Link

Autism-Europe N°83 / June 2025

Information from and for **the autism community**

Autistic community's demands recognized at the UN

Launch of the **European Accessibility Act**

AE International Congress comes to Ireland

Co-funded by the European Union

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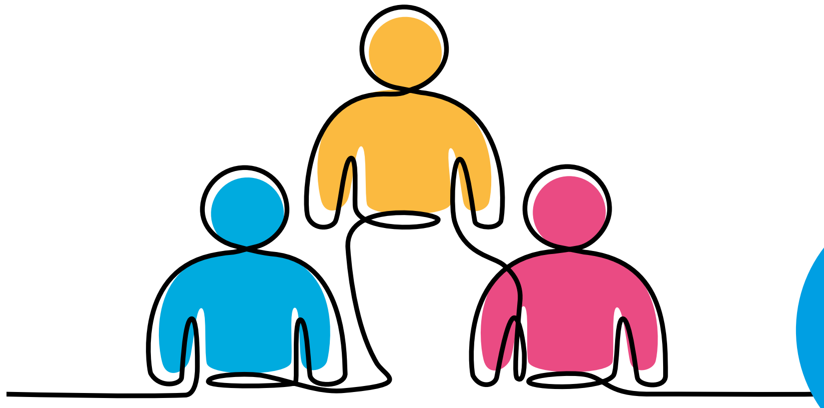


Edito

Dear readers,

As we continue to advocate for the rights of autistic people in Europe, this issue of LINK arrives at a time when truth and trust are once again being tested. The recent disinformation campaign launched in the United States—falsely linking painkillers to autism and portraying autistic people as burdens to society—underlines the urgent need for policy frameworks that put people first and are rooted in scientific facts. Autism-Europe firmly stands against harmful narratives, which distract from real systemic issues and only hurt autistic people and their families.

In this edition, we highlight our central role in ensuring that autism-specific concerns were considered in the 2025 UN review of the European Union’s implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We welcome the fact that the CRPD committee has recommended the EU take targeted measures to address the discrimination autistic people experience, and we will make sure to keep pushing for a better recognition of their needs by policy-makers.

In that regard, we have also worked to remind them that accessibility must evolve beyond the physical environment. As the European Accessibility Act comes into force, we continue to call for an inclusive definition of accessibility—one that recognises sensory, cognitive, and communication diversity and addresses the daily realities of autistic individuals and their families.

It’s important that policy decisions are made based on sound science—and it’s just as important that scientific research is conducted with the meaningful involvement of the people it aims to serve. In this issue, we highlight a number of research projects in which Autism-Europe represents autistic people and their families during research projects that inform the scientific community, policy-makers and society at large.

Against the backdrop of misinformation, these initiatives reaffirm our commitment to truth, empathy, and inclusion. By grounding our advocacy in human rights, we continue to ensure that autistic people are not invisible—but heard, represented, and respected.

Warm regards,

Director,
Aurélie Baranger

President,
Harald T. Neerland

Adam Harris, CEO of Irish autism charity AsIAm, speaking at the 14th Autism-Europe International Congress in Dublin

Adam Harris

Interview

“No single country’s got this cracked”

AsIAm’s founder on the benefits of working together

By the time you read this, the 14th Autism-Europe International Congress will have come to a successful conclusion, no doubt. Autism researchers, advocates, practitioners and community members from all over the world met in Dublin to learn from and about each other for three days. Ireland’s autism charity, AsIAm, partnered with Autism-Europe to host the congress.

We spoke to AsIAm’s founder and CEO, Adam Harris, about organizing this large event, important developments for the autism community in Ireland and beyond, and his journey leading a large advocacy group.

It takes a lot of effort to organize a large international event like this. What’s the benefit for AsIAm and the Irish autism community?

I think a key benefit is that it provides a spotlight for what we're trying to build here in Ireland: to bring about a society in which every autistic person is accepted as they are.

The congress has provided a really powerful vehicle for us to engage with government, with parliamentarians, with key corporate supporters, with civil society and the wider Irish public around our priorities and our vision.

We're also very proud to be the first autistic-led organisation to host the congress. I think that provides an important opportunity for further discussion around key research priorities for the autistic community and to demonstrate accessibility at scale at an event of this size and importance.

Also important to note is that we're coming together at a time in which we've seen an incredible growth in misinformation around autism, where we've seen governments around the world coarsen their attitudes towards autistic people and at times proactively spread dangerous misinformation around autism. So, I would hope that the Autism-Europe International Congress will be beneficial to AsIAm, but indeed to all member organisations in terms of creating a platform and a space in which we can counteract that message.

The congress occurs every three years. What significant developments for autistic people in Ireland, and more generally in Europe, have you seen since the last one (2022, Cracow)?

I think it's a very mixed picture. I think here in Ireland we've seen some positive developments. So, since the last congress, we saw the establishment of a joint Oireachtas [Ireland’s parliament] committee on autism for the first time, which produced a major report on autism policy here in Ireland. That in turn led to the publication of Ireland's first autism innovation strategy, so the first time a whole government policy has been in place in terms of autism here in Ireland.

But despite those developments, in day-to-day life, autistic people in Ireland continue to face major barriers to accessing the most basic supports, and I know that continues to be the case right across Europe. So, while we are seeing a momentum, while we are seeing new thinking, I think there's still huge challenges in terms of implementation and delivery. And as the theme of this congress is quality of life, I think systems and effective public systems is something that we'll need to explore across the three days and indeed that we will explore on the agenda.

I think internationally it's a much more challenging picture. Autistic people in Ukraine continue to face horrific experiences as a result of the illegal invasion of their country.

And, as I've already mentioned, we have seen a growth in very negative misinformation around autism since we last met. So, I think up until maybe a year ago we would have been talking about how we can push forward. How do we push new boundaries for the community? It feels like now we're in a space where we're trying to defend the progress that's already been achieved, and I think it just shows us that forward progress isn't always inevitable.

What changes do you hope will have taken place by the next Congress (2028, Bilbao/Spain)?

I think there are positive signs coming from the European Parliament at the start of this new mandate. We're seeing proposals for the need for a European autism strategy. We've seen autism featured in President von der Leyen's priorities for the terms and in her mission messages to various commissioners. So, I think all of that is really positive and I would hope by the time we're coming to Bilbao, where we're coming very much towards the end of this mandate for the European Parliament, we'll have begun to see the fruits and the benefits of some of those changes.

The European Union has just been reviewed by the UN Committee on the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [see story on page XX]. Very significant recommendations made in that committee report in terms of autism specifically, and I would hope we would see the European Union act and deliver on those recommendations by the time we gather in Bilbao.

