



Autism  
Education  
Trust

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# AET Strategy

## 2021-2024



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### **The Autism Education Trust (AET) was formed as a partnership in 2008 to help improve the quality of education for autistic children and young people across England.**

At the heart of the AET is the belief that good outcomes can only be achieved by working in partnership. The AET is a not for profit partnership organisation founded by two national autism charities – the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism. Supported by the Department for Education, the AET promotes and supports partnerships throughout the education system to improve educational access, experience and outcomes for autistic children and young people.

The AET is not a legal entity and is hosted on behalf of the partnership by the National Autistic Society (NAS). The AET is however governed by its own Board, which determines its strategy, protects its values and both supports, and holds the staff team to account for the delivery of its objectives. Board membership reflects a broad and rounded perspective from across the autism and education communities to include autistic people and parents.

The AET uses a social franchising model and has a network of licenced training partners. Social franchising involves enabling another organisation to deliver a proven intervention (in this case the AET systems and workforce development programme) to agreed standards but without dictating the exact delivery model. This enables a range of different organisations with different business models to deliver the AET Programme in a way that works for their business and their local community. The primary aim is to maximise social benefit which is what distinguishes it from the commercial use of franchising.

Our work (and that of our licenced partners) centres on upskilling the workforce, supporting system leaders and promoting good practice standards for education settings through the provision of a range of professional development training and resources for early years, schools and post 16 settings. Our licenced training partners are central to ensuring that our workforce development training and resources are accessible and high quality.

## 2 Vision Statement

**Our vision is a world where all autistic children and young people experience a positive education that supports wellbeing.**



### 3 Mission Statement

**Our mission is to empower the education workforce and support them in securing a positive education that supports wellbeing for all autistic children and young people.**



**Central to successful social franchising is ensuring that a clear set of social values are embedded and replicated in every franchised organisation.**

**Our values are:**



**Voice** – We take into account the views and needs of young people, parents/carers and professionals across the ethnic, cultural, social-economic, gender and disability diversity in developing the AET’s governance, plans, and work.



**Partnership** – We work collaboratively to run and deliver the AET programme. We work through partners to deliver our work because our focus is on capacity building and system wide change.



**Reach and sustainability** – The AET Programme reaches across the different education settings, the whole autism spectrum, age ranges from early years, through school age and onto post 16 and reaches across the ethnic, cultural, social-economic, gender and disability diversity among the autistic population. By continuing to develop our reach, and working sensitively to meet the diversity of need, the AET remains current and sustainable.

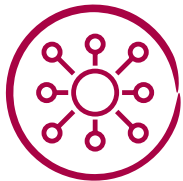


**Impact, outcomes and evidence** – Our aim is for autistic children and young people to learn and thrive in all education settings. Materials, resources and support remain evidence-based and current; and we will work to measure outcomes and impact at an individual and strategic level so that we know what works and this feeds back into the evidence for future materials and resources.

**Our vision, mission and values culminate in two simple statements that summarise the AET Brand:**



Autism is a difference not a deficit and we value the strength that comes with embracing neurodiversity and working in partnership.

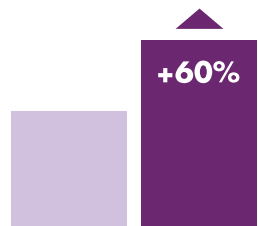


The AET is the go-to destination for autism education expertise brought to life by our unique network of autism education specialists, autistic people, parents of autistic children, academics and education professionals.

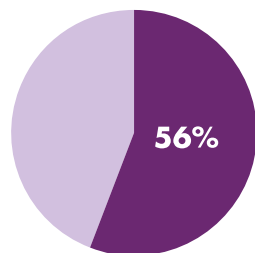
## 6 Context

### 6.1 Why do autistic children and young people need us to continue our work?

Unfortunately many autistic children and young people still do not have a positive education experience that empowers them to achieve their potential. Some of the statistics that reflect this sad fact are:



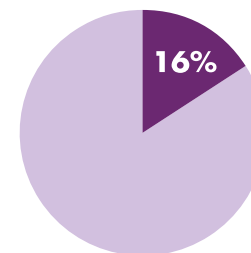
Formal exclusion from school of those with an autism diagnosis have risen by **60%** in five years.



