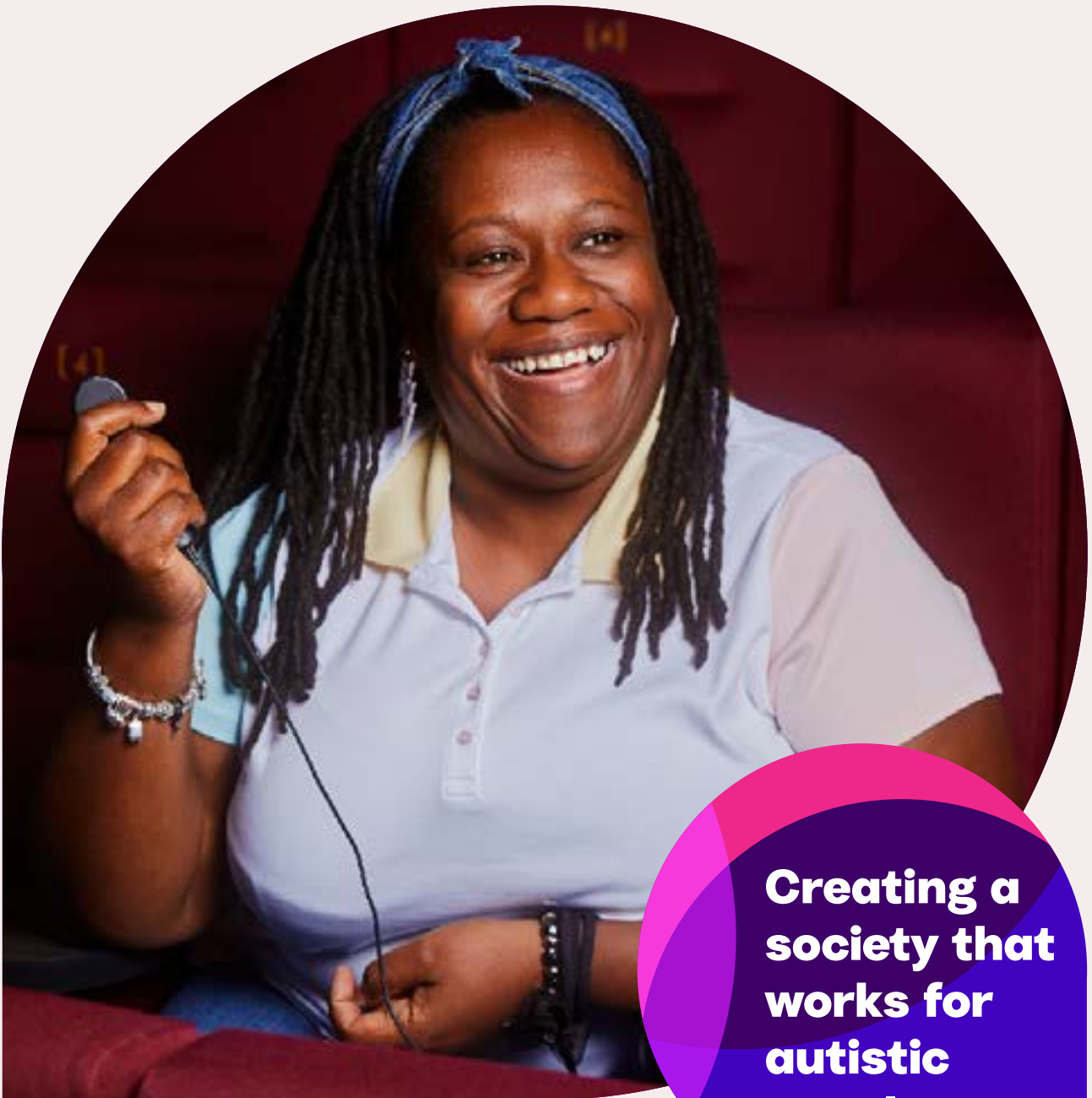


# Vision to Reality

Strategy 2023-2026



**Creating a  
society that  
works for  
autistic  
people**

# Contents

Forewords	4
Who we are and what we do	8
Our vision	8
Our mission	9
Sixty years of change	10
Our beliefs	12
Belief 1: Support	14
Belief 2: Influence	18
Belief 3: Transform	22
How we'll deliver this strategy	26
Thank you	29





# Forewords



**We are delighted to be launching our new Vision to Reality strategy. This three-year strategy sets out the role of the National Autistic Society in creating a society that works for autistic people.**

It's been over 60 years since our charity was founded to improve the lives of autistic people and their families. In 2022, the [Moonshot Vision](#) was launched, setting out the steps needed in the near, medium and long term to create a society that works for autistic people. It also outlines the milestones we need to reach along the way to get us there.