One of AsIAm’s initiatives is to make Dublin an ‘autism-friendly city’. What does that mean, exactly?

Since our inception 11 years ago, we've had programs in schools and workplaces and businesses that are aimed at making the environment, the experience, more accessible for autistic people. In 2018, we were challenged to develop a framework for a whole community to become accessible, and we implemented that in Clonakilty, a small town in West Cork, in 2018. And that was a very successful project. It's been featured on French television, it's featured on the World Economic Forum, for example.

Adam Harris presenting a certificate to Seán Ó Fearghaíl, a Teachta Dála (member of the Irish parliament), for making Leinster House Complex in Dublin the world's first autism-friendly parliament building.

It's about co-creation between autistic people in the locality and the wider community. It's about the recruitment of autism-friendly champions, organisations that take training and make changes to how things work to improve accessibility and the development of a town plan so that there's this ongoing process of change and improvement over a three-year period. So, since that framework has been developed, we've had 40 communities across Ireland go out on the journey. Five have now achieved the standard, including the City of Waterford, which became Ireland's first city to become autism friendly.

And now the big task of Dublin, a city of over a million people, our capital city, undertaking this framework is really exciting. Dublin City Council, who are also one of the sponsors for the congress, are working in partnership with us on this through the mayor's office and we have a full-time employee in place just focused on supporting communities across Dublin in the suburbs and also in the central business district in implementing this framework, which we hope to achieve over the coming two years.

Seeing this interest from all these communities, would you say that Ireland is more inclusive than many other European countries?

I think what makes Ireland special is that we have very strong communities, and our communities come together, organise. I think that's quite a part of the Irish DNA and what we've seen in recent years is more and more communities turning their attention to the idea of autistic people and their meaningful inclusion and participation. I think that's welcome. And there's just huge momentum and goodwill out there that we're really trying to harness to the maximum effect.

But we also shouldn't get into a complacency of saying that, you know, in Ireland we're somehow so much more informed or open than in other parts of Europe. Autism is an invisible difference and sometimes people can struggle to push their good intentions into action in real life when they may not realise the barriers the person they see on the street or in their family circle is experiencing. So, I think we've become a very autism-aware society. I think we've become a society that wants to be very autism-friendly, but we need to become a society that's truly accepting of autistic people.

What changes do you think organizations could push for in their communities to direct more attention toward the needs of autistic people?

Hopefully the delegates [from other countries] will have an opportunity over the course of the three days to meet our team, to learn more about our projects and to see some of our projects in action across Dublin City. We're so committed to collaboration. For example, our service delivery work for the community, so much of that has been informed by the fantastic work of our colleagues in Scottish Autism, another Autism Europe member. So, I think the flow of ideas is extremely important. There's no one country that's got this cracked. There's no one country that excels in each of these areas.

Adam Harris speaking at the Dundalk Institute of Technology, a university in Ireland which has been awarded an Autism Friendly University Award by AsIAm.

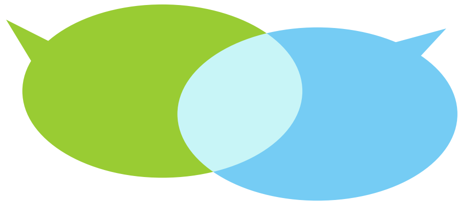
If there's one thing I am very proud of, it's that AsIAm is Ireland's main autism charity, a disabled-persons organization, autistic-led, but also with a very strong participation by family and parents. So, I think we have developed a partnership model that works, and all our work is about working in partnership both internally within the autistic community and indeed within broader society, with relevant thought leaders and sectors.

On a more personal note: you are a fairly young autistic person leading a major advocacy organization. Any tips for young autistic advocates who want to take a similar path?

One of the things I think is so important is that if you have an idea or a drive to make a difference, it's hard to put yourself forward or put your hand up. But you will be amazed by how many people will follow you and support you, particularly if you're young and are taking that step. So don't be afraid. We need young voices and young attitudes.

It's important that all of us in positions of leadership within the community do all we can to build the capacity of other advocates from as young an age as possible.

You know, it's very important to me that AsIAm is autistic-led and that my lived experience and the lived experience of my colleagues and the community informs everything that we do. That requires not just your ethos or the work that you do externally. It's also about how we behave internally and about how we recognize the ups and downs and the barriers that our community and individuals can experience along the way. That's certainly something I've had on my own journey in this.



Not Invisible:

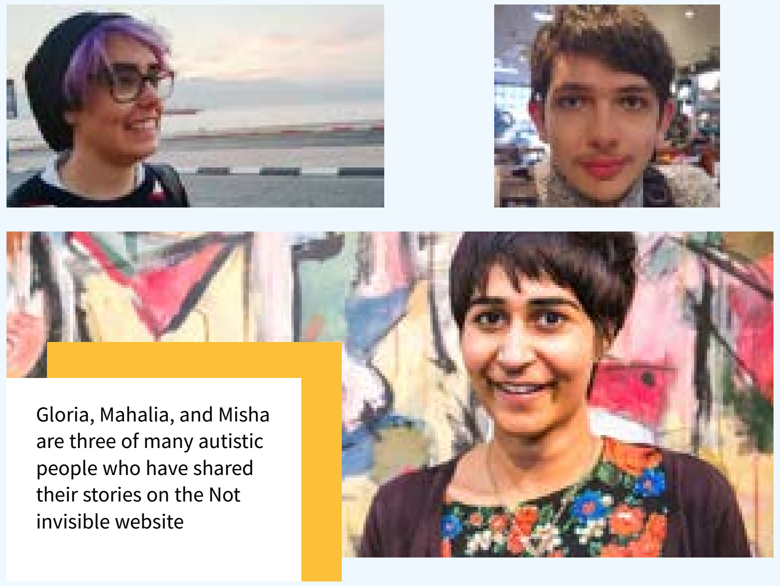
autistic people's voices at the heart of the campaign for authentic representation

Accurate, diverse, and respectful representations of autism have always been at the centre of Autism-Europe's (AE) work. In a world where misinformation and harmful stereotypes still shape public perceptions, AE continues to highlight the lived experiences of autistic people and their families.

The 'Not Invisible' campaign

Launched in 2024, Not Invisible is an AE initiative that raises awareness of how autistic people's needs are too often overlooked or disregarded. The campaign aims to challenge stereotypes, combat misinformation, and make sure that the autism community is seen and heard.

This year, the campaign entered its second phase with the launch of a dedicated website. The platform shares stories from autistic people and their loved ones, celebrating the diversity of the autism spectrum and centring their perspectives. AE is still welcoming new contributions to add to the site and reflect the range of autistic experiences across Europe.



