

An evaluation of the National Autistic Society's accreditation programme for specialist schools.

COMMISSIONED BY THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY

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Executive summary

Introduction

Research suggests that inadequate support for autistic pupils is commonplace across the current UK education system (1, 2). The Autism Specialist Award is part of a national accreditation programme designed to promote best practice in supporting autistic people across provisions. The programme for those seeking the Autism Specialist Award offers a framework for assessing mainstream and specialist schools and gives recognition to those meeting the standard for autism practice. The NAS commissioned Health Innovation East to conduct an independent evaluation of the Autism Specialist Award's impact in specialist schools. This report presents the findings and recommendations from the evaluation. The project was carried out by the Health Innovation East Evaluation Team between August 2024 and January 2025.

Aim

The aim of this evaluation was to measure the impact of the Autism Specialist Award on autistic CYP attending specialist schools, post-award. The following questions formed the basis of the evaluation:

1. What specific supportive practices have been implemented or improved post-award?
2. How satisfied are stakeholders with the changes resulting from the award?
3. What has the impact been of achieving the award for autistic students and their families, staff and the school?
4. What were stakeholders' experience of the accreditation process?

Methods

Three specialist educational providers, including members of staff, autistic students and their families, participated in the evaluation. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, focus groups, and case studies to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. An advisory group, including autistic adults (n=3) and members of the evaluation team (n=2) was set up to guide the evaluation, ensuring it reflected the needs and preferences of autistic people and their families.

Overall findings

The award had an overall positive impact on the school, autistic students and their families. Eighty-nine percent of staff respondents to the survey reported support practices had been implemented or improved, though 35% felt there was further opportunity for improvement.

Most stakeholders found the award outcomes satisfactory. Overall, staff reported slightly higher levels of satisfaction compared with the parents of autistic students. Findings from the survey revealed 68% of staff and 44% of parents to autistic students were either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the award's impact on autistic students at their school. Approximately 20% across both groups were somewhat satisfied and less than 15% reported no satisfaction at all. Schools valued the structured framework and advisor expertise. They identified some accessibility issues in the online survey, accreditation report, and family resources. One school struggled with documentation. Recommendations included simplifying reports and improving accessibility of accreditation materials and resources.

Students generally reported positive and supportive school experiences. Participants expressed a desire for improved self-expression, a more challenging curriculum, and increased decision-making roles. Student reactions to accreditation varied, from anxiety and enjoyment to growth.

While all three participating schools appreciated the award, its visibility in communities and recognition by parents were limited. Feedback included suggestions that both the NAS and schools could enhance promotional efforts and inclusive communication to enhance awareness.

Additional recommendations from autistic adults (n=3) participating in the co-design and advisory group included refinements to the accessibility of the online student surveys; equality and diversity monitoring in the online surveys; accessible resources for communication of the accreditation to families; and enhanced opportunities to provide qualitative feedback in the post accreditation feedback survey.

Case studies developed for each of the three schools highlighted shared commitments to supporting autistic students and professional development. Variations between schools including school size, English as a second language among families and prior experience with NAS criteria led to different experiences of the accreditation journey.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this evaluation, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Refine accessibility of surveys and support data collection in schools:** Feedback suggests the need for further refinement to improve clarity and accessibility of the online survey delivered to autistic students.
2. **Provide accessible post-accreditation recommendations and feedback to schools and families:** The NAS should consider simplifying their post-accreditation feedback materials by including a concise, one-page summary of actionable recommendations.
3. **Consider equality, diversity, and inclusion monitoring:** The NAS should consider incorporating the collection of demographic data, such as age, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, into the surveys. This helps schools and the NAS assess access barriers and outcome disparities.
4. **Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes:** The NAS should consider reviewing and expand its post accreditation feedback survey. For example, introducing open-ended qualitative questions could provide deeper feedback on schools' experiences post-accreditation, to support ongoing evaluation.
5. **Further consultation and feedback from autistic students:** Feedback from a student focus group revealed dissatisfaction with the school's Zones of Regulation implemented in their school, which warrants further exploration from the student's perspective at this school.

Introduction

Autism Know How is a newly established arm of the National Autistic Society (NAS) specialising in autism training and services to promote best practice (3). Autism Know How comprises five teams each with their own portfolio of services that aim to equip professionals, organisations, and service providers with the knowledge and understanding required to tailor their existing practice to be inclusive and meet the needs of autistic people. Work across these teams is considered important to help create the NAS vision of a society where services, support, employment, education, leisure activities, and a good quality of life are accessible to all.

The Autism Accreditation Programme, encompassing the Autism Specialist Award, caters to various services, including specialist and mainstream schools serving autistic children and young people (CYP). The programme offers a framework for assessing schools and gives recognition to those meeting the standard for autism practice. Those seeking the award engage in a rigorous assessment process that involves a pre-assessment and assessment phase. During the pre-assessment, schools are required to complete a comprehensive self-audit and action plan to understand their current practice. Schools are then assessed through observations; existing documentation; and insight gathered from stakeholders across the provision, including autistic students where appropriate. Key findings from the assessment are used to determine whether the provision should be accredited; those that are successful can achieve one of three award levels including 'aspiring', 'accredited', or 'advanced'. Throughout the accreditation process, the NAS works with schools to recommend areas for improvement and support the implementation of new practices.

Although staff working within Autism Know How believe their services are effective and bring value to autistic people, there has not been an independent evaluation of the Autism Specialist Award. The NAS have commissioned Health Innovation East to conduct an independent evaluation to measure the impact of the Autism Specialist Award in specialist schools. This report outlines the findings and recommendations from the evaluation of the Autism Specialist Award.

Background

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world (4). Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses. Some difficulties autistic people may share include social communication and social interaction challenges, repetitive or restrictive behaviours, extreme anxiety, over- or under-sensitivity to environmental stimuli, highly focused interests or hobbies and meltdown or shutdowns (4). The

NAS supports the 700,000 autistic people living in the UK and their families (3). Be it running specialist schools, campaigning for improved rights or training companies on being more autism-friendly, the NAS are dedicated to transforming lives and changing attitudes.

The Equality Act 2010 requires equal access to public services, meaning all autistic children and young people (CYP) have the right to mainstream education (6). Recent data estimates 73% of autistic students in the UK currently attend a mainstream school (2). The remaining percentage of students access specialist schools that cater to a range of special educational needs (SEN) or specialise in autism. Although mainstream schools are thought to be suited to most autistic students (7), research suggests this isn't always the case. Of the 400,000 people who responded to a survey conducted by the NAS, just one in four parents of autistic CYP were satisfied with the support provided at school (1). Less than 50% of autistic CYP reported that they are happy at school, and seven out of ten autistic CYP felt school would be better if teachers understood autism.

There is a clear need for best practice in autism across the educational system so that autistic CYP feel supported, enjoy their time at school and have the opportunity to flourish. This is particularly true for specialist provisions where expertise in SEN, including autism, is an expectation.

Aim

The aim of this evaluation was to measure the impact of the Autism Specialist Award on autistic CYP attending specialist schools, post-award. Our objectives were to evaluate how the accreditation process and awarded status enhances schools' understanding of autism and facilitates supportive practices. This evaluation also aimed to understand stakeholders' experience of the accreditation programme and overall satisfaction of the outcomes after receiving the award. The evaluation was underpinned by the following questions:

1. What specific supportive practices have been implemented or improved post-award?
2. What were stakeholders' experience of the accreditation process?
3. How satisfied are stakeholders with the changes resulting from the award?
4. What has the impact been of achieving the award for the school, autistic students and their families?

Methods

Evaluation context

This was an independent evaluation delivered by the Evaluation Team at Health Innovation East between August 2024 and January 2025. The NAS were consulted throughout the evaluation but not actively involved in its delivery. The NAS distributed an invitation to participate in data collection activities to all relevant parties and potential participants. Recruitment and data collection was then managed by the Evaluation Team once employees consented to their contact details being shared.

Co-design and advisory group

Autistic adults were invited by the Evaluation Team to form a co-design and advisory group to guide the evaluation. Group members were identified through existing contacts with the Evaluation Team and responses to an open invitation shared by the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge. The invitation was shared with the Centre's established advisory group via email in September 2024. Respondents to the invitation were asked to complete a brief screening form which asked respondents to share their connection to autism was and their availability to contribute to the evaluation. The group was selected based on their availability and experience with autism, including experience as a parent to an autistic child(ren) in education, and experience conducting or supporting research with autistic people. The final group included five people: three autistic adults and two members of the Evaluation Team. Each member (excluding Evaluation Team representatives) was paid £25 per hour for their contributions to the project.

The co-design and advisory group contributed to the design of the evaluation framework and data collection materials, ensuring the research approach and questions were suited to achieving the objectives of the evaluation. Five group meetings took place via Microsoft Teams between September 2024 and January 2025. These meetings centred around discussion to inform the design of the evaluation framework, participant recruitment, and best practice for conducting research with autistic CYP. Interactive workshops were also held during these meetings to co-design evaluation questions for the surveys and focus groups. Outside of meetings, group members had the option to feedback on written materials including the evaluation plan and questions in the survey and focus group topic guide. Furthermore, feedback was provided on the NAS-delivered data collection materials, specifically regarding student survey accessibility. Towards the end of the project, the group provided feedback on dissemination materials,

including the final evaluation report and a two-page summary for external audiences, to ensure they were informative and accessible for autistic readers.

Recruitment

An invitation to participate in the evaluation was sent to a sample of twenty-two schools across the UK who had achieved the award in the past year. The invitation was sent out by the NAS on behalf of the Evaluation Team to adhere to data protection regulations. Recruitment and data collection was then managed by the Evaluation Team once schools had consented to their contact details being shared.

Four schools were recruited for the evaluation. All four were specialist providers in education that had achieved the award in the last twelve months. All four schools included Key Stages 1 to 4. Two schools also ran a sixth form provision. Forty-two to 97% of students at each school were diagnosed or suspected autistic; two specialised in providing education to minimally verbal autistic CYP with high support needs, the other two schools included autistic CYP with primarily low to moderate support needs. Because of these differences, the Evaluation Team held an introductory call with a lead representative from each school to understand how the evaluation could be tailored to suit the school's needs and their student population. Offering this flexibility was considered important to ensure the voices of autistic students were included in the evaluation. Each school was incentivised with a £250 voucher for their participation. One school dropped out of the evaluation after the recruitment phase due to limited availability, leaving just three schools involved in data collection.

