

Autism friendly museums

Your guide to becoming an inclusive venue



dimensions
Autism
friendly



In this guide...

<u>Welcome</u>	3
<u>Understanding autism</u>	4
What is sensory overload?	5
Communicating with people who have autism	6
<u>Your sensory friendly environment</u>	9
Let everyone know you're autism friendly	10
<u>Share information</u>	11
Provide signs, instructions and equipment	11
<u>Going a step further</u>	14
Provide specific times	14
Create a private space	14
Create a sensory space	15
Host autism specific events	15
<u>Promoting your autism friendly work</u>	17
Promoting nationally	17
Promoting on social media	18
Promoting locally	18
Where to find local services	19
<u>Thank you</u>	20
<u>Contact Dimensions</u>	20



Welcome

In 2011 we, Dimensions, started our first autism friendly project: autism friendly cinema screenings. Since then, we're pleased to see more and more environments becoming autism friendly.

We want a society where all opportunities are open for people with autism, where they can enjoy their local facilities and venues with minimal anxiety and stress and where no one looks on with judgment.

Museums are crucial for understanding local history, enjoying artwork and exhibitions and provide a fun and engaging learning experience for people of all ages.

We hope this guide will provide you with the knowledge and tools you need to confidently welcome customers on the autism spectrum.



Understanding autism

It's estimated that 1 in 100 people across the country have autism - that's around 700,000* - and that it touches the lives of 2.7 million people per day.

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person senses the world. Too much sensory input can be overwhelming; it can affect how people communicate and, because it's a spectrum condition, everyone experiences it differently and no two people are the same.

This means they can have difficulty with:

- Social communication (making their thoughts understood)
- Social interaction (knowing social rules)
- Social imagination (predicting what others think)
- Processing sensory input (lights, sounds, smells and textures can be too overwhelming).

While it appears to affect more men than women, research shows women tend to “mask” it and sometimes aren't diagnosed until adulthood**.

Masking is a term used to describe when people with autism mimic, or replicate, behaviour from their non-autistic peers without fully understanding their behaviour.

*<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/> | **<https://www.spectrumnews.org/>



What is sensory overload?

People with autism can find it difficult to suppress background input and being able to focus on making decisions or listening to your instructions. Imagine trying to do long division in your head at a music concert.

Too much input can cause sensory overload. This is why routine, reduced sensory input and clear instructions and choices can really help your customers who have autism.

Sensory overload can cause a meltdown – where the person reacts in an erratic way. They may thrash around on the floor crying or shouting. If you see someone having a meltdown, clear the area of potential hazards and try to make the environment less stimulating. Ask the person who's with them, or wait for them to calm down, and ask if there's anything you can do to help.

Sensory overload can also cause shutdown – where the person closes their senses and themselves off. They may not move, speak or respond when engaged with.

If you see someone who has shutdown, give them space and quiet, and make sure someone is around to help when it finishes.

Suggested videos

- ▷ [Watch videos on Dimensions autism friendly playlist](#)
- ▷ [Watch this video from the BBC for a short introduction to autism](#)
- ▷ [Watch this video about sensory sensitivities](#)

Everyone with autism experiences things differently. Someone might be hypersensitive to sound. Someone else might be hypersensitive to silence. Someone might find patterns confusing or painful, so some customers might need warning for an ornate tiled floor, tapestry or painting.



Communicating with people who have autism

Everybody experiences autism differently, so you will find your customers prefer to be communicated with differently too.

But, Dimensions consultant, James, can give you a little insight into his world.

Meet James

“

My name is James Gauntlett, I'm 13 and I have Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of autism.

I love science and engineering and finding out how things work.

I have hyper and hypo sensitive sensory processing disorder and for me that means that I experience sensory input different to others.

For example, sounds are louder, smells are stronger and lights are brighter. So it makes going to public places very difficult and can make me anxious and exhausted.

I have selective mutism which means that I can talk but find it difficult to speak to strangers, particularly when stressed.

I have thought about how you can help people with autism when they visit your museum. Here are my tips for autism friendly museums...



- Eye contact -

Don't expect eye contact - it's not always comfortable and autistic people can find it hard to concentrate on the conversation.

- Listen -

Don't assume silence is because of a lack of understanding. Some autistic people can find it difficult to talk, while others can talk quite a lot about topics or areas they have an interest in or know a lot about.

