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Guidance for school leaders on supporting autistic members of staff

Guidance on reasonable adjustments to meet the equality objectives for staffing and to enhance autistic staff's well-being

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WholeSchool SEND

Guidance for school leaders on supporting autistic members of staff

Autism and employment

This resource is developed as part of the Whole School SEND Autism Resource Suite, and offers practical strategies to: support an inclusive school ethos by recognising the contribution autistic staff can make, and suggest how making reasonable adjustments can enable autistic people to fully participate as members of staff.

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. One in 100 people are on the autism spectrum, and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK (The National Autistic Society, 2020).

In 2016, the National Autistic Society carried out a survey asking autistic people about their experiences in finding and maintaining employment. Two thousand autistic people responded, and findings showed that:

- Under 16% are in full-time paid work. Only 32% are in some kind of paid work (full and part-time combined), compared to 47% of other disabled people and 80% of non-disabled people.

- Over three quarters (77%) who are unemployed say they want to work.

- 4 in 10 say they have never worked.

This led to a national programme to raise awareness of autism and the skills and potential of autistic people among employers. You can find the report from the survey here.

Working in a school

Working in a school has specific demands in terms of social-communication skills and dealing with unpredictability and sensory information, which can make it a particularly difficult environment for autistic staff. A survey conducted by Wood (2019) revealed that the most common reason provided by autistic people who no longer worked in a school was that they had found it impossible to continue due to burnout. In addition, the study found schools to be a difficult working environment in terms of sensory information, such as noise and lighting. Autistic people reported a lack of support from their employer, and that both their employer and colleagues had limited understanding about autism.

Yet there are enormous benefits to employing autistic members of staff, for the school in general, the learners, as well as other staff. According to the National Autistic Society (2020), some of the strengths that autistic employees can demonstrate at work include:

- High levels of concentration.

- Reliability, conscientiousness and persistence.

- Accuracy, close attention to detail and the ability to identify errors.

- Technical ability, such as in IT.

- Detailed factual knowledge and an excellent memory.

Thinking specifically about schools, some of the benefits of employing autistic staff are:

- Having a better understanding of the needs of autistic pupils, and how to meet them.

- Acting as role models for autistic pupils.

- Demonstrating and encouraging good autism practice across the whole school.

- Providing formal training on autism, informed by practice but also lived experience.

- Supporting non-autistic pupils in understanding their autistic peers.

In their study with autistic school staff, Wood and Happe (2020) found that these staff members felt that they were better at empathising with children with autism and other SEND, thereby providing a more child-centred learning approach. Therefore, it can be argued that having autistic staff can facilitate a school's ability to meet the diverse needs of its pupils and create an inclusive environment.

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The Equality Act (2010)

The Equality Act (2010) (The Act) protects disabled applicants and employees against discrimination. Autism is generally considered to be a disability for the purposes of the Act. A person has a disability if they have a '…physical or mental impairment… [which] has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities' (Equality Act, 2010, 6). Employers therefore need to ensure that they are not discriminating against autistic candidates and employees, either directly (e.g. not hiring them because they are autistic) or indirectly (e.g. having a policy in place which puts them at a disadvantage as an autistic person) (Bhayani, 2018). The Act also puts a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments, to enable the autistic employee to do their job despite any challenges they may have. This resource provides some suggestions on how these reasonable adjustments can be made at different stages of employment.

General principles for an inclusive working environment

- Whilst legislation exists for the benefit of individuals with protected characteristics, something that makes a huge difference is the attitude of the school towards both children and adults with SEND. Positive attitudes need to come from the Senior Leadership Team and Governors, so autism training needs to include them, as well as all other staff.

- Consider having posters up with positive messages about autism/neurodiversity and inclusion, as well as assemblies addressing these issues.

- Consider gender neutral toilets in school, as a recent study has shown that 24% of trans or genderfluid people are autistic too (Warrier, et al., 2020).

- Do not disclose that a member of staff is autistic without the permission of the individual.

- Consider creating a handbook for staff in the school which covers information such as school structure, procedures and sources of support – and make it available to everyone, not just those who are autistic, in order to be truly inclusive.

Recruitment

When you are recruiting for a post, you should consider what adjustments are required to ensure that autistic applicants' needs are met.

Job description/application form

- Consider the wording of the advertisement – phrases such as: "would need to have good interpersonal skills" may be off-putting for an autistic candidate and discourage them from applying, as they may think they cannot meet the criteria. Instead, clarify what you mean by saying "candidate must be able to demonstrate an ability to communicate and work well with others to meet deadlines" (Leggett, 2016).

