Local Government with 32 London Borough Councils and the City of London. These London Borough Councils have the best local knowledge of their area and are best placed to lead the way with their own initiatives. It should be the Mayor of London's job to bring London boroughs together with initiatives that are important across London. If London boroughs make their own initiatives to become autism friendly, the Mayor should promote this and encourage other boroughs to do so whilst making sure they're in line with a consistent London-wide strategy.

The London Borough of Hackney is making a concerted effort to become an autism friendly borough. Making Hackney a better place for autistic residents, is the aim of a consultation to develop the borough's first autism plan. City and Hackney's Autism Alliance Board - made up of autistic residents, carers and organisations are developing the plan⁵¹. The Council is also improving job opportunities for autistic residents through its employment service *Hackney Works*, which provides a supported employment service at Hoxton Opportunity Hub. A person receives one-to-one support from an advisor who works closely with them to help them find the right opportunity with specific employers. The Mayor of London could do more to promote individual London Boroughs to form their own autism friendly consultations and initiatives. Due to the huge size of London, it could be more effective to encourage individual boroughs to tackle this issue and then have the Mayor of London oversee this work and work with councils to make sure the strategy is joined up. A London-wide autism strategy would be of huge benefit to develop a consortium approach similar to Manchester.

⁴⁸ Andrew Boff AM Question at MQT, 17/1/19, <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/0447>

⁴⁹ GLA Population and Household Projections, London Data Store, <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/projections/>

⁵⁰ Birmingham Population, Birmingham City Council, https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/20057/about_birmingham/1294/population_and_census/2

⁵¹ Making Hackney and City of London Autism Friendly, Hackney Council, February 2019, <https://consultation.hackney.gov.uk/adult-social-care-commissioning/making-an-autism-friendly-hackney/>

Autism Friendly London: What Should The Mayor Be Doing?

The Mayor of London should be doing more for autistic people and their families in London. Approximately one percent of people living in London are autistic and for many more people, autism is part of their daily life. As London is a major world city and tourist hotspot, many more autistic people from around the UK and the rest of the world will also visit London, making it different to other UK cities as there are a higher number of visitors⁵². Making London a more autism friendly place would benefit the non-autistic population of London too as autistic people often play an active role in their local communities. There are five broad areas which the Mayor could be making more of an impact to make the lives of autistic Londoners and visitors to London easier.

It is important that any action taken by the Mayor to make London more accessible should actively involve autistic people. The autistic community want to be an active part of shaping their support as opposed to being told what they want. For example, Autistica co-produce their briefings with autistic people through the discover network and insight group to increase validity and promote inclusion.⁵³ The National Autistic Society also involves autistic people in its campaigning and influencing, and in the development and delivery of the Autism Friendly Award.

Accessibility

The Mayor needs to ensure public spaces and services in London are accessible to those on the autism spectrum and their families. Some work has been done to promote accessible design in the draft London Plan, but the Mayor can do more. There is no specific mention of autism in the London Plan. The London Plan is something that many developers and local Councils pay a lot of attention to regarding their approach to developments and planning policy. Even just the mention of autism in this strategy could have a profound impact on autism friendly design by increasing awareness and understanding.

The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design and the Royal College of Art have produced a study on autism friendly design⁵⁴. There is not much guidance available for developers in this area, but as the awareness and understanding of autism and the number of autistic people rises, this is something that is being explored more. Due to the lack of guidance, developers have little awareness or understanding of what is best for autistic people, with most considerations to disabilities being for more obvious physical disabilities. Perhaps including some specific guidance on autism friendly spaces in the London plan could help. Most

⁵² *Welcoming Autistic People: A guide to tourism venues*, National Autistic Society, Visit England, https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/default/files/vb-corporate/autism_guide_for_tourism_venues_2018.pdf

⁵³ *Discover Insight Group*, Autistica, <https://www.autistica.org.uk/get-involved/calmer-christmas/help-shape-research>

