



Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland



VISION

“A Northern Ireland where autistic people of all ages know they belong, feel valued, and are supported to be their whole authentic selves.”

Autism and Heritage, Culture and Creativity Policy

Briefing May 2026

1. Purpose and Scope

This evidence briefing has been prepared by the Independent Autism Reviewer of Northern Ireland to support the Department for Communities' Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) Programme, particularly the development of policy across Arts, Historic Environment, Public Libraries and Museums.

Annex A sets out the statutory context and remit of the [Autism Act \(NI\) 2011](#) and the Independent Autism Reviewer.

The purpose of this briefing is to bring together evidence, practice examples and emerging learning relating to autism, culture, creativity and participation. It considers the potential contribution of arts, cultural and creative activity to wellbeing, belonging, learning, identity and community life, and identifies practical considerations that may support greater access, participation and inclusion.

The briefing is intended to inform policy development at a formative stage. It does not seek to provide an exhaustive review of all available literature, practice examples or stakeholder perspectives. Rather, it draws upon a combination of academic research, policy documents, sector guidance, lived experience evidence and learning gathered through broader engagement with autistic people, families, carers, community organisations, cultural institutions and public bodies.

The briefing is framed around three core propositions:

- First, participation in cultural life is a right. Arts, culture, heritage and creativity are not peripheral activities. They form part of how people express identity, connect with others, contribute to their communities and participate in society.
- Secondly, the benefits associated with arts and cultural participation should not be assumed. The existence of programmes, buildings or access statements does not in itself demonstrate inclusion. Participation depends upon whether cultural environments, opportunities and experiences are accessible, welcoming, predictable and responsive to different needs.
- Thirdly, autistic people should be recognised not only as audiences, visitors or service users, but as contributors to cultural life. This includes participation as

artists, creators, performers, writers, makers, volunteers, cultural workers, leaders, researchers, historians, curators and community knowledge-holders.

These principles have important implications for policy. They suggest that the central question is not simply whether cultural opportunities exist, but **whether autistic people are able to participate meaningfully, contribute confidently and feel genuinely welcome within cultural life.**

The scope of this briefing therefore extends beyond occasional autism-specific or autism-friendly provision. Such provision can be valuable and may play an important role for some individuals and families. However, it should not become a substitute for mainstream inclusion. The ambition should be to support participation in everyday cultural life while also recognising the importance of targeted adjustments where these are needed.

Autistic people are not a homogeneous group. Experiences of culture, creativity and participation vary considerably between individuals, communities and stages of life. Factors such as communication differences, sensory needs, learning disability, age, poverty, transport, geography, digital exclusion, ethnicity, gender and wider life circumstances may all influence participation. The findings within this briefing should therefore be considered alongside wider engagement and consultation activity.

As policy development progresses, ongoing engagement with autistic people of different ages and backgrounds, families, carers, autistic-led organisations, disability organisations, cultural institutions, community groups, artists, creators and practitioners will be essential to ensuring that future policy and practice reflect the diversity of autistic experience across Northern Ireland.

This briefing is relevant across all four HCC policy areas and considers implications for participation, inclusion and contribution within Arts, Museums, Public Libraries and the Historic Environment.

2. Rights and Policy Context

Participation in cultural life is a human rights issue. Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the right of disabled people to participate in cultural life, on an equal basis with others.¹

¹ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art 30
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-30-participation-in-cultural-life-recreation-leisure-and-sport.html> accessed May 2026.

Article 30 is particularly important because it moves cultural participation away from a discretionary, charitable model or service-based model. Access to culture is not simply a matter of goodwill, special events or additional customer service. It is part of disabled people's equal participation in society. For autistic people, this means that cultural policy should consider not only physical access, but also sensory accessibility, communication accessibility, predictability, staff understanding, flexible participation and meaningful opportunities to contribute.

The HCC Programme provides a timely opportunity to embed these principles within policy development. The Department for Communities has stated that the HCC Programme Framework provides the context, purpose and direction for future policy development across Arts, Museums, Public Libraries and the Historic Environment, and that it establishes the foundation for the next phase of consultation and policy development.² The HCC Programme provides an opportunity to consider autism and neurodivergence at the policy-design stage rather than retrospectively as an access issue.