- Try to ensure that the job description is clear and accurately reflects what is expected of the candidate.

- Be very clear if a covering letter or CV is needed, and if so how many pages or words are required.

- Use inclusive and welcoming language in the advertisement such as "We welcome applications from disabled/neurodiverse applicants."

- State explicitly that candidates with a disability such as autism can request for reasonable adjustments to be made.

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Call to interview

- Send candidates structured interview details, with a timetable for the day if there are several activities planned.

- Specify how many interviews there will be, if there will be a practical session, group sessions or an observation.

- Specify how many interviewers there will be and provide a photograph (or online 360 view) of the interview room.

- Check with the autistic candidate if they would like particular sensory adjustments, such as lighting.

- If possible, send out questions that will be asked in the interview beforehand, or at least outline the topics that will be discussed during the interview. Making such reasonable adjustments during the process of recruitment is in accordance with the Equality Act (2010).

Interview

There are several issues which may make typical interviews harder for autistic candidates. It is important to be aware that many autistic people find small talk difficult, so keep it to the minimum. Try not to assume that a candidate is being rude if they do not join in with social niceties. Here are a few more pointers to consider, which could help autistic applicants:

Language during interview

- Ask closed questions and avoid open ones.

For example, "Tell me about yourself" is very vague and the candidate may not be able to judge exactly what you want to know. A better question would be, "Tell me about any jobs/ voluntary work you have done in the last five years".

- Allow processing time.

An autistic person may take a little longer to process information. Leave 6 seconds before prompting or rephrasing.

- Ask questions based on the candidate's real/past experiences.

For example, "In your last job, did you do any filing? What processes/procedures did you use to do this effectively?"

- Avoid hypothetical or abstract questions.

For example, "How do you think you'll cope with working if there are lots of interruptions?" could be better phrased as, "Think back to your last job. Can you tell us how you coped with your work when people interrupted you?".

- Be aware that the candidate may interpret language literally.

Asking "How did you find your last job?" may result in an answer of "I looked on the web" or "I looked in the paper, sent for the application form and completed it". Avoid using metaphors, although you can use similes when talking with the person.

- Avoid multi-layered questions.

This can be overwhelming, and the candidate may forget the different facets of the extended question. Also, as an interviewer you may risk missing out on useful and revealing responses that you could have received with clearer questions. If there is more than one part to a question, ask them one at a time, leaving time in between to answer.

- Be aware of the language you use when referring to autism – check what terms the candidate prefers, for example 'autistic teacher/employee' or 'teacher on the autism spectrum.' For more information on how to talk and write about autism, please look at guidance on the National Autistic Society website.

- If you have not provided the interview questions in advance, make sure that you have a printed copy of the questions you will ask, for the candidate to refer to during the interview.

Interview environment

- Provide a quiet and calm space for the interview.

Many autistic people have sensory processing differences and need the right environment to process information. If there are any sudden sensory disturbances (for example loud banging) during the interview you may need to take account of this, if it disturbs the candidate.

- Check your lighting.

Are there any CFC (low energy lightbulbs) that are unshielded or lights that are flickering? Be aware that a person may choose to wear tinted glasses depending on their sensitivity to light. Also, as the interviewer, do not sit with your back to a light source or window as you will appear as a silhouette to the candidate, which can be quite off-putting in an already stressful interview situation.

- Be aware that eye contact may be fleeting or prolonged, depending on the individual.

Autistic people can find eye contact intense, painful or difficult. It is also possible that non-verbal behaviours such as eye contact are culturally influenced, which would be something to consider when interviewing an autistic person from a minority ethnic group. Try not to judge someone based on their eye contact. Reducing your own eye contact can be a supportive way to make an individual feel more at ease.

After an interview

- At the end of the interview, be clear that it has finished and state whether they are to go home or stay in a waiting area. Let the person know clearly when to expect to hear the outcome of the interview.

- Provide clear and constructive feedback to unsuccessful candidates, making it clear why they did not meet the criteria.

Positive action

According to the Equality Act (2010) an employer can take 'positive action' to encourage people from groups with different needs, or with a past track record of disadvantage or low participation, to apply for jobs. Therefore, in a 'tie-break' situation, where there is one autistic candidate and one non-disabled candidate who are equally qualified, the employer can choose the autistic candidate, if they reasonably believe this group to be disadvantaged or under-represented in the workforce. However, an employer must not have a general policy of treating disabled people more favourably in connection with recruitment. It is also important to note that while reasonable adjustments are expected in the recruitment process, employers do not have to accept a disabled person who does not meet the competence standards required to perform the job.