⁵⁴ *Living in the Community: Housing Design for Adults with Autism*, Royal College of Art, 2010, <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/helen-hamlyn-centre/research-projects/2010-projects/living-community-housing-design-adults-autism/>

designers are likely to prioritise the commercial performance of a project which would be assessed against any designs. Having the tools and initiatives in place will help autism friendly design be considered seriously. There are several recommended design features that could be helpful in workplaces for those on the autism spectrum to calm and focus the mind; most of these are subtle sensory changes. Quiet spaces and natural materials (as they're proven to help calm and focus), having a garden or some greenery, a mixture of designated quiet areas (not just open plan) and soft lighting. Hot desking can be challenging for some autistic people and having a steady working environment as much as possible will help autistic people get on. For retail spaces and transport spaces, improved signage can also make a huge difference for autistic people. The only caveat to this is that due to the diversity of autism, not all of these approaches will be helpful for autistic people⁵⁵. By maximising choice and variety, autistic people will be able to live and work in environments that benefit them.⁵⁶

If the Mayor of London were to make specific reference to autistic people in his London Plan and strategies across the board, he could provide better choice for autistic people and awareness and understanding across different sectors.

Community, Awareness & Understanding

Autistic people are often at the heart of communities across London. It is important to be as inclusive as possible, not only as they represent a significant proportion of the population but because being inclusive will benefit the wider population too. The best way for people to be inclusive is to understand the diverse needs of autistic people and what an autism friendly environment is. Although it often can sound too obvious, increasing awareness is the most important thing that can be done to create an autism friendly environment as it also increases understanding of autism and the issues autistic people face. The Mayor in his role as a leader and figurehead for London should be leading the way in increasing awareness and understanding of autism. 'Autism together', one of the UK's leading providers of support to autistic people, commissioned the 'Future 50' survey for their 50th anniversary last year. The survey was conducted to find out how the autism community feels about key issues and surveyed 1080 families. One of the key findings of this report was that when asked 'what practical future changes should or could be made to improve the lives of those on the spectrum and their families?' the top answer with 76 percent of respondents choosing it, was 'mandatory autism awareness training for public facing staff across the public and private sectors'⁵⁷. It is telling that the most popular response from the autistic community is to increase awareness and understanding. This has also been a focus of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism's inquiry into autism understanding, support and services, with similar findings on the importance of staff training. This report will be published

⁵⁵ Ausderau K, et al. (2016) Sensory Subtypes and Associated Outcomes in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Autism Res* 9, 1316-1327. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27135214>

⁵⁶ Lane S, et al. (2012) Sensory Overresponsivity and Anxiety in Typically Developing Children and Children With Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Cause or Coexistence? *Am J Occup Ther* 66(5), 595-603. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40489-016-0084-y>

⁵⁷ *Future 50 Survey*, Autism Together, 2018, <https://www.autismtogether.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/future-50-survey-web.pdf>

in September. The Mayor could and should easily be able to facilitate this through his position, whether just making more mention of autistic issues, in his plans and strategies, advocating autism friendly awards and initiatives, supporting autistic charities or increasing awareness and understanding training as an employer.

The Mayor of London has a role to take a lead on campaigns and mayoral initiatives. Campaigns can have a great impact in facilitating change and raising awareness and understanding but often they can merely become PR stunts and a means to virtue signal. The Mayor could easily include specific sections about understanding autism on relevant campaigns. For instance, the *London is Open* campaign began as a very pointed response to Brexit, making a point that London is open to people from the European Union. It has since evolved into a broader campaign about London being open and inclusive for all⁵⁸. Despite this focus on inclusion there is not much mention of disabilities. This campaign should focus more on inclusion for Londoners as this comes under his remit. The *London is Open* campaign could and should have a section on disabled people, and specifically non-visible disabilities such as autism to increase awareness and understanding.

Another campaign that the Mayor of London should be promoting amongst businesses in London is the National Autistic Society's "Autism Hour" campaign. Last year, over 11,000 businesses took part in this campaign and it is open for businesses to apply again this year from the 5th to the 12th October⁵⁹. Every business and every autistic person is different so there is no set way to hold an autism hour. There are two key parts to an Autism Hour. The first is making adjustments to business premises to make it less overwhelming for autistic people. This could mean turning down music or lessening background noise, dimming lights where safe to do so, having a quiet space or making signage clearer. The second key part is sharing information about autism with staff to increase their understanding of autistic colleagues or customers⁶⁰. These are simple tangible steps that the Mayor could be promoting amongst businesses across London to make a more autistic friendly environment.