Gloria, Mahalia, and Misha are three of many autistic people who have shared their stories on the Not invisible website

Growing reach and impact

Since its launch on World Autism Awareness Day (2 April), the Not Invisible platform has been steadily gaining momentum. In just the first three months, the videos, articles and artwork reached tens of thousands of viewers online, particularly on social media.

- Stories from across Europe: Sixteen contributions from 10 EU countries have already been published, covering a wide range of topics—from late diagnosis and autism in women, to the role of art as a powerful tool for self-expression. Dozens more submissions are ready to be published after a short summer break.
- Strong online visibility: The campaign has reached more than 52,000 people across Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.
- Impactful videos: Campaign videos have been watched for a total of 38 hours on social media. One powerful submission came from Misha, a young autistic person from Ukraine. His video, which alone drew 16 hours of watch time, shares the unique challenges autistic people face during war—such as coping with sensory overload from loud noises—and calls for greater recognition of neurodiversity in all areas of life.

At the same time, AE has been actively engaging with policymakers to ensure autistic rights remain on the political agenda following the EU elections. To date, 50 members of the European Parliament, and 35 MEP candidates, from 15 countries have pledged to cooperate with and support autistic people. Autism-Europe and its members are advocating policy-makers to join the ranks of our supporters.

Nikos Pappas and Sakis Arnaoutoglou are two Greek MEPs who recently pledged tot create a more inclusive and accessible EU for autistic people

Shaping understanding and policy

By sharing authentic stories, AE continues to strengthen awareness of autism across all stages of life. The Not Invisible campaign not only gives visibility to autistic perspectives but also helps ensure that policies at the European level are informed by real experiences and diverse voices.

Share your story

Autism-Europe is still collecting submissions for the Not Invisible campaign—and your voice matters. If there's something you wish more people understood about autism, this is your chance to share it.

Topics can include anything important to you, such as education, employment and skills, mental health, intersectional identities, public awareness, inclusion, independence and autonomy. You are also free to express yourself in the format that suits you best—whether through video, text, audio or art.

Your contribution will not only help challenge stereotypes but also inform AE's advocacy work in the future.

- **Send your story to: communication@autismeurope.org**
- **Scan the QR code** to learn more about the campaign, access tips on preparing your content, and complete the consent form.

In March 2025, Autism-Europe was at the United Nations in Geneva for the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) review of the European Union.

Autism-Europe assists in United Nations review of EU's human rights obligations

In 2025, Autism-Europe played a pivotal role in one of the most impactful human rights processes for persons with disabilities in Europe: the review of the European Union's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This rigorous UN-led review assessed how the EU is meeting its obligations under the CRPD through policy and legislative reforms (mostly via the Strategy for the Rights of People with Disabilities 2021-2030). This is only the second time the EU has undergone such a review process since it became a party to the convention in 2010.

The review process involved many steps and lasted from 2022 to 2025. Autism-Europe's involvement in it ensured that the realities and needs of autistic people and their families were front and centre. This review process not only elevated autism-specific concerns onto the global stage but also reinforced the vital link between international monitoring mechanisms and tangible policy improvements in the EU and beyond.

A timeline of Autism-Europe's involvement

2022 – 2024: Laying the groundwork

The review process began in March 2022 with the adoption of the so-called 'list of issues prior to reporting'. This list consists of the questions the CRPD Committee wants the EU to address in the EU's report on the implementation of the CRPD.

Before the list was published, Autism-Europe had consulted with its network of member organisations and individuals and finally prepared an alternative report for the list of issues. That report listed the main concerns in relation to autism rights and provided suggested questions to be addressed in the list of issues.

In late 2024 Autism-Europe published another alternative report. This one was a direct response to the EU's official report to the UN. It highlighted systemic gaps affecting autistic people in areas such as discrimination, education, healthcare, independent living, legal capacity, and more.

This second alternative report underscored that despite policy advances, autistic individuals across the EU continue to face discrimination, institutionalisation, and poor access to inclusive services. AE's report provided concrete recommendations for each article of the convention to ensure the EU meets its respective obligations.

February 2025 – Briefing the CRPD Committee task force

Autism-Europe took part in a private briefing with CRPD Committee members ahead of the formal dialogue in Geneva between the CRPD Committee and the EU delegation. During this briefing AE presented the key concerns from its alternative report.

March 2025 – Public dialogue in Geneva

During the formal dialogue, Autism-Europe was present in the room. AE provided real-time input to committee members, ensuring that questions about autism-specific challenges and systemic gaps were raised during the two-day session.

For three hours per day, the committee asked the EU delegation detailed and challenging questions about many of the 50 articles of the convention.

The committee raised important issues, many of which reflected the concerns highlighted in AE's alternative report. These include the need to advance deinstitutionalisation and ensure real opportunities for independent living, guarantee equal employment with reasonable accommodations, and strengthen protection from discrimination and violence. The committee also stressed the importance of autistic people's meaningful participation in decisionmaking processes and ensuring access to fully inclusive education.

What the UN Committee said

On March 18, 2025, the UN Committee issued its concluding observations, a detailed set of recommendations for the EU, based on the committee's findings during the review. Autism-Europe's concerns were directly acknowledged, with autism explicitly referenced over a dozen of times. In particular, the CRPD regretted that there were "only limited actions to address the situation of autistic persons" in the first phase of the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030.

Key wins for the autism community included:

- A call for autism-specific actions in the next phase of the EU Disability Rights Strategy from 2026-2030.
- Criticism of the continued use of EU funds for institutionalisation and a demand to redirect support toward community-based services.
- Calls for earmarked allocation of funds from the EU Social Fund to combat the high levels of poverty and social exclusion faced by disabled women, autistic people and those with high support needs.
- Recommendations for better access to disability assessment for autistic people
- Recommendations for inclusive education, and accessible healthcare
- Noted with concern the limited availability of disaggregated data about the situation of children with disabilities, including autistic children, who are living in institutions, and calls for strengthening such data collection.
- Specifically highlighted the prevalent stigmatisation, harmful stereotyping and prejudices against autistic people.
- Condemnation of forced psychiatric treatment and substituted decision-making, advocating for supported decision-making instead.
- A strong push for harmonised disability recognition across member states to facilitate freedom of movement.
- A call for the compulsory training on specific and evidence-based habilitation strategies for autism and for the EU to adopt quality assessment systems for habilitation services focused on inclusion, participation, and users' quality of life.

During the March review, AE staff represented the voice of autistic people alongside other disabled people's organisations.