Data collection

Data collection took place for five weeks between November and December 2024. A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct the evaluation. Surveys were designed to understand how stakeholders perceived the award's impact, in particular how the accreditation process and awarded status enhances schools' understanding of autism and facilitates supportive practices, and stakeholders' satisfaction on the award outcomes; addressing evaluation questions 1, 3 and 4. Focus groups supplemented surveys by collecting qualitative data to understand stakeholders' experience of the accreditation process, thereby addressing evaluation question 2. Case studies were also developed to document each school's journey through the accreditation process.

Surveys (approach)

Two surveys were designed for this evaluation. Survey one was completed by staff across the three participating schools and covered themes around the perceived impact on the school, autistic students, and their parents, as well as overall satisfaction after achieving the award. The survey comprised fifteen questions, including a mix of Likert scale and multiple-choice questions (see Appendix 1).

Survey two was completed by parents of autistic students at each school. This survey covered themes around the perceived impact on the school, autistic students, and themselves as parents, as well as overall satisfaction after achieving the award. The parent survey also included a supplementary section for CYP to complete with parental support, if required (see Appendix 2). In total, there were thirteen questions for parents and seven questions for CYP. Again, these included a mix of Likert scale and multiple-choice questions. CYP were asked simple questions to understand how they feel and their experiences at school. For each question, CYP could respond 'Yes', 'Sometimes' or 'No'. The response text was paired with corresponding images found on 'Talking Mats' ¹ to allow for the inclusion of non-verbal CYP.

Both surveys were created in Zoho and were live from the 20th November 2024 until the 20th December 2024.

Surveys (analysis)

Survey data was exported from Zoho in Excel format and stored in Health Innovation East's secure data storage. Quantitative data from the survey was descriptively analysed and interpreted based on emerging patterns, and presented in tables. An inductive, thematic analysis of free-text responses was also performed in Microsoft Excel.

Focus groups (approach)

All three schools participated in a focus group. Sixteen stakeholders participated in total. Focus group one involved 3 members of teaching staff; focus group two involved 6 stakeholders who were a mix of teaching and specialist provision staff; and focus group three involved 7 stakeholders who were a mix of teaching staff, school leadership, and governors. All participants

¹ Talking Mats is a visual communication tool designed to support people who struggle with speech and communication to express their thoughts and feelings (8).

were aware of the award and had some involvement in the assessment process. The focus group topic guide included five overarching questions that addressed the themes described in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes included in the staff focus group topic guide

Theme
Motivations for obtaining the accreditation
Experience of the accreditation process
Impact of the accreditation
Future expectations and aspirations

An additional focus group was conducted with autistic students from one school. While all three schools were invited to participate in a student focus group, only one felt this approach was appropriate for their student population. The other two schools did not feel their autistic student population would not be able to meaningfully contribute to a focus group discussion due to their high support needs or students being minimally verbal. CYP that participated in a focus group were all aware of the accreditation and had some involvement in the assessment process, such as participating in a focus group with assessors from the NAS. Seven CYP were involved, ranging from 11 to 18 years old. The topic guide for this session included nine overarching questions that addressed the themes described in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes included in the student focus group topic guide

Theme
Experiences at school
Experience of the accreditation process
Things that can be improved at school

Focus groups were delivered online via Microsoft Teams. Participant information sheets and consent forms were shared and signed by all participants prior to the focus group (see Appendix 3, 4 and 5). CYP under the age of sixteen were given consent to participate by a parent or guardian.

Focus groups (analysis)

The focus group transcripts were thematically analysed using the six-stage approach: familiarisation, coding, searching, theme refinement, and reporting. An initial coding framework was developed based on a topic guide and a researcher performed an inductive analysis of each transcript by systematically coding the transcripts line by line in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Key themes within the data set were then identified.

Case studies

To document each school's journey through the accreditation process, we employed a case study approach. This qualitative method allowed for an exploration of individual schools' accreditation experiences to provide a nuanced understanding of the accreditation process and the outcomes achieved. A pre-determined framework was devised to guide the extraction of relevant data from the accreditation reports and focus group transcripts. The data sources provided information across five key areas, including:

- background, focused on contextual details such as the size, location, and demographic composition of each school.
- provision setting, describing the organisational and operational structures within the school.
- motivations for pursuing accreditation, exploring the specific goals and reasons that prompted each school to undertake the process.
- experiences of the process, capturing narratives related to challenges, successes, and strategies employed.
- outcomes, detailing the impacts of accreditation, such as improvements in teaching quality, changes in practices, infrastructure changes, and stakeholder engagement.

The extracted data were synthesised into individual case studies that captured the unique characteristics and experiences of each school.

Findings

Throughout November and December 2024, 88 participants opened a survey across the three participating schools, including 70 members of staff, 18 parents and 6 autistic students. Of the 88 participants, 65 staff members, 16 parents, and 6 students submitted a survey. The results below report data from all partially (n=18) and fully (n=70) completed surveys submitted within the data collection period. Three staff and one student focus group were also conducted; a thematic analysis revealed several key overarching themes, each of which encompassed a range of subordinate, lower-order themes offering a nuanced understanding of the data.

The findings from the surveys and focus groups have been synthesised and presented for each evaluation question to provide a rich narrative about the motivations, impacts, satisfaction, and experiences linked to the National Autistic Society accreditation process.

1. Motivations for pursuing the accreditation

Analysis of focus group discussions with staff highlighted recurring themes that provided insights into the motivations driving the decision to seek accreditation, which included validation and recognition; continuous improvement, reflective practice and quality assurance. The themes are explored further below:

1.1 Validation and recognition

The common thread across the three schools was a strong motivation to receive validation and recognition for their current practices in supporting autistic students. The first school created a new department to serve students identified as having the most complex communication and sensory needs. To improve services for autistic students, the school aimed to meet NAS standards, gain recognition, and expand support. The second school viewed accreditation as a way of validating their work and showcasing achievements while fostering continued improvements. The third school emphasised the importance of external validation as part of their broader development plans and as a response to the operational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Fundamentally it's to validate ourselves with the children that we have a huge cohort with." (Focus group 1)

"We already fitted many of the criteria and it also was a really good opportunity for us as a department to strengthen those foundations and make sure that we knew that

we were doing the right things and that we it was nice to be honest, to get recognised.”
(Focus group 2)

“We were very keen to have that external view of where we are and where we're going and just having that chance to kind of show what we do well and show that off. You know it is that external verification.” (Focus group 3)

1.2 Continuous improvement, reflective practice and quality assurance

The accreditation was seen as a method for continuous improvement and reflective practice. Schools described the NAS accreditation aligned with their values and provided quality assurance:

“It's bringing that kind of viewpoint into us is that ongoing development and that quality assurance that it provides.” (Focus group 3)

2. Changes in support practices (evaluation question 1)

To understand whether the accreditation process enabled schools to improve the support offered to autistic students, staff responding to the survey were asked whether new support practices had been implemented since the receiving the award. Just over half of respondents (n=35) responded yes to this question, and 23 (35%) said they had seen some improvement but felt there was room for more (see Table 3). Few participants responded no (n=1) or that they were unsure (n=3).

Table 3. Survey responses to question asking school staff whether new support practices have been implemented since the accreditation was awarded

	N	%
Yes	35	54%
Somewhat, but there is room for more	23	35%
No	1	2%
Unsure	3	5%

Following on from this, staff were asked if existing support practices within their school had been improved post-award. Again, over half of participants responded yes (n=36) and 18 participants (28%) reflected that practices had somewhat improved but felt there was room for more (see

Table 4). Similar to the previous question, just one (2%) participant responded no and four (6%) were unsure.

Table 4. Survey responses to the question asking school staff whether existing support practices have been improved since the accreditation was awarded

	N	%
Yes	39	60%
Somewhat, but there is room for improvement	18	28%
No	1	2%
Unsure	4	6%

In the focus groups, staff shared that their school had introduced communication boards, Zones of Regulation², calming rooms and de-escalation techniques for students.

"There wasn't really anything like Zones of Regulation, which I think was recommended through the accreditation and it's something that we use it throughout school and adopted every single class - a student can walk into any class and know exactly what that means."
(Focus group 1)

3. Impact of the award (evaluation question 2)

One focus of the evaluation was to understand how participants perceived the impact of the award on stakeholders across their school. Collectively, twenty-two survey questions were answered by members of staff and parents to understand how they viewed the award's impact on staff, the parents of autistic students, and autistic students themselves. Staff also shared their perceived impact of the award during focus groups discussions.

² Zones of Regulation is a curriculum that has been used in schools across Australia to help children, including Autistic children, develop awareness of emotions and skills for regulation. The Zones uses four colours to help people become aware of their feelings, behaviours and thoughts, and provides them with strategies/tools to self-regulate depending on their zone (9).

3.1 Survey responses showing award impact

Impact on staff

Using a five-point Likert scale, staff responding to the survey were asked to indicate what impact the award had had on them (see Table 5). A majority of respondents either agreed (n=32) or strongly agreed (n=19) that their understanding of autism was better post-award. Similar numbers of respondents reported an improved understanding of how to support (agree n=38; strongly agree n=17) and confidence in supporting autistic students (agree n=35; strongly agree n=18). Again, most respondents either agreed (n=36) or strongly agreed (n=16) they were now better prepared to cater to the individual needs of autistic students at the school.

Table 5. Impact of the award on members of staff based on their responses to the survey

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel that I have a better understanding of autism.	19 (29%)	32 (49%)	8 (12%)	4 (6%)	2 (3%)
I feel that I have an improved understanding of how to support autistic students at the school.	17 (26%)	38 (58%)	4 (6%)	3 (5%)	2 (3%)
I feel more confident supporting autistic students at the school.	18 (28%)	35 (54%)	6 (9%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)
I feel better prepared to cater to the individual needs of autistic students at the school.	16 (25%)	36 (55%)	7 (11%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)

The same questions, with adjusted wording, were answered by parents to understand how they perceived the award's impact on staff at their child's school. Of the 16 parents who submitted a response, over 50% either agreed or strongly agreed to all four questions (see Table 6). In contrast, 19% of parents (n=3) consistently responded "strongly disagree" across all four questions.