⁵⁸ *London is Open*, Mayor of London, <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/london-open>

⁵⁹ *The National Autistic Society's Autism Hour: Sign up your business for 2019*, National Autistic Society, 2019 <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/autism-hour/businesses.aspx>

⁶⁰ *What is an Autism Hour?* National Autistic Society, 2019 <https://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/autism-hour/about.aspx>

Support

Support is vital to help autistic people lead fulfilling lives. Specificity and availability of the support is vital to meet the complex and varied needs of those on the autism spectrum. The Mayor should work with Borough Councils, CCGs, charities and businesses to ensure that there is not only support available but to make sure that London is an environment where service providers are able to deliver the necessary support. For example, the 'Changing Places' campaign which provides specialist toilets and changing facilities for anyone who requires such adjustments, has an online map where service users and providers can see where their closest facility is⁶¹. An online map or database for autistic people to find autism friendly facilities or areas could be a helpful way to make sure London can better facilitate the needs of autistic people. The Mayor should work together with partner organisations to create a platform where the autistic community can find autistic friendly facilities. There are existing platforms the Mayor of London could tap into such as the National Autistic Society's *Autism Services Directory* and *The Autism Directory*.⁶² New initiatives are also being set up such as the platform Autistica and the Alan Turing Institute are working to create to enable autistic people and their families to share experiences to work for a better, more autism friendly and accessible society.⁶³ The Mayor could work with these organisations with the view of improving facilities and accessibility in London.

The Mayor of London could also provide a better environment to support autistic people through the Metropolitan Police Service. Although the Met Police has recently partnered with the National Police Autism Association (an independent organisation formed in 2015, to better support its autistic employees⁶⁴) to introduce the autism alert card, it could be useful to partner with them for further future initiatives. Additionally, the Mayor of London should be providing clear training and guidance for Police Officers on how to interact with autistic people in the most appropriate way. Although there is training available, partnering with expert organisations to emphasise understanding rather than awareness could be more beneficial. The National Autistic Society have produced a handbook called "*Autism: A guide for police officers and staff*"⁶⁵ which could be made available to staff and police officers to better equip them to interact with autistic victims, witnesses or offenders in the best way possible. In recent years there have been several cases where autistic people have been wrongly arrested or approached by the police due to their behaviour from a lack of understanding of the condition. The National Autistic Society has created a CPD certified training module to help officers and staff to better understand and

⁶¹ *Toilet Map*, Changing Places, <http://changingplaces.uktoiletmap.org/>

⁶² *The Autism Directory*, <https://www.theautismdirectory.com/listing/>

⁶³ *Creating Better Environments*, Autistica, 2018, <https://www.autistica.org.uk/our-research/research-projects/creating-better-environments>

⁶⁴ *What we support*, National Police Autism Association, <http://www.npaa.org.uk/conditions/>

⁶⁵ *Autism: A guide for police officers and staff*, National Autistic Society, [file:///homedata/home\\$/mneale/Downloads/Autism-Police-Guide-The-National-Autistic-Society-2017.pdf](file:///homedata/home$/mneale/Downloads/Autism-Police-Guide-The-National-Autistic-Society-2017.pdf)

deal with autistic people. The Mayor could explore the option of incorporating this into training for Met police officers and staff.⁶⁶

Another policing initiative where London has fallen behind other areas of the country is a Vulnerability Identification card scheme. The purpose is for the cardholder to produce the card when they come into contact with the police, alerting them that the holder has an autistic spectrum disorder. The card contains basic information about the individual and details how autism manifests itself. The card also provides practical advice for the officer involved, allowing them to make reasonable adjustments and interact appropriately with the autistic individual. West Midlands, West Mercia, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, British Transport, Devon & Cornwall, Thames Valley, Kent, Hampshire, Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, South Wales, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Nottinghamshire, Dyfed Powys, Lincolnshire, Surrey and Sussex police forces have all been promoting different kinds of identification cards.⁶⁷ It has recently been published that the Metropolitan Police, City of London Police and the British Transport Police to roll out a tri-police service “Alert Card” scheme, it will be important that the Mayor takes a lead on this to ensure it is rolled out effectively across London.⁶⁸

Prisons and young offender institutes can also be better prepared to deal with autistic people. Current prison population figures are around 82,672 which would therefore mean there are at least 826 Autistic people currently in prison.⁶⁹ Her Majesty’s Young Offenders’ Institution Feltham was the first prison to be awarded an autism accreditation after two years of working with National Autistic Society to improve the way they support autistic people in custody⁷⁰. This could be a useful award for other prisons to work on to support autistic people in all sections of society. The Mayor could promote this within prisons throughout London.