**56%** of autistic children have been sent home illegally or denied a full education.



Fewer than **one in four** autistic young people access education beyond school.



**Only 16%** of autistic adults are currently in full-time paid employment.



## 6.2 What does the market need us to do?

### 6.2.1 Digital learning and implementation literature reviews

**The key findings of the two literature reviews were as follows:**

- There has been a move away from one-off lecture / workshop-based interventions towards a social model of learning involving expert-to-professional and peer-to-peer conversations and sharing of learning needs and potential solutions, delivered over a long period. This trend is justified by research evidence: one-off external training events do not, in isolation, result in sustained change to education working practice, and the best evidence for the efficacy of teacher training / behaviour change programmes comes from long duration interventions.
- Also, there has been a move to more active learning strategies, with the learning and development happening (and being supported) in situ and around realistic or real learner/pupil interactions and the actual curriculum that needs to be delivered. Again, the implementation research literature supports active learning as an effective approach for changing practice in education settings.
- Open and user generated content is increasingly being shared, adapted and personalised to the needs of the professional learner.
- The adoption of digital technologies, including social media tools (e.g. Facebook, YouTube), to flexibly support the learning process is becoming more common.
- There has been a move to more use of 'micro' learning content, including video, and also some emerging evidence of the positive impact of virtual and augmented reality on behaviour change, e.g. empathy building.



## 6.2 What does the market need us to do?

### 6.2.2 The Impact of the Pandemic

**The financial pressure on our hubs as a result of the pandemic is likely to result in further scrutiny by hub senior leaders and finance directors as to whether the AET licence is value for money. This consequence of the pandemic highlights again the point that we must ensure our offer and customer service makes the AET licence a ‘must have’ rather than a ‘nice to have’.**

The pandemic has also emphasised the need for our business to create more digital options for our customers. Furthermore, it has highlighted the need for all businesses, including ours, to be agile so that we can respond quickly, efficiently and effectively to a constantly changing landscape.

With crisis comes a recognition that things can and must be done differently though, and this has become particularly true in education. Our publications earlier this year (Learning from the Covid Pandemic) outlined the learning from the pandemic and identified elements of education delivery that have benefitted some autistic children and young people. It is important that we don't lose sight of this learning and continue to maximise the opportunities that come from an education workforce that is beginning to recognise that we no longer have to do things the way they have always been done.

It will be important for the AET to create resources that are useful for parents struggling to support home schooling and remote learning along with resources for education settings on recovery curriculums and approaches that will work for autistic pupils. Finally, it will be important that we continue to work with our academic partners to research and monitor the impact of the pandemic on education for autistic children and young people.



