

A guide for landlords to supporting autistic and/or learning-disabled tenants in Greater Manchester



Contents

Page 3-5 What is Autism?

Page 6 What is a learning disability?

Page 7-8 How can I support my tenant?

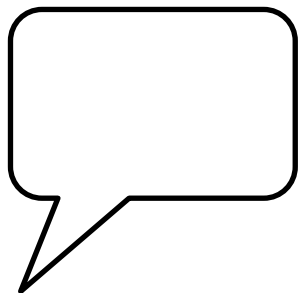
Page 9 Useful contacts and resources

What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability 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.

Being autistic

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways. Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses. Below is a list of difficulties autistic people may share, including the two key difficulties required for a diagnosis. Click on the plus sign for more information.



Social communication

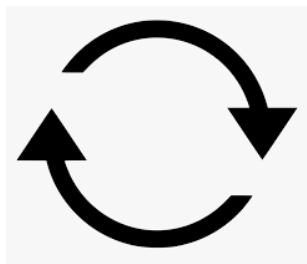
Autistic people have difficulties with interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand sarcasm or tone of voice. Other challenges include:

- taking things literally and not understanding abstract concepts
- needing extra time to process information or answer questions
- repeating what others say to them (this is called echolalia)

Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard to navigate the social world. Autistic people may:

- appear to be insensitive
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate
- find it hard to form friendships.



Repetitive and restrictive behaviour

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people. This is why they often prefer to have routines so that they know what is going to happen. They may want to travel the same way to and from school or work, wear the same clothes or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Autistic people may also repeat movements such as hand flapping, rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen or opening and closing a door. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when they are stressed or anxious, but many autistic people do it because they find it enjoyable.

Change to routine can also be very distressing for autistic people and make them very anxious. It could be having to adjust to big events like Christmas or changing schools, facing uncertainty at work, or something simpler like a bus detour that can trigger their anxiety.

Over or under sensitivity to senses

Autistic people may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds like music in a restaurant, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Many autistic people prefer not to hug due to discomfort, which can be misinterpreted as being cold and aloof.

Many autistic people avoid everyday situations because of their sensitivity issues. Schools, workplaces and shopping centres can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload. There are many simple adjustments that can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.



Highly focused interests or hobbies

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge. A stereotypical example is trains but that is one of many. Greta Thunberg's intense interest, for example, is protecting the environment.

Like all people, autistic people gain huge amounts of pleasure from pursuing their interests and see them as fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

Being highly focused helps many autistic people do well academically and in the workplace but they can also become so engrossed in particular topics or activities that they neglect other aspects of their lives.

Extreme anxiety

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many autistic adults, particularly in social situations or when facing change. It can affect a person psychologically and physically and impact quality of life for autistic people and their families.

It is very important that autistic people learn to recognise their triggers and find coping mechanisms to help reduce their anxiety. However, many autistic people have difficulty recognising and regulating their emotions. Over one third of autistic people have serious mental health issues and too many autistic people are being failed by mental health services.

(The National Autistic Society 2020)

Want to know more about autism? Go to page 9 for a list of useful links.

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people.

Different types of learning disability

There are different types of learning disability, which can be mild, moderate, severe or profound. In all cases a learning disability is lifelong.

It can be difficult to diagnose a mild learning disability as the individual will often mix well with others and will be able to cope with most everyday tasks. However, they may need support in other areas of their life such as filling out forms.

People with a severe learning disability or profound and multiple learning disability (PMLD), will need more care and support with areas such as mobility, personal care and communication. People with a moderate learning disability may also need support in these areas, but not definitely.

(MENCAP 2020)

Want to know more about learning disabilities? Go to page 9 for a list of useful links.

How can I support my tenant?

Tip:

Each person's needs are different. Ask the tenant and anyone they have supporting them what would help them maintain their tenancy.

When supporting your tenant, you may want to consider:

Premises

Understand the sensory challenges that the autistic person faces. This particularly applies to noise, smells and lighting, as these are directly relevant to maintaining a tenancy.

Consider the impact of hypersensitivity in dealing with issues such as noise nuisance.

Understand the fears that autistic adults may have in relation to processes such as annual PAT tests/ regular maintenance and try and reduce the anxiety about such events.

Processes

Consider avoiding automated letters about issues such as rent arrears as they can often be misunderstood and cause distress.

Consider handling issues such as complaints more informally to stop them escalating.

If the person is vulnerable and/or falling out with neighbours due to misunderstandings, discuss if the tenant feels that disclosing their diagnosis, with your support, might help the situation. This needs careful handling and discussion with both the tenant and their close supporters before going ahead.

Communication

Check if the person has a communication passport, or similar.

Talk to people that knows the individual such as family members, with permission of the autistic person, as they can often give crucial information.

Make the tenancy rules clear about noise levels/ bins etc, as well as the more formal tenancy rules.

Make sure that any written communication is clear, and check the person's understanding of the content, especially for important issues.

Offer alternative ways to communicate such as emails or text messages.

Planning and Preparation

Prepare the tenant for changes, mandatory inspections or safety tests with as much warning as possible.

Allow a longer timeframe for tenancies to be taken up as moving is a major transition that will be particularly challenging to some autistic people.

Useful contacts and resources

The National Autistic Society:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Mencap learning disability charity:

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/>

The Greater Manchester Autism Consortium:

<https://www.autismgm.org.uk/>

Resources

Autism homelessness toolkit: <https://ki.se/media/240344/download>

MENCAP housing easy read guide: <https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/housing/housing-our-easy-read-guide>

References

The National Autistic Society 2020, *What is Autism?*, viewed 30 Aug 2020, <<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>>

MENCAP 2020, *What is a learning disability?*, viewed 30 Aug 2020, <<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/what-learning-disability>>