Achieving the Moonshot Vision will take the efforts of many - not just our charity - so our new strategy defines the unique role that the National Autistic Society will play over the coming years to drive society towards achieving the vision. It outlines the beliefs, ambitions and priorities that will guide our work.

Our new strategy is about all autistic people. Whether you need a small bit of advice or a large package of care and support. Whether you want to join your local branch or make your supermarket more autism friendly. Whether you want to raise money in your town or campaign to change the law nationwide. We want the National Autistic Society to be alongside you, so we can change the world together.

**“At every stage, the strategy has been guided by what we heard from autistic people, families, our staff and external experts, and I am immensely grateful to everyone involved for their insights and thoughts.”**

What invigorates me the most is the number of autistic people, families and different stakeholders that have been involved in developing the Moonshot Vision and our Vision to Reality strategy. At every stage, the strategy has been guided by what we were told by autistic people, families, our staff and external experts, and I am immensely grateful to everyone involved for their insights and thoughts.

It feels like we are moving forward with a vision that is truly authentic and really will help us to create a society that works for autistic people.

**Caroline Stevens**, Chief Executive  
April 2023







**On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I am delighted to introduce the National Autistic Society's new strategy. It sets out what the charity will do to achieve the autism-friendly society articulated in the Moonshot Vision. It's wide-ranging, covering all aspects of life, and it's ambitious. It gives us a clear set of shared objectives to work towards and hold ourselves accountable to as an organisation.**

The strategy is shaped by what autistic people told us they expect from the National Autistic Society. They told us that we need to exist for ALL autistic people, that we can't do it alone, and that we need to be louder and bolder as a leader. We also know we need to get better at reflecting the change we want to see - for example, by being a truly autism-friendly employer and having more autistic people at all levels of our organisation, including governance.

Achieving the ambitions outlined below relies on the passion, generosity and determination of our staff, volunteers, partners, donors, fundraisers, and the autistic people and their families who inspire us every day. I would like to take this opportunity to thank every one of you.

Let's keep pushing for a kinder, fairer, more compassionate society where every autistic person has the opportunities they deserve. A society that works for autistic people is a society worth fighting for - and we won't stop until our vision is a reality.

**Stephen Ladyman**, Chair of Trustees  
April 2023

**“A society that works for autistic people is a society worth fighting for – and we won't stop until our vision is a reality.”**



# Who we are and what we do

The National Autistic Society was started in 1962 by a group of desperate parents sitting around a kitchen table. They were trying to get the right education for their autistic children at a time when autism was barely heard of and autistic people were often locked away in institutions.

In the six decades since, we've successfully fought for autistic people's rights and autism-friendly policies. Our specialist schools and services, local branches and online communities are life-changing for those who use them. Relentless campaigning alongside autistic people and their families has driven vital improvements in healthcare, education, the workplace and the law. Public awareness and understanding of autism has massively increased as a result.



Today, our goal is the same as it always was - to create a society that works for autistic people. But society has changed a lot since that kitchen table conversation, as has what we know about autism and what autistic people rightly expect from the world around them.

So in 2022 we embarked on a major exercise to articulate what a society that works for autistic people actually looks like, by asking autistic people, their families and professionals about the challenges they face and the changes they most want to see. This led to the publication of our shared vision of an autism-friendly society. We called it the [Moonshot](#) because of the scale of ambition and collaboration needed to achieve it.

Autistic people and family members told us powerful stories about the barriers and discrimination they face every day in all areas of life. They told us that a society that works for autistic people:

- Values autistic individuals
- Maximises autistic power
- Guarantees support
- Adapts public services and spaces
- Is free from discrimination.

This organisational strategy puts us on a pathway to make this vision a reality.





# Sixty years of change

We've come a long way together since the movement that became the National Autistic Society began in 1962. Here are just a few of the highlights on our journey towards a society that works for autistic people.



## 1965

We opened the world's first school specifically for autistic children. At the time, there was no provision for autistic children, who were often diagnosed with childhood schizophrenia and sent to institutions.

## 1974

Parents helped open the UK's first residential school for autistic adults, helping them to feel more independent and part of society. John Lennon visited and wrote a cheque for £1,000.

