



# **Merton Autism Strategy 2018-2023 Executive Summary**

**January 2018  
Draft for public engagement**

# Executive Summary

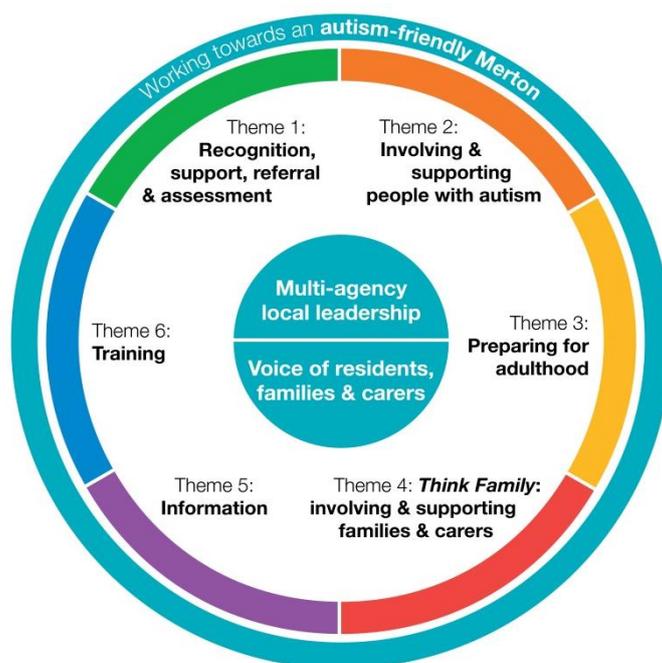
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We want Merton to be an autism-friendly borough in which people with autism are able to live fulfilling and rewarding lives within a society that accepts and understand them and reach their full potential at all stages of their lives. With this in mind, we have developed a strategy for the next five years which takes a whole life course approach, encompassing children, young people and adults with autism and taking into consideration the needs of families and carers.

We know that autism touches the lives of many people in Merton and demographic data suggests that the number of people with autism is increasing. It is therefore important that we have a strategy which enables us to work in partnership to support people with autism in the most effective way possible. This includes raising awareness and understanding of autism in the wider community, ensuring that people with autism reach their educational potential, gain employment and can access the right support at the right time to be as independent as possible. Additionally, there is a need to ensure our local services are compliant with new statutory duties and guidance for local authorities and the NHS in relation to autism.

This is a joint strategy between the London Borough of Merton and Merton NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in collaboration with a range of partners, including NHS providers, Merton JobCentre Plus, Schools and the voluntary sector. Public sector services are all facing financial pressures and we need to work in partnership to ensure we use local resources most effectively.

In preparing this strategy we have met with a wide range of stakeholders, including people with autism and parents and carers, people working in education, housing, employment and health services to seek their views on what is working well and what needs to improve for people with autism. We have also collected and evaluated a wealth of local and national data and evidence. Through this process we have identified six key themes that we need to address in order to achieve our ambition of making Merton an autism-friendly borough:



Multi-agency local leadership and the voice of residents with autism and their families and carers underpin each of the key themes, and are fundamental to delivery of this strategy. Therefore, we will set up a multi-agency Merton Autism Steering Group, or similar, and develop effective ways of listening to and acting upon the views of people with autism and their families and carers, to oversee the delivery of our Autism Strategy.

### ***Theme 1: Recognition, support, referral & assessment***

We know that the earlier autism is identified, the better the outcomes and we therefore need to ensure that the wider community as well as those working with people with autism are aware of the signs of autism and the local pathways for assessment and diagnosis for people of all ages. We recognise that an autism diagnosis and assessment of needs can offer an understanding of why a child or young person is different from their peers. It can open doors to support and services in education, health and social care, and be a route into voluntary organisations and contact with other children and families with similar experiences. Access to support should however, be guided by need and should not be dependent on a diagnosis.

Summary of proposed actions:

- CCG and Local Authority commissioners, in consultation with residents, will work together to redesign local referral, assessment and support services to meet the needs of children and young people (and their parents or carers) who may need diagnosis of an autistic spectrum disorder.
- We will ensure the new assessment, diagnosis and support pathway for CYP 0-18 year olds is easily understood, has the capacity to meet demand and is National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) compliant.
- We will design services such that access to assessment and diagnosis is available to those who need it, but not a requirement to accessing support.
- We will raise awareness of the diagnostic pathway for adults with autism through a published pathway, poster campaigns and training of professionals.
- We will promote 'Autism Champions' in all early years and education settings to raise awareness of autism among staff and support early identification and referral. This is a long-term goal.

