

**Employment Opportunities for People with Autism
Task Group**

Final Report and Recommendations

November 2023

Task group membership

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The task group would like to thank the council officers, supported internship leads and particularly residents who shared their views and experiences.

Introduction

This task group was commissioned by the Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel to undertake a review of services for people with autism. It was agreed to focus on employment opportunities and had the following aims:

- To review current employment opportunities in Merton for people with autism.
- To review employment opportunities provided by the council.
- To make recommendations to improve provision.

The task group believes that creating employment opportunities for people with autism, and closing the gap in employment opportunities for all, aligns well with the Council's strategic priority of Nurturing Civic Pride. It builds upon the notion of inclusivity and fairness for all.

The Council Plan states that: *To nurture civic pride across Merton, however, the borough must become a fairer, more equal, and inclusive place. That means tackling inequalities and disadvantage across the borough and supporting those who are most in need.*

Conversations with residents and with officers highlighted common observations:

- There is a lot of good work being done in Merton to improve opportunities for people with autism to secure employment.
- Many improvements have been made, particularly in transitioning from education to employment, but much more can be done.

- It is important to consider the cohort of older young adults who have not benefitted from more recent improvements.
- Employability can and should be built into discussions with people with autism and their parent carers from a young age.
- Better links must be made with local employers that have autism-friendly recruitment and employment practices.

The National Picture

A Survey conducted by Ambitious about Autism found that Just 29% of autistic people in the UK are in full or part-time employment, one of the lowest rates of employment of all disability groups.

People with autism face many barriers preventing them from finding meaningful, sustained employment. This includes access to good quality careers advice and inflexible hiring practices. In addition, the application and interview processes are difficult to navigate, making this the biggest barrier to them finding work. ([Position statements | Ambitious about Autism](#))

The National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults 2021-2026 has identified increasing employment opportunities as a priority. Again, it identifies recruitment processes and lack of support to find work as the main barriers. ([The National Strategy for Autistic People, Children and Young People 2021 to 2026 | Local Government Association](#))

A YouGov poll by the National Autistic Society in 2019 has shown improvements in employer awareness of autism, as well as confidence in recruiting autistic people (The Autism Act, 10 Years On, 2019). ([New review to boost employment prospects of autistic people - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#))

Autism charity Autistica are raising awareness of the barriers autistic people face with the traditional interview process. The Hire Different Campaign is an opportunity which can be explored: <https://www.autistica.org.uk/hire-different>

The Merton Picture

As community leader and the largest local employer, the Council can play an important role in reviewing internal policies and encouraging other local employers to do the same. The National Strategy says that employer awareness plays a crucial role in addressing many of these issues, both in enabling them to make the right adjustments to recruitment practices or identifying the adjustments their employees might need.

Councillors were able to draw upon personal experiences, as well as meetings with parents of children with autism to understand the importance of long-term sustainable employment opportunities. They met with officers across the council as well as other organisations who had established supported internships.

The Findings of the Task Group

Kids First

Kids First is Merton's forum for parents of children and young people with disabilities or special needs. It provides workshops and other support activities for parents with a view to supporting them to achieve improved outcomes for their children. It also provides the means for parents to meet other parents in the same or similar situation, and to support each other. Kids First supports parents in influencing the development of service provision and planning in the Borough, giving them a voice on local issues.

Over the course of two discussions with parent carers, the task group gained vital insight into the lived experience of young people with autism moving from education and into employment. All the parent carers spoke about their children having a huge desire to be in jobs, but all have experienced barriers to gaining employment and suffered negative feelings as a result. The task group heard how their children struggle with interviews and communicating with professionals and suffer from the sudden lack of a timetable and routine that being in education offers them. It was also felt that it would benefit adult children if their parent carers were included in communication in order to be able to support them.

It was particularly identified that children who are *now* post-25 have not been able to benefit from many of the more recent processes which have been put in place to improve the transition from education into employment and to make autism-awareness training mandatory for social workers.

Parent carers thought the earlier the better in terms of discussing their children's future routes into employment, and that even at the Early Years stage there can be skill-building. It would also be good to be informed of which employers are autism-friendly in their hiring practices. This would also be helpful for young people to be able to enter part-time employment whilst still in education. It was felt that there was an expectation for young people to only consider employment once they have completed their education when many have a desire to do both, as many teenagers do!

Merton Autism Strategy 2018-2023

The task group members received an overview of the Merton Autism Strategy 2018-2023 which oversees the delivery of core services and commissioned services across education, health and care partners and the voluntary sector for people of all ages.

The Strategy has been developed in partnership with the health, public and voluntary sectors. Also working closely with service users, parents and carers.

The aim of the Strategy is to make Merton an autism-friendly borough in which people with autism are able to live fulfilling and rewarding lives within a society that accepts and understands them, supporting them to reach their full potential at all stages of their lives.