It should be noted that the European Parliament resolution on "Harmonising the rights of autistic persons" adopted in October 2023 and driven by Autism-Europe and its members, is the only disability-specific legislative and policy measure taken by the European Union since 2015 to promote the rights of persons with disabilities that is mentioned by the CRPD, highlighting the impact of our advocacy work.

Why this matters for autistic people and their families

The CRPD review process is much more than a symbolic exercise. It offers a direct channel of accountability, where civil society organisations and disability rights organisations like Autism-Europe can present lived experiences and demand systemic change. This review provides a clear international mandate to guide improvements in policy and practice across the European Union.

For autistic people and their families, this process:

- Confirms their struggles are recognised at the highest international level.
- Strengthens the case for action at EU and national levels.
- Promotes the shift from medical to rights-based approaches to autism.
- Ensures that policy is shaped with, not just for, autistic people.

A powerful tool for national and EU advocacy

The concluding observations provide Autism-Europe and its members with a strategic advocacy tool. As these recommendations are issued by the UN, they carry moral and political authority. They encourage EU institutions to revise policies and funding mechanisms, they guide member states in aligning national laws with the CRPD and reinforce autistic people's demands for equality, dignity, and inclusion.

These concluding observations are more than a report card, they are a call to action.

From policy to practice

Autism-Europe is committed to monitoring the EU's implementation of the recommendations, ensuring the next phase of the Disability Rights Strategy is inclusive of autistic people. Some key next steps include:

- Pushing for an EU-wide autism strategy that is holistic, rights-based, and co-developed with autistic people and their families.
- Campaigning for reform in areas such as education, health, social protection and support in the community and employment, in line with CRPD standards and the 2023 European Parliament Resolution 'Harmonising the Rights of Autistic people'.
- Mobilising member organisations to use the CRPD concluding observations in their national advocacy.
- Advocating for the EU to ensure that its funding mechanisms (such as the ESF+ and Recovery and Resilience Facility) support independent living and deinstitutionalisation.

Autism-Europe's work throughout the CRPD review process highlights the importance of sustained and informed advocacy to advance the rights of autistic people. By participating in every stage from submitting an alternative report to engaging in dialogue with the UN Committee and reviewing the final recommendations, Autism-Europe ensured that the lived realities of autistic people were reflected in this high-level assessment.

You can access the documents here:

AE's 2022 Alternative report to the list of issues prior to reporting:

AE's full report on the concluding observations:

AE's 2024 Alternative report:

AIMS-2-TRIALS

Exploring the biology of autism to tailor treatments and inform policy

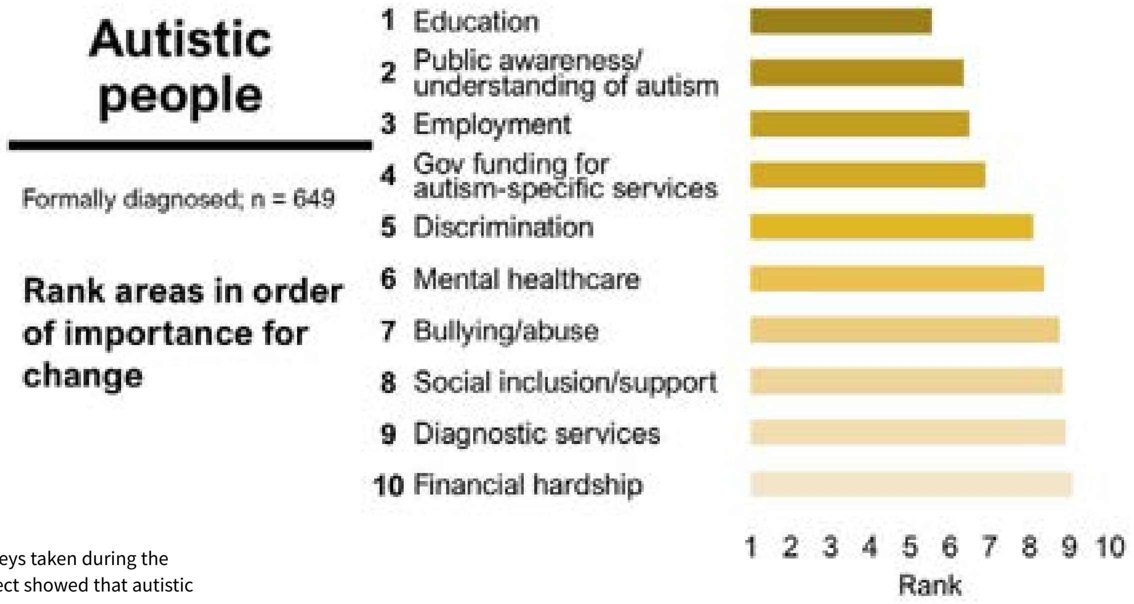
A large research project focusing on autism recently presented its findings at a high-level conference in Brussels. AIMS-2-TRIALS — short for Autism Innovative Medicine Studies-2-Trials — is an EU-funded project which has established the largest research platform of longitudinal studies on autism from infancy to adulthood.

The project began in June 2018 and will run until November 2026. It includes 48 partners across 14 countries from academia, industry, charities and the autistic community. A group of autistic representatives was also recruited to inform researchers on the needs of the community and provide insights and feedback on the work carried out.

The project's research explores how autism develops, from before birth to adulthood, and how this varies in different people. The researchers look for biological markers which indicate whether a person has or may develop certain characteristics. This could help to identify who may ultimately benefit from particular treatments. The objective of AIMS-2 Trials is not to cure autism, which is part of the identity of an individual, but to test medical treatments to help with specific disabling aspects that people find distressing. These could relate to social difficulties, repetitive behaviours, sensory processing, or co-occurring conditions. The project also conducted research regarding access to education, healthcare and support services, as well as the priorities of the autistic community. Autism-Europe co-led the work on policy alongside the University of Cambridge and Autistica.

The project's objectives are to:

- Understand how autism, and its co-occurring health conditions, develop from before birth into adulthood
- Identify biological features/structures common to autistic people that can be measured, called biomarkers
- Test new medicines that could become a treatment option for autistic people
- Build a network to connect researchers, clinicians and the autism community
- Prepare Europe to pioneer large clinical trials of future medicines
- Improve and accelerate the process of developing new medicines
- Analyse and manage the data collected in research
- Explore how policies on autism can better support autistic people
- Develop educational tools to improve understanding of autism
- Put Europe at the forefront of autism research



Surveys taken during the project showed that autistic people found the education sector to be most in need of change

New research results

The project presented some of its findings at a high-level conference on autism, held at the European Parliament on 23 April 2025. The conference, titled "Towards a common approach for autism in Europe", was organized by Autism-Europe in partnership with the project, and hosted under the auspices of the Disability Intergroup of the European Parliament.