## 1979

One of our founders, Dr Lorna Wing, revolutionised thinking about autism with the idea of the 'autistic spectrum'. This has had a huge impact on the number of people being diagnosed and having access to support, not only in the UK but around the world.

## 1992

We set up our Autism Accreditation scheme, the UK's only autism-specific quality assurance programme. To date, we've awarded it to over 2,500 organisations and services including schools, colleges, universities, social care settings, prisons, GPs, dentists and hospitals.

## 2009

We successfully campaigned for the Autism Act in England, which says there has to be a government strategy for improving services for autistic adults, underpinned by legally binding guidance to councils in England. Similar strategies have since been enacted in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## 2015

By now we have 100 local branches across the UK. This means 75% of autistic adults and children and their families are within 20 miles of a place to meet others in similar situations.

## 2019

In association with the Bloomfield Trust, we set up our Autism at Work programme to help increase the number of autistic people in sustainable paid employment.

## 2022

We celebrated our 60th birthday! In 2021-22 alone, five million visitors found information and advice on our website. 520,000 people connected through our online community, and 17,600 autistic children and families got involved at their local branch. Our residential, supported living and community services provided life-changing assistance to 879 autistic adults. We delivered autism training to 18,000 health, social care and education professionals, and 5,130 families used our specialist helplines.



## 2023

We published the [Moonshot Vision](#), defining what a society that works for autistic people would look like, based on the contributions of autistic people, their families, and professionals in health, care and education. Now this strategy puts us on a pathway to achieve it.



# Our beliefs

**We believe the role of the National Autistic Society is to:**

- 1. Support all autistic individuals and their families to live a fulfilled life on their terms.**
- 2. Influence and collaborate with others to improve standards and adjustments.**
- 3. Transform society by building understanding, acceptance and respect for all autistic people.**

Within each belief, we have defined a set of ambitions; we'll use this as a framework to decide where to focus our efforts for maximum impact. In the pages that follow, we set out these ambitions with examples of some of the steps we'll prioritise in the next three years to achieve them.

Each of these ambitions will take time to realise. With some, we can start work straight away. With others, we need to research and plan before we start delivering on them. We will complete some of the ambitions within the three years of this strategy, while others will be started but will still run for many years to come.

**If we can go further and do more to work towards our beliefs, we will.**





# Belief 1: Support

## Support all autistic individuals and their families to live a fulfilled life on their terms

We're here to support the more than 700,000 autistic people in the UK and their families. That won't change - we heard loud and clear from our insight gathering that this should remain one of our top priorities. But we'll work harder to make sure that autistic people are at the heart of shaping and delivering the support they want, whether that's in public or specialist services, the world of work, or their care and family networks. We'll also strive to maximise autistic power through greater representation in all areas of life.

**“[It's about] platforming autistic voices, so autistic people can get their emotions and feelings out there... on their own terms.”**

Participant in the Moonshot research

### Ambition 1

#### Autistic people are empowered to shape public narratives and influence their communities

For example, we'll start by:

- campaigning to get autistic people from across the spectrum into positions of influence across TV, politics, journalism, health and education
- collaborating with media and TV companies to increase and diversify representation of autistic people, including those with different experiences on the basis of race, age, gender and sexuality
- providing autistic people with information and support to play a full part in society, for instance by joining governing bodies and local councils
- leading by example through appropriate representation on our Trustee board and in other leadership positions.

### Ambition 2

#### Autistic people are supported to enjoy varied life experiences through all stages of life

For example, we'll start by:

- becoming the go-to source of knowledge about autism, with trusted information for autistic people of all ages and backgrounds, including those who haven't been diagnosed, available in a range of formats
- establishing a set of financially and operationally viable and sustainable specialist services for autistic adults with complex needs
- nurturing peer networks of autistic people of all ages so they can support each other and share experiences.

### Ambition 3

#### Autistic people can access all types of work, fulfil their goals and feel part of workplace communities

For example, we'll start by:

- creating guidance and tools that help autistic people find fulfilling work opportunities and progress in them
- launching specific programmes to increase employment of autistic people from minority and marginalised backgrounds
- celebrating role models that showcase the contributions of autistic people in all types of work, including volunteering
- employing twice as many autistic people ourselves and improving our hiring, management and workplace practices.

### Ambition 4

#### Families and support networks are equipped to support autistic people, from pre-diagnosis to the end of life

For example, we'll start by:

- making information for carers widely available, including better information about support when they are no longer able to provide care
- campaigning to improve awareness, understanding and treatment of families and carers by health, social care and education professionals.