Employment service for young people, Merton pilot

The Employment Pilot, was originally set up in September 2022 to run for 18 months with a review after one year. The scheme has worked with a cohort of young people who are not eligible for services from the Learning Disability Team, but have clear support needs around learning and in other areas. The group are aged under 30 and have or have had an EHCP, and have expressed an interest in finding employment.

Staff in the Pilot team work intensively with the job seeker to ascertain possible areas of work and to assess their vocational and social skills and experiences. Support is given to construct a CV, apply for jobs and work trials and carry out interview training and some travel training to learn routes to work. Other training arranged is around confidence building and in specific areas such as health and hygiene.

Many of the referrals are people who have some work experience but have not sustained this or have the opportunity to continue. For example, some graduates from Project Search who were not able to find employment through that scheme have benefitted from the extra time and opportunities provided by the pilot.

To date the scheme has found paid jobs for 21 young people. We are reviewing the pilot through the Adult Social Care, Integrated Care and Public Health DMT.

Merton Employment Team (MET)

The Merton Employment Team works with adults with a learning disability and aims to secure paid employment or long-term volunteering options if paid work is not a viable outcome. The team is prepared to work on a longer-term basis to both prepare customers to become 'job ready' and then support them once in a job or work placement. Staff help prepare CVs, give interview practice, identify potential areas of work, find job tasters and help with travel training where needed.

The team works with the Adult Learning service to enable customers to access relevant training courses. All referrals come via Merton's Learning Disability Team, or if not, are assessed by that team. MET had success for a number of years, often placing 20 people per year into paid jobs. The increased needs of newer referrals added to a more demanding jobs market (exacerbated by the pandemic) has meant that in the past two years this number has halved, with more people moving into volunteering roles. The Employment Pilot has worked alongside the Merton Employment Team.

Towards Employment Team (TET)

The Towards Employment project is funded by successful bids to a variety of funding streams and sources local jobs, apprenticeship and training opportunities for young people in Merton. The team works closely with potential candidates to build self-confidence apply for jobs, attend interviews and support people to stay in the role. The project also signposts clients to suitable services, builds relationships with employers to help with in-work support. Signposting clients to relevant services is an important part of their role, and they are always on the lookout for employers that are disability-confident and have entry-level roles suitable for the project.

The project has been very successful in supporting the long term unemployed but has had very limited interaction with those on the autistic spectrum because the remit of the team is to provide a universal offer for those ready and able to engage in opportunities sourced. The service is widely promoted, and by default but not design, many of the beneficiaries of the project do have additional needs, but more often than not they do not want to be identified primarily by their EHCP. The team will work with them based on the needs they present with. The team is funded by successfully bidding for appropriate grants/funding pots which means criteria to access opportunities is subject to change.

The task group were extremely impressed with the work of the Towards Employment Project. The work is making a difference to the lives of local people. The project currently secures funding on an annual basis, and councillors would be keen to see sustainable long-term funding.

Merton Library Volunteer Scheme

Merton libraries has one of the largest and most successful volunteer schemes in the UK. There are currently over 750 volunteers working in different areas of library services. The scheme enables volunteer to choose their role and gain experience within their own areas of interest.

The libraries employ a wide range of neurodiverse volunteers, including those with autism. Volunteers with additional needs are supported by permanent staff. In addition, the service has been successful in obtaining funding from Arts Council to ensure library buildings are autism-friendly.

Merton Adult Learning Strategy 2023 – 2026

Cabinet agreed earlier this year a new Merton Adult Learning Strategy. The strategy statement includes:

“The London Borough of Merton is committed to providing high quality and sustainable adult learning to improve the social, economic, health and wellbeing outcomes of our residents. We will deliver this through a strategic investment approach: commissioning provision to the best providers in the field and by developing sophisticated evidence based approaches to what we deliver.

We aim to reduce inequalities across the borough by focussing a significant proportion of our investment on those most socially and / or economically disadvantaged whilst providing a broad range of learning opportunities to develop all of our resident’s skills.”

A key element within the strategy is to increase the pathways for learners into ‘good work’ and specialist training provision is provided for neurodivergent groups.

Merton Council Human Resources

HR is very proud of the work on neurodiversity (of which autism is a part) that has taken place over the past 12-18 months, including extensive information in the Wellbeing pages on the Hub— [Neurodiversity \(sharepoint.com\)](#)— and e-learning packages on autism that over 300 members of staff have taken to date. They do not target any specific groups for recruitment as they ensure their practices are open, fair and accessible for applicants from all demographics, abilities and backgrounds. It is also made clear to all applicants that should they have any special requirements there will be full support available to help them through the selection process.

Any time there is an apprenticeship vacancy, if the Towards Employment Team has a suitable young person, they can ask for a guaranteed interview. The redeployment list also goes to the TET for early notification. On the Council’s graduate programme, one of the existing graduates has autism and has now secured permanent employment at the Council.