⁶⁶ *Autism and the Police Force*, National Autistic Society, <https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/training-consultancy/online/police.aspx>

⁶⁷ *Vulnerability Identification Card Scheme*, Appropriate Adult, <https://www.appropriateadult.org.uk/index.php/information-for-vulnerable-people/identifying-vulnerability>

⁶⁸ *Launch of Autism Alert Cards*, Metropolitan Police Service, July 2019, <http://news.met.police.uk/news/launch-of-autism-alert-cards-375740>

⁶⁹ *Prison Population Figures*, Ministry of Justice, June 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2019>

⁷⁰ *HMYOI Feltham first Prison to be awarded autism accreditation*, National Autistic Society, <https://network.autism.org.uk/content/hmyoi-feltham-first-prison-be-awarded-autism-accreditation>

Employment

Employment is an area where the statistics are rather bleak for autistic people. Not all autistic people will be able to work but for many, employment is important to ensure financial dependence and create a sense of achievement. This is even more vital for those on the autistic spectrum as they often feel misunderstood and are more likely to suffer from social isolation. As the Mayor is responsible for the GLA and its associated bodies, he has a duty to improve these organisations as employers to be more autism friendly. Not only this but he should also be working with businesses across London to ensure this is replicated in the private sector. Autism awareness and understanding training, making reasonable adjustments to the workplace, improving the accessibility of recruitment drives and monitoring diversity are all areas that employers could improve to ease the employment gap for autistic people. It has also been discovered that many autistic people have tendencies to be attracted to working in the police force.⁷¹ This should make it even more important that the Metropolitan Police Service is as inclusive and supportive of autistic people as possible.

The Mayor of London should be promoting more initiatives for autistic employees of the GLA and its associated bodies. The Met Police and Mayor's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC) could benefit from developing a strong partnership with the *National Police Autism Association*, an independent organisation formed in 2015, to better support its autistic employees.⁷²

Working Together

It is vital that the Mayor of London works together with other stakeholders to ensure a joined-up approach to making London an autism friendly city. The Mayor can learn from other major cities who are making efforts to become autism friendly. Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester are all leading the way in the UK to becoming autism friendly cities by working with Councils, CCGs, charities and various businesses to facilitate change. The Mayor of London has a duty to lead from the front and bring people together. To make London an autism friendly city, the Mayor of London needs to work together with everyone.

⁷¹ *The uniform and the rules attract autistic people to the Join the police*, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-43584212>

⁷² *What we support*, National Police Autism Association, <http://www.npaa.org.uk/conditions/>

Conclusion

It is obvious that, although awareness for autism has increased over recent years, there is still a lot of work to do in increasing understanding of autism and the issues the autistic community face daily. This is particularly vital in London due to its complexity and diversity. Although there is some work being done to make London more autism friendly, there is still plenty more that the Mayor of London could do to take a lead and facilitate this change. The autistic community are an important and diverse section of society within London who have a lot to offer. Small tangible changes could make a big difference to the lives of autistic people. The key to making London autism friendly is increasing people's understanding of what autism is and enabling all areas of city life to offer choices for autistic people that will best suit their needs. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to make London more autism friendly, but by enabling and providing choice for autistic people, society can become fairer and more cohesive.

We therefore recommend to the Mayor of London that he should:

- **Promote the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award across London;** to push businesses to become autism friendly around London and help autistic people access services more easily.
- **Introduce mandatory autism awareness training for all roles within the GLA group;** not just public facing roles. This includes the Metropolitan Police, TfL and the London Fire Brigade to increase understanding of autism and the issues autistic people face.
- **Take a lead on a joined-up, multiagency approach to making London autism friendly.** Working with Borough Councils, CCGs, charities and businesses to ensure that London is an environment where service providers are able to deliver the necessary support. This should be underpinned by an all-age London-wide autism strategy
- **Amend his strategies where necessary to include specific provision for autistic people.** The Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy and London Plan in particular make no mention of autism. Specifically referencing autism could help to highlight the issues autistic people face and work towards alleviating them.
- **Work to introduce a platform where the autistic community in London can locate autism friendly businesses and facilities.** These could be places with an autism friendly award or nominated as an autism champion. The Mayor could work with existing platforms or create a new one.



GLA Conservatives

Twitter: @GLAConservative

Facebook: [facebook.com/glaconservatives](https://www.facebook.com/glaconservatives)

www.glaconservatives.co.uk