# Supporting autistic people

## Supporting autistic adults in the world of work

Less than 30% of autistic adults are in employment, even though our research shows that the vast majority want to work. We're collaborating with employers and the government to make it easier for autistic people to find - and stay in - employment.

For example, our Autism at Work programme supports employers to attract, recruit and retain autistic employees. We promote accessible roles to autistic jobseekers and support applicants through the recruitment process. We offer ongoing coaching to successful candidates and their managers, creating the conditions for success.

"This programme has taught me that with the right level of support and understanding from employers and colleagues, it's definitely possible to feel comfortable in a workplace."

Autism at Work participant

## Ensuring autistic adults enjoy the quality of life they deserve

Conor used to live in a mental health ward, where he spent 23 hours a day in his bedroom, heavily medicated and often very distressed. The staff had no autism-specific knowledge and little understanding of his needs. Today Conor lives in one of our residential centres, where trained staff provide expert care. Conor especially enjoys the sensory room, art room, and walking around the grounds. He regularly visits the local shop to buy his favourite magazine.

"I couldn't be happier, knowing that he is in a safe and protected environment. The staff are very professional in the way they provide care to my son."

Rose, Conor's mum

## Enabling autistic children to thrive at school

School can be a very unhappy experience for autistic children and young people. Our specialist schools place as much emphasis on pupils' wellbeing and happiness as academic achievements, and prioritise skills for future living. And with generous financial support from the Cullum Family Trust, we're working with local authorities to open more 'Cullum Centres', which help autistic students get the support they need to thrive in mainstream school.

"I see massive improvement since my child started school and I know this is just the Cullum Centre... there is no chance we could go to the normal mainstream school and be happy."

Parent of autistic student





# Belief 2: Influence

## Influence and collaborate with others to improve standards and adjustments

Our vision of an autism-friendly future is a vision for the whole of society. This means we can't achieve it alone. Autistic people and their families told us we need to collaborate more - with local and national government, employers, and other groups and charities, among others - in order to have the reach and influence we need to change society. Our training, campaigning and advocacy must be targeted, persistent and based on autistic voices.

**“[We need to] increase awareness about autism in schools, not only from teachers but also from the students.”**

Participant in the Moonshot research

### Ambition 1

**Public spaces are welcoming, with adjustments that recognise the diverse needs and preferences of autistic people**

For example, we'll start by:

- campaigning for a review by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) of the discrimination and inequalities autistic people face - chaired by an autistic person
- funding research to define what accessibility looks like for autistic people across the spectrum, including the design of public spaces and physical and online content
- pushing for every local area to have an autism strategy or partnership board, with autistic people or family members on it.

### Ambition 2

**Autistic people have positive educational experiences with a curriculum and learning environment that suits them**

For example, we'll start by:

- driving a UK-wide campaign for autism training in schools and pushing for a commitment to make autism training mandatory for all staff
- working in partnership with other experts to develop best practice in schools with regard to the curriculum, mental health and teaching practices
- advocating for autistic children to be involved in decision making about their education, and holding schools and education authorities to account on engaging autistic staff, students and parents
- campaigning for standardised and high-quality provision of support for autistic children in all four nations of the UK.

### Ambition 3

**The needs of autistic people are recognised in the provision of healthcare, social care, housing, mental health and criminal justice**

For example, we'll start by:

- delivering more training across health, care, criminal justice, mental health and other key disciplines, co-designed and delivered by autistic people
- advocating for legislative changes that advance the rights of autistic people, for example in education funding, housing provision and social care
- campaigning for each UK nation to have a government or independent official responsible for autism
- influencing UK governments to invest in reducing waiting times for diagnosis, improving autism assessments and widening autistic people's access to benefits and support.

### Ambition 4

**Autistic people are a core part of the workforce and kind, flexible workplaces are commonplace**

For example, we'll start by:

- providing clear information and advice about employing autistic people in all kinds of roles, with guidance on the barriers that traditional recruitment and workplace practices present
- training more UK employers to recognise and enable the potential of autistic people, and to adapt their hiring, workplace and promotion practices accordingly
- creating a good employer kitemark to promote employers with trained and inclusive staff.





# Influencing change

## Improving autism knowledge and practice amongst professionals and organisations

Improving understanding is vital in creating a society that works for autistic people. We want all professionals, organisations and services to have the knowledge and understanding of autism to know how to adapt their practice and environments to be fully inclusive.