School policies and procedures

Understanding school policies and procedures can be a potential area of stress for autistic employees, particularly when it comes to unwritten rules, or 'grey areas', within policies and procedures. Some of the following adjustments may be useful in helping secure autistic staff in their understanding of what is expected.

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Unwritten rules and expectations

- Ensure that unwritten rules and expectations are explained to an autistic employee, for example:
  - What are the dress code expectations?
  - Clarify the expectations around voluntary activities/rotas. For example, break time cover may be voluntary, but autistic employees may not know they are expected to take turns volunteering, or conversely may not know that they do not have to volunteer for everything.
  - Provide guidance regarding how much time they are expected to spend in the staff room at the beginning and end of the day.

- It can be beneficial to provide a mentor and/or buddy for the member of staff to meet with regularly that they can check these issues with. This would be helpful for all autistic staff, not just for NQTs.

- A notice board with photos of staff, detailing responsibilities and hierarchy, may also be helpful in understanding the workings of the school.

Written policies

Ensure that written policies for staff are explicit and accessible. For example:

- Ensure that all policies state the name of the person in charge of each policy and/or the name of the person who should be contacted, e.g. who is the person responsible for Safeguarding issues?

- Clarify the hours of work, and expectations surrounding this (for example teachers undertaking marking at home in their own time).

Staff meetings

The following suggestions can be applicable for staff meetings, INSET days and other kinds of meetings:

- Provide agendas and content for discussion prior to meetings and conversations, to allow additional processing time and thereby more meaningful discussion. Include a timetable, detailing start and finish times for the meeting.

- Ensure that the staff members understand how to request to add an agenda item.

- Make it clear for autistic staff members when it is their turn to talk, and avoid 'putting people on the spot' during the meeting as this can cause a lot of anxiety.

- Provide any necessary written information prior to the meeting.

- Provide notice of any changes as early as possible in written form, explaining clearly the reason for the changes and how they will impact the employee.

- If ambiguity or uncertainty is unavoidable, provide the reason why clarity or detail cannot be provided.

- Ensure there is a follow-up meeting with a colleague or the person's line-manager, who can provide summary notes of the meeting in bullet points and can offer clarifications.

- Be mindful and flexible about locations and times for discussions and face-to-face communication, considering the employee's sensory sensitivities. Facilitate frequent and regular short breaks during long meetings.

- Be mindful that the employee may not wish to socialise or may be anxious about doing so and need support, such as offering to meet them prior to an event and walking into the venue with them. Be sure to let them know if the event changes from a structured one, such as eating a meal, to an unstructured one, e.g. drinks afterwards.

- When holding virtual meetings:
  - Provide an interaction etiquette for everyone and ensure everyone is following this.
  - Offer the option of not having the camera on.
  - Avoid break-out rooms or at least ensure employees in the same group are familiar with each other.
  - Offer regular breaks.

Teacher placements

In particular, those on teacher placement would benefit from mentors as well as the teacher they are attached to for additional support. The mentor should:

- Have a positive attitude and a good understanding of autism.

- Set times for meetings and be clear about how to get in contact.

- State what went well as well as how to improve, and they should be specific and unambiguous in their feedback.

The other adjustments discussed throughout this guidance should also be applied to teacher placements.

Managing workload/ teaching requirements

- Discuss with autistic staff how they prefer to have communications given to them and have an alternative communication system in place as well, since an autistic person's communication skills can become reduced when anxious.

- Allow PPA time at home if possible and when requested, as there may be fewer sensory issues there, meaning the employee may be able to focus and work more effectively.

- Alternatively, having a quiet, dedicated office space in school for staff might work better for some autistic people, particularly those who feel more comfortable with clear separation between 'home' and 'work'.

- Where possible, autistic teachers having their own classroom would be beneficial, as this can provide an opportunity for them to create a more conducive working environment, and will reduce anxiety related to working in new settings.

- For INSET days/training days when routines are different, autistic employees may need more support to manage anxiety. Colleagues and senior leadership teams need to be aware that some activities may be difficult for autistic staff members, for example role play.

- Offer part-time work to help manage potential stress/sensory overload.

Liaising with families

- Talk to the teacher or teaching assistant to find out if they have a preferred way of communicating with families. Some people may not be comfortable using the phone and will prefer face-to-face or email communications.