Table 6. Perceived impact of the award on members of staff based on parent responses to the survey

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel that the school has a better understanding of autism.	8 (50%)	3 (19%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)	3 (19%)
I feel that the support offered to autistic students at the school has improved.	5 (31%)	6 (38%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)
I feel more confident the school understands my child's needs.	6 (38%)	4 (25%)	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)
I feel that the school is better prepared to cater to the individual needs of autistic students at the school.	7 (44%)	3 (19%)	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)

Impact on students

The survey included three questions to understand staff and parents' perspective of the award's impact on the learning and development, wellbeing, and social outcomes for autistic students. For each question, participants could select multiple options from the list provided or select "other" and specify an alternative response. When asked for their perceived impact on the learning and development of autistic students, "increased interest in certain lessons" received the highest response from staff (n=36) followed by "increased confidence in lessons" (n=34) (see Table 7). In contrast, "increased academic performance" was the most selected response by parents, followed by "increased interest in certain lessons" which was selected by fewer than half of parent respondents (n=5). A smaller number of staff (n=7) and parents (n=3) responded with "no impact observed".

Table 7. Perceived impact of the award on learning and development for autistic students based on survey responses

	Staff perspective		Parent perspective	
	N	%	N	%
Improved academic performance	16	26%	7	54%
Increased interest in certain lessons	36	59%	5	38%
Increased confidence in lessons	34	56%	2	15%
No impact observed	7	11%	3	23%
Other (Please specify)*	5	8%	0	0%

*Responses to other included "increased engagement". Some participants did not specify their response.

When asked about the perceived impact on the wellbeing of autistic students, many (69%) across both stakeholder groups were in agreement that achieving the award had a positive impact on the mental health of students (see Table 8). Some staff (n=29) and parents (n=4) shared they had also observed a positive impact on the physical health of students. However, almost 20% of participants across both groups shared they had observed no impact (staff n=11; parents n=3).

Table 8. Perceived impact of the award on the wellbeing of autistic students based on survey responses

	Staff perspective		Parent perspective	
	N	%	N	%
Improved physical health	29	48%	4	31%
Improved mental health	42	69%	9	69%
No impact observed	11	18%	3	23%
Other (Please specify)*	5	8%	0	0%

*Responses to other included "improved regulation". Some participants did not specify their response.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate their views of the award's impact on social outcomes for autistic students. Among staff respondents, "increased confidence around others at school" received the highest number of responses (n=37), followed by "improved communication skills" (n=33) (see Table 9). Parents were given additional options for this question to understand their perspective of social outcomes both within and outside of the school environment. Based on parent responses, communication skills (n=8) and social interactions outside of school (n=7) were perceived to have been impacted the most, post-award.

Table 9. Perceived impact of the award on social outcomes for autistic students based on survey responses

	Staff perspective		Parent perspective	
	N	%	N	%
Increased social interactions at school	27	42%	6	38%
Increased social interactions outside of school	-		7	44%
Increased confidence around others at school	37	57%	4	25%
Increased confidence around others outside of school	-		5	31%
Improved communication skills	33	51%	8	50%
No impact observed	8	12%	2	13%
Other (Please specify) *	5	8%	0	0%

*Participants who selected "Other" did not specify their response.

Impact on parents

A total of five questions across both surveys were designed to understand if the award also impacted the parents of autistic students, in particular whether the award influences feelings of reassurance. Staff were asked if they thought that the award helped parents feel more reassured the school was offering appropriate learning and development support, wellbeing support and met the needs of autistic CYP. Between 47% and 62% of respondents agreed that parents felt more reassured across all three areas (see Table 10). A neutral response was provided by 18% to 32% participants and just one participant strongly disagreed the award increased any feelings of reassurance.

Table 10. Perceived impact of the award on feelings of reassurance among parents based on staff responses to the survey

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Parents seem more reassured their child receives the learning and development support they need.	7 (12%)	28 (47%)	19 (32%)	5 (8%)	1 (2%)
Parents seem more reassured their child receives the health and wellbeing support they need.	10 (17%)	32 (53%)	13 (22%)	4 (7%)	1 (2%)
Parents seem more reassured the school meets their child's needs.	8 (13%)	37 (62%)	11 (18%)	3 (5%)	1 (2%)

When parents were asked if they were feeling more reassured because of the award, most either agreed (n=4) or strongly agreed (n=4). One respondent neither agreed nor disagreed, and three either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of the eight parents who agreed, a follow-up question was presented to understand why they were feeling more reassured. Responses to this question revealed that increased communication around their child's wellbeing (n=7) and learning and development at school (n=6) were key to increasing feelings of reassurance (see Table 11). Just knowing the school has been awarded an accreditation also played a key part for many parents (n=6).

Table 11. Factors contributing to increased feelings of reassurance since the award based on parent responses to the survey

	N	%
The school is keeps me more informed about my child's wellbeing	7	88%
The school keeps me more informed about my child's learning and development	6	75%
Just knowing they've been awarded the accreditation reassures me	6	75%
I've seen a change in my child's learning and development	4	50%
I've seen a change in my child's wellbeing	4	50%
My child seems happier at school	5	63%
The teachers seem to better understand autism	4	50%
The teachers seem to better understand my child	5	63%
The teachers seem more confident supporting my child	4	50%
My child seems more supported at school	4	50%
I'm not sure	0	0%
Other (Please specify)	0	0%

Parents were also asked whether knowing that a school has been accredited with the Autism Specialist Award would influence future decision-making on which school to send their child to. Again, most parents either agreed (n=4) or strongly agreed (n=2). However, a few respondents felt neutrally about this question (n=2) or disagreed with it entirely (n=2) (see Table 12).

Table 12. Parent views on whether knowing a school has been awarded the accreditation would impact future decisions on which school they attend

	N	%
Strongly agree	4	33%
Agree	4	33%
Neither agree nor disagree	2	17%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	2	17%

Impact on the school

One final question was presented to both staff and parent respondents to understand their thoughts on the overall impact of the award on autistic students and the school. Across both stakeholder groups, most participants agreed (staff n=28; parents n=5) or strongly agreed (staff n=17; parents n=3) the award had helped the school become more focused on the needs of autistic students (see Table 13). A handful of staff respondents neither agreed nor disagreed (n=12) the school had become more focused, however a few respondents across both groups disagreed.

Table 13. Views on the overall impact of the award on the school meeting the needs of autistic students based on survey responses

	Staff perspective		Parent perspective	
	N	%	N	%
Strongly agree	17	28%	3	25%
Agree	28	47%	5	42%
Neither agree nor disagree	12	20%	1	8%
Disagree	1	2%	1	8%
Strongly disagree	2	3%	2	17%

It is important to note that the survey did not collect information on staff roles, and some respondents may not have been directly involved in the accreditation process. In addition, from the focus group discussions and survey responses revealed some schools felt they were already operating at a high level, with the accreditation primarily serving to validate existing practices.

"We were working at a high level." (Survey)

"As far as I am aware, the accreditation only serves to make the school look good to outside observers. While this is a good thing, I don't believe obtaining the accreditation has had any effect on the practices and outcomes within the school." (Survey)

This may account for some responses disagreeing with the idea that the accreditation had a direct impact on areas such as knowledge, confidence, and support for autistic students.

Focus group discussions with school staff suggested that some parents may have limited awareness of the accreditation. Therefore, responses should be interpreted cautiously, as they may reflect recent experiences at the school rather than the direct effects of the award.

"In terms of parents' understanding of the accreditation itself has been quite difficult because a lot of parents of the students are also SEN. So the parents themselves sometimes don't understand what it means and if they do understand, they maybe don't know how to express the emotion of how they feel and that kind of thing." (Focus group 1)

3.2 Themes from focus groups and survey free text responses relating to award impact

Impact on students

Schools reported improved student outcomes following the accreditation process, such as improvement in modes of communication and promoting child-led practices. For example, one school reported the introduction of communication boards, Zones of Regulation and calming rooms.

"There wasn't really anything like Zones of Regulation, which I think was recommended through the accreditation and it's something that we use it throughout school and adopted every single class - a student can walk into any class and know exactly what that means." (Focus group 1)

"I think what's been really positive that's come out of both the behaviour sensory stuff and the communication." (Focus group 2)

The accreditation process fostered a deeper understanding of student behaviours and the adoption of more inclusive terminology, creating a more supportive environment. Schools also identified changes that included positive behavioural approaches, like skills-based learning frameworks. Schools emphasised a new understanding of student behaviours as expressions of communication needs.

"I think it almost links to in our behavioural approach as well and now we've kind of adapted how we view and even our language because we think originally we would kind of talk about how the child might have displayed negative behaviour or would be described in a bad light, whereas now we're talking using terminology." (Focus group 1)

"When these things were changed actually helped us actually take a step back and look at what maybe we're doing something wrong or maybe something that we need to

improve on. And you were actually able to look at that behaviour as a way of communicating.” (Focus group 2)

A participant highlighted the accreditation process as a source of valuable insights into fostering supportive student interactions, encompassing appropriate body language, sufficient processing time, and the acknowledgment and respect of each student's unique requirements.

“It's got to be student specific. One student might need a lot of processing time, another doesn't need any at all. I think it's learning that each student is very different and I think that's something that I've definitely picked up from the accreditation.” (Focus group 1)

One parent responding to the survey describes observing improvements in their child's happiness, confidence and heightened awareness of their environment.

“As a parent I see how much effort they put into my child, as I see a confident and happy boy. But not just in his personality but improvement in his understanding, acknowledging his surroundings, getting the right tools for life skills and the understanding of his educational needs.” (Survey)

Impact on parents

Schools reported improvements in communication with parents, which fostered stronger partnerships and alignment between home and school strategies. One school emphasised the importance of involving parents through various initiatives, such as workshops and regular updates from key staff members.

“It's a reminder to get parents more involved as well. So running our parent workshops and meeting with parents and sharing things who's our other intervention TA reporting back to parents and keeping them in the loop. And those are all things that we reflected on as part of the accreditation.” (Focus group 2)

One school highlighted how introducing honest and open communication with parents led to reciprocal honesty. This approach helped parents feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and challenges, enabling schools to provide tailored support. By fostering these reciprocal and transparent relationships, schools created a shared understanding of students' needs.