At the conference, Prof. Eva Loth, who researches cognitive neuroscience at King's College London and is a deputy lead of AIMS-2-TRIALS, explained that autism is tremendously variable, in part because many autistic people have co-occurring mental-health or physical conditions. Healthcare, social and educational systems must be able to support this wide range of conditions. One of the goals of the project therefore is to better tailor treatments and/or support to individual needs.

To this end, the project has created the largest research platform of longitudinal studies from infancy to adulthood, Loth said at the conference. The researchers characterize each volunteer's clinical features, cognitive profiles, brain anatomy and function, immune markers, family psychiatric history, environmental factors, and genomics.

Among their findings:

- There is "enormous overlap" between autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions, both at a clinical and a biological level. This means that people should be assessed for multiple conditions at once, rather than testing only for autism, for example.
- There is no single part of the brain or a cognitive feature or genetic marker that characterizes all autistic people. This means researchers must move away from searching for deficits in specific parts of a person, Loth said, and move to a more holistic approach that tracks how the brain, the body and the social environment interact.

Study insights to inform policy

Another effort undertaken in the context of the project was the 'ACCESS-EU' survey, which asked more than 2,000 autistic participants in the EU and the UK about their access to various services. Dr Siti Ikhsan, a researcher from the Autism Research Centre, University of Cambridge, and Pierre Violland, a professional peer practitioner and autism representative, presented the survey results. One finding: most participants waited for up to six months for most services including therapy, educational services and housing-related services, less than one month for emergency medical services and mental health crisis services, and more than 12 months for autism diagnostic services.

The two researchers also shared the results of the ‘10 Points for Change’ study. The areas autistic people and parents/carers of autistic people most wanted to change were education, employment, public awareness and understanding of autism, government funding for autism-specific services and mental healthcare.

Prof. Celso Arango, head of the child and adolescent psychiatry service at Hospital General Universitario Gregorio Marañón in Madrid, Spain, along with Violland, presented results from a study on access to services to diagnose autism and epilepsy. The results varied greatly between EU member states. Autistic people in Spain and in the UK had to wait much longer for such services than people in Italy, for example.

Prof. Emily Jones, from the University of London, underlined the importance of early detection, and explained that the project research points to sensory and sleep differences in infancy as early indicators of autism.

Researchers call for changes at the conference

Several of the researchers highlighted their findings point to a need for changes in policy and healthcare practices:

- The ‘ACCESS-EU’ study showed the urgent need for policy changes to improve access to services across Europe, Dr Ikhsan said.
- More awareness of the co-occurrence of epilepsy and autism was urgently needed both among medical practitioners and in families, Mr Violland said.
- Access to diagnostic and other services must be improved for lower-income families, Mr Violland said.
- More research is needed on helping autistic people with high support needs, Prof. Jones said.

AIMS•2•TRIALS
AUTISM RESEARCH FOR EUROPF

A European strategy for autism

The goal of the conference was to initiate dialogue between researchers, representatives of the autism community, and policymakers on the next steps for investment in research, support and infrastructure related to autism. It rests in part on the commitment of the European Commission to work towards a common approach to autism at the EU level, as expressed in a mission letter from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to Commissioner for Health, Olivér Várhely, in September 2024. Several members of the EU Parliament who were present at the conference committed to a push for an EU-wide autism strategy. Autism-Europe has long demanded a strategic and holistic approach – developed in full cooperation with the autism community – at the European level to realise the rights of autistic people.

The three members of the European Parliament who attended the conference signalled their agreement. MEP Rosa Estaras (EPP), a Spanish bureau member of the Disability Intergroup, concluded her opening remarks with an announcement. “In the next days, I will propose the creation of a European strategy on autism, with the aim of ensuring that people with autism have access to the same opportunities and rights in European countries, promoting their inclusion and full participation in society,” she said.

MEP Alex Agius Saliba (S&D), Maltese co-chair of the Disability Intergroup, called for “establishing a binding European autism strategy aligned with the CRPD.” This refers to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The CRPD Committee issued recommendations earlier this year calling on the EU to adopt concrete actions to address the needs of autistic individuals in the second phase of the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among other findings (see story on page XX).

MEP Katrin Langensiepen (Greens/EFA), German co-chair of the Disability Intergroup, affirmed that she and her colleagues will push for such actions. “We are working on the disability strategy,” Langensiepen said, with a nod to her colleagues on the podium. “We will push the [European] Commission for something concrete and not only for guidelines.”

From the European Accessibility Act to the specific needs of autistic people and their families

On 28 June 2025, the European Accessibility Act (EAA) officially came into force. While it marks a significant milestone in accessibility legislation, its scope remains limited in terms of the products and services it covers. To celebrate this step, reflect on progress, and advocate for the inclusion of everyone’s accessibility needs—including those of autistic people—Autism-Europe joined European and national stakeholders, along with the wider disability community, at a gathering in Brussels in early July 2025.

“Let’s Rock Accessibility!”

On 3 July 2025, Autism-Europe (AE) took part in the conference ‘European Accessibility Act: Let’s Rock Accessibility!’ held in Brussels and organized by AccessibleEU. This platform serves to discuss accessibility in key areas like the built environment, transport, and information and communication technologies (ICT), with the aim of promoting equal participation for people with disabilities.

AccessibleEU was proposed by the European Commission in its 2021–2030 Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and has been coordinated since 2023 by a consortium led by the Spanish disability service provider Fundación ONCE, in partnership with the European Disability Forum (EDF), of which AE is a founding member.

The conference gathered representatives from EU institutions, national governments, leading technology companies, and both European and national disability organizations, along with accessibility experts. Participants shared their experiences and insights on applying the new legal requirements for accessibility. The day also featured panel discussions on various themes, including ICT products, transport, digital services, telecommunications, public procurement, and the built environment.

The European Accessibility Act - a milestone with challenges

This conference marked the important deadline of June 28, 2025, by which EU member states were required to implement the EAA. This EU directive mandates that various products and services must be accessible to everyone, including the 100 million people with disabilities living in the EU. It represents a major step forward for disability rights and brings benefits to society as a whole—helping businesses, citizens, and the communities alike.

The EAA applies to a wide range of products and services, including the European emergency number 112 (to be accessible by 2027), consumer electronics like TVs, smartphones, computers, and video game consoles, as well as ticket and vending machines, websites, mobile apps and e-commerce platforms.

The roots of the EAA go back decades. AE has been advocating for accessibility along the way, including at this protest in 2017.

EU member states were given exactly three years—from June 28, 2022—to enforce the EAA. This meant implementing the national legislation and regulations they had to adopt since 2019. The deadline of 28 June 2025 marks the point by which full compliance with the EAA is expected across the EU.