- Unpredictable interactions can cause anxiety. Therefore, some teachers or teaching assistants may prefer to have a specific set time during which they see or speak to families. Ensure that these are respected and communicated to families in a positive way.

- You may want to adopt these arrangements as a well-being measure for all staff, and communicate this as your school's practice to the families. This will reduce the need to single out autistic staff, which can lead them to be viewed less favourably than other staff.

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Working with colleagues

- Providing training to all staff about working with autistic colleagues can help in creating an inclusive and understanding working environment. For example, other staff need to be aware that small talk may be an issue, and autistic colleagues are not being rude if they do not engage in it.

- Similarly, autistic staff may also find it difficult to know the difference between staff room banter and bullying. Colleagues need to be aware that their comments and tone of voice may be misread.

- Leadership teams also need to be aware that autistic staff may be more vulnerable to bullying. Provide clear guidance to autistic staff of the process to follow if they experience bullying. Having a peer mentor system could also help the autistic staff member to navigate any work related issues.

Sensory processing

It will be necessary to make sensory adjustments in consultation with autistic employees, as individuals all have specific needs. However, some of the following may be useful:

- Having a car parking space close to the school, to allow easy access to a quiet personal space, especially if one is not readily available in school.

- Employees may need different colour overlays on the computer screen, or to wear tinted glasses.

- Consider the lighting that is used in the classrooms and staff room: are there any CFC (low energy light bulbs) that are unshielded or lights that are flickering?

- Consider the effect of school bells and fire alarms. Always pre-warn autistic employees if there is a planned alarm and allow recovery time afterwards.

- It may be helpful to have a quiet area available for break times when there are additional sensory difficulties such as children running around and additional noise.

Line management

Ensure careful planning around line management meetings:

- It is recommended that you develop a proposed agenda with autistic employees for all line-management meetings, and that you provide the agenda in advance, along with advance notice of when the meeting will take place. The employee should be encouraged to add to the agenda prior to the meeting. This will help the employee to prepare for these meetings, remain focused and on-track during the meeting, and will reduce any anxiety that might occur as a result of not understanding the purpose of the meeting.

- A summary of any action points from these meetings should be fed back to the employee in an accessible written format.

- It is important to always give positive feedback and commendations in a timely way and in writing.

- Be clear, direct and explicit in all of your communication, avoid emotive language and provide alternative solutions and strategies to the employee wherever possible.

In order to ensure that the employee gains full benefit from their line management meetings and to minimise their experience of anxiety, the following areas need to be considered:

- Frequency: It is recommended that line management meetings are scheduled for a set time and day at regular intervals to enable the employee to plan and prepare for the meetings.

- Format for the meetings: The meetings should follow a clear and consistent format. For example: 1. Feedback from manager, 2. Feedback from employee, 3. Planning of timetable for the next period, 4. Reporting any upcoming changes or events.

- Location of meetings: Meetings should take place in a quiet environment, with low background noise levels and minimal opportunities for interruptions. The manager should take responsibility for finding an appropriate place for these meetings to take place.

Managers should also be encouraged to adjust their style of management, providing clear and sensitive feedback, reassurance in stressful situations, and supporting the employee to prepare for changes (Bhayani, 2018).

If an autistic employee is having performance difficulties, consider accessing workplace assessment to determine if the difficulties are a result of unmet needs (such as communication or sensory) which could be addressed by reasonable adjustments (Swiatek 2016).

Non-teaching members of staff who are autistic

Additional support and adjustments will also be needed for autistic staff who are not in a teaching role, and there will be much crossover. It will be helpful to:

- Set clear expectations in writing at the start of their contract, including what they are responsible for or not responsible for (for example what do they do if they see a child 'in distress'), and a timetable for the working day.

- Allow for shadowing to enable autistic employees to see how the job works in practice.

- Be very clear and literal with all instructions.

- Offer support to help autistic employees prioritise their workload and manage their organisational skills. For example, setting reminders on phones for tasks or breaks, having visual prompts, making lists of tasks with deadlines, and knowing who to ask for help with prioritising work. As with teaching staff, provide a mentor.

- Provide positive feedback as well as constructive comments, being aware that autistic adults may dwell on negatives.

- Be clear about where they are able to go for their breaks, and try to ensure that there is a quiet area for them. Ensure clarity of staff room rules, for example whether non-teaching staff can also use it.

- Clearly communicate (and pre-warn) of any changes to the school day or their timetable.

- Consider providing scripts for staff (if relevant) for scenarios such as answering the phone, greeting parents or asking questions. This can help reduce anxiety and increase confidence and practical workplace skills.

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