“Communicating with parents I found is now better when we're more honest, because actually the parents are then more honest. I think it helps parents discuss what is

happening at home, so what can we do to help. And these are all that impacts. These are all the things that have made a massive difference.” (Focus group 2)

One free text survey response from a parent highlighted their confidence in their child's enjoyment of school:

“I am really confident that my daughter enjoys school. She's always happy to go to school every morning.” (Survey)

One parent responding to the survey expressed appreciation for the school's commitment to their non-verbal child, highlighting the reassurance they felt regarding their child's safety. The parent considered the school deserving of accreditation, thus affirming the credibility of the accreditation and recognition it had received:

“The school also offers safety, reassurance. As a parent to a non-verbal child, it's been a blessing as I am being informed daily of what had happened throughout his schedule, so I am well informed how his day went. The school is well deserving for being accredited.” (Survey)

One staff participant expressed optimism about parents' pride in the school's offerings, commitment to respectful treatment of all children, and dedication to accreditation pursuits.

“I would like to say that a lot of our parents would take pride obviously in what we can offer as a school and how we respect their children and each child's treated like you say with that dignity and respect. And I think as a parent, that would probably feel, I would like to say, feel proud of as a staff team for how we are like you say, willing to get these accreditation.” (Focus group 1)

Impact on staff

Staff across schools highlighted the benefits of engaging in reflective practices throughout the accreditation process. This reflection allowed for a deeper understanding of existing methods and revealed opportunities for growth. One participant stated, *“I'd say the most positive thing was reflecting on our practice”* (Focus group 2), while another shared that the process *“helped us to be more reflective as to what we do and ways we can continue to develop.”* (Survey)

Similarly, staff emphasised the value of examining their successes and challenges, with one stating,

"A lot of it has been definitely to do with the accreditation and then also reflecting on our own practice as well—what we've learnt and going well, this wasn't working" (Focus group 1).

While the accreditation process initially caused anxiety associated with implementing recommendations from the NAS, this discomfort gave way to confidence and appreciation for the changes. One participant shared:

"It made a lot of staff more anxious when things got changed because they were sort of our safety barriers. However, if you'd have asked me this now, when I was told that this was changing, I was like, oh, wow, I don't know how we're going to do that, but now I would say it was the best thing we did." (Focus group 2).

A shared sense of pride and motivation also emerged as a common theme. Staff at all schools expressed a sense of collective accomplishment, with one participant noting,

"There's a lot of sense of pride. And the teachers that have been here for a good few years, you could really see that it meant a lot to them" (Focus group 3).

One staff member described this sense of uplift and pride as a catalyst that motivates others to uphold standards and encourages staff to reflect on it further:

"Obviously that just uplifts the school anyway in a bit of a vibe and people have a bit of pride about it now as well. You know, so obviously standards have to be maintained to sort of to constantly say we're up to that standard. So the people are thinking about it a little bit more." (Focus group 1)

The accreditation process offered professional development opportunities. For example, one staff member reported gaining new skills and greater confidence:

"As an NQT at the time of our accreditation, it helped my practice immensely. The collaboration between our working group, the resources that were shared and the general focus on world class basics massively improved my confidence in delivering quality learning experiences to autistic learners, to the point where I felt confident enough to share my knowledge and experience with other members of staff." (Survey)

The accreditation process of a particular school prompted the refinement of their strategies to cultivate de-escalation techniques and enhance the identification of triggers among students, resulting in a decrease in incidents of harm towards teachers. As one participant explained,

"It's also a point of it's basically understanding their de-escalation, supporting their needs and their triggers. So, we I think once all of that got stripped back, we had to learn what are what the triggers were for some of our students. Because it wasn't as easy then, because actually we would end up getting hurt." (Focus group 2)

The accreditation process allowed for additional confirmation and validation of staff of their good practice, as one participant describes,

"I think also the process itself was probably very good for reinforcing to a lot of staff that they were already doing things very well. Yeah. And it was, it was that additional confirmation of the good things they were doing." (Focus group 3)

Impact on the school

For all schools, accreditation reinforced a unified approach to supporting autistic students and improved consistency in practices. One school made infrastructure changes, such as building a regulation room, while another used data triangulation from the accreditation process and integrated it into their development plans.

The process also played a pivotal role in improving communication and consistency across school departments. For example, at one school, staff described how the accreditation helped rebuild stability and established universal approaches following disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as one participant describes,

"Through that (COVID pandemic) we'd lost a bit of that consistency across the school. We'd almost lost our stable base. So that universal approach that all classes have as a starting point and then you individualise it along the way... that was really important for us as a school. And that was something that Ofsted picked up on." (Focus group 3).

The accreditation process and its outcomes supported onboarding practices for new staff and the development of their understanding, particularly in schools that experienced high turnover or growth following the pandemic. As one participant observed,

"We just had a massive intake of new staff... we lost so many people who moved on after COVID. And I think that was one of the values of the accreditation process, particularly for some of the newer staff coming into the school—developing their understanding" (Focus group 3).

Achieving accreditation was deemed uplifting for all schools, providing a boost to the school and staff, especially given the dedication shown in supporting students with special needs and overcoming challenges in this setting:

"The accreditation gives a boost not just for the school but every staff member as they truly put their souls into these special children, going above and beyond with challenges with these children. (Focus group 2).

4. Stakeholder satisfaction (evaluation question 3)

The survey aimed to understand levels of satisfaction amongst stakeholders, post-award. Both members of staff and parents of autistic students who responded to the survey were asked to rate on a Likert scale how satisfied they were with the impact of achieving the award on both the students and the school. Table 14 summarises the survey responses. Across both stakeholder groups, most respondents shared that they were either very satisfied (48% of staff; 19% of parents) or extremely satisfied (20% of staff; 25% of parents) with the impact of the award, however lower scores were also submitted with 5% of staff and 13% of parents indicated that they were not at all satisfied.

Table 14. Level of satisfaction with the award's impact on autistic students based on survey responses

	Staff		Parents	
	N	%	N	%
Extremely satisfied	13	20%	4	25%
Very satisfied	31	48%	3	19%
Moderately satisfied	11	17%	3	19%
Slightly satisfied	2	3%	0	0%
Not at all satisfied	3	5%	2	13%

5. Stakeholders' experience of the accreditation process (evaluation question 4)

The focus group topic guide included questions designed to understand stakeholders' experience of achieving the award and perceptions of the accreditation process.

5.1 Framework for improvement

Schools described the accreditation process as providing a helpful, structured framework that supported consistent and sustainable development across the schools, offering clear benchmarks and a systematic approach to improvement.

"It gave the school a focus and clear framework to work within to help develop our practice." (Survey).

"It's really structured. So [Name] mentioned that we did these briefings, but it was all linked to those standards so that we could work through it in a really methodical way. There was a need to get consistency, we need to improve communication. How do we do it? It gave us that framework to work within and gave us a logical step." (Focus group 3).

5.2 Support from NAS

School staff highly valued the practical and structured guidance provided by NAS. School staff praised NAS advisors for their approachability, support, expertise, and guidance:

"Our advisor was so supportive. The NAS, they're coming in and they're giving us support throughout the process away from the actual the assessment." (Focus group 3).

5.3 Collaboration and teamwork

All schools emphasised the importance of collaboration and support throughout the accreditation process,

"We all fall back on people working together as well, you know, from the parents, the pupils to us, everybody working together." (Focus group 3).

"There was a whole school approach as well. We had briefings in the mornings with reminders of things to do around the class to do with the accreditation, which were really helpful." (Focus group 3).

The endorsement of the school's leadership proved vital in facilitating the accreditation initiative, particularly in guiding the team's efforts related to documentation and strategic planning.

"We also need to make the point that we get massive amount of support from the executive head teacher and the senior leadership team across the federation. So it's hugely supported at every level in the school." (Focus group 3).

5.4 Challenges in the accreditation process

The accreditation process proved rigorous, demanding substantial preparation for the school with a small department undergoing the accreditation for the first time. The pre-visit period was marked by stress and pressure to comprehensively and articulately present all aspects of the work, and this school found the documentation process to be stressful and time consuming.

"Everyone has a lot of responsibilities, so it was quite a heavy approach, paperwork, heavy process. However, we were able to evidence all of those criteria. (Focus group 2).

Collecting input from non-verbal students posed challenges for all schools. Participants reflected that supporting students with complex needs necessitates flexible instruments and methods to accurately represent their varied experiences. All schools fed back that the NAS questionnaires' components were too abstract for some students,

"That was a bit we struggled with because the questionnaire NAS send out and it was a little bit some of the concepts are a little bit too abstract for some of our young people, ... it was quite hard concepts for them to understand." (Focus group 3).

A school felt the survey and NAS feedback were too rigid for their high-needs students. Parental and teacher perceptions of student support were deemed critical factors in the accreditation review process, especially concerning the educational experiences of nonverbal students.

"Our autistic students are often mostly pre verbal and non-speaking, so gaining their opinion on anything is incredibly tricky. In terms of the process, it wasn't great that we had that section of it because it didn't tell us anything. It was just a pointless part of the whole process." (Focus group 2).

"I'd say parents' and teachers' opinion, how we feel with supporting the students...I've spoken to parents where they can't believe that actually we have a child in school all day. So their opinion to go on to that would actually be a lot more effective." (Focus group 2).

A school recommended adapting data collection methods to align with the school's unique requirements and offering more diverse participation choices, as reflected by one participant's feedback.

"I'm not saying they get rid of that for other schools, but just in terms of our school or just recognising the needs of each school, like does it need to be student focused or does it need to be parent focused? I think just having the option available for future accreditations." (Focus group 2).

However, most schools valued the adaptability of the data collection for the accreditation for their specific contexts and the ability to integrate existing data collection methods.

"Our advisor was really open and said, look, you can change it. So that's one of our areas for next time is we can then adapt it. So the flexibility within the accreditation process that we can add our own things in is great." (Focus group 3).

One school valued the significant amount of data collected from both students and parents, which was seen as a strength, but one school wanted to have access to parental responses from the accreditation data collection,

"So we did get a lot of data from the students and actually from the parents, I think that was a big strength from this." (Focus group 3).

