

'Understand autism'

Briefing for Trowbridge Area Board - 14 March 2013

"Treat me the way they would like to be treated. Take into account my disability but remember me and my rights" (Wiltshire resident)

Introduction – What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to other people and the world around them.

Autism is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways.

The three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are sometimes known as the 'triad of impairments'. People have difficulties with:

1. social communication (e.g. difficulty with both verbal and non-verbal language, interpreting comments very literally, while thinking that people always mean exactly what they say)
2. social interaction (e.g. difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, and expressing their own, which can make it hard to fit in socially)
3. social imagination (e.g. difficulty understanding and predicting other people's thoughts or behaviour and making sense of abstract ideas or situations outside of the immediate daily routine).

"The complexities of communication with people with autism are more than just a noisy room and speaking plainly" (Wiltshire resident)

Why are we going to area boards?

“they feel alone and alienated as people will often give them a wide berth”

(Wiltshire resident)

1. It can be hard to create awareness of autism as people with the condition do not 'look' disabled: parents of children with autism often say that other people simply think their child is naughty; while adults find that they are misunderstood. We would therefore like to share how autism affects individuals in Wiltshire so there is more understanding about the condition.
2. We have worked with a lot of local people with autism and their families to form a plan about how changes will be made. We would like to share this with you and see where your local area can support any improvements.

Why this area is important?

- **Autism is not uncommon**

It is estimated that 1 in every 100 people have autism and therefore in Wiltshire, we estimate that over 4,500 individuals are affected by the condition. That would represent over 420 people in Trowbridge.

In Wiltshire, we know about (a little over) one thousand children and adults with the condition. Many of these people will also have a learning disability or mental health problem (autism, in itself, is neither).

We therefore believe that there are over 3,500 people in Wiltshire with autism who are unknown and may not get any support from other means.

This may well be appropriate as many people with autism can live relatively independent lives, however, because of the hidden nature of the condition, many people have also said that they find it difficult to get the right understanding and support, at the right time, from the same local services as everyone else.

We think that this could affect around 2000 in Wiltshire who have a form of autism (aspergers or high functioning autism) which is 'hidden' but nevertheless, may still struggle in life.

Very often, without low level natural and community support or understanding, these individuals tend to come to the attention of statutory services later on in life; this is usually at crisis point which has a negative impact on the individual and tends to be much more intensive and costly.

“Bewildered, not knowing where to turn” (Wiltshire resident)

“Prevention and support is much better than trying to pick up pieces afterwards” (Wiltshire resident)

- **Poor outcomes**

People with autism tend to have significantly poorer outcomes than others. As an example, national research shows that only 15% of adults with autism have a job. In comparison, the employment rate for disabled people, as a whole, is 48% indicating the low rates. This is despite the fact that many people with autism have unique skills and abilities that can help a business thrive (ie. problem solving skills, attention to retail, ability to retain detailed factual knowledge, excellent memory, technical abilities etc).

“Use of careful planning, strategy and therapeutic relationships can steer them through this [work] successfully developing their self awareness and ability to cope” (Wiltshire resident)

- **The Autism Act 2009 places duties on local areas**

“It seems that there is the assumption that at 18, all problems cease”

(Wiltshire resident)

In March 2010, the first ever strategy for improving the lives of adults with autism in England was published.

This strategy set out a number of key actions and recommendations which the government decided were the most important:

1. Making sure that more people understand about autism.
2. Making it easier for adults to get a diagnosis of autism. A diagnosis is when a doctor tells someone that they have autism.
3. Making it easier for adults with autism to choose how they live, and get the help that they need to do this.
4. Helping adults with autism to find jobs.
5. Helping local councils and health services to write plans so that the adults with autism who live in their area get the help that they need.

If you would like to find out more detail about what the strategy says, please follow this link: www.autism.org.uk/dhstrategy

The Wiltshire Autism Partnership

To help Wiltshire plan how to make these key priorities happen, a 'Wiltshire Autism Partnership' meet five times per year. This group includes people with autism, parent/ carers and professionals from different teams, agencies and organisations.

The group have done a lot of work to consult with local people. They have developed a strategy and are now finalising a plan detailing how the changes will be made. To view these documents, please visit:

<http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/healthandsocialcare/disabilities.htm>

How Trowbridge area board can help?

“Awareness that certain groups in our communities are more sensitive and vulnerable.....gives me faith that this can be extended to those on the autistic spectrum” (Wiltshire resident)

To promote more understanding and acceptance about the nature of autism in the local area: improved recognition, awareness and minor adjustments in the community would alone, contribute significantly. We would therefore welcome the opportunity to hear your views and ideas for improvements as the success of this work will be limited if there is a 'standalone' approach.

Useful websites

- <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/healthandsocialcare/disabilities.htm>
- <http://www.autism.org.uk/>

Contacts

For further information about the autism work please contact the disabilities commissioning team on 01225 718559 or email: disabilities@wiltshire.gov.uk

If you are a carer or person with autism (or think you may have autism) and feel that you may need some help, please contact 0300 456 0111 and someone will be able to tell you about the process of having an assessment to see if you are eligible for support.