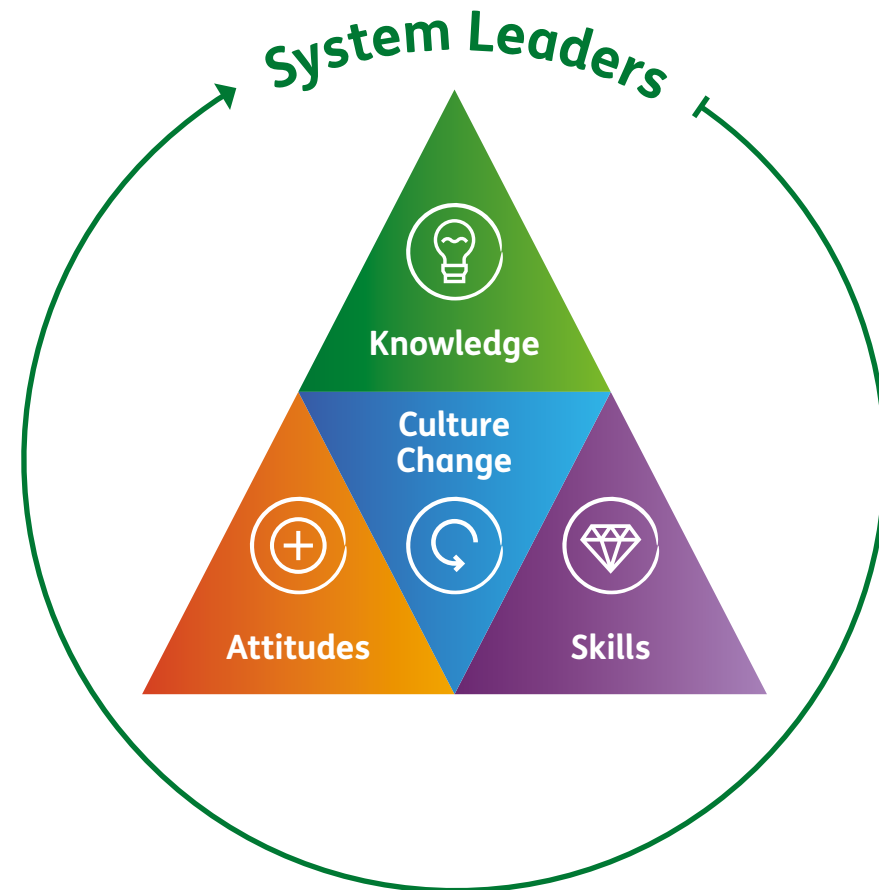
## 7 Top Priorities

To achieve our vision we need there to be a significant change in the current, accepted culture surrounding the education of autistic children and young people. Changing culture requires a change in knowledge, skills, attitudes and support for system leaders.

To achieve our vision, respond to the needs of the market and maximise the opportunities the pandemic has created we must focus on four priorities over the next three years:

- **Sharing our knowledge and understanding**
- **Developing the skills of the workforce**
- **Embedding positive attitudes towards neurodiversity**
- **Supporting system leaders**

These four priorities are the cornerstones of this three year AET strategy. The four priorities and their associated objectives are outlined below in more detail. Alongside there is an outcomes statement that defines how we will know we have been successful. Further work will be required to develop ways to measure and benchmark these outcomes before targets can be set.



## 7.1 Share our Knowledge and Understanding

**The AET partnership of autistic young people, parents/carers, academics and professionals coupled with our approach to research and evidence-based resources means that we have expert knowledge to share.**

We will:

- Develop standards and frameworks, training materials and resources that are current, bitesize, accessible, address the needs created by the pandemic and can be used flexibly by our training partners.
- Ensure that a full range of views across the ethnic, cultural, social-economic, gender and disability diversity are represented across the AET network and materials.
- Create online learning and digital resources that can be accessed globally.
- Develop a user friendly website and learning management system through which to access our resources.
- Through product leadership, improved marketing, better customer service and new partnerships maintain our current network and increase the number and type of training partners and other customers nationally and internationally.
- Cement our position as the go-to organisation for education professionals.



### **How will we know we've been successful?**

An increase in education professionals who state they can confidently support autistic children and young people.



