

## Introduction

Raising a child with special needs is a journey filled with moments of both happiness and challenge. You may be looking to get a deeper understanding of your child's strengths and needs, and you may be thinking about whether to find extra support outside of the services in your local area.

We have put this leaflet together to help you make informed decisions about which provider best fits your needs. This information aims to support you and your family's financial and emotional well-being during the assessment process. Any pink text is a link you can click for more information.



## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that affects how a person experiences and interacts with the world. This difference (or 'divergence') from the typical pattern of brain (or 'neuro') development experienced by most people in our population is why some people with autism like to be referred to as 'neurodivergent'.

Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable part of human diversity. You may have heard of other types of neurodivergent needs such as ADHD, epilepsy or dyslexia. When we have lots of people with neurodivergent and neurotypical brains together, we have a richer experience through 'neurodiversity'.

Every autistic person is unique and just like any other individual, autistic people have different skills, passions, tolerances, language abilities, coordination and many other characteristics. These differences are due to genetics, experience, coping skills, support networks, practice and just being human! Some autistic people experience challenges that require additional support; this could be all the time, or just for certain periods of time, for example, when going through big life changes.

## What is a learning disability?

Some autistic people also have a learning disability, which is when a person has reduced learning abilities generally and difficulty with doing everyday tasks like household chores, managing money, understanding information and learning new skills. It is helpful to know whether a person with autism also has a learning disability as it will help you to understand what support they will need.

## Understanding your child's needs

If you need help understanding your child's needs, you can talk to your local Parent Carer Forum. They cover [Bristol](#), [North Somerset](#) and [South Gloucestershire](#) and offer lots of free events and information sessions.

You can meet other parents, talk to experts and learn from families who are going through the same things. Parent carer forums are run by parents, so they know what you're going through. They can also help you to find local services and other groups that can support your family. Parent carer forums work with local services to help improve them so please do share your thoughts with them.

## Accessing the right support for your family



Local services have an important job and they must follow various laws to help children with special needs and disabilities, even if they don't have an official diagnosis. For example, local authorities must offer a [short breaks programme](#) for all children and young people. Schools also have a [duty to do their best](#) to help children with special needs all the time. They can also change things to make it easier; these changes are called '[reasonable adjustments](#)'. For example, if someone has trouble wearing their school uniform because it feels uncomfortable, the school must change their policy to meet the needs of that pupil.

If you ever need help talking to the school, you can ask [SEND and You](#). They can tell you more about the changes schools should make and may be able to support you in a meeting.

## Seeking an autism assessment

Sirona Care and Health is locally commissioned to provide a Specialist Autism Assessment Service for children and young people with suspected autism and functional difficulties associated with autism, living in the Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire areas.



If you are thinking about seeking an autism assessment and your child attends school, start by speaking to the SENCO about your child's needs. You may also wish to explore support from other services, such as Speech and Language Therapy. Your SENCO can help you understand the options available and identify the most appropriate next steps.

If the SENCO is unable or unwilling to help, or your child does not attend school, you can speak to your GP or contact the Neurodiversity Hub. If you are considering a private assessment, any report should meet the NICE guidelines checklist on page 4. You can also choose to access an assessment through Right to Choose, see page 3 for more information.

## What are NICE guidelines?

NICE guidelines are evidence-based recommendations developed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK, offering clear and up-to-date guidance on healthcare practices. These guidelines help healthcare professionals and patients make informed decisions about diagnosis, treatment and care based on the best available evidence and expert consensus. We have provided a checklist on page 4 to ensure any report you seek meets these guidelines and quality standards.

## What is the Right to Choose?

Referral to the local Sirona Care and Health Specialist Autism Assessment Service is the locally commissioned NHS route for assessment. This service is part of the Local Offer and the team works in collaboration with Local Authority Social Care and Education services and other local services.

The NHS Choice Framework sets out when patients have the legal right to choose any provider or team that offers the service they require, for their first outpatient appointment. This is known as the Right to Choose.

