

# Including Support for Intimate Lives in Local Autism Strategies

## About SAAIL

SAAIL: Supporting Autistic Adults' Intimate Lives is a participatory research project exploring how adult social care in England can better recognise and support autistic people's intimate lives. SAAIL is funded by NIHR SSCR. Visit our website [www.autlives.com](http://www.autlives.com) for free autism and intimacy toolkits and resources.

## Why intimate lives matter

Love and relationships are part of an ordinary life for many people. However, autistic people experience more challenges and barriers around intimate relationships and seldom receive support in this area. Health and Social Care in England should address these inequalities and help people to enjoy a fulfilling life which includes support with sex and relationships. Health and care policy shapes priorities, guides service provision, and ultimately determines the support people receive locally. However, the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults: 2021 to 2026 overlooks autistic people's intimate lives [[Read our report here](#)].

## Local autism strategies in England

A local autism strategy is an action plan outlining how local authorities will support autistic people, helping them feel included and live well. According to the Autism Act (2009), all 153 councils in England should have an up-to-date local autism strategy, developed with a local autism partnership board.

## What we did

This study examined whether local autism strategies in England mentioned support for the intimate lives of autistic people. We found that 106 local authorities had local autism strategies. We identified and analysed 89 strategies (15 strategies were jointly produced by more than one local authority).

## Key findings

- Only 37% of councils had up-to-date autism strategies, with just 55% of these mentioning sex, relationships, or intimate lives.
- While support for most aspects of life is included, intimate lives are often overlooked or ignored in local autism strategies.
- Discussions on sex and relationships often focused on risk management.
- No strategy included sex and intimate relationships as a priority area, unlike employment which was frequently prioritised.
- Few strategies considered people's intimate lives within main priority areas such as transition to adulthood, home, housing, and independent living.
- Few strategies acknowledged how greater diversity of gender identities and sexualities among autistic people impacts their sex and relationship support needs.

Read the research journal article [here](#)

**“Intimate lives are often overlooked or ignored in local autism strategies”**

# Our Recommendations for Including Intimate Lives in Your Local Autism Strategy



## Recommendations

Based on our research findings, we recommend that those involved in updating or producing local autism strategies:

### 1 Recognise and represent intimate lives as part of ordinary life

Ensure autistic people's intimate lives are represented across your strategy as one part of an ordinary life, to be supported alongside other aspects of social life such as work and employment. Use images, vignettes, and case studies to convey this message throughout the strategy. One local autism strategy, the Lancashire and South Cumbria Autism Strategy, consistently represents sex and relationships as part of autistic people's ordinary lives. It is a good example of how intimate lives can be meaningfully included and prioritised.

We recommend that you read Lancashire and South Cumbria's Autism Strategy. [Read it here.](#)

### 2 Include intimate lives in home, housing, and independent living priorities

Everyone deserves a home that provides a safe and private space where intimate relationships can flourish. For the many thousands of autistic people likely to live in supported living and residential care settings, home can be a barrier to intimate life. Your strategy should explicitly consider people's intimate lives in discussions about support provision around home, housing, and independent living.

### 3 Recognise intimate lives in transition to adulthood discussions

The transition to adulthood is a particularly challenging time for autistic young people. During this period, most young people navigate challenges related to sex and intimate relationships. You should explicitly consider young people's sex and relationship needs and integrate these within the priorities for transitioning to adulthood.

### 4 Include sex and relationship support for LGBTQ+ people

Autistic people are more likely to identify as gender diverse and LGBTQ+, which impacts their sex and relationship support needs. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategy priorities should commit to supporting autistic people in these areas. However, many local strategies only offer generic discussions on gender and sexuality as protected characteristics. Instead, include thoughtful, nuanced discussions on the intersection of autism and sexual and gender diversity, and show a genuine commitment to supporting queer autistic people's intimate lives based on their expressed needs.

### 5 Avoid risk-focused representations of sex and relationships

Include balanced discussions of sex and relationships, acknowledging both the risks and positive potentials for autistic people. Overemphasising risks without positive representations reinforces harmful stereotypes and promotes restrictive, risk-averse care. Ensure your strategy emphasises professionals' responsibility to support individuals in fostering positive intimate relationships, not just managing risks.

### 6 Involve autistic people in strategy development

Co-produce strategies with autistic people and their supporters. To start this process, get in touch with local autism partnership boards, self-advocacy groups, and local National Autistic Society (NAS) branches.

### 7 Include intimate lives in consultations

Include specific questions about support for sex and relationships during public consultations to gather evidence of these needs.

### 8 Include actionable commitments and accountability structures

Local autism strategies should move beyond vague promises of support for intimate lives. Strategies should outline clear plans, measurable commitments, and timelines for implementation, with systems for monitoring progress and accountability.

### 9 Advocate for national recognition and support

Lobby for the inclusion of intimate lives in national autism policy, recognising the strong influence of national priorities on local strategies.

#### Download SAAIL's free Local Autism Strategy and Partnership Board Database



This helpful resource contains all publicly available local autism strategies and details of each local autism partnership board in England and is searchable by local authority.

You can download this free database [here](#)



#### Contact the research team

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