Although the EAA became official as Directive 2019/882 six years ago, its roots go back even further. At the July 2025 conference, EDF President Ioannis Vardakastanis reminded everyone that the journey toward the EAA began over 20 years ago, when the disability movement united to urge EU policymakers to eliminate the many barriers that continue to exclude people with disabilities from full participation in society.

The European Disability Card allows users to prove that they are recognised as disabled even if their disability is invisible

Beyond 2025: What still needs to be done for accessibility in the European Union

While the EAA is a major step forward, its scope remains limited. Key areas like the built environment, transport vehicles, and home appliances—which people with disabilities use daily—are still not fully accessible. To make real progress, accessibility must be integrated across all laws, with proper funding and enforcement to ensure the EAA is effectively implemented.

The journey toward full accessibility is ongoing. Strong enforcement of the EAA, with the involvement of people with disabilities at every stage, is essential. The act must deliver real benefits—not just for people with disabilities, but also for businesses. It should clearly define what accessibility means and harmonize rules across the EU's single market—the biggest in the world!

To make this a reality, EU member states must give enforcement authorities enough power, resources, expertise, and staff. Businesses also need to go beyond legal minimums by investing in accessible design and trained personnel. Autism-Europe and the EDF are calling for the creation of a dedicated European Accessibility Agency—replacing the current AccessibleEU—and for a sufficient EU budget to support accessibility and disability rights.

The European Commission must ensure the law is properly applied. In fact, in 2024, it referred Bulgaria to the European Court of Justice for failing to transpose the EAA on time. Other countries, including Croatia, Greece, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden, faced infringement procedures for missing key parts of the accessibility requirements.

Recognising the accessibility needs of autistic people

The EAA aims to make certain products and services across the EU easier to perceive, operate, understand, and use. These inclusive design principles can greatly benefit autistic people by making websites, devices, and digital tools clearer, more consistent, and easier to navigate. Features like simple menus, predictable layouts, and logical structures help reduce confusion and stress. Real-time communication support—such as text or visual alternatives in telecommunication and emergency services—is especially useful for autistic people who do not use speech.

However, the EAA does not specifically mention autistic people or address their unique needs. Most of its requirements are still focused on physical or sensory disabilities, such as vision or hearing loss. As a result, key supports like reducing sensory overload, using plain language, or providing visual aids like symbols or schedules are not included. This oversight misses important ways to support those who may struggle with noisy spaces, sudden changes, or complex information.

These gaps also affect families and carers of autistic people. Many parents or carers act as guides, helping their autistic children or adult relatives navigate daily tasks such as shopping, traveling, or using public services. Without features like quiet areas, soft lighting, or clear signs, outings can become overwhelming or are avoided altogether. To truly be inclusive, the EAA's future updates—both at the national and service level—must consider the full range of accessibility needs faced by autistic people and their families.

CANDY

exploring targeted treatment paths for somatic diseases

Across Europe, an estimated 50 to 75 million children and adults live with various early-onset neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism, ADHD and intellectual disabilities. These conditions can often co-occur, and overlap, with health issues like epilepsy, allergies, and immune-system or gastrointestinal problems, which can contribute to reduced life expectancy.

The CANDY Project was launched to improve understanding of neurodevelopmental conditions and how they co-exist with somatic illnesses. Researchers already knew that genetics play an important role, but CANDY goes further: it looks at how our immune system and the microbiome (the bacteria living in our gut) interact with our genes. By doing so, the project hopes to create better options for diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of the health issues that often co-exist with autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

An overview of CANDY's activities

Since it began, CANDY has carried out a wide range of studies using both **animal models and human clinical studies**.

- **Animal studies:** Researchers worked with genetic mouse models to explore how different genes linked to autism and related conditions affect behaviour, sensory processing, and brain function. For example, one model showed that changes in sensory processing could be linked to disturbed sleep and daily rhythms.
- **Immune system and gut bacteria:** CANDY found that immune system profiles do not neatly match diagnostic labels like autism or ADHD. However, a correlation was found between certain intestinal bacteria, many of which are known to play a role in inflammation, and conditions such as autism and ADHD.
- **Clinical studies:** CANDY's large-scale clinical work includes the **PIP-CANDY study**, following preschool children, and the **Multiplex study**, involving families where more than one member has a neurodevelopmental condition. The team has already discovered important genetic differences between families with a single affected child (simplex) and those with multiple affected members (multiplex).

The findings from these studies, together with the experiences of the participating families and existing international guidelines, were used to issue recommendations to professionals regarding clinical assessment and diagnosis of autism and ADHD (and other neurodevelopmental conditions) — highlighting the fact that they often co-occur. The project also provided guidance on support for preschoolers.

Researchers involved in the CANDY project in their last afternoon session during the project's Annual General Assembly

CANDY is laying the groundwork for a future where diagnosis and treatment are earlier, more precise, and more personalised. This could lead to new biomarkers (biological signs) for earlier and more accurate diagnoses; more-targeted treatments; and better prediction tools for conditions that often co-occur with autism, such as epilepsy, auto-immune disease, or gastrointestinal problems.

By building these foundations, CANDY is helping to create a future where neurodevelopmental conditions are better understood — and where families can receive more effective support.

More information: www.candy-project.eu

SACREE
Autism & Sport

Sport and Autism: From Diagnosis to a European Pedagogical Model

The Sacree (Sport and Autism, from a scientific diagnosis to the CREation of a pedagogical European model) project promoted inclusive sports to improve the lives of autistic children and adults. Running from June 2022 to June 2025, it was funded by the European Union Erasmus+ Sport Program. It involved cross-country research and field-testing in France, Italy, Portugal, and Croatia. SACREE tackled low, narrowly focused sports participation among autistic people. Autism-Europe led the dissemination, facilitated the sustainability and organized the final conference in the European Parliament in Brussels in May 2025 attended by Members of European Parliament from Italy and Ireland, autistic athletes, trainers and inclusive-sports stakeholders.