A Right to Choose referral can only be made by the GP and there are restrictions about which alternative providers GPs can refer to; it cannot just be any provider.

- The provider must already have an NHS standard commissioned contract with an NHS Integrated Care Board in England for the service you require, i.e. Autism Assessment.
- The provider could be a voluntary organisation, a non-NHS provider or an NHS provider.
- The provider service/team must be led by a consultant or a mental health care professional.
- The assessment must comply with NICE guidelines, which may not necessarily be the case.

Your GP will be able to give limited advice on which provider will offer you the most suitable assessment and will take your child's needs and preferences into account. You should conduct your own research into providers offering autism assessments through Right to Choose to support informed decision-making on the most suitable assessment route for your child.

The local Specialist Assessment Service provided by Sirona Care and Health is not able to advise on the selection of an alternative provider. Some providers that meet Right to Choose criteria may offer an online (or virtual) assessment, rather than an in-person (or face-to-face) assessment.

## What if I would like to choose a Private Provider?

If a family wish to choose a provider of autism assessments that is not a Right to Choose provider, then they can do so and contact the provider directly themselves. In this case, the family would have to pay for the cost of the assessment themselves. Families are advised to look at the checklist on the next page to ensure the assessment and report will support them in accessing other services after the assessment.

It is important to note that recommendations for support and follow-up services included in autism reports from alternative providers (including private assessments) may not be available as part of existing local services. To secure any support, your child may need an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment to understand and meet their needs. There is more information [here](#).

# Private assessment checklist



If you decide to pay for your child to have a private assessment, instead of accessing one provided by an NHS neurodevelopmental service or via Right to Choose, the assessment and report should comply with the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [guidance on autism assessments](#). To ensure your report is NICE compliant it must meet the following checklist:

1. The person - ideally two professionals - completing the assessment should be suitably qualified and experienced to give a diagnosis. They could be:
  - A Consultant Community Paediatrician, Child Psychiatrist or Specialist Nurse.
  - A Clinical Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist or Occupational Therapist.Any professional should have current registration with either the GMC, HCPC or NMC.
2. Your child should be the centre of the process and the assessment must include direct observation or interaction with your child. For a virtual/online assessment, information from other sources must be sufficient to compensate for this.
3. Information must come from a variety of sources. This includes detailed discussions with the child or young person, if possible, as well as their parents, caregivers, teachers and other important people in their life.
4. Standardised questionnaires or assessments must be used to gather information as part of the assessment.
5. Assessments must include a complete medical and developmental history, including social, environmental and psychological factors.
6. Assessments must consider if there might be other reasons for their experiences or differences, like learning disabilities, language issues, tough life events, mental health issues, relationship concerns or developmental trauma.

The report you receive after the assessment should include the findings of the assessment and the reasons for the conclusions drawn. The report should also include signposting relevant to the individual and their family to locally available support for children and young people and their parents and carers, as well as contact details for local and national support organisations.

## Key Contacts

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**Bristol Parent Carers**

Click for website [here](#)  
Email: [info@bristolparentcarers.org.uk](mailto:info@bristolparentcarers.org.uk)

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**Bristol Local Offer:**

Click for website [here](#)

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**North Somerset  
Parent Carers**

Click for website [here](#)  
Email: [admin@nspcwt.org](mailto:admin@nspcwt.org)

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**North Somerset  
Local Offer**

Click for website [here](#)

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**South  
Gloucestershire  
Parent Carers**

Click for website [here](#)  
Email: [team@sglospc.org.uk](mailto:team@sglospc.org.uk)

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**South  
Gloucestershire  
Local Offer**

Click for website [here](#)

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**Sirona Care and  
Health**

Click for website [here](#)

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**ICB**

Click for website [here](#)

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**SEND and You**

Click for website [here](#)

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**Autism Central**

Click for website [here](#)

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Working together  
for SEND families



Bristol Parent  
Carer Forum  
Shaping the Future *Together*



PARENT CARERS WORKING TOGETHER