"It would be nice to see those, to have access to the parental responses. Yeah, it would be helpful to get some of that data." (Focus group 3).

Feedback on the NAS report was generally positive, but one school raised concerns about its accessibility, length, and complexity. Staff found it difficult to extract actionable insights and understand the positive observations behind their accreditation. They suggested the report include simplified summaries, such as a front-page overview or bullet points, highlighting key strengths, areas for improvement, and practical takeaways for classroom staff. These changes could save time, enhance understanding, and help staff leverage feedback to improve practices and celebrate successes. One participant explained:

"The report was quite lengthy and... not very readable. There could have been a sheet where they just say the positives... or what bits meant that we got the accreditation... It was written in the report, but you'd have to read every single page to find that bit of information. We had to make a sheet of our own to simplify it... because I don't think a lot of people have the time to go through the whole thing." (Focus group 2).

Another point raised was the perceived lack of recognition for changes made by the school between visits. One school reported making substantial adaptations in response to initial feedback, however, the final report did not reflect or recognise these efforts. One participant remarked:

"The report doesn't really recognise the commitment we put into making those changes and the phenomenal response from the class teams." (Focus group 2).

5.5 Observations

The accreditation observations were well received; schools valued the supportive and low-stress nature of the process.

"Oh, for me it was a very light touch when we had the observations." (Focus group 1).

Feedback from the school with a smaller departmental structure indicated that accreditation assessment meetings placed a strain on classroom resources.

"You also have to take people out of classes to have meetings to be interviewed, which means that the classrooms are shorter staffed ... back in class are having a really tricky time." (Focus group 2).

They also raised concerns regarding children's behavioural responses and their apparent sensitivity to staff stress levels during observations.

"I feel like also children can sometimes pick on your stress when things are different and there's new people, new faces in school, then children can also pick up on that and it affected their behaviour." (Focus group 2).

6. Other findings

While insightful data was obtained from staff and parent surveys, the Evaluation Team prioritised gathering information directly from autistic students regarding their school experiences. Seven additional questions were included towards the end of the survey for parents. These questions explored the experiences of autistic students at school, post-award. Considering the diverse population of students and support needs across participating schools, these questions were designed to be simple and accessible, and did not require students to reflect on their experiences before and after the accreditation. Therefore, these responses should not be interpreted as a consequence of the award, but as an indication of their recent academic experiences. This supplementary section of the survey was optional and parents could support as appropriate.

6.1 Experience of autistic students

Table 15 presents responses from the six students who completed the survey. Almost all students (n=5) agreed with each of the seven statements, indicating that they feel supported, understood, and comfortable at school. One student (17%) responded 'sometimes' to four statements, but 'yes' to statements around getting help at school, and feeling like they can be themselves at school.

Table 15. Responses to the parent survey from autistic students

	Yes	Sometimes	No
I get the help I need during lessons at school	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I get help I need outside of lessons at school	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
My teachers at school understand me	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
My teachers listen to me when I am at school	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
I can be myself when I am at school	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I feel comfortable at school	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)
I enjoy being at school	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)

6.2 Accreditation experiences reported by autistic students

A focus group comprising of students and one member of staff explored several areas, including their overall school experience, the adequacy of support for autistic students, comparisons with mainstream education, and their perspectives on the accreditation process and areas for school improvement.

The students expressed positive experiences at the school, mentioning that everyone is kind, thoughtful, and respectful; which has helped to create supportive community. One student highlighted the efforts made by individuals to assist students dealing with mental health issues, physical problems, and personal challenges. One student expressed their satisfaction with fitting in and another with enjoying their role as a wellbeing ambassador. Good lessons, friends, and a fulfilling social life outside of school were also identified as positive outcomes of being at the school.

"Everyone is kind, thoughtful and respectful" (P1)

"Feel I really fit in." (P2)

"I like as [Name] said, everyone is kind, thoughtful and everyone is doing their best to help students that sometimes have mental health problems and physical problems and things going on at home." (P3)

"Enjoys being a wellbeing ambassador." (P4)

"Got friends and good social life outside of school." (P5)

"Good lessons." (P7)

While all students reported that their autistic needs were being met, one student indicated only partial fulfilment, specifically regarding self-expression and understanding of their own needs.

"Half and half - Working half being met but expressing self, getting it out and understanding it not met." (P6)

The teaching assistant explained that there had been the introduction of Zones of Regulation, which was not well received by the college students.

"We have started doing Zones of Regulations and the college students are not a massive fan of Zones of Regulations." (Teacher)

One student expressed their frustration at not being able to use their own equipment for schoolwork, as this student explains,

"Not being able to use my equipment's (e.g. pens and pencils) from home, I've been told I have to use the school equipment – like calculators." (P7)

The students felt that the school did things differently compared to mainstream schools, with the school showing more care and attention.

"A lot. My mainstream school didn't really care, they just thought they could just teach kids (inaudible). I hated my old school because they didn't give a hoot." (P2)

However, they also mentioned that they sometimes preferred doing things the way they were used to.

"Half and half. You get to express your feelings more here, more than mainstream, but sometimes I prefer to do things the way I'm used to." (P2)

Regarding the accreditation process, students reported a mixture of anxiety, enjoyment and of personal growth when discussing their experience of the assessors' visit, though some students had limited recall of the event.

"It was the last (academic) year, I can't remember." (P4)

"Its little bit of a blur." (P1)

"I gave a tour. I felt a little nervous." (P2)

"[Name] fed back at the time he loved it, which was interesting." (Teacher)

"It was good to challenge myself. Nervous are just a feeling." (P1)

The students suggested areas for improvement, such as better handling of emotions, more challenging curriculum options, and greater student involvement in decision-making processes.

"[Need help with] handling emotion." (P6)

"Challenged a bit more." (P5)

"Students who are part of the formal curriculum, want a slightly more challenging curriculum." (Teacher)

"One thing that does need to be a bit better is the student voice. We have a quality group which was just staff, but we want to bring in parents and students, so we need to get your voice in better." (Teacher)

Overall, the students felt that things were currently going well at the school.

"When everything is settled there is nothing to think about. I feel like everything is ok at the moment." (P2)

7. Future aspirations of the schools

Schools emphasised their dedication to continuous improvement and maintaining high standards. Their goals focused on:

1. Embedding student needs into daily teaching practices.
2. Achieving higher accreditation levels.
3. Building networks and partnerships to share best practices.
4. Enhancing parental communication.
5. Ensure consistent practices across classrooms and operational consistency across school departments.
6. Establish connections with other institutions.
7. One school aims to become an assessor, contributing to the accreditation ecosystem.
8. One school had goals to develop accessible training resources, such as eBooks.
9. Prioritisation of ongoing professional development.
10. Promotion of reflective practices among staff.

8. Perception of accreditation's value

Across schools, there was a desire for increased public understanding and appreciation of the NAS accreditation's value. While staff and parents expressed pride in their achievements, accreditation was compared to more widely recognised frameworks such as Ofsted. Despite the sense of accomplishment associated with accreditation, schools reported limited efforts to celebrate these milestones within their communities.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of raising the visibility and perceived credibility of accreditation through deliberate celebratory efforts and targeted outreach. Introducing awards ceremonies, community events, and promotional materials to better showcase their achievements and instil a sense of pride was suggested. For instance, one school proposed celebratory initiatives specifically designed to enhance recognition and engagement.

A consistent theme was the challenge of effectively communicating the significance of accreditation to parents and the broader community. Schools identified language barriers and the accessibility of reports as significant obstacles. As one survey respondent noted:

"It would be good if we had a way of giving the information to parents about the impact of the accreditation. The report was hard to read and not accessible for the parents that do not speak or read English." (Survey).

This sentiment highlights the need for more inclusive and user-friendly communication strategies to ensure that all stakeholders can fully understand and appreciate the value of accreditation.

9. Case studies

Three case studies detail the journeys of individual schools through the accreditation process, highlighting key themes, such as motivations, experiences, and outcomes. These case studies provide a holistic view of the process, showcasing both shared features and unique differences. All schools showed a strong commitment to supporting autistic students, emphasising quality assurance, validation, and opportunities for professional development and reflection. However, variations emerged in school size, the proportion of students and families for whom English is an additional language, prior experience in supporting autistic students within NAS criteria, and their overall accreditation experiences. The full case studies are available in Appendix 8 for further reference.

10. Additional feedback from the advisory group

The advisory group offered recommendations for improvements to NAS accreditation processes, data collection instruments, and resources, such as the communication package and post-feedback survey.

Data collection

Online surveys for students and families are an integral part of the accreditation data collection. Schools administer these surveys, and they are responsible for making adaptations if needed, such as translating to other languages. While the accreditation report documents the number of completed surveys, it does not collect demographic data.

The team sought feedback from the advisory group on the student survey's accessibility and usability. Feedback from the advisory group on the content of the student survey provided the following feedback:

- Questions are abstract which may prove challenging for an autistic pupil to interpret. One advisory group member commented: 'Even as an adult I'm not sure what the questions are actually asking me to think about and I'm having to carefully shut down the associations my brain is trying to pull together so I don't get stuck and overwhelmed trying to second guess them'.
- Questions are broad and do not take into account individual differences.
- To address the above, the group recommended redesigning questions to ensure they are more specific to the individual responding. This could be achieved by including a guiding question before each question to help the pupil think of examples specific to them, for example: What do you need help with at school? Does your teacher help you with this?

Communication

The NAS offers a complete suite of communication tools, including a comprehensive social media package and a user-friendly template for crafting and disseminating press releases. However, no specific communication resources were identified to explain the accreditation process or its significance to families.

Post-accreditation feedback

After receiving accreditation, the NAS conducts a feedback survey to assess experiences of going through the accreditation. The survey includes questions about the effectiveness of the support and assessment, the impact on autistic individuals, and a checklist of outcomes from the accreditation process. It also provides space for success stories, and confirmation of interest in continuing the programme. However, the survey lacks open-text options for further explanation or qualitative feedback about the accreditation process. Additionally, only one school contact completes the survey; it does not gather feedback from all staff involved in the accreditation process.

