Creating Autism Friendly Public Services

Christine Watts

Environmental Services Manager

Northern Ireland Assembly

# Introduction

Thank you. I'd like to thank the National Disability Authority for giving me the opportunity to speak here today and sharing my experiences. I first started working for the Northern Ireland Assembly back in 2001 and I have been privileged to work with several organisations to try to enhance services within government buildings and its surroundings. Over the last 15 years parliament buildings have evolved and have become a major tourist attraction. Last year we had over 67,000 visitors at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Tourism is plays a significant role in terms of educating young people on the work of the Assembly. In the past year, we have had over 433 school groups, totalling 14,000 children and young people attending the Assembly’s education programme. 11 of those groups, included people with disabilities.

# Partnership with the National Autistic Society of Northern Ireland

Our partnership with the National Autistic Society started in 2011, when a group of adult and parents visited parliament buildings on a mystery shopping exercise.

A small group of our staff from different business areas met the group a few days later and listened to their opinions on the visit and the recommendations for improvements and I can say I don't think I will ever in all my life experience such honest feedback. At some points it was quite brutal but we learned a lot from it.

At this meeting the National Autistic Society explained their current accreditation process.

# Key elements to a successful partnership

## Support from the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and Senior Management

I explained the accreditation process to the Northern Ireland Aseembly Commission and to all our senior managers. They were all happy to endorse it. They agreed that we should work in partnership with the National Autistic Society to develop this standard and become the first organisation to work towards the award. We hoped that by doing this we would hopefully encourage other organisations to engage in the same process.

## Commitment from Senior Management and staff

Senior Management and staff demonstrated support and commitment to the process. The director of facilities agreed to train and become an Autism Champion. This was very significant for us, the fact that one of our directors signed up to become an autism champion showed the staff that there was serious buy‑in from senior management for ensuring that the Assembly provided autism friendly services.

It was crucial to get buy‑in from all the staff to ensure they became engaged with the initiative to provide autism friendly services. I ensured that staff were aware of the initiative and that any changes that were going to implement as a result of the initiative were communicated to them in a clear and timely manner.

# Providing Autism Friendly Services

## Signage

In November 2011, staff from my team and the autism working group developed a plan for providing an autism friendly area within parliament buildings. This included some physical changes to the building and adding signage. The signage was a great way to engage with people. We initially received negative comments from the press in relation to the signage which said caution, loud noise as they thought it was health and safety gone crazy. We engaged with the press and explained what we were doing and it resulted in them doing a short positive piece on the work we were doing to making the building more accessible. The press coverage started to spread the message.

## Video and austism friendly webpage

We worked closely with the autism constitution group to determine how to alleviate people with autism’s concerns about visiting the buildings. It was agreed that it would be beneficial to make a video that would give an overview of everything involved in visiting the Assembly, showing how to access the estate and parliament buildings etc. The video was basic. It included sections on coming through security, the sound of the fire alarm system etc. We designed an autism friendly web page with the autism focus group that showed all the work we had done and the services we provided to make the Assembly accessible to people with autism and their families. Producing the video and designing the website took a lot of work and involved a significant amount of time but the feedback following its implementation and has been extremely positive.

## Training and Autsim Champions

Autism training was rolled out to frontline staff in 2011 and 2012 with over 90 staff attending voluntarily. Following this training, ten staff volunteered to become autism champions and they received further training in 2012, since then other staff have trained. These champions act as a point of contact and provide assistance to anyone on the spectrum coming to parliament buildings. They can be contacted directly. If somebody wanted to come to the building, they can look up a champion on the website, contact them and ask them to meet them at the front door.

## Organisational learning

### Desiging an acessible webpage and the introductory video

The hardest thing in all of this was to change the web page and make it more accessible. The website video and regular consultation with the autism focus group took up the most time.

### Commitment from staff

Initially I was concerned that staff would not participate in the training source, however the response we got from staff was incredible. All of the front line staff asked to attend the training, in addition to staff from other business areas. We have 13 more staff who are being trained as autism champions. Staff training was much easier than expected.

### Low cost, maximum impact

The cost of providing autism friendly services was minimal. We had no money put aside for the project and I think other people can relate to that, as there's less and less money available. We determined what we could do it with low cost and maximum impact.

### Working with people with autism

Listening and working with people with autism was one of the most important aspects of project. If you can invite an autism group to your work, you will get valuable and honest feedback. We found working within this process the most rewarding as the group didn't have high expectations. It was so rewarding at the end of the project to see their wishes being fulfilled and the profound effect it had on these people.

# Outcomes

## Autism Access Award

Winning the autism access award has been fantastic. It's been very rewarding to work with other government departments and other organisations to help them learn from our experiences. In Scotland they pursued the access award. It would be great to work with people in Ireland to help them win the Autism Access Award.

## Positive impact on the organisation

The accreditation has been fantastic for the Assembly and I have enjoyed being part of it. Our frontline staff and all of our staff in general are much more engaged with visitors and more aware of the groups of people who could be visiting. It's made staff more conscious of how they are perceived.

## Next Steps

It will be great when other places sign up, such as cinemas and public transport. This is only the start of the process for the Northern Ireland Assembly. We will continually review and improve all of the services we provide to anyone on the autism spectrum. We, already have a range of work planned for the coming year. We are always looking for new ways to make the buildings and surrounding grounds accessible for people with autism. Thank you.