We already deliver a range of services to thousands of professionals and organisations, but we want to do more. We will increase our reach over the next three years so that more professionals and organisations benefit from our wide range of services, including Accreditation, Assessment & Diagnosis, Conferences, Consultancy, Cullum Centres, Employment and Training. This will improve the lives of thousands more autistic people.

"Achieving the advanced status for the College will have a huge impact on the support our learners receive, as this validates all the hard work and commitment our staff have put in since we joined the Accreditation programme in 2014. We recognise being accredited by the National Autistic Society is the highest standard of validation, so we are extremely proud to be affiliated with them."

Mark Morton, Accreditation lead, Portland College

## Influencing policy to protect autistic people

We campaign and work with policymakers to achieve long-term changes so that society works better for autistic people. For example, thanks to persistent campaigning by our supporters and allies, in 2021 the Westminster government agreed to change the definition of 'mental disorder' in the Mental Health Act in England and Wales so it no longer includes autism. Autism isn't a mental health condition - and mental health hospitals are not the right place for the vast majority of autistic people. The change to the Mental Health Act will be a huge step forward for our campaign to stop autistic people being wrongly detained and stuck for long periods in mental health hospitals.

As well as campaigning for policy change, we directly help autistic people who are detained or at risk of detention, through our Autism Inpatient Mental Health Casework Service. This vital service was contacted by over 250 families in 2021-22 alone.

"We wouldn't have come this far or been heard if it wasn't for your support, help and knowledge. I can't thank you enough."

Parent who used our Autism Inpatient Mental Health Casework Service



# Belief 3: Transform

## Transform society by building understanding, acceptance and respect for all autistic people

Autistic people and their family members often tell us that the thing that would make the biggest improvement to their lives is greater public understanding of autism. Lack of understanding has a daily impact on autistic people's lives and is one of the main barriers they face to taking part in education, work or leisure activities. We're committed to deepening public knowledge, sharing best practice, overcoming stereotypes and ending stigma.

**"[I wish] for society to let go of preconceived notions of what you think autism is. Every person is different. Not every autistic person sees themselves as disabled. Autistic people should be respected... be believed and listened to, not questioned and judged."**

Participant in the Moonshot research

### Ambition 1

#### **There is universal understanding of the unique lived experience and power of autistic individuals**

For example, we'll start by:

- launching an 'always-on' campaign for autism understanding and acceptance
- constantly working to gather the opinions and lived experiences of autistic people and their families, and listening to what they tell us
- partnering with other autism organisations to run campaigns that reflect and represent the full range of autistic experiences, including those of people from minority and marginalised backgrounds
- providing comprehensive and trusted information on autism to the general public, tailored in partnerships with organisations representing minority and marginalised communities.

### Ambition 2

#### **Autistic stereotypes and misinformation are challenged and stigma is ended**

For example, we'll start by:

- challenging discriminatory laws in court, including pushing for action by equality watchdogs
- working to improve the reporting and recording of crimes against autistic people, including hate crime and mate crime.

### Ambition 3

#### **There is a wide and ongoing commitment to deepening knowledge about autism and sharing best practice**

For example, we'll start by:

- influencing government to fund a new study on the prevalence of autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions
- encouraging and supporting specific research to improve support for challenges autistic people face
- supporting the development of specific autism pathways in health, social care and education, including changing attitudes to diagnosis among professionals
- partnering with other neurodiversity organisations to better understand the full range of autistic people's experiences at different life stages.

### Ambition 4

#### **Autistic people and those that advocate for them are brought together in a movement of change**

For example, we'll start by:

- uniting autistic people, organisations and families around a shared vision for the future of society - the [Moonshot Vision](#)
- growing our support for our volunteer-led branches so they can coordinate support in local communities
- providing advice, guidance and support for autistic people, families, friends and allies to build their own capacity to push for change
- communicating our vision for the future, and providing positive and optimistic stories that galvanise and inspire people to act.



# Transforming lives

## Amplifying autistic voices

Our campaigns are driven by the voices and lived experiences of autistic people. Launched in November 2022, the Now I Know campaign features powerful photography and films of autistic women and non-binary people from across the UK, who share their experiences of late diagnosis of autism. Six people were photographed in spaces that reflect their personalities and unique interests. The photoshoots were collaborative, with each person using a clicker to also capture photos of themselves, allowing them to take control of their image.

"I always knew who I was. Now I know why I am."