Summary of findings

This evaluation aimed to evaluate the impact of the Autism Specialist Award on autistic CYP attending specialist schools, post-award. Objectives of the evaluation were to evaluate how the accreditation process and awarded status enhances schools' understanding of autism and facilitates supportive practices, in addition to understanding stakeholders' experience of the accreditation programme and overall satisfaction of the outcomes after receiving the award. Exploring the accreditation journeys of the three schools highlighted all were dedicated to supporting autistic students and professional development, but variations emerged regarding school size and how established they were in supporting autistic students, prior familiarity with NAS criteria, and the overall accreditation experience. The survey, focus group and review of accreditation reports showed clear positive outcomes from the NAS accreditation process and award, which are summarised below in alignment with the evaluation questions:

What specific supportive practices have been implemented or improved post-award?

Through the accreditation process, schools reported enhancement in their supportive practices for autistic students. Survey and focus group response showed that the majority of stakeholders observed the implementation of new practices. School staff focus group discussions and accreditation report analysis revealed the implementation of communication and sensory strategies, including communication boards, Zones of Regulation, calming rooms, de-escalation techniques, and behavioural and child-led approaches. Respondents also reported improvements to existing practices, though 35% identified further opportunities for enhancement. Focus group discussions highlighted the adoption of inclusive approaches, including the use of supportive and inclusive terminology and strategies tailored to students' individual behavioural and communication needs.

What has the impact been of achieving the award for the school, autistic students and their families?

The accreditation process and subsequent award were perceived to positively impact the school, students and their families. Staff reported increased understanding, confidence and preparedness in supporting autistic students. A majority of parents also noted improvements in the school's understanding of autism, support quality, and preparedness to meet their child's needs. However,

a minority of parents strongly disagree with this observation, suggesting variability in experiences.

Impacts on students

Schools and parents reported benefits for autistic students, including improved mental health, increased confidence, wellbeing and better communication. Specific changes, such as introducing child-led practices, positive behavioural approaches, and inclusive terminology contributed to these outcomes. Survey responses highlighted increased interest in lessons and academic performance as improvements.

Impacts on parents/families

In some cases, the award process fostered stronger partnerships with parents through enhanced communication strategies like workshops and regular updates. Parents reported feeling reassured about the school's commitment to their children, particularly around safety, engagement, and individualised support. However, from the survey responses, a minority of parents expressed disagreement when asked about the impact of the accreditation award.

Impact on staff

Staff professional development, including the opportunity for reflective practice, resulted from the accreditation. Incorporating refinements suggested by NAS assessors yielded positive outcomes, especially within the context of a school's new department and initial accreditation. Introducing enhanced de-escalation techniques and trigger identification for students resulted in a subsequent reduction in incidents. Staff members conveyed pride in their achievements, and many considered the accreditation as confirmation of their efforts and impact. Their success was attributed to effective teamwork, which fostered a process of continuous improvement and elevated staff commitment to excellence.

Impact on school

The award improved communication and reinforced a unified approach to supporting autistic students and improved consistency across departments. Infrastructure enhancements, such as regulation rooms, were introduced. Schools integrated data from the accreditation process into development plans, supported onboarding practices for new staff and provided a framework for regaining stability post-pandemic. The accreditation was viewed as uplifting, boosting morale and affirming the school's dedication to excellence in autism support.

How satisfied are stakeholders with the changes resulting from the award?

Survey results revealed that most stakeholders were satisfied with the impact of the award, with a majority of staff and parents rating their satisfaction as "very satisfied" or "extremely satisfied." However, a minority of respondents showed dissatisfaction.

What were stakeholders' experience of the accreditation process?

Schools valued the structured framework provided by the accreditation process, which supported sustainable improvements. The NAS advisors were praised for their guidance and expertise, though challenges were highlighted, such as the time intensive nature of documentation and the accessibility of surveys, particularly for high-needs students. Although most schools expressed satisfaction with the final report, limited time for review was noted; one school specifically identified accessibility issues within the document. Recommendations included providing simplified or plain English versions of the reports for better accessibility and increased recognition and visibility of the changes made between visits and for this to be reflected back in the final report.

Experiences of autistic students

The student focus group highlighted positive school experiences, with students feeling supported and included. Some respondents, however, voiced a need for improved avenues of self-expression – noting dissatisfaction with implementing Zones of Regulation in one instance – along with a more demanding curriculum (for students on a formal curriculum) and heightened involvement in the decision-making process. Regarding the accreditation process, from the students spoken to, they reported a mixture of anxiety, enjoyment, and of personal growth when discussing their experience of the assessors' visit.

Perception of accreditation's value

While the accreditation was viewed positively within schools, its recognition by parents and in broader communities was felt to be limited. School's staff emphasised the need for greater visibility and appreciation of accreditation achievements and offered suggestions such as producing promotional materials, holding events and adopting inclusive communication strategies.

Advisory group recommendations

The advisory group offered recommendations, which included refining the accessibility of the online student survey; equality and diversity monitoring in the online surveys; accessible resources for communication of the accreditation to families; and enhanced opportunity for qualitative feedback post accreditation via a survey.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback from participants and the findings in this evaluation, the following recommendations are made:

Refining accessibility of surveys and supporting data collection in schools

Feedback from schools and the evaluation advisory group has highlighted recurring challenges with the student survey. These include its abstract and broad style of questions, as well as difficulties in delivering the survey effectively to students. While the NAS emphasises adapting surveys to meet all students' communication needs, the feedback suggests that the NAS needs to further refine the online survey's clarity and accessibility for schools.

To address these challenges, the NAS should consider refining the survey questions to ensure they are clear, specific, and age appropriate. This would help enhance student engagement and ensure the feedback collected is meaningful and actionable. In addition, further consultation with schools and other stakeholders could guide improvements to the survey's structure and content.

The NAS should continue to provide resources and guidance to support inclusive data collection. These resources would empower schools to gather input effectively from all students, including those with communication difficulties.

Accessible post-accreditation recommendations and feedback provided to schools and families

The NAS should consider reviewing and simplifying post-accreditation feedback materials by including a concise, one-page summary of actionable recommendations. This summary could emphasise key achievements and provide clear next steps to enhance accessibility and impact for schools.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion monitoring

The NAS does not currently collect demographic data from students and families in the accreditation surveys. The NAS should consider collecting demographic data, such as age, ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status in the surveys. This would enable schools and the NAS to pinpoint and address potential barriers to access or participation, and to better identify and address disparities in outcomes and experiences among diverse student and family groups.

Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes

The NAS currently collects a survey at the conclusion of the accreditation process to gather feedback from the key school contact. The NAS should review and expand its post accreditation feedback survey; for example, introducing open-ended qualitative questions could provide deeper feedback on schools' experiences post-accreditation. These improvements would support the ongoing evaluation of the NAS accreditation, ensuring the process remains effective and responsive to the needs of schools. Regularly monitoring and updating the feedback mechanism will help maintain high-quality standards and foster continuous improvement.

Further consultation and feedback from autistic students

Feedback from a student focus group revealed dissatisfaction with the college's Zones of Regulation implemented in their school, which may warrant further exploration from the student's perspective at this school.

Conclusion

The Autism Specialist Award was perceived to positively impact schools, autistic students, and their families by enhancing support practices, reassuring parents, and improving student wellbeing. Key improvements included tailored communication and sensory strategies, and inclusive practices. The structured framework, expert assessors, and professional development opportunities offered by the accreditation were highly valued by schools and their staff. Schools highlighted limited community visibility and parent recognition, suggesting promotional efforts and inclusive communication to boost awareness. The recommendations encompass enhancements to the accessibility of accreditation reports, surveys, and resources, alongside the integration of equality and diversity monitoring and continuous evaluation processes to ensure ongoing assessment and improvement.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths

The evaluation was guided by a co-design and advisory group to ensure autistic perspectives informed every stage, enhancing the likelihood of meaningful recommendations. Feedback from diverse stakeholders—students, parents, staff, and commissioners—provided a comprehensive view of the accreditation's impact. A mixed-methods approach, integrating surveys, focus groups, and reflections of the accreditation process from the advisory group, ensured robust findings, with triangulation of data sources validating key themes. Prioritising autistic students' perspectives was a notable strength, offering valuable insights into practice effectiveness.

Limitations

However, the evaluation had limitations. Findings were based on three self-selecting schools, limiting generalisability to others with differing contexts. Surveys lacked staff role data, and self-selection among participants may have led to over or underrepresentation of certain groups. Confidentiality constraints restricted the exploration of parents' reasoning in survey responses. Some parents' limited awareness of the accreditation may have influenced feedback reliability.

Some schools viewed the process as validating existing practices, potentially affecting their attribution of improvements to accreditation. Assessor-specific factors also contributed to variability in experiences. The evaluation was time limited therefore it is possible that other longer-term impacts would emerge under a longer evaluation. Self-reported data introduced potential bias, and external factors like funding, staff turnover, and community support were not fully examined.

Acknowledgements

Health Innovation East acknowledges the invaluable contributions of stakeholders from the National Autistic Society, whose support was instrumental in the successful completion of this evaluation. We would also like to thank members of the Co-design and Advisory group who have volunteered their time to support this evaluation. Lastly, thank you to colleagues from across Health Innovation East who have contributed to this work but are not listed as co-authors.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Staff survey

1. I feel that I have a better understanding of autism.
2. I feel that I have an improved understanding of how to support autistic students at the school.
3. I feel more confident supporting autistic students at the school.
4. I feel better prepared to cater to the individual needs of autistic students at the school.
5. Have new support practices for autistic students have been implemented?
6. Have existing support practices for autistic students been improved?
7. What impact has the accreditation had on learning and development for autistic students?
Select all that apply.
8. What impact has the accreditation had on the wellbeing of autistic students? Select all that apply.
9. What impact has the accreditation had social outcomes for autistic students? Select all that apply.
10. Parents/carers seem **more** reassured their child receives the learning and development support they need.
11. Parents/carers seem **more** reassured their child receives the health and wellbeing support they need.
12. Parents/carers seem **more** reassured the school meets their child's needs.
13. Overall, I feel the accreditation has helped the school's provision become more focused on the needs of autistic students.
14. Overall, I am satisfied with the impact the accreditation has had on autistic students and the school.
15. Do you have any other comments or feedback about the impact of the accreditation on the school? **Please keep comments general - do not specify any names or individuals.**

Appendix 2: Parent survey with supplementary questions for students

1. I feel that the school has a better understanding of autism.
2. I feel that the support offered to autistic students at the school has improved.
3. I feel more confident the school understands my child's needs.
4. I feel that the school is better prepared to cater to the individual needs of autistic students at the school.
5. What impact do you think the accreditation has had on learning and development for your child at school?
6. What impact do you think the accreditation has had on the wellbeing of your child?
7. What impact do you think the accreditation has had on social outcomes for your child?
8. I feel **more** reassured that the school meets my child's needs.
 - a. Why do you feel more reassured? Select all that apply.
9. Knowing if a school has accreditation would now impact my decision on which school my child attends in the future.
10. Overall, I feel the accreditation has helped the school's provision become more focused on the needs of autistic students.
11. Overall, I am satisfied with the impact the accreditation has had on my child and the school.
12. Do you have any other comments or feedback about the impact of the accreditation on the school? **Please keep comments general - do not specify any names or individuals.**

Questions for your child:

13. I get the help I need during lessons at school (hint: how do you feel during English or Maths lessons).
14. I get help I need outside of lessons at school (hint: how do you feel during lunch, or break time).
15. My teachers at school understand me.
16. My teachers listen to me when I am at school.
17. I can be myself when I am at school.
18. I feel comfortable at school (hint: how do you feel about the lights or sounds in the classroom).
19. I enjoy being at school.

