Designing and delivering autism-friendly services for justice professionals in Northern Ireland

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Good morning, my name is Shirelle Stewart and I am the National Director for the National Autistic Society in Northern Ireland.

During the first part of my presentation I am going to outline the work that the National Autistic Society carried out with the Department of Justice, in terms of producing an autism guide. The second part of my presentation will focus on the work we have done with Christine Watts and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

Then Christine Watts will give a presentation on the work that the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission has done to ensure that they are providing autism- friendly services.

Christine and I decided to do this presentation together, because the work that we did on the Autism Access Award was a true partnership.

# Introduction to the National Autistic Society

For those of you who don't know a lot about the National Autistic Society, we are a UK wide organisation. We have national organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

We were founded in 1962, by frustrated parents who had been told their children could not be educated. In 1965, they remortgaged their homes, sold their cars and put in enough money to build the first autism specific school in the world. In 1974, they developed the first specialist service for adults with autism. As those children started to grow, they moved on to the provision of adult services.

Over 50 years later, the National Autistic Society is still run and governed by parents and carers. One of the key elements of the organisation is that it is very much about participation. In our organisation, we campaign and lobby on those policies and those areas of life that people with autism and their parents and carers tell us are important. They make up our board, they also are involved in interviewing key members of staff. People with autism are involved in the interview panel. People with autism have even interviewed our Chief Executive. It's something that's at the core of where we come from. We are genuine about the involvement of adults with autism, their parents and carers. This commitment to participation is clear in the work the National Autistic Society has done.

The National Autistic Society is the largest organisation for people with autistic spectrum disorders in the UK and in Northern Ireland. We provide a wide range of services for children with autism and adults. We lobby, campaign and offer advice on benefits and how they impact on families.

# The Autism Act in Northern Ireland

In 2011, the Autism Act in Northern Ireland Act received royal assent and came into action. The Autism Society of Northern Ireland, another organisation lobbied for a long number of years to get the Act on the statute books. We supported this organisation in their lobbying activities.

This Autism Act in Northern Ireland has a whole life approach as it deals with children and adults. The Act has had an impact on two key areas:

* It amended the Disability Discrimination Act, by extending the criteria by which a person is deemed to be disabled. Basically a person is deemed to be disabled if he/she has a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long‑term adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out normal day‑to‑day duties. The list of duties has been extended to include social communication and social interaction
* The Autism Act also laid the groundwork for the production of a cross‑departmental autism strategy.

The representatives from the eleven government departments across Northern Ireland, along with four Non Governmental Organisation, adults with autism and their parents/carers worked with each other to develop the strategy and to push it through.

The National Autistic Society sat on the Autism Strategy Board that was responsible for developing the Strategy. When the action plan for the Strategy was published the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland put in an action to produce an autism guide for professionals in the criminal justice system.

# Developing the Guide for Justice Professionals

The National Autistic Society had already produced a guide in the United Kingdom for professionals in the criminal justice system. So we thought let's not totally reinvent the wheel, let's use that UK guide as a foundation document and revise it for the justice system in Northern Ireland. We got a group of adults together who had helped create the document.

# Key Elements of the Guide

The guide itself is not designed to help people diagnose somebody with an autistic spectrum disorder, as autism is an extremely complex condition. The guide is designed to help people working in the justice system to recognise some of the symptoms/signs in people that may indicate that they have some difficulties and that they may require some supports.

The guide was not produced because there is a high rate of offenders amongst the autism community. The guide was produced to ensure that people with autism, whether they are a victim of crime, a witness or maybe a suspect, get equal treatment under the law.

The guide itself contains real life case studies and personal accounts, based on the experiences people with autism and their families and carers have had with the criminal justice system.

The guide contains a number of case studies that demonstrates how the behaviour of a person with autism can be misunderstood, for example:

* A young man with autism spent a lot of time hanging around the children’s playground because he liked watching the movement of the swings going back and forth. When other people noticed his behaviour, they became very suspicious of him. They jumped to conclusions and called the police. The police interviewed him because of his so called suspicious behaviour
* Some people with autism often find it difficult to maintain direct eye contact. If a policeman is unaware that a person has autism and is interviewing them regarding a crime or a situation, they may interpret this lack of eye contact as a sign that the person is behaving in a suspicious manner.
* Some people with autism can be very sensitive to touch so if someone touches them unexpectedly, they may react in an unexpected manner. Their reaction maybe be mistakenly perceived as being aggressive.
* Sometimes when a person with autism has been a victim of a crime, for example, a burglary, they may require support to help them contact the police and tell them everything that has happened.

The objective of the guide is to teach and to instruct people on how to communicate with people on the autism spectrum and the reasonable accommodations they may need to have in place to support people on the autism spectrum.

## Support from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland

We were very lucky in producing this guide because we got considerable support from the Department of Justice. One of the very senior civil servants in the Department was on the autism spectrum and she also had a child on the spectrum. She really pushed the promotion of this guide and that was really good to see. In 2014, the guide was eventually launched by David Ford, the Minister for Justice.

This senior civil servant also pushed for articles in the Law Society's writ, which is their newsletter.