Dawn Mills, who was diagnosed at the age of 56 and whose words inspired the campaign

## Changing lives through local branches

Our brilliant volunteers lead our 116 branches across the UK - providing information, support and social activities for autistic adults, children and their families in their local area. In 2021-22 alone, local branches supported 17,600 people. We also have several online branches, offering a social space for autistic people to reach out and seek peer support for a shared interest, identity or experience. Branches organise and join in with fundraising and campaigning, bringing the voices and experiences of autistic people to the fore. Over the next three years, we'll be working with our branches to build their capacity to push for change.

"From the moment we joined, our lives have been transformed. My son has become much more confident and has made friends for the first time! Belonging to the branch has taken me out of a slump of staying at home all the time, and made me feel much more positive about both mine and my son's future."

Parent, Newtownards branch





# How we'll deliver this strategy

We recognise that to achieve the ambitions laid out above, we also need to change ourselves. Fundamentally, we need to reflect the change that we want to see and to lead by example. Here we focus on our 'foundations' - the culture and ways of working we'll develop as an organisation to help put our strategy into action.

## To support our strategy:

**We'll become the best employer of autistic staff and provide opportunities to learn, progress and enjoy work for every National Autistic Society employee.**

For example:

- We'll improve our hiring and training practices, and provide more opportunities for our autistic employees and volunteers to progress and achieve their professional goals.
- We'll work to achieve balanced representation of autistic people and their families on our Trustee board, and to become a more ethnically diverse and inclusive workplace.

**We'll further develop sustainable financial models to support the long-term delivery of our vision and strategy.**

For example:

- We'll be excellent stewards of our donors' money and work to improve cost efficiency across all we do.

**We'll demonstrate an exemplary approach to safeguarding, governance, risk, and health and safety in delivering high-quality services.**

For example:

- We'll implement a centralised digital compliance system across the organisation, with a consistent compliance-reporting process.

**We'll champion technology internally and externally as a way to improve the lives of autistic people.**


For example:

- We'll promote the potential of technology to improve the experiences of autistic people in our services.

**We'll establish a new operating and decision-making model so that we can effectively and efficiently deliver our strategy for the benefit of all autistic people.**

For example:

- We'll bring all the right teams together to focus on delivering on our ambitions and monitoring our progress on this strategy.



**"I've seen phenomenal changes... a much broader understanding of the condition. A much more welcoming environment, where autistic people are increasingly free to talk openly about their condition and to ask for positive changes."**

Chris Packham CBE, National Autistic Society ambassador

**We'll deliver high-impact fundraising approaches, exceptional supporter care and experience, and compelling storytelling to demonstrate impact.**

For example:

- We'll develop and grow our membership programme and improve our supporters' experience.
- We'll grow World Autism Acceptance Week to reach even more people.

**We'll coordinate and harmonise the ways that autistic people, families and others can contribute to, be involved with and relate to our charity.**

For example:

- We'll consult with autistic people and their family members to make sure we're enabling them to be involved in the ways they want.
- We'll develop a plan to grow a movement for change, uniting a diverse range of communities around of a set of common goals.





**Thank  
you**

We've come a long way together - but there's still a long way to go. Together, we will achieve our vision of a society that works for autistic people.

**Help create a society that works for autistic people.**

**Campaign with us**

Lobby your local MP, council and businesses to ensure autistic people get the support and services that they're entitled to.

**Donate**

Give a regular or one-off gift to help fund vital services for autistic people and their families.

**Volunteer with us**

Find out about the variety of volunteer roles currently available, including working with our local branches.

**Raise funds**

Run a marathon, cycle round the park or hold an online quiz to raise money and help transform the lives of autistic people.

**Become a member**

Join over 22,000 like-minded people and receive our quarterly *Your Autism* magazine, expert advice and other benefits.

To find out more, visit [www.autism.org.uk/get-involved](http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved)



**The National Autistic Society is here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.**

We transform lives by providing support, information and practical advice for more than 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, as well as their three million family members and carers. Since 1962, autistic people have turned to us at key moments or challenging times in their lives, be it getting a diagnosis, going to school or finding work.

We change attitudes by improving public understanding of autism and the difficulties many autistic people face. We also work closely with businesses, local authorities and government to help them provide more autism-friendly spaces, deliver better services and improve laws.

We've come a long way, but there is still so much to do. The Moonshot Vision sets out what a society that works for autistic people really looks like - as described by autistic people and their families. This organisational strategy puts us on a pathway to achieve this vision for all of society.

Find out more at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

