



An Garda Síochána

Autism Awareness: Autism-Friendly Practices Guidelines

Version 1.2

Introduction & Background

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disability present from birth which causes difficulties in communication, forming relationships, understanding abstract concepts and sensory processing. It is a spectrum condition, meaning that people living with autism will experience varying levels of challenges and needs.¹

Building a strong relationship with the autism community through earned respect and trust will not only facilitate a better quality of protection of their human rights, but will also more effectively embed a heightened awareness of human rights within An Garda Síochána.

Purpose & Scope

As Garda Personnel, it is important that we make the Garda service accessible for and inclusive to the autism community. Autism is a different way of understanding the world, and many autistic people see their autism as both a difference and a disability.

Autism can be invisible and everyone's experiences of being autistic will be unique. Autistic people are represented across all ages, ethnicities, genders, nationalities and sexual orientations in society.

Autistic people may also identify as "neurodivergent". Neurodivergent people make up a broader community of people whose brains differ in a structured, consistent way from the majority of the population, other examples of neurodivergence include ADHD, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. It is therefore vital that we are aware of and understand the obstacles the autism community experience daily.

This is important because it is inevitable that an autistic person will need the help of the Garda service at a point in their lives. An Garda Síochána is committed to ensuring that all Garda personnel act impartially, professionally, and sensitively when they interact with members of the public who are autistic.

These guidelines aim to provide Garda personnel with autism-friendly practices that can be used as part of the policing toolkit in interactions with members of the autistic community.

Guidelines

Language

The language around autism, autistic people, and disability in general is evolving. Many autistic people feel strongly about how autism is referred to by professionals, which can often be different to how many autistic people wish to identify themselves. The two most common ways of doing so are through:

- identity-first language ("autistic person/people") and;
- person-first language ("person/people with autism or on the autism spectrum.").

Different people will have their own reasons for preferring one over the other. If ever in doubt, it is always best practice to ask an autistic person how they would like to be referred to. If generating generic materials or public facing materials, it is best practice to use identity-first language as this is the preference of the majority of autistic adults. It is really important to remember that the needs or rights of autistic and disabled people are not "extra" or "special". Autistic and disabled people have the same rights as everybody else, even if they might sometimes need different supports to access or enjoy these rights.

¹ AsIAM, "Autism FAQs", *e-Book – Information on Autism* (2023), <https://asiam.ie/ebook-information-on-autism/#h5pbookid=3§ion=top&chapter=h5p-interactive-book-chapter-bb59adab-ead5-4b8e-ab45-76d65a9e2d43>, accessed 11 April 2023.

Access, Inclusion and Communication

There are aspects of how society is organised and structured which can shape how an autistic person might feel accepted and included in society. This includes aspects such as the physical and sensory environments, how we communicate, how we socialise, access to services and supports, or society's attitudes toward autistic people. The level and type of support that an autistic person might need can differ from person to person.

Autistic people may communicate differently to others and so may require additional time to process information, questions and instructions. This does not mean that one should speak slower or louder. It means you may need to provide alternative communication options, this might include the use of visual instructions or writing questions or information down for a person to read, understand and respond at their own pace. Autistic people may not understand or use facial expressions or body language in the same way as non-autistic people. This means you cannot rely on facial expressions/body language to communicate your point but equally an autistic person's facial expression/body language may not always appear to communicate how they are feeling themselves at a particular moment in time. It is important therefore, to be clear, explicit and concise in our written and verbal communication.

An autistic person might be disabled by an environment not set up to accommodate their difference. Sensory environments and triggers can be overwhelming. Many autistic individuals avoid busy places or find it hard to cope in day to day environments like public offices. Meeting at the public counter could be challenging. It is important to be open to adaptations and flexibility in terms of implementing autism-friendly practices for the autism community to ensure they are afforded equal access to Garda services and justice. This can have a huge impact on the experience of an autistic person.

Autism-Friendly Practices

Here are some autism-friendly practices that will help Garda personnel ensure the Garda service is more accessible for and inclusive to the autism community:

- If in doubt during an interaction, stop and think to review the situation and do not make a snap assumption that an individual's behaviour is simply rude or abrasive. It may be that a person is autistic or neurodivergent. Ask the person – "Are you autistic or neurodivergent? I am asking this question so that I can make reasonable accommodations";
- It is important to realise that an autistic person may be a vulnerable adult or become vulnerable in certain situations;
- Allow the person to decide how they feel most comfortable communicating;
- Consult with the person on their preferred mode of communication. Consider meeting face to face rather than dealing with the matter on the phone or by written communication. Some autistic people find face to face easier and more reassuring while others may prefer another mode;
- Ideally, assign one person to communicate with the individual so that a rapport may be developed;
- To help reduce anxiety by providing certainty, give the person advance notice that you are going to call, meet them or write to them and give them an overview of why you are communicating with them;
- Avoid confusion. Say exactly what you mean, clearly and succinctly;
- Avoid open-ended questions;
- Check for understanding. It is important that a person understands the questions or information you are providing and to ensure that they are not providing responses that they think you want in order to please you or to end what may be a stressful situation
- If the person expresses interest in a particular topic or subject or you are aware of their interest (for example the person is wearing the t-shirt of a particular band) it may be useful to engage the person on this topic. This can provide reassurance, build rapport and provide an opportunity to identify how a person prefers to communicate;
- Don't take offence to direct, matter of fact communication or to a person not elaborating on an answer to a question;
- Minimise facial expressions and hand gestures;

