

Introducing the autism & homelessness toolkit

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What is autism?

- ▶ Problems with social understanding and interaction
- ▶ Inflexibility and sensory differences
- ▶ Lifelong condition



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Links to homelessness

**1.1% OF
GENERAL
POPULATION
ARE AUTISTIC**



**PUBLISHED PAPER:
12% OF PEOPLE
EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS
SHOWED STRONG
SIGNS OF AUTISM**

Autism & homelessness toolkit

- ▶ A practical guide for staff and organisations who work with people experiencing homelessness.
- ▶ Includes what autism is, how to recognize it, and how to work effectively with autistic people experiencing homelessness.

Supported by:



City of Westminster



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Recognising possible autism

- ▶ Indication not definitive diagnosis.
- ▶ Look for signs of autism in **two areas**. The first area is in their **social relationships**, where they will face challenges in communicating and getting on with others. The second is in their **behaviour and interests**, which will have a tendency towards being repetitive and rigid.



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Case study: Jack*

- ▶ A middle-aged man, known to homeless services for many years.
- ▶ Very difficult to engage with.
- ▶ Started rough sleeping after the death of his parents 15 years ago.
- ▶ Very monotonous voice, repetitive speech, never made eye contact.
- ▶ Attempts to re-house him had foundered because he seemed distressed by attempts to interact with him, and he always seemed uncomfortable in busy hostel environments.
- ▶ During his brief stays in hostels he always slept in an arm-chair, and his few belongings were arranged in a 'tidy but peculiar' way.

*this case study has been anonymised

Adapting support

**ADJUSTING
SUPPORT**

**ADJUSTMENTS TO
ACCOMMODATION**

Engaging with clients who show signs of autism

- ▶ Adapt how you build relationships - short and regular
- ▶ Be consistent
- ▶ Slow down
- ▶ Reduce choice and minimise demands
- ▶ Make communication clearer and use images
- ▶ Be aware of differences in sensory sensitivity
- ▶ Use strengths-based approaches
- ▶ Be reflective and resilient

Overall area to consider	Specific issues
What are their needs in terms of social contact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they want to talk to and spend time with others, or would they rather be on their own? • Would they benefit from having regular contact with someone, such as a befriender?
How can you adapt your communication for this client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you use pictures to make communication easier (e.g. a picture of the hostel/accommodation on offer)? • Think about the key things you need to tell them, and how you can make this information as clear and simple as possible • Some autistic people take a little longer to process information
Can any of the actions or protocols the service normally expects, be dropped, or done in a different way?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some autistic people find signing forms very difficult • Can welfare checks be done differently? (E.g. noting when they are seen on CCTV.)
Does your usual approach to support planning need to be adapted to meet the person's needs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are all the forms you use necessary / do they all have to be filled out with the individual? • What is the priority of the person receiving the support?



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<p>Do they engage in any behaviours which appear ritualised or obsessive? If so, what can the service do to accommodate these behaviours?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to establish clear and explicit rules with the person of how those behaviours will be accommodated
<p>Do they have any highly-focused interests which need to be accommodated?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, clear and explicit rules are essential • Can you better engage the person by focusing on these interests?
<p>Are there any sensory sensitivities to be aware of?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Things most people would not even notice (e.g. a slightly brighter light) can be overwhelming • They may otherwise be less sensitive, and as a result want more stimulation (e.g. loud noises, extremes of temperature) • Think about all the senses
<p>How can you help them manage change?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping the person move on from the service will need substantial preparation



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Case study continued: Jack*

- ▶ A formal assessment was a non-starter. Instead keyworkers attended an anonymised consultation at the local autism assessment service.
- ▶ It was apparent that interaction was difficult and aversive for him, and that he found noise difficult to cope with.
- ▶ Approach agreed was to wait until the weather deteriorated, such that he was willing to accept a hostel placement. When this happened he was found a room in a secluded and quiet corridor.
- ▶ The team kept an eye on him, but did not approach. After a couple of weeks he started to approach the staff with small requests (e.g. 'How does the washing machine work?'). They would not try to ratchet these interactions into something more significant or progressive, but instead met his requests in a low intensity and direct manner.
- ▶ This approach meant that Jack was prepared to stay in the hostel.

*this case study has been anonymised

Applying an 'autism lens' across the homelessness services in Westminster

- ▶ Started with rough sleeping teams – bitesize training
- ▶ Added a screening question/prompt on assessments
- ▶ Created a regular 'advice clinic' format for workers to meet with the WCC Autism Assessment Psychologist to discuss strategies
- ▶ Identified which accommodation options work well across pathways
- ▶ Awareness and communication training for Housing Options workers
- ▶ Prevention – created an autism friendly tenancy sustainment surgery

Further details

- ▶ Paper on autism & homelessness: Churchard, A., Ryder, M., Greenhill, A., & Mandy, W. (2018). The prevalence of autistic traits in a homeless population. Autism. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484>
- ▶ The toolkit can be found at: <https://www.westminsterhhcp.org/>  #autismtoolkit
- ▶ Article about research: <http://theconversation.com/autistic-people-at-greater-risk-of-becoming-homeless-new-research-97227>
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