Merton Council is a Disability Confident Employer.

There is a challenge, as in every organisation, to identify the number of neurodiverse employees as it requires self-identification.

Support is provided for people at interview, including candidates having a chosen person to attend with them, and people being given interview questions in advance. There is no discrimination and for the right candidate everything will be done to support them into employment at the Council. There is a robust Occupational Health Programme, and there is support for Managers to enable reasonable adjustments across their teams.

The Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead is currently looking at expanding the staff support networks. They are introducing a disability support network which will include colleagues who have any form of neurodiversity.

SEND Employability Group

The council has recently established a Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Employability Group. The group is chaired by the Head of Education Inclusion and has representatives from across the council and an education provider.

The group is hoping to increase access to employment opportunities and secure work-based placements.

Employment in local businesses

The task group wanted to get an update on the progress amongst local businesses in employing people with autism. Through discussions with officers and representatives from the business community, it became apparent that many local employers are still developing in this area. Councillors were told that small businesses face greater barriers to employing groups that need additional support because of the additional resources required for training. Small businesses need staff who are able to start the job with minimal support. Businesses often require people who can work flexible hours.

Officers told task group members that the council need to forge closer working relationships with the small business community. They may have roles within their organisations which are suitable for people who are autistic, but they need support to implement autism-friendly recruitment processes.

The Council as a community leader can lead on discussions with large retail stores regarding issues such as the barriers which exist in their recruitment practice. However, the council will need to ensure that its own practice is autism-friendly before advising others.

Project Search, St George's

The task group met with Celia Dawson OBE, Headteacher at Cricket Green School for children with Special Educational Needs. The school has a focus on employment, and therefore pupils are given skills such as working in the school café. There is also a supported internship programme called Project Search which is a partnership between Cricket Green School and St Georges Hospital in Tooting. The scheme offers a supported internship at the hospital to a young person with additional needs for a six-month period. The placement offers the young person competitive skills which can help them find full-time employment. The task group were told that there are limited employment opportunities available in Merton and a joined-up approach is required.

Supported Internships at Hillingdon Council

The task group met with the lead for supported internships at Hillingdon Council. There are five projects across Hillingdon in partnership with a hotel, hospital, shopping centre. They work closely with an education provider.

The task group received an overview of what would be required to implement a project search model in a local authority. The project requires a dedicated training room within the council, resource from the IT, as well as support from 2-3 members of staff, at least one as a full-time dedicated role. This can support about 15 young people in supported internships. There are start-up costs of £20,000 as well as additional infrastructure costs. The project took about ten months to set up.

The project was established to create opportunities for people with autism to help them find work when they leave school. The young people are not paid but are treated like council staff. The programmes run for one year.

Many of the witnesses the task group spoke to are in favour of a supported internship model for Merton. This is an opportunity for the local workforce to benefit from the skills and abilities that people with autism can bring to the workplace.

The task group were impressed by the programme run by Hillingdon Council. It is recognised that there is a cost implication for this approach with a dedicated room, IT resources, staff and start-up costs. However, these costs could be mitigated over the longer term in greater health and wellbeing amongst people with autism feeling like they are making a valuable contribution to society by securing meaningful employment. It can also boost the local economy and help to fill gaps in the job market.

Recommendations

	Recommendation	Implementation
1	Explore the scope for having a supported internship model in Merton Council.	HR, CLLF, ASC
2	Examine the Council's status as a Disability Confident Employer level and whether there is scope to improve its rating.	HR
3	Towards Employment Project to update the Healthier Communities and Older People Scrutiny Panel in early 2024 on its funding and outcomes.	CLLF
4	The scope for an extension to the Employment service for young people pilot be reported to the Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel.	ASC, CLLF
5	HR to look at guidance from the National Autistic Society, the LGA and London Councils to see if there is further best practice guidance on increasing employment opportunities and adapting recruitment practices.	HR
6	For an update from the SEND Employability Group to come to Healthier Communities and Older People Scrutiny Panel.	CLLF

Who the task group met with:

Parent Carers living in Merton (through KidsFirst)

Andy Ottaway-Searle, Head of Direct Provision

Anthony Hopkins, Head of Library, Heritage and Education Service

Keith Shipman, Head of Education Inclusion

Mellisa Stewart, Towards Employment Project

Peter Little, Head of Organisational Development

Caroline Ramsey, Recruitment Manager

Cate Gachet, Karla Finikin, Head of SEND Integrated Service

Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, Assistant Director of Education and Early Help

Gillian Moore, Head of Learning Disability (integrated)

Celia Dawson, Hillingdon Project Search.

Scrutiny support:

Stella Akintan, Scrutiny Officer; Octavia Lamb, Policy & Scrutiny Manager

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