- Patience -

Autistic people can find it hard to block out background noise, lights and colours to focus on the conversation, so allow at least six seconds of thinking time. My brain is busy processing lots of information so give me time to think about what you asked.

- Help them to choose -

Lots of options can be overwhelming so say, "Shall I show you where the art gallery is?" or "Would you like to see our exhibition on history or art?" Try not to give too much information if it's not necessary and give information in advance.

- Help plan -

Try to be specific but don't make promises you can't keep, such as explaining how the museum is usually quiet at this time, but sometimes groups do come in.

- Empathy -

Some autistic people can say hurtful or rude things when stressed but please don't take it personally, they might be having trouble communicating their distress.

Also, autistic people can have very keen empathy for others and really emotional or realistic scenes can be distressing. It would help me to know what to expect, maybe by looking at photos before I visit.

- Don't rely on words -

Learn basic Makaton (spoken sign language that also uses symbols) such as paintings, artwork, and statues. Or use signs with images (such as a picture frame for artwork and colour coded areas of the museum).

There are a number of videos and guides available to help learn basic Makaton. You don't need to be fluent, but knowing a few words can really help show your understanding and enthusiasm.

- Think literally -

Avoid jargon, slang and metaphors. Just simply say what you mean.

- Independence -

Put up plenty of signs and provide information online before they visit, to reduce the need to ask for help. Some autistic people may dislike things that most people enjoy (such as interactive exhibits) so provide a good guide with plenty of photos.

Make a note of noises, smells, lights and whether the atmosphere changes in a room, for example darkness, moving mannequins, sound effects.

Autistic people know what things they don't like so a good guide will help plan their day better.

- Personal space -

Some people with autism do not like being touched, it can cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

Everyone's experience of autism is different so be aware that some people find it hard to understand personal space and they might want to hug you or take your hand. If you don't want this then please gently and firmly tell them what they should do instead.

Your sensory friendly environment

Museums are generally considered quiet places, which can deter some people with autism from attending. They're afraid of disturbing the peace.

Museums can sometimes be in old buildings too – old buildings can be cold in places and have different smells.

For many people, the main causes of sensory overload are noise, movement, lights and smell. Social interaction can also really increase stress.

You know your museum best – think about the quiet and busy times and make this clear in information about the museum: online and offline. Make it clear if there will be a change in the environment, such as temperature, brightness or smell.

Some old buildings also have heavy doors – think about customers in, or who have someone pushing them in, a wheelchair and prop the doors open or have someone available to help.

Small things can also make a big difference – try to reduce excess noise, such as hand-dryers in the toilets and put up warnings where noise can't be reduced.

Where you can't make changes to the environment itself, provide as much guidance and signs as possible. This will help customers feel prepared.

While many people with autism need a quiet environment, they make noise themselves. People might talk to themselves or others, they are easily excitable and might move around.

It should be clear to other customers that your museum



is autism friendly, and that includes tolerance of certain levels of noise and acceptance of different behaviours.

Your staff teams should see this as an opportunity to help raise public understanding about autism. Encourage them to explain to other customers what being autism friendly means, and by hosting special events too.

Let everyone know you're an autism friendly environment

In our 2018 survey, we found that one of the most important things people with autism and their carers want is understanding.

They want to know they're in a safe and inclusive place where people won't judge them.

Make it clear to all customers – those with autism and those without – that you are an autism friendly museum.

Share the adjustments you have made and the resources and support you have available, but encourage customers to talk to members of staff to find out more.

Use this as an opportunity to share your knowledge and understanding, all while providing security and reassurance to your autistic customers.

Share information

Provide signs, guidance and instructions

Many people with autism hate uncertainty.

They need to have absolute confidence, before entering an environment, about where to go, what to do and what the schedule is.

You can really help them, and the person who supports them.

In signs and guides, try to:

- keep imagery and language consistent
- avoid adjectives and keep language clear and concise
- use clear images that relate to the message you're trying to convey
- avoid bright colours and think carefully about contrasts
- remember your audience will include autistic adults too so don't just aim to appeal to children.



- Before customers arrive -

- Have a map of your museum available on your website and lots of photos.
- Share a social story about what they can expect from their trip to the museum and tailor each one for times of the day (where it might be busier) and events etc.