She also was very involved in the Department of Justice’s input into the Autism Strategy in Northern Ireland. The Department’s input is really excellent, it's probably one of the best parts of the strategy.

The Department of Justice also supported us in others ways:

* The Department in conjunction with the Institute of Legal Professionals held a conference on vulnerable witnesses. The National Autistic Society in Northern Ireland and an adult with autism gave a presentation at this conference.
* We also gave a presentation to first year law students in Queens University in conjunction with one of our members who has Asperger’s Syndrome. This member had completed her law degree at Queen’s University.
* We also carried out training with senior management within the probation board

A great deal of work has gone on right across the criminal justice system to increase awareness of people with autism and to make their services more autism friendly.

## Beneficial Partnerships

We have a very beneficial, reciprocal partnership with the Department of Justice.

The production of the guide assisted the Department to meet its obligations under the Autism Strategy.

The Department of Justice assisted us, in a voluntary capacity, to devise and produce a crisis management strategy, so that we have the appropriate supports in place if one of our service users ever got into trouble with the criminal justice system.

The National Autistic Society in Northern Ireland adopts a partnership approach with many organisations. We worked in partnership with the Department of Employment and Learning to produce a guide for employers on recruiting and employing people across the autism spectrum. The objective of the guide was to increase employers’ awareness of the capacities and skills people with autism bring to the workplace. The guide also provided employers with the skills and knowledge to support people with autism in the workplace.

We also have a very beneficial partnership with the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

## Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Secretariat have a role in representing the interests of the electorate in making effective legislation.

The Commission hold the Northern Ireland Executive to account.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission works continuously to make parliament buildings as accessible as possible to a wide a range of people. The Commission supervised a programme of major physical renovations, including extensive work to make public buildings accessible to people with disabilities, in 2005/2006. In 2012 ramps were installed across the front entrance to Parliament Buildings.

## Partnership with the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

After the Autism Act in Northern Ireland was enacted in 2011, Christine Watts from the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissions contacted me to see how they could provide autism-friendly public services. Christine and I met for coffee and discussed what we were going to do.

We decide to put together a group of adults with autism and their parents and carers. This group went on a “mystery shop”, basically a tour of the Assembly buildings. They visited the plenary sessions, the cafe, etc. After their tour they provided the National Autistic Society with feedback on how accessible they felt the Assembly was for somebody with autism.

We set up a meeting with Christine so that the group could provide her with their feedback. We thought Christine might ask a few questions. However, Christine brought ten representatives from the Commission, representing all of the different government departments, (including education and facilities management), to come and meet with this group of people with autism. That’s when we really knew that this was going to be a genuine partnership with the Assembly Commission.

The representatives from the Commission really listened to the group’s opinions, they really took on board the views of people with autism. It wasn't just a tick the box exercise.

# The Autism Access Award

The National Autism Society had in place an accreditation system, where services support services and schools for example, received accreditation for providing autism friendly services or being accessible to people with autism. It's quite a high level system, so organisations have to work really hard in order to get accredited.

We wanted to develop something that would make public services and buildings accessible for people with autism.

We worked with the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the relevant departments in Stormont to develop an Autism Access Award. Public buildings and services would receive this Award if they demonstrated that their services and their buildings were accessible to people with autism. This Award is at a slightly different level than our accreditation award, but the aim of this Award is to try to make a whole range of public services and buildings accessible for people with autism.

The Autism Access Award is the first award of its kind in the United Kingdom.

The seven protocols that underpin the Access Award and form the criteria by which public services and buildings are judged are called the Stormont Standards.

Any organisation who is awarded the Autism Access Award will be adopting the Stormont Standards. The Award and the Stormont Standards demonstrate that an organisation is committed to be autism friendly.

The Autism Access Award is given to services that have:

* Made adjustments so people with autism, their families and carers find it easier to use these services
* Demonstrate that the staff have received training so that they can understand and adapt to the needs of people with autism.
* Demonstrate that they have consulted with people with autism, their families and carers and acted on that feedback.

In 2011 the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission made an application to the Autism Access Award. We worked with Christine's team and supported them with the application process. We advised them on how to make the Assembly autism friendly.

## Application process for the Autism Access Award

The application process for the Access Award is straight forward. It involves looking at the criteria for providing autism friendly services, what an organisation needs to do, etc. Organisations have to create an action plan that looks at all of the steps and processes that they need to go through in order to provide autism friendly services. An independent panel of autism experts, outside of the National Autism Society evaluate the applications. The evaluation process is an independent process separate from the National Autism Society.

## Organisations who have received the Autism Access Award

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission was the first organisation to receive the Autism Access Award. Since then, we have promoted the Autism Access Award throughout the United Kingdom. The following organisations have received the awards:

* The National Assembly of Wales
* The Scottish Parliament
* The Theatre Royal in Newcastle
* The Royal Air Force Museum in London
* Queens Park Rangers football club

There are other organisations working towards getting the award including Westminster.

# Conclusion

We have an exceptional partnership with the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. No matter how much we asked, all I ever heard from Christine and her team was Yeah, that's okay, that's not a problem. So for us it was a very, very exciting and memorable journey.

Thank you for listening. I would now like to introduce you to Christine Watts.