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- Provide information on how processes work for example, passport applications, reporting a crime including pictures/visuals;
- It is important that signage in public offices contains visual images and not just words;
- Allow the person to nominate someone to support them in communication during a meeting, interview or telephone call, if they find it stressful or confusing;
- Provide as much information about what to expect and highlight things a person could do for themselves – such as bringing a hand fidget or ear plugs;
- Consider the environment where a conversation is taking place for example a packed public office. An autistic person may be stressed by this environment. A suitable environment is critical for effective communication;
- In busy stations or where work involves high levels of noise or bright lights, consider suggesting a time period suitable for people with sensory issues – remove noise such as music and dim lights;
- Alternatively, offer appointments-based service to individuals with sensory difficulties during a quiet period;
- It is vital to remain patient with the person you are interacting with, that you make the effort to understand how they are trying to communicate and that you are respectful in your interactions;
- Avoid raising your voice and be mindful that even mild intonation may be perceived as shouting by someone who is sensitive to noise;
- Recognise that a person who is autistic may not make eye contact and may find it extremely overwhelming. Never force eye contact or tell someone to look at you when they are speaking;
- Be mindful of personal space – an autistic person may not have the same sense of personal space as a non-autistic person, they may come up close to you without meaning to be aggressive or intrusive. Equally, an autistic person may not like others entering their personal space;
- Many autistic person are sensitive to touch. In so far as possible, you should avoid physical contact and always give forewarning where it is a necessity, minimising in so far as possible;
- When arriving at the scene of an emergency, where an autistic person is present, minimise stimuli such as lights, sirens or torches.
- When speaking to an autistic person it is important to use the person's name, some autistic people may not realise you are speaking to them unless you address them by name;
- Many autistic people self-regulate through engaging in repetitive actions or noises commonly called "stimming". This may be an obvious activity such as person running in circles or flapping their hands or may be more subtle such as person playing with their fingers or hair. This behaviour can look unusual or even arouse suspicion but it is vital tool for an autistic person to remain regulated and calm. You should avoid drawing attention to stimming and allow a person to stim;
- Be aware that an autistic person may experience echolalia. This might mean that a person repeats certain words or noises, often out of context, and may not seem to make sense;
- Autistic people may experience meltdowns. These occur when a person becomes over-whelmed. They are processes which take place in the brain and take time to recover from. If a person experiences a meltdown they may become visibly distressed or appear outwardly aggressive. It is important to respond to a meltdown in a manner which may appear counter-intuitive. As the person is already overwhelmed it is not beneficial to seek to engage the person. In so far as possible, reduce stimulus in the environment and avoid others congregating or staring. A person should only be moved if they pose a danger to themselves or others. If a person is in the company of a family member or carer it is wise to engage with them and follow their advice. Communication should be kept to a minimum, with one person speaking, saying the minimum number of words required. A person should not be moved or touched unless it is essential for their safety or that of other people;
- An autistic person may also experience a shutdown, which may appear as a more muted or withdrawn response than a meltdown. The person may be unable to communicate during this time and a similar approach to that of responding to a meltdown should be followed.

Related Documents

- HQ Directive 19/2019 - Human Rights Framework
- An Garda Síochána Code of Ethics
- HQ Directive 37/2019 – Garda Decision Making Model

Legal and Human Rights Screening

This document has been Legal- and Human Rights-Screened in terms of the respective obligations placed on An Garda Síochána for the subject area concerned.

Ethical Standards & Commitments

Every person working in An Garda Síochána must observe and adhere to the standards and commitments set out in the Code of Ethics for An Garda Síochána and uphold and promote this Code throughout the organisation. Equally, every person working in the Police Service of Northern Ireland must observe, adhere to, uphold, and promote their respective Code of Ethics.

Review

These guidelines are drafted in alignment with An Garda Síochána's document hierarchy and will be reviewed as necessary by the policy owner.

Disclaimer

This document is not intended to, and does not represent, legal advice to be relied on by members of the public on the subject matter considered herein. This publication should not be used by members of the public as a substitute for professional legal advice.

Contacts

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