There's a social story template available to [download from Dimensions website.](#)

- Create a video walk-through of the museum which explains what to expect in each room.

- When customers arrive -

- Have a map of your museum available at the entrance and printed versions available for customers to take.
- Make as much information about the museum available as possible: on your website and as printed signs and leaflets customers can take home.

Think about opening days/times, busy and quiet times, regular events, what to expect on their first visit (e.g. what's in each room) and even introductions to the staff team.

- If there's a large party or a school trip booked in, make it clear when customers arrive or even share the schedule for future bookings in advance.
- Make it clear what's free, what customers have to pay to see and what it means to make a donation.
- Make sensory equipment, such as ear defenders, available at the counter.



- Navigating the museum -

- Have a clear route customers can follow – museums can be like mazes sometimes so suggest a route with arrows and (if possible) footprint stickers on the floor.
- Signpost the different sections using visual imagery and colour code different sections of the museum.
- Put clear signs on the entrance to each room explaining what's in there.
- Put clear signs directing to the exit and toilets.
- Do you have a café? Make sure there's space for wheelchair users, put menus and prices on every table and provide a wide range of seating (benches, chairs, comfy seats, even beanbags).

- Understanding what to do -

- Have clear 'Do not touch' and 'Please touch' signs.
- Put up clear signs saying where they can't take food or drink.
- Put up information about interactive exhibitions: what to expect, what to do and what they can and can't touch.



Going a step further

These are the basic steps you can take to make your museum more autism friendly.

But there are some extra steps you can take to make the experience even more inclusive and enjoyable for your customers on the spectrum.

Provide specific times for extra autism adjustments

Some people might only feel comfortable in the museum when they know that the environment is autism friendly, and that other customers are completely aware and comfortable this is an autism friendly time.

This gives you the opportunity to implement more autism friendly adjustments (reducing the lighting, having extra staff on hand to provide further support and guidance and providing some sensory equipment) as well as getting a better understanding about your autistic customers and what interests they have.

Create a private space

If you have the space available, make it clear to customers that there is somewhere private, quiet and calm they can use if they start experiencing sensory overload.

Some time to relax might be the difference between a meltdown or shutdown, and having to leave or being able to continue their time at the museum.

Create a sensory space

If you have a private area away from hustle and bustle, you can create a sensory room or space for customers. This can be an area where children can go to enjoy some sensory activities.

Provide some board games and educational books and resources for entertainment, including fidget toys for self-stimulatory behaviour (stimming).

Projectors with calming scenes, fairy lights, floor mats, beanbags, cushions and pop-up tents are great ways to create a comfortable and welcoming environment.

Customers can use this area when the museum becomes too overwhelming.

This sensory space can be a place for someone to self-regulate and take a moment to calm. It helps them to reset so they can enjoy the museum at their own pace.

Make sure it's clear this sensory space is autism friendly and isn't a play area for children – the confusion and noise could cause stress and deter your customers who have autism. Signs saying that stimming and movement is welcome, but that customers need to be safe and respect others, are also important.

Host autism specific events

When you have got to know your customers, you might want to host events they'd enjoy.

Are some of your customers fascinated with local history? Is there an exhibition that's proving popular? Ask an expert to host a talk about it or invite the artist to host an event.

- When hosting events -

- Don't overfill – make sure there are free spaces for customers to sit, move around, change seats and mitigate feeling cramped in.
- Ask customers what adjustments would help them in advance and let them know you'll do what you can to accommodate.
- Create a social story and even a video to walk them through what to do and what to expect. This should include a schedule for the event.
- Put signs and posters up so it's clear where they are, where they should go and what they're there for.
- If it isn't an autism specific event, allow customers with autism to come earlier than the other customers so they can get settled.
- Have everything set up and ready to go before customers arrive.
- Assign someone who is responsible for the event so they can act as compère; introducing the event, explaining what to expect from their time there, what adjustments are in place, directions to the nearest toilet and who they can go to with questions or suggestions.
- If it isn't a free event, finalise payment before the event and if something goes wrong offer a partial refund etc – you don't want to be chasing customers for payment if they're busy supporting someone or they have to leave suddenly.
- Put up clear signs saying where they can't take food and drink.
- Make a quiet space available for customers who want to leave and calm down – put up signs to show where it is and have someone available to let others know if it's occupied.

