



## Understanding autism-focused training access and engagement in mainstream secondary school staff

### Figures suggest approximately 70% of autistic pupils are educated in mainstream schools.

However, the true figure is difficult to estimate as many are unable to access formal diagnosis and are instead recorded as having 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs'.

It has been compulsory since 2018 to include autism content within all Initial Teacher Training within England. For employed teachers, a member of the senior school team uses professional judgement to identify training needs. A designated Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinator (SENDco) must also be present within each mainstream school.

Despite this, many autistic young people and their families report feeling unsupported in school. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism recently found that fewer than half of autistic children said they were happy in school. Moreover, fewer than half of teachers said they were confident in supporting an autistic child (The National Autistic Society, 2019).

### What was the aim of the project?

This piece of work was part of a wider project to explore young people's experience in mainstream secondary schools and consider how to create a more inclusive educational environment.

We wanted to understand 1) what training and information school staff had access to, to support their work with autistic pupils and 2) any barriers or facilitators to engagement.

### What did we do?

We spoke to mainstream secondary school staff in the region including teachers, support staff and others, and asked them to complete an anonymous survey detailing existing training and any barriers/facilitators to engagement.

### How were people involved?

This project was initiated, developed and led by neurodivergent young people and researchers. Our steering group included young people, members of the public, school staff and those working in the community sector.



## What did we learn?

Twenty mainstream secondary school staff, across the North East and North Cumbria region took part in the survey.

Most commonly staff reported taking part in in-person, in-school training via a SENDCo and/or accessed training/information themselves (for example via online resources). It was not clear how much the autistic community had been involved in developing or delivering this training.

Participants described the following key barriers to accessing suitable autism-focused training opportunities: **Time and resource pressures, School Leadership and Personal beliefs around autism and autism-focused training.**

***“There are so many priorities that unless [Senior Leadership Teams] see Autism training as a main focus then it is unlikely to be covered in any meaningful way”.***

Participants also described challenges

implementing training into everyday practice, related to **managing competing demands** and the need to **navigate multiple complex needs and behaviours in the classroom.**

**Learning from those with lived experience** was key in facilitating a more nuanced understanding of autism and neurodivergence, and supported translation of knowledge into practice.

***“Experience of working with autistic young people has been the best educator”***

Respondents also suggested a number of ways to improve existing training provision including greater inclusion of practical examples to support autistic pupils in the classroom.

## What next?

The next phase will include focus groups with neurodivergent young people to explore their experiences of mainstream secondary school.

## Who are we?

The NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) North East and North Cumbria (NENC) is one of 15 NIHR ARCs in England.

We bring together six regional universities, health and social care providers, local authorities, the VCSE sector and public and community groups, to support ‘better fairer health and care at all ages and in all places’.

## Who was involved in this work?

North East and North Cumbria ARC Young Person’s Advisory Network; Newcastle University; Durham University; CNTW NHS Foundation Trust; Children North East; Gladstone Terrace Centre for Young People.

## For more information:

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