



REPORT TITLE: Autism Strategy 2022-2026 Update

Scrutiny meeting	Children and Families Scrutiny Committee July 2024
Chair	
Presenting Officer	Benedict Leigh, Director of Integration
Item Type	Information
Purpose of Report	To provide members of the committee with an overview and update on the implementation of the Autism Strategy in Gloucestershire
Recommendations/ Action sought	For information and discussion
Forthcoming Decisions	N/A
Background Documents	All-Age Autism Strategy 2022-2026: FOR PUBLISHING Autism Strategy.pdf (gloucestershire.gov.uk) Autism support Think Autism National Disability Strategy 2021 SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 (Statutory Guidance) Education Inclusion Strategy 2022-2025 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy for Gloucestershire 2022-2025
Appendices	N/A
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1. Background

- 1.1. The Autism Strategy is an all-age joint health, education, and social care document detailing Gloucestershire's strategic plans to improve the support for autistic people in our county.
- 1.2. Whilst the strategy has focused on autism, it has also recognised the need to consider neurodiverse needs as a whole. Where possible, development and investment should be considered more broadly.
- 1.3. The strategy was formally published in January 2024; however, the action plan has been in its delivery phase since early 2023.
- 1.4. The Gloucestershire strategy is split into 6 themes, in line with the [National Strategy for autistic children, young people and adults 2021-2026](#), these are:
 - Theme 1** – Improve Acceptance of Autism
 - Theme 2** – Improve Access to Education and support positive transitions into adulthood for Autistic Children and Young People
 - Theme 3** – Support Autistic People into Employment
 - Theme 4** – Tackle Health and Inequalities for Autistic People
 - Theme 5** – Build the Right Support in the Community and Support People in inpatient care
 - Theme 6** – Improve Support within Criminal and Youth Justice Systems

2. Development of the Strategy

- 2.1. When developing the Autism Strategy, it was important to recognise that, as a Local Authority and Integrated Care Board, we collaborate closely with our communities daily to constantly improve how we support adults, children, and young people, as well as their families and carers. This co-productive approach provided a solid foundation for writing this strategy.
- 2.2. Commissioners collaborated closely with the Autism Partnership Board, particularly their co-chairs, to draft versions of the strategy and ultimately develop the final product.
- 2.3. Virtual sessions were held, open to services and settings across health, education, and social care, as well as community providers, to share their experiences and visions for Gloucestershire. Separate sessions were also available for parents and carers, ensuring they had a space to share their honest views. Note: Due to most of the strategy being developed in 2021, face-to-face meetings/sessions were limited.
- 2.4. To ensure the voices of children and young people were heard within the strategy, the Future Me platform, also referred to as the Young People's Local Offer, and the neurodiverse Speak Up groups led by Inclusion Gloucestershire were utilised to hear the views of local children and young people. This enabled organic conversations rather than prescriptive forms or engagement sessions.
- 2.5. There was a co-productive approach to drafting the strategy, with each version being shared among stakeholder groups following engagement and feedback sessions, ensuring the document accurately reflected their views, thoughts, and feelings, and captured our aspirational intentions.
- 2.6. The Autism Strategy was also designed to link with other strategies, such as the [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) Strategy 2022-2025](#) and the [Education Inclusion Strategy 2022-2025](#), to avoid duplication and

ensure alignment. The new autism strategy also reflects on the developments made since the previous strategy, holding ourselves accountable for our achievements and identifying areas for further improvement.

3. Strategy Implementation and Delivery to Date

3.1. In order to implement the strategy most effectively, an action plan was developed. This ensured that each theme had an assigned Board as an owner, such as the Autism Partnership Board for Theme 1 and the SEND and Inclusion Local Area Partnership (SILAP) Board for Theme 2.

3.2. A brief update has been provided on each theme of the strategy:

Theme 1 - Improve Acceptance of Autism.

The Neurodiversity Network Manager, a collaborative forum to support voluntary and community sector providers, has held listening events across the county to offer providers a platform to share their views and to facilitate joint working mechanisms. The purpose of the Neurodiversity Network Manager, led by Active Impact, is to encourage community providers to understand and embed inclusive practices and opportunities, this contract has been in place since early 2023 and is continuing to develop. Autism Acceptance Week 2024 (18th-24th March) was an opportunity to share information about what is available for individuals and their families within Gloucestershire, with one of the days specifically focusing on children and families. Grants have previously been provided to community providers to develop their offers to support neurodivergent children and young people, many of which have been sustained beyond the time-limited grants. It was recognised in this work how much families valued these opportunities within their communities; it would be beneficial to develop a more sustainable model to help fund these community offers, as opposed to being reliant on one-off funding.

Theme 2 - Improve Access to Education and support positive transitions into adulthood for Autistic Children and Young People.