These events could be open for anybody to come to, with a focus on them being autism friendly.

Always make it clear that the environment is autism friendly and if anyone has any questions they can speak to a member of the team.

Promoting your autism friendly work

Promoting your autism friendly museum and events is key to growing your customer base.

They need to trust your space and feel confident that your staff team understands autism and other customers won't judge.

There are a number of ways you can promote autism friendly museums to your local community – don't keep it all online, provide printed materials and talk to people locally too. Word of mouth will be your greatest asset.

Remember to keep autism friendly at the forefront of your messaging and design – keep the language simple and inclusive (say what you mean) and the design clean with a good contrast (no garish fluorescent colours). Use this as an opportunity to engage with potential customers and showcase your autism awareness and understanding.

Promoting nationally

Email dimensionscampaigns@dimensions-uk.org and let us know you're an autism friendly museum! We'd love to hear more and discuss opportunities for Dimensions to share your work across our digital channels and PR.

Dimensions are well known for autism friendly cinema screenings, so we can share your work with thousands of potential customers and provide extra support and guidance to develop your autism friendly work.

Promoting on social media

Using your Facebook page or Twitter account is a great way to promote your autism friendly museum and events.

Share your work, events you're holding and provide customer service for customers who have questions.

Follow @DimensionsUK on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and tag us in your posts so we can share them too.

Using popular hashtags, tagging relevant accounts and posting on relevant Facebook pages can all help your reach.

Consider these autism hashtags:

- #autismfriendly
- #autismmuseums
- #sensoryfriendly
- #asd

Promoting locally

You can promote your autism friendly museum and events locally by reaching out to local support services, groups, schools and publishing on directories.

Having positive and proactive relationships with local groups, schools and charities is critical but building those trusting networks takes time.

Hosting joint events, inviting them to tour the museum and getting their feedback and advice will help you develop that relationship as well as better understanding local needs and expectations.

Your offline work should also support your online work, if you have posted on a local group's social media account call them to explain a little more and share flyers they can distribute.

Where to find local services

To grow your audience at a local level, we strongly recommend that you contact your local authority to access information on local services and organisations.

Finding your Local Authority: gov.uk/find-your-local-council

Search for Local Offer – this is the provision made by each local authority. Local Offer is a way local authorities give children and young people with special educational needs (SEND) and/or disabilities and their parents or carers information about what activities and support is available in the area where they live.

Most local authority websites will have a section dedicated to ‘disability services’ and will generally have separate listings for adults and children (Disabled Children Services/Adult Care and Health). You may find that your local authority has collated all the information into a downloadable information pack.

The local authority websites will have contact details for children’s centres, schools, outreach teams, local services and organisations for people with autism, all of which are great places to contact and pass on information about your museum and events.

The National Autistic Society also has an A-Z directory of available services around the country, an excellent resource to use to see who you can contact in your local area.

NAS Services Directory: autism.org.uk/directory/a-to-z/l=A.aspx
The majority of the services are listed alphabetically, starting with the town name of where the organisation is based. If you are unable to see anything relevant on the list, there is also the option to do an advanced search autism.org.uk/directory/advanced-search.aspx

Thank you

Thank you for becoming an autism friendly museum – it's so rewarding and you are helping people with autism feel more welcome and accepted in society as a whole.

This guide was written by Dimensions, with help from autism consultants and experts. We provide autism friendly training resources for a number of venues, including cinemas and libraries.

Dimensions is a national not-for-profit organisation that supports people with learning disabilities and/or autism. This means our resources and any surplus goes back into providing high quality support services.

But, we want to change society and help people we support and their families to lead this change. We want to see a world where people with autism and learning disabilities are in paid employment, able to enjoy time in their communities and don't face the stigma and ignorance that is still so abundant.

At Dimensions we're proud to make a difference – we don't just talk about the change, we help make it happen – and by partnering with us for autism friendly museums you can be part of it.



Contact Dimensions

Email: dimensionscampaigns@dimensions-uk.org

Web: www.dimensions-uk.org

Tel: 0300 303 9062

Social: @DimensionsUK

Dimensions UK Limited. 2nd Floor, Building 1430, Arlington Business Park,
Theale, Reading, RG7 4SA | March 2019