Appendix 3: Participant information sheet and consent form for staff

Evaluation of Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme

Participant Information Sheet for Focus Groups

Introduction

You are invited to take part in an evaluation of the National Autistic Society's Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme in specialist schools. If you agree to participate, we invite you to participate in a focus group to explore your experience with the accreditation programme and its impact on autistic students at your school. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why this project is being completed and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or want more information.

What is the purpose of the focus group?

Health Innovation East is conducting an evaluation on behalf of the National Autistic Society of their Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme, which was recently achieved by [school name]. As part of this evaluation, we would like to explore the impact of the accreditation on autistic students attending the school through a focus group including a small number of staff from across the school. The session will be facilitated by two researchers conducting the evaluation and will involve a group discussion around your experience of the accreditation journey and your views on the accreditation's impact.

Who is conducting this study?

The focus group will be led by a member of the Evaluation Group at Health Innovation East. The team conducting the evaluation are Katherine Cummergen and Moesha Lamprey.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being invited to take part as you are a member of staff or key stakeholder at [school name] who will be able to offer perspective on the impact of the accreditation on autistic students at the school.

What will be involved if I agree to take part?

Once you have confirmed with us that you are happy to participate, you will need to complete a consent form prior to the focus group. This can be found here: <https://surveys.eahsn.org/zs/mpBPOQ>. The focus group will be held and recorded via Microsoft Teams. At the end of the focus group, the recording will be converted to an audio file for storage and analysis. Focus groups will last no more than 90 minutes. The evaluation team will organise the session with support from [lead contact at school and role].

Do I have to take part? Can I withdraw once I have started?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form to show that you have read and understood the information provided and that you are happy to participate. If you participate in a focus group, you are free to stop at any stage or to decline to answer any of the questions. However, as it is a group discussion, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from our records once the group has started. You are free to withdraw from the evaluation at any time without giving a reason up until the point of data analysis – at which time your de-identified data will be pooled with other participants. Deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the project will not affect you in any way. You can withdraw from the study by contacting Katherine Cummergen at katherine.cummergen@healthinnovationeast.co.uk.

What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this evaluation. You will be free to leave the focus group at any time without judgment or having to give a reason. You can choose not to answer questions without explanation or step out and take a break at any time. If you decide not to take part or withdraw, it will not affect your relationship with the evaluation team or your employer.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation in this project will help improve the National Autistic Society's understanding of the impact of the Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme on autistic students at schools like yours. With this improved understanding, we can make recommendations to the National Autistic Society to ensure that the accreditation meets the needs of autistic students at schools across the UK and has a lasting, positive impact.

What will happen to the information I provided and the data collected in the study? Will the information obtained be confidential?

With your permission, we will audio-record and transcribe the focus group. The audio recording and transcript will be stored in Health Innovation East's secure storage space. Transcripts and recordings will be deleted after analysis and publication of the final report. Only the evaluation team will have access to the files. The names of individuals will not be included in any transcripts or data extracted from the focus groups to avoid identifying participants. All data will be handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) of 2018 and Health Innovation East's Data Management.

Evaluation findings will be reported to the study's funders and may be published on the Health Innovation East website, but you will not be identified in any reporting.

Who do I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please email Katherine Cummergen at katherine.cummergen@healthinnovationeast.co.uk. If you have a concern about any aspect of this project or would like to make a formal complaint, please email Judith Fynn at judith.fynn@healthinnovationeast.co.uk. The Data Protection Officer at Health Innovation East is Sarah Tantin (sarah@informationgovernanceservices.com)

I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to complete the online consent form which you can access via this link:

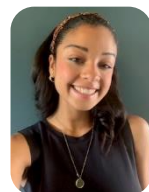
<https://surveys.eahsn.org/zs/mpBPOQ>.

Please keep this Participant Information Sheet for your information.

Appendix 4: Participant information sheet and consent form for students (16+)

National Autistic Society Evaluation

Participant Information Sheet for Focus Group



Hello, we are Katherine and Moe .

[School name] are helping us complete a project for the National Autistic Society. Over the next few weeks, we will be speaking with staff, parents, and students to understand how the National Autistic Society can help schools like yours better support autistic students.

What will I have to do?

If you are happy to help us with this project, Katherine and I would like to ask you a few questions. This will be an informal conversation in a safe space for you to share how you feel at school and what we can do to support you better. There are no right or wrong answers. Some examples of questions we might ask during this session include:

- What do you like about your school?
- Do you feel understood by the people around you at school?
- Do you feel well supported in the classroom?

The group discussion will last no more than 1 hour. You are free to leave at any point or take a break – there will be a member of staff there to support you. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. If you prefer to write your answer down after the discussion, that is also ok.

What do I need to do next?

If you are happy to take part, please let your teacher know and they will share a consent form for you to sign, or you can access the form yourself here: <https://surveys.eahsn.org/zs/oMBPQL>. The discussion will take place online, your teachers will help you get set up. We will record the session to help us with analysis, however everything you say will be kept anonymous and the recording will be deleted at the end of the project.

Do I have to take part? Can I withdraw once I have started?

You do not have to take part, it is entirely voluntary. You are free to stop the session at any point, and this will not impact your relationship with staff at the school.

Why should I take part?

Taking part in this project will help us improve the support offered by the National Autistic Society. The National Autistic Society is a charity that helps schools like yours better support autistic students to make sure they are happy and thriving at school.

Who do I contact if I have any questions?

If you have any questions, please reach out to your teacher who is helping us with this project.

Please keep this Participant Information Sheet for your information.

Appendix 5: Participant information sheet and consent form for students (under 16 years old)

Evaluation of Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme

Participant Information Sheet for Focus Groups

Introduction

Your child is invited to take part in an evaluation of the National Autistic Society's Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme in specialist schools. If you agree for your child to participate, we would like to invite them to participate in a focus group to explore their experiences and views of the impact of the accreditation programme on them and other autistic students at the school. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why this project is being completed and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or want more information.

What is the purpose of the focus group?

Health Innovation East are conducting an evaluation on behalf of the National Autistic Society of their Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme which was recently achieved by [school name]. As part of this evaluation, we would like to explore the impact of the accreditation on autistic students attending the school through a focus group including a small group of autistic students at the school. During the discussion sessions, students will be asked simple questions to help us understand their experiences and views of the school since the accreditation. Examples of questions we might ask during this session include:

- Can you tell me how you feel at school?
- Can you tell me if you feel understood at school?

Who is conducting this evaluation?

The focus group will be led by a member of the Evaluation Group at Health Innovation East. The team conducting the evaluation are Katherine Cummergen and Moesha Lamptey.

Why are you being asked to participate?

Your child are being invited to take part as you are they are an autistic student currently attending [school name].

What will be involved if I agree to take part?

Once you have confirmed with us that you are happy for your child to participate, you will need to complete a consent form prior to the focus group, this can be found here: <https://surveys.eahsn.org/zs/A1BPGX>. The focus group will be held and recorded via Microsoft Teams. At the end of the focus group the recording will be converted to an audio file for storage and analysis. Focus groups will last no more than 60 minutes.

The evaluation group will organise the session with support from [lead contact at school and role]. A date and time for the focus group will be communicated once agreed with the school.

Do I have to take part? Can I withdraw once I have started?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you agree to your child participating, you will be asked to complete a consent form to show that you have read and understand the information provided and that you are happy to participate.

If your child takes part in a focus group, they are free to stop participating at any stage or to decline to answer any of the questions. You or your child are free to withdraw from the evaluation at any time without giving a reason up until the point of data analysis – at which time your de-identified data will be pooled with that of other participants. Deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the project will not affect you in any way. You can withdraw from the evaluation by contacting Katherine Cummergen at katherine.cummergen@healthinnovationeast.co.uk.

What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?

Aside from giving your child giving up their time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this evaluation. Your child will be free to leave the focus group at any time without judgment or having to give a reason. Your child can choose to not answer any questions without explanation or step out and take a break at any time. If you decide not to take part or withdraw, it will not affect their relationship with the evaluation team or your school.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your child's participation in this project will help improve the National Autistic Society's understanding around the impact of the Autism Specialist Award Accreditation Programme on autistic students at specialist schools. With this improved understanding, we can make recommendations to the National Autistic Society to ensure the accreditation meets the needs of autistic students at schools across the UK and has a lasting, positive impact.

What will happen to the information provided by me and the data collected in the evaluation? Will the information obtained be confidential?

With your permission we will audio-record and transcribe the focus group. The audio recording and transcript will be stored on Health Innovation East's secure storage space. Transcripts and recordings will be deleted after analysis and publication of the final report. Only the evaluation team will have access to the files. Names of individuals will not be included in any transcripts or data extracted from the focus groups to avoid identification of participants. All data will be handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) of 2018 and Health Innovation East's Data Management. Evaluation findings will be reported to funders of the evaluation and may be published on Health Innovation East website; but you will not be identified in any reporting.

Who do I contact if I have any questions?