Early Years and Education settings continue to offer significant support to children, young people, and their families, providing inclusive and adaptive environments that meet a wide range of needs. The local endorsement of the Department for Education's Change Programme and the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND project will continue to build on these foundations. Within the DBV programme an Inclusion Baseline is being developed which will help schools to identify how inclusive their setting currently is, and they will then be offered support to help develop in the areas they are less confident in. Additionally, the change in structure to the EHCP service has provided an enhanced focus on preparation for adulthood, ensuring young people are offered the right support to meet their needs in post-16 education and beyond. A new project to support 16–25-year-old young people in

understanding their own neurodiversity and developing skills to self-advocate has also been implemented locally in early 2024.

Theme 3 - Support Autistic People into Employment.

The development of the Employment and Skills Hub has enabled more inclusive approaches to gaining employment for everyone in Gloucestershire. This service offers SEND Post-16 Pathways Advisers, who develop pathways to appropriate post-16 provision. These roles work with schools and other professionals to deliver guidance and advice to young people with SEND, including access to Supported Internship opportunities. The [SkillZONE Preparation for Adulthood Programme](#) for children and young people with SEND, has recently been introduced. The Programme takes a focus on experiential learning and real-world scenarios, equipping young people with the tools they need to thrive and succeed into adulthood.

Theme 4 - Tackle Health and Inequalities for Autistic People.

One of the key priorities for Children's Services has been to improve the waiting times for diagnostic assessments. Significant investment has been made into developing a 0-18 autism and ADHD diagnostic service, which will go live later in 2024. This has been a phased development since 2021, recognising the need to offer a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting children and young people that is not solely based on diagnoses alone. It is recognised that whilst the trajectory of the requests for assessment continues to increase this outweighs the capacity of the service to complete timely assessments, again highlighting the need to prioritise a need led approach to support. As such, using the Graduated Pathway's Team Around the Locality Cluster (TALC) model, a project was devised to support young people of secondary school age who were awaiting an autism assessment but not accessing education. This enabled the assessment service to identify young people who would benefit from a multi-disciplinary conversation through TALC whilst they were on the waiting list and develop a package of support for them. This package may have included referral into the mentoring and youth support scheme, known as, Ignite, led by Young Gloucestershire. This project has now ended but has been integrated into other work which continues with Young Gloucestershire, led by the Education Inclusion Service (known as the s19 Project). It would be beneficial to expand this offer to enable it to support a larger number of young people who are struggling to access their education setting and re-introduce a particular focus on neurodivergent young people.

Theme 5 - Build the Right Support in the Community and Support People in inpatient care.

There is now an all-age Dynamic Support Register (DSR) in place within Gloucestershire; for children and young people, this is held by the Dynamic Keyworking Service. The purpose of the DSR is to support the management and prevention of Tier 4 hospital admissions for individuals with a learning disability and/or autism. The Dynamic Keyworking Service works closely with

children and young people who are at risk of admission or are placed in in-patient settings, many of whom have an autism-only diagnosis. The Dynamic Keyworking Service support the coordination of different parts of the system to ensure the right support is in place to avoid admission, it has been highly commended in our recent SEND Inspection and receives regular positive feedback from Parents and Carers. It is recognised that in some cases the service is supporting children and young people with an autism-only diagnosis who are presenting with emotions displayed through behaviour but are not able to access other services because they do not meet necessary thresholds. Therefore, locally we are beginning to scope out what type of support is required to meet the needs of these children and young people to offer them earlier intervention and avoid them and their family reaching crisis, acknowledging this is most likely going to require a multiagency approach of some kind. This will include benchmarking against other areas and reviewing current case studies to understand the gap in Gloucestershire. Where children and young people are admitted to hospital, the Dynamic Keyworking Service will be part of discharge planning alongside other services. The Dynamic Keyworking Service works closely with the Integrated High Needs Team in Adult Services to ensure that children and young people who may be at risk of admission have a smooth and planned transition into adulthood.

Theme 6 - Improve Support within Criminal and Youth Justice Systems.

The Appropriate Adult service has recently been recommissioned and remains led by Communities Caring for People (CCP), this ensures that all vulnerable individuals have access to support when in a custody setting. A sensory toolkit has been rolled out at one station in Gloucestershire, with the intention that this will be made more widely available to support individuals when they are in custody. It is nationally and locally recognised that a disproportionate number of neurodiverse individuals come into contact with the criminal and youth justice systems. It was acknowledged in the new Youth Support Service tender that the provider(s) would need to be able to work effectively with neurodiverse children and young people, recognising they may require different approaches to support. The strategy also recognises that youth services must be offered training and support to identify when a child may be neurodiverse.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1. With the implementation of the new diagnostic service, it is recognised that while this will offer a more coordinated approach in the county to accessing assessments, there will still be a reasonable waiting list, similar to the rest of the country.
- 4.2. Therefore, it is a priority to ensure that as a health, education, and care system, autism and other neurodivergent conditions are acknowledged as 'everybody's business' and that within individual services and settings, there is a continued culture shift towards embedding inclusivity and diversity in every aspect of delivery. It is also acknowledged that there may be areas which need further exploration, such as where children and young people are

presenting with high levels of emotions expressed through behaviour and are unable to access services.

- 4.3. Similarly, it is important to empower neurodiverse individuals and their families to ensure they have the right support they need at the right time, while also acknowledging what is reasonable to expect of the system and the provisions available within it.