### ***Theme 2: Involving and supporting people with autism***

No two people with autism are the same and they will have different needs at different times of life, it is therefore key to this strategy that people with autism of all ages in Merton are able to access the right support at the right time. We want Merton to be a borough in which people with autism are fully involved in their care and can participate equally in society, including in their education setting, the world of work and in leisure activities. It is essential we work with people with autism to ensure the design and delivery of services which are of a high quality, well joined up and available to everyone equally when they need them. We will seek to ensure that there is always opportunity for people with autism to be involved in service developments and delivery.

Summary of proposed actions:

- We will actively involve people with autism, families and carers in co-designing services and take steps to promote equality.
- We will work to better support those with lower level needs as well as those with complex needs, including publishing a protocol outlining social care needs assessments for adults with 'high functioning' autism.

- We will work with JobCentre Plus, the voluntary sector and the local accommodation market to improve our current offer of support for people with autism in Merton, this will include training key staff groups so that they understand autism and are aware of the positive attributes of people with autism.
- We will ensure the new Work and Health programme, which helps people with a disability or those who have been out of work for a period of time to find and maintain work, is promoted and well utilised in the Borough.
- We will raise awareness of autism in the wider community, including promoting the National Autism Society 'Autism Friendly' award among local organisations and businesses and encourage services to consider how their physical environments can be re-designed to better meet the needs of people with autism.

### ***Theme 3: Preparing for adulthood***

Preparing for adulthood is a recognised challenge. Although the majority of young people with autism will not need specialist services as an adult e.g. adult social care, they will need support as they move towards adulthood in developing independence. This includes learning additional life skills such as travelling independently and seeking opportunities for further education, employment and independent living.

Summary of proposed actions:

- Transition assessments will be timely and structured and involve the young person and their families or carers.
- Assessments will equip people with autism with realistic expectations of services available to them as they move towards adulthood, and have a focus on developing independence.
- We will review existing opportunities for supporting students with autism in further education and look to improve these opportunities, with a specific focus on preparing for employment and independent living.

### ***Theme 4: Think Family: involving & supporting families & carers***

Families and carers in Merton have expressed that they would like to be more involved in decision-making about the care and support their loved ones receive. In Merton, families and carers value the existing support services available such as parenting programmes and short breaks, but felt they would benefit from a better continuum of support. In addition, access to clear, comprehensive, up-to-date information about local services has been highlighted as a priority for families and carers.

Summary of proposed actions:

- We will review opportunities to improve support for families and carers of people with autism, such as strengthening signposting, peer support networks, advocacy services and direct work with families and short breaks, as part of the wider 'local offer' for families.
- We will produce clear information about local parenting support as part of the 'local offer'.
- All organisations commissioning or delivering services that support families and carers of people with autism will actively involve them in the co-designing and delivery of services. They will take account of equality issues and take steps to promote equality.

### ***Theme 5: Access to Information***

Access to comprehensive information about local services is essential in empowering people with autism to making informed choices. High quality information is also crucial to support families and carers of those with autism and staff working in organisations who may be in contact with people with autism. Merton Local Authority publishes a 'local offer' for children and young people with special education needs and disabilities, an online resource containing information about the local services. However feedback has identified that this could be improved and local stakeholders have also highlighted the need for a system which enables them to share their own knowledge and information with the local community.

Summary of proposed actions:

- We will build on and strengthen the 'local offer' for children, young people and adults to provide a single point of access to clear, comprehensive information about local services and resources relevant to autism, for staff and the community.
- When producing information, stakeholders will consider its accessibility in terms of clarity (easy-read), whether translations into non-English languages are required, and whether cultural factors have been taken into account, seeking to ensure information is widely accessible.
- We will explore opportunities for a system to enable key groups, including people with autism and their families/carers, to share local information with the community.

### ***Theme 6: Awareness training and support for staff and services***

Increasing awareness and understanding of autism is at the heart of this strategy and is fundamental to achieving our ambition of making Merton an autism-friendly borough, in which the general population are aware of autism and have a basic understanding of the condition. This means understanding the specific strengths of people with autism, as well as having an awareness of the core social difficulties that those with autism may face. By improving autism awareness in the general population, and not just those who are working directly with people with autism, we hope to counteract unhelpful stereotypes and prejudices.

Summary of proposed actions:

- We will work towards all NHS and Merton Local Authority staff undertaking autism awareness training as part of equality and diversity training. Higher level training will be offered to those working directly with people with autism. Training will be quality assured and monitored to ensure it is effective.
- We will seek to offer autism awareness training to a wider range of staff, including local employers and those working in the criminal justice system.
- People with autism will be involved in the development of training.

### ***Delivering the Strategy***

A time-limited, Merton Autism Steering Group, or similar, will be set up to lead and oversee delivery of this strategy, which is based on working in partnership to use our resources most effectively and seeking opportunities to bring additional resources to the Borough. A delivery action plan will be produced setting out how and when the actions will be implemented. Progress will be reported to the Health and Wellbeing Board and Children's Trust Board.