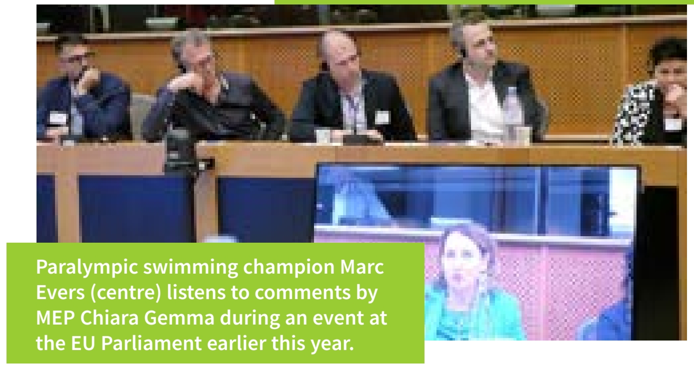
Several recent studies examined the impact of sports on autistic people. However, these studies primarily focused on local practitioners and involved small sample sizes, which may not accurately represent the broader experiences of people on the autism spectrum across Europe. In a similar vein, previous EU-funded projects aimed at supporting people with disabilities through sports often concentrated on specific sports, addressed disabilities in general, or focused solely on physical disabilities. Consequently, there is a clear need to enhance both the research on how sports affect autistic people and the practical access to inclusive sports opportunities for them across Europe.

Sacree aimed to promote the integration of autistic people into sports and society by improving their access to physical activities tailored to their specific needs. The project helped build an inclusive sports ecosystem designed to be scalable across Europe. It also sought to raise awareness among European sports clubs, staff, practitioners, researchers, and other key stakeholders. The experts collaborating in Sacree developed an evidence-based educational model, grounded in a scientific comparative study and field-tested in diverse settings and countries.

The primary goal of the Sacree project was to promote the recognition of sport as a means of integration and inclusion for autistic people, while also advancing European knowledge on the intersection of sport and autism. In addition to enhancing the quality of life for autistic people and their families, friends, and carers, Sacree aimed to inspire EU stakeholders and policymakers to take future actions that support a more inclusive and diverse society.

To achieve SACREE's goals, partners from France, Portugal, Italy, Croatia, and Autism-Europe established a dynamic network built on transnational, transdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Based in five EU countries with diverse contexts for disability inclusion, the partnership brings together experts from sport, autism, social sciences, and health. It includes a national sports federation (ASPTT Fédération Omnisports, FSASPTT, France), an international advocacy group (Autism-Europe), an inclusive football club (Romulea Autistic Football Club, Italy), a research laboratory (Marie and Louis Pasteur University, France) and two autism associations (Croatian Union of Associations for Autism and Inovar Autismo, Portugal). The consortium worked to share best practices, assess field test outcomes, and ensure the project's results are impactful and replicable. Autism-Europe led dissemination and sustainability, promoting knowledge exchange across Europe.

The Sacree project invited a group of experts, policymakers and key stakeholders to an event at the EU Parliament to discuss the importance of accessibility in sports



Paralympic swimming champion Marc Evers (centre) listens to comments by MEP Chiara Gemma during an event at the EU Parliament earlier this year.

The Sacree project culminated in a European Parliament event in Brussels in May 2025 hosted by Member of European Parliament (MEP) Chiara Gemma from Italy who highlighted the need for inclusive education and training, showcasing its findings and tools. Other speakers included Dutch autistic paralympic swimmer Marc Evers recounting his experience in both inclusive and competitive sports settings, Special Olympic Europe/Eurasia Vice President Christo Velkov making the case for inclusive sport events, French autistic trainer Jean Philippe Piat explaining the needs of autistic people, and Irish MEP and jockey Nina Carberry pointing to the benefits horse sports can have for autistic people.

For more information: sacree.eu

PROJECT EMPOWER:

Supporting Neurodivergent Learners Through Technology

EMPOWER
DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT TOOLS TO EMPOWER STAKEHOLDERS IN DIGITAL EDUCATION

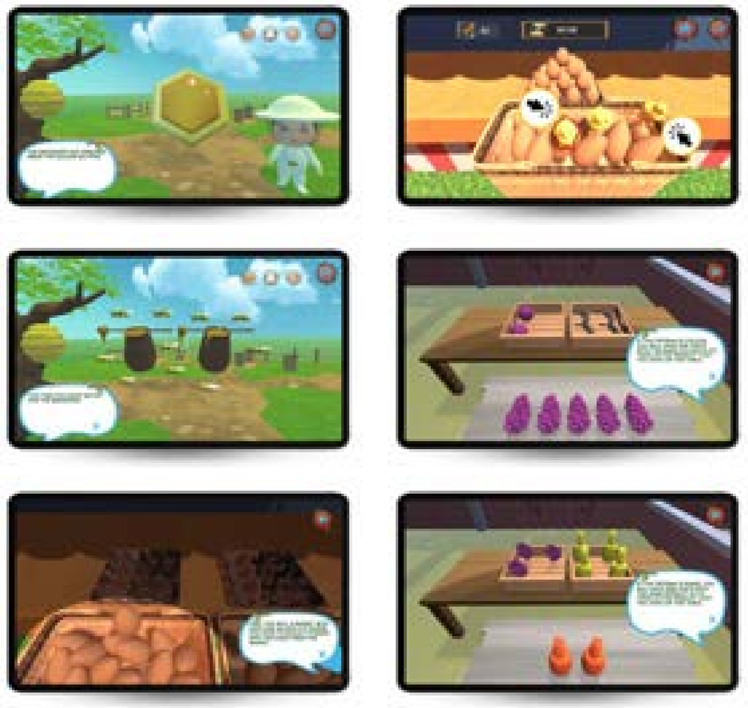
In today's classrooms, educators are increasingly asked to support children with diverse learning profiles—especially those with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities. While awareness of these conditions is growing, practical tools for addressing them in everyday classroom settings remain unevenly available. Project EMPOWER, a three-year research initiative funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme, wants to address this gap by developing a digital platform designed to strengthen emotional and cognitive skills in neurodivergent children.

The project focuses on two key areas: executive functioning—which includes skills such as attention regulation, task-switching, and planning—and emotional self-regulation. Both areas are commonly affected in children with neurodevelopmental conditions and can significantly impact learning and classroom behaviour. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model, EMPOWER is working on a set of tools that can be adapted to individual needs and used flexibly by educators.

Coordinated by IRTIC at the University of Valencia, EMPOWER brings together universities, educational experts, software developers, and advocacy organisations from across Europe—including Autism-Europe.

In its early phase, the project conducted qualitative research through interviews and focus groups with educators in Portugal and Romania. Participants shared insights about the kinds of support they need and what features they believe would make a digital intervention both effective and usable in a classroom context. Recurring themes included the need for engaging brief activities, visual supports, and systems for monitoring student progress.

Based on this feedback, the project team began developing a set of "serious games"—digital activities designed to support skill-building in a playful but structured way. Among the games are Reflex, a game focusing on mental flexibility; BEeHOLD, which helps children practice delaying gratification; and Egg pyramid (part of EmotiFest), which supports emotion identification. These games are now being tested internally and will later be evaluated in school environments.

