

The Autism & Homelessness Toolkit

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What is autism?

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

Research

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:



Recognising possible autism

- ▶ Indication not definitive diagnosis.
- ▶ Look for signs of autism in two areas:
 - ▶ Social relationships
 - ▶ Behaviour and interests

Social differences

- ▶ Two areas:
 - ▶ Social understanding
 - ▶ Social interaction

Examples

- ▶ *This client does not initiate social interaction and displays a rigid smile when greeted. They give tangential responses and speak in stilted sentences.*
- ▶ *This client does not make eye contact, has a blank facial expression, and has to be told when interactions are finished as they would not pick up on this otherwise.*

Behaviours & interests 1: fixated interests

- ▶ Intense and highly focussed
- ▶ Can be anything from art or music to trains or computers.

Examples

- ▶ *For this client everything they buy has a particular animal on it. They like one colour a great deal and painted their room an intense shade of this colour.*
- ▶ *This client makes lists of obscure musicians and has a large collection of broken electronics.*

Behaviours & interests 2: sensory differences

- ▶ Over or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain.
- ▶ Can lead to sensory-seeking behaviours.
- ▶ Think about all the senses.

Sensory differences video



Behaviours & interests 3: inflexibility & repetitive behaviours

- ▶ Often want to know exactly what is going to happen every day: routines and rituals
 - ▶ Change can be very hard
 - ▶ Repetitive movements and use of language
- Examples**
- ▶ *Items in this client's room are organised in rows. Their day follows a precise routine of when they sleep and watch TV. They always take the same route to the shop and have rules about where shopping can be placed in their flat.*
 - ▶ *This client repeatedly moves their arms in a very particular way. They speak in an old-fashioned way and have a stereotyped old-fashioned way of saying goodbye.*

Case study: Jack*

- ▶ A middle-aged man, known to homeless services for many years.
- ▶ Very difficult to engage with.
- ▶ 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

Distinguishing from other conditions

- ▶ Can be challenging even for specialists
- ▶ Even if unsure it's reasonable to try out changing support and see if this works: it's unlikely to do any harm
- ▶ Distinguish from other conditions on basis of behaviours and interests, as social difficulties are widespread beyond autism

Pursuing a diagnosis

- ▶ Pros:
 - ▶ Can be a moment of realization
 - ▶ Potential access to support services
 - ▶ May supersede previous misdiagnosis e.g. schizophrenia
- ▶ Cons:
 - ▶ Services not always easily accessible and often have long waiting lists
 - ▶ The assessments themselves can be time-consuming and may require multiple appointments
 - ▶ Generally rely on speaking to family members and getting a full history
- ▶ You should not wait for a formal diagnosis of autism before considering what reasonable adjustments or support could be offered.

Adapting support

**ADJUSTING
SUPPORT**

**ADJUSTMENTS TO
ACCOMMODATION**

General principles

- ▶ Continue following best practice:
 - ▶ Highlight and celebrate the client's strengths
 - ▶ Focus on what the client's priorities are for your work with them
 - ▶ Recognise the importance of relationship building
- ▶ BUT adapt approaches to meet the specific needs which come with autism

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?

Do they engage in any behaviours which appear ritualised or obsessive? If so, what can the service do to accommodate these behaviours?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try to establish clear and explicit rules with the person of how those behaviours will be accommodated
Do they have any highly-focused interests which need to be accommodated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Again, clear and explicit rules are essential Can you better engage the person by focusing on these interests?
Are there any sensory sensitivities to be aware of?	<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
How can you help them manage change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping the person move on from the service will need substantial preparation

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

At a systemic level

- ▶ Having access to specialist autism services
- ▶ Using the toolkit and research paper to make the argument to commissioners around getting more resources

Further details

- ▶ Paper on autism & homelessness: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318768484>
- ▶ The toolkit can be found at: [http://westminsterhcop.org/Resources\(4\)/Autism_Homelessness_Toolkit.pdf](http://westminsterhcop.org/Resources(4)/Autism_Homelessness_Toolkit.pdf)
- ▶ Article about research: <http://theconversation.com/autistic-people-at-greater-risk-of-becoming-homeless-new-research-97227>
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