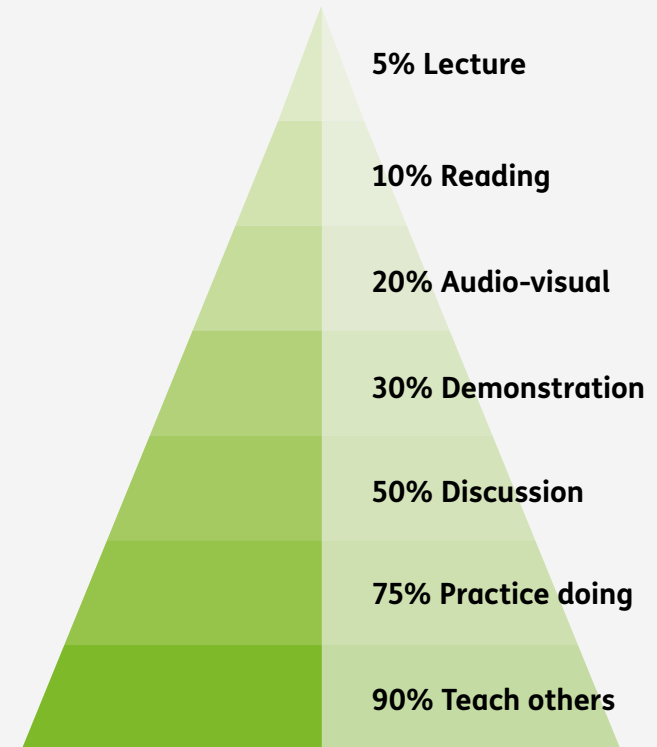
## 7.2 Develop Skills

To develop skills, people have to not just know what to do, they have to understand why and how to do it. They have to practise doing it and to excel in it they have to be able to teach and mentor others in how to do it.

In supporting the education workforce to develop the skills to secure positive education experiences for all autistic children and young people we will:

- Build communities of practice using methods that work best for our training partners and delegates. These are likely to include our social media channels, learning management system, virtual and face to face events. Whichever approach is used the communities of practice will be safe spaces for discussion and debate.
- Support our communities of practice to share their experiences of ‘having a go’ and enable them to seek and provide peer support as they practice.
- Develop the ability of the peer network to mentor new partners as they join the AET community.
- Provide the mechanisms for education settings to be accredited and individual professionals to be certified as a way of demonstrating their level of knowledge, understanding and skill in good autism practice.

### Learning Pyramid



#### How will we know we've been successful?

An increase in autistic children and young people and/or parents who state they receive the appropriate support in their education setting to experience a positive education that supports their wellbeing.

## 7.3 Embed Positive Attitudes

**We need both the current and future workforce to have a positive understanding of autism and neurodiversity and the added value such diversity contributes to our schools, communities and society as a whole. The attitudes of the workforce can be influenced in many different ways but for the purposes of this strategy our focus will be on empowering increasing numbers of autistic young people to self-advocate and become ‘social influencers’ (a term used in social media circles).**

This needs to include the voices of autistic children and young people with severe and profound disabilities and the voices of autistic children and young people with complex needs. To achieve this we will:

- Commission a youth panel consisting of autistic young people from across the spectrum, including those with severe disabilities and/or complex needs. We will ensure their voice is at the centre of the AET. We will expand the influence of our youth panel through our
- We will embed real stories in all our materials and resources and actively promote the co-facilitation of training with autistic young people across our network.
- We will work with the AET youth panel to promote positive images and examples of neurodiversity with their peers using the social media channels they and their peers use.



### **How will we know we've been successful?**

An increase in the number of autistic young people who state they feel empowered, supported and able to self-advocate.

## 7.4 Support System Leaders

**Effective system leadership requires collaborative, inclusive leadership and governance across systems. It is not enough for there to be a coalition of the willing, or of like-minded professionals. It is vital that every part of the local system is engaged. Evidence indicates that strong relationships are the most important factor in leading successful transformation, ones which enable leaders to overcome organisational boundaries for the benefit of the whole system and the whole population. Where this is working well, it is often because local leaders at all levels are taking bold steps to move away from traditional ways of working individually towards collaborative approaches that benefit all.**

System leaders need a clear vision, over the longer term, for achieving better education, health and wellbeing for all autistic children and young people, alongside integrated activity, for which leadership can be held to account by citizens. Achieving such a vision requires joint commissioning models that have a focus on wellbeing for children and young people and recognise the importance of integrated workforce planning and development that will support the sustainability and resilience of the sector. To support system leaders we will:

- Co-produce an education commissioning model that has a clear vision.
- Work strategically with our partners to actively promote the AET as a mainstream plus service and support them to implement the AET to help manage demand on specialist services.
- Work with our partners, using our new evaluation toolkit, to develop the evidence that system leaders need of the impact of the AET at both an individual and strategic level. Use the information we gather to develop a theory of change model and improve our evaluation framework.
- Engage and co-produce with leadership groups such as the Education Leadership Group at Birmingham, the Local Government Association, the Education Training Foundation.



### **How will we know we've been successful?**

An increase in the attendance and engagement levels of autistic children and young people in education settings.



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