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please email Katherine Cummergen at katherine.cummergen@healthinnovationeast.co.uk. If you have a concern about any aspect of this project or would like to make a formal complaint, please email Judith Fynn at judith.fynn@healthinnovationeast.co.uk.

The Data Protection Officer at Health Innovation East is Sarah Tantin
(sarah@informationgovernanceservices.com)

I want my child to take part – what do I do next?

You need to complete the online consent form, which can be accessed here:
<https://surveys.eahsn.org/zs/A1BPGX>.

Please keep this Participant Information Sheet for your information.

Appendix 6: Staff focus group topic guide

Experience of the accreditation process

What was your experience like going through the accreditation process?

Prompt: What aspects of the process were most positive or helpful for you?

Prompt: Were there any particular challenges you encountered during the process?

Prompt: How effective do you feel the assessment approach was in capturing the voices of autistic students? Can you provide specific examples?

Prompt: What improvements, if any, would you suggest for the accreditation process?

Impact of accreditation

What impact do you think the accreditation has had since achieving it?

Prompt: what impact has it had on you?

Prompt: In what ways do you think accreditation has impacted autistic students specifically?

Prompt: How has the school as a whole been impacted? Are there any noticeable changes you can point to?

Prompt: How do you feel parents/carers have responded to the accreditation?

Future expectations and aspirations

What are your future expectations or next steps for the school now that you've achieved accreditation?

Prompt: what kind of long-term impact do you hope to see as a result of the accreditation?

Prompt: do you have plans for the school's ongoing development in relation to autism?

Prompt: do you plan to renew your accreditation again in the future?

Prompt: are you hoping to achieve a higher award in the future (i.e. advanced or beacon status)

Final question

Do you have any final reflections, insights or suggestions you'd like to share that we haven't covered?

Appendix 7: Student focus group topic guide

Warm up question:

1. What has been the highlight of your day so far?

Evaluation questions:

2. What's one thing you'd like to share about your experience at school?
3. As mentioned before, the National Autistic Society recently came to your school to assess how well it supports autistic students. How do you feel about the school being recognised for supporting autistic students?

Prompt: Does this match how you feel about being here? Why or why not?

Prompt: Can you tell us more about why you feel this way?

4. We understand [name of assessor] from the National Autistic Society spoke with some of you during the assessment processes to understand your experiences at school, can you share how you found this?

Prompt: what did you like about speaking with the NAS?

Prompt: what did you not like about speaking with the NAS?

Prompt: did you feel comfortable speaking with the NAS?

5. Can you share examples of times you felt supported at school?

Prompt: What about in lessons—do you feel supported there?

Prompt: How about outside of lessons, like during lunch or break?

Prompt: Do you feel supported when talking to other students?

6. Can you think of ways we could make school even better for you?

Prompt: What would help you feel more comfortable during lessons or break times?

Prompt: Do you feel confident asking teachers for the help you need? Why or why not?

Prompt: Are there things you need at school that you don't have at the moment?

7. Do you feel understood by teachers at school?

Prompt: Can you tell us more about why you feel this way?

Prompt: Do you feel your teachers understand your autism?

8. Do you feel that you can be yourself at school?

Prompt: What helps you feel like you can be yourself?

Prompt: What makes it harder for you to be yourself?

Appendix 8: Case studies

Case study 1: A Journey to Advanced Accreditation

Background information

This special day school caters to autistic students with additional needs. The school has small classes of around 8 students. Each class is supported by 4 staff members, including a class teacher, senior teacher, and two teaching assistants. The school supports a total of 239 individuals aged 4 to 19 years, out of which 101 have an official diagnosis of autism. Divisions across the school focus on supporting the different support needs across the student population. The majority of students are non-verbal and all students have communication and interaction support needs. Additionally, 32% of students do not have English as their first language.

Staff at this established school use specialist approaches to support students with complex learning needs, including structured teaching, sensory and communication approaches. The school has invested in coaching and positive behavioural support training for staff. They also provide in-house support for NAS awareness, Makaton, and communication strategies, and offer a twilight programme on autism awareness and intervention.

The school first completed the accreditation process in March 2020, achieving the Accredited award. Concerned about the negative impacts of COVID-19, the school sought the advanced accreditation status for an outside perspective on their current standing and future goals, as well as external verification of their accomplishments since they were last accredited. Various sources of data collection and evidence were used to support accreditation, including feedback from autistic pupils and their families, staff discussions, observations, and case studies.

Experiences of the accreditation journey

The school highlighted positive aspects of the accreditation process, such as reinforcing staff's good practices and providing a structured approach to work. They emphasised the need for consistency and improved communication, describing the accreditation process as offering a helpful framework for development, clear benchmarks, and a systematic approach to improvement. School staff highly valued the practical and structured guidance provided by the NAS. However, there were challenges with the student questionnaires, as some concepts were too abstract for young people to understand. Overall, the accreditation process had a positive impact on the schools' approach to education.

Outcomes of the assessment

The Autism Accreditation Committee assessed the school and found that the staff have a strong understanding of evidence-informed approaches to autism practice. They can adapt these approaches to provide highly person-centred support tailored to individual needs. The committee also considered positive feedback from surveys, although they would have liked more input from young people. They acknowledged that an online survey may not be the best method for gathering feedback from autistic individuals and encouraged the school to explore other options. The committee also reviewed case studies submitted by the school, which highlighted the positive impact of their support and innovative practices, such as using Expressive Arts to reduce anxiety. The committee's overall conclusion was that the school's consistently high-quality practices warranted an Advanced award. Looking to the future, the school aspires to higher accreditation, building strong networks and partnerships to share best practices and foster innovation. The school staff expressed great pride at being recognised for the quality of their school provision for autistic students.

Case study 2: Improving practices to achieve accreditation

Background information

This special day school sits within a larger college that supports 418 pupils in total. Sixty of these pupils attend the specialist provision, 58 of whom are autistic. There are two pupils who meet the criteria for autism but do not have a formal diagnosis. The age range of the pupils is six to 19. Among the autistic pupils, 56 have high support needs and are minimally verbal. The other four have moderate support needs and are verbal.

The school sought accreditation for newly formed specialist provision that focuses specifically on working with young people with communication and sensory difficulties, most of whom are autistic. The staff described gaining accreditation as one of the department goals to achieve accreditation and criteria aligned with their values and a means of validating the department's work and enhancing practices. Various sources of data collection and evidence were used to support accreditation, including staff discussions, surveys completed by students and families and observations.

Experiences of the accreditation journey

The NAS accreditation postponed its July 2023 visit to allow the school to implement changes based on observations and committee recommendations. Assessors raised concerns about the use of Blue Mats which they found were used to coerce pupils, potentially posing a risk to student wellbeing. The NAS recommended staff receive training in trauma-informed practices.

To address these concerns, the school immediately stopped using Blue Mats and implemented a new policy. The school implemented alternative strategies such as visual aids, timers, motivators, Makaton, and changes in facial expressions. The school provided staff with distraction packs containing various tools to support pupils showing signs of dysregulation. Staff reviewed and updated calm rooms and established regulation and sensory rooms for all pupils to access sensory activities and self-regulate.

School staff reported the process to be highly stressful, a substantial time commitment, and to necessitate comprehensive documentation in order to meet NAS criteria. The leadership team worked together effectively, providing mutual help, particularly in preparing documentation. Although the accreditation process initially caused anxiety about implementing NAS recommendations, the implemented changes inspired confidence and gratitude, and were later seen as highly positive.

Outcomes of the assessment

Staff reported positive outcomes from these changes, noting improvements in how pupils transition within the school. Staff completed online trauma-informed training, and senior leadership took the safeguarding concern regarding the use of Blue Mats seriously, adhering to proper procedures. The school continues to develop its practices by incorporating talking mats and visual communication aids, ensuring consistent use of sensory methods in all classrooms, and building links with the local community. The school attained accreditation following a self-assessment, data collection by the NAS assessors, and fulfilment of all criteria and recommendations.

Case study 3: Validating existing good practice

Background information

This specialist provision is an established school that supports 94 pupils, 63% of whom have been diagnosed or are suspected as autistic. The current population of autistic pupils attending the school have a range of low to high learning and support needs, including communication and interaction needs, verbal and non-verbal abilities, as well as social and emotional support needs. A number of these pupils have also been diagnosed as ADHD. Autistic pupils are provided specialist support in social communication, nurture and wellbeing, and sensory and regulation, as well as being offered emotion coaching, personalised environments, and access to therapeutic support. Training and ongoing development is also offered to staff across the provision including training in autism and anxiety, attachment and trauma, and Lego therapy.

This school sought the accreditation to validate and showcase practices already in place across the provision. The accreditation was also an opportunity for the school to foster a culture of continuous improvement. Various sources of data collection and evidence were used to support accreditation, including discussions with staff, feedback from pupils and their families, observations, and case studies.

Experiences of the accreditation journey

Overall, the school had a good experience of the accreditation and found the process straightforward to complete. Staff found the accreditation was a great opportunity to reflect on their own process and learn from what was and wasn't working so well. Features of the accreditation, such as observations, were viewed as light touch and did not cause any anxiety for staff or pupils. However, the school did feel that obtaining feedback from the parents / carers of autistic pupils was challenging considering many also have SEN and had difficulties understanding the accreditation or expressing their feelings towards it. Despite this, the school was successful in collecting some parent / carer feedback, most of which was positive.

Outcomes of the assessment

The school was found to be proactive in using strategies to help autistic pupils regulate their emotions and avoid anxiety or distress. The assessment also highlighted the school's ability to help autistic pupils participate and engage in activities that promote independence, wellbeing, and social communication. Based on feedback collected from pupils, their parents / carers, and members of staff, the Accreditation Committee recognised the school's efforts to improve their provision for autistic pupils with the introduction of new initiatives that were associated with positive outcomes for the pupils.

Following the assessment, the Committee did identify areas within the existing provision that required further development and recommended a more consistent use of support tools and developing a Sensory Profile for all autistic pupils. However, the Committee concluded this should not detract from the provision's overall good practice in supporting autistic pupils which included a good knowledge and adoption of specialist approaches that enable personalised support to meet the needs and interests of each person. The school was awarded the Accredited status and hoped this achievement would encourage efforts to maintain their high standards going forward.