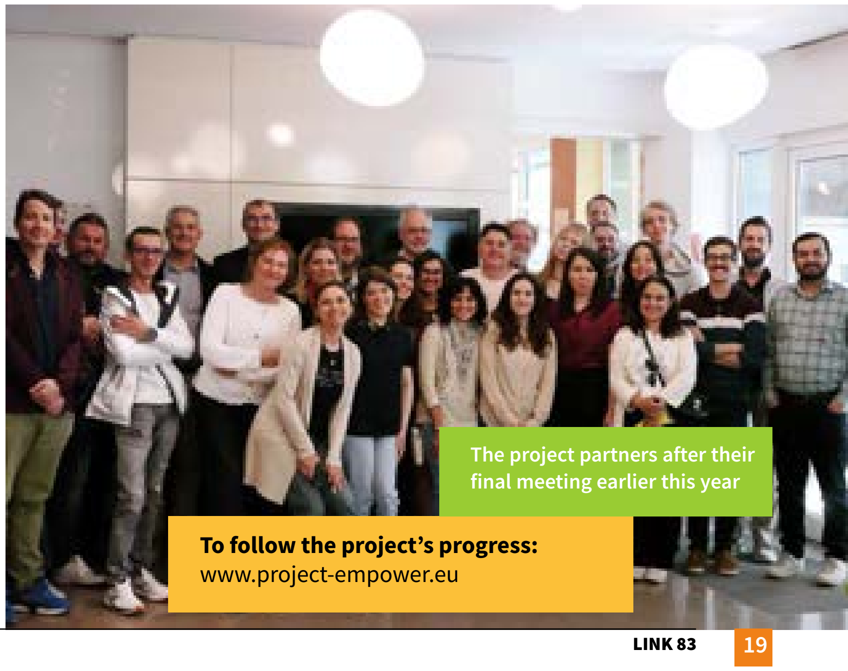


The EMPOWER project has created six "serious games" that help with executive functioning and emotional self-regulation

Technology plays a significant role in EMPOWER, but it's always applied with a human touch. The project integrates innovative tools like wearable sensors and eye-tracking to better understand user engagement, while also embedding a strong ethical framework to ensure privacy, consent, and inclusivity. Autism-Europe has contributed its expertise to ensure that autistic voices and perspectives are central to both design and implementation.

In parallel with game development, the EMPOWER team is building a teacher training programme, equipping educators with strategies to support emotional and behavioural challenges in the classroom. The goal is not just to introduce a digital tool, but to foster a shift in educational practice—one that prioritizes emotional learning alongside academic achievement.

In the spring of 2025, EMPOWER launched a randomised clinical trial to evaluate the platform's effectiveness in real-world school settings. The consortium will continue working after the project ends in September 2025 to make the resulting products widely available, offering an evidence-based resource for schools across Europe.



The project partners after their final meeting earlier this year

To follow the project's progress:
www.project-empower.eu

INOVAR AUTISMO: a society for all

Founded in December 2016, Inovar Autismo places innovation at the heart of its mission. Located in Setúbal, it is the only autism organization in Portugal with autistic people and/or family members in executive roles. Inovar's goal is to fight discrimination and create an inclusive society for everyone.

Inovar Autismo was established by 34 partners, including both autistic and non-autistic people. The involvement of autistic people within the organization reflects its core principle: a society that embraces all individuals. Partners believe that inclusion is not a distant ideal but a reachable objective. Their priority is empowering society to accept differences as a normal part of life.

The name Inovar, which means "innovate" in Portuguese, perfectly represents their innovative approach to services. Their Innovation and Development Centre for Inclusion offers various services, including personal assistance and mediation, with the aim of promoting self-determination and inclusion, all in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Their extensive work encompasses support through mediation, coaching, music therapy, and workshops.

Inovar operates two centres called CAVI, one in Setúbal and the other one in Alentejo, that support independent living. Both centres are guided by the Portuguese model of Independent Living (MAVI) and are the only ones in the country with a focus on supporting autistic people.

Inovar supports autistic people of all ages through more than 33 projects that cover various aspects of life. One unique initiative, Geração com Valor+, helps young autistic people develop new skills and maintain employment in jobs they enjoy. Other projects, such as Child Inclusion, All Kids Play, and Young Mediators for Inclusion, focus on promoting activities and facilitating inclusion within children and youngster's communities and extracurricular programs. Recent initiatives also emphasize sports, theatre, and employment opportunities.

Inovar Autismo strives to be a model of inclusion in both Portugal and Europe.

More information: www.inovarautismo.pt

Inovar Autismo
is a affiliated member
of Autism-Europe.

Creating accessible learning environments: How Liberty Academy Trust supports autistic students

Founded in 2022, Liberty Academy Trust is a group of primary and secondary schools in England, dedicated to improving education for autistic children and young people across the United Kingdom. Through a whole-child approach, the Trust works to create accessible learning environments that support the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students.

About Liberty Academy Trust

The Trust's mission is to provide high-quality education and welfare support for children and young people with special needs. Over 210 students aged 4 to 19 are currently enrolled in its schools. Places are commissioned by local authorities according to need. Liberty Academy Trust offers a broad and balanced curriculum and support tailored to each student.

A whole-child approach to improving quality of life

Liberty Academy Trust prioritises the long-term development and well-being of its students. Schools place a strong emphasis on equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need for a fulfilling life beyond school, rather than solely focusing on academic achievement. When appropriate and possible, students are encouraged to take part in in- and out-of-school activities that reflect their specific interests, whether during lessons or lunchtime clubs.

A supportive learning environment

A central pillar of Liberty Academy Trust's model is its emphasis on autism-friendly environments. The schools' buildings and general organisation are intended to minimise stress and accommodate the sensory sensitivities that autistic learners may experience. Low-arousal classrooms, structured spaces and thoughtful layouts support students' learning, comfort, and emotional regulation.

This whole-school approach draws on the strengths of the entire school community. Families are seen as key partners in planning and evaluation, working with the school and external professionals to co-produce support strategies. Resources are allocated for continuous staff training, helping educators better understand autism, address learning barriers more efficiently, and improve outcomes for autistic children and young people. It also enables staff to adapt teaching methodologies to cater to students' interests and learning preferences.

Every student is supported by a dedicated key worker, who acts as a consistent point of contact for families, advocates for the child within the school, and co-develops a personalised curriculum in line with the student's interests, skills, and needs.

Thanks to its robust institutional support, Liberty Academy Trust makes learning more accessible for autistic children and young adults. Its holistic and flexible approach recognises and builds on the strengths of the entire school community to make sure students thrive at school and beyond.

Liberty Academy Trust
is an associated member
of Autism-Europe.

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