The Museums Policy consultation demonstrates how these principles may be applied in practice. The consultation places emphasis on people, communities, place, education, wellbeing and participation.³ These themes are closely aligned with the evidence explored within this briefing and highlight the importance of understanding inclusion not merely as physical access to buildings and services, but as meaningful participation in cultural life.

The policy context should therefore be understood through three connected duties and opportunities.

A Rights Duty

Public bodies have a responsibility to promote equal participation in cultural life and to consider the barriers that may prevent disabled people from accessing and contributing to cultural opportunities on an equal basis with others.

A Policy Opportunity

The HCC Programme provides an opportunity to embed inclusion, participation and accessibility within the development of future cultural policy across Arts, Museums,

² Department for Communities, 'Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme' <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/heritage-culture-and-creativity-hcc-programme> accessed 28 May 2026; Department for Communities, 'The Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme Purpose and Framework' <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/heritage-culture-and-creativity-programme-purpose-and-framework> accessed May 2026.

³ Department for Communities, *Consultation on Museums Policy for Northern Ireland* (April 2026) <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-04/dfc-consultation-museums-policy-northern-ireland.pdf> accessed May 2026.

Public Libraries and the Historic Environment, rather than treating these issues as secondary considerations.

A Delivery Challenge

The existence of cultural programmes, venues, events or access statements does not in itself demonstrate inclusion. The central challenge for policy and practice is to understand whether autistic people are participating meaningfully, contributing confidently and experiencing cultural life as welcoming, accessible and relevant.

This distinction is important. Participation should not be assumed simply because provision exists. Effective policy should consider who participates, who remains excluded, what barriers persist and how cultural systems can become more inclusive over time.

It is not simply whether autistic people can enter cultural spaces, but whether they are able to participate in cultural life as equal citizens, contributors and members of their communities.

3.What the Evidence Says About Arts, Culture and Wellbeing

The wider evidence base supports the proposition that arts and cultural activity can contribute positively to health, wellbeing and social participation. While the relationship between cultural participation and wellbeing is complex, a substantial body of research suggests that engagement in arts and cultural activity can support connection, expression, identity, learning, confidence and quality of life across the lifespan.

One of the most significant reviews of this evidence was undertaken by the World Health Organization (WHO) through its Health Evidence Network. Drawing together a large body of international research, the review concluded that arts activities can contribute to health promotion, disease prevention and the management of physical and mental health conditions throughout life.⁴

For the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme, this evidence is significant because it situates arts and cultural participation within a mainstream public policy context. It suggests that arts, culture and creativity should be recognised as part of the wider

⁴ Fancourt D, Finn S. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report 67) [What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review](#) accessed May 2026. **[Note - while this WHO scoping review provides a credible high-level evidence base on arts, health and wellbeing, some autism-related language reflects older clinical framings and should be interpreted cautiously within a contemporary neurodiversity-affirming and rights-based approach.]**

social, cultural and environmental conditions that support wellbeing, belonging, connection and participation.

However, the evidence should be interpreted carefully. The WHO review does not suggest that all cultural activity benefits all people equally, nor does it imply that participation will automatically produce positive outcomes. The quality of the experience, the accessibility of the environment, the relevance of the activity and the circumstances of the individual all influence how participation is experienced.

This is particularly relevant when considering autistic people. Cultural environments can be experienced very differently depending on sensory, communication and participation needs. An environment that is experienced as welcoming, enriching and regulating by one person may be experienced as inaccessible, stressful or overwhelming by another. The potential benefits of cultural participation are therefore closely linked to the conditions under which participation takes place.

The UNICEF Innocenti systematic review on arts and culture for inclusion provides a particularly relevant disability-focused evidence base. Examining programmes involving children with disabilities, the review concluded that arts and culture-based activities show promise in supporting social inclusion, while also highlighting limitations within the current evidence base, including the prevalence of pilot programmes, small-scale studies and relatively limited effectiveness research.⁵

This supports a balanced and proportionate policy position. Arts and culture should not be presented as a universal solution, nor should participation be assumed to be inherently beneficial. Rather, the evidence suggests that positive outcomes are more likely where participation is accessible, meaningful, inclusive and responsive to individual needs and preferences.

Importantly, UNICEF frames arts and culture within a social inclusion model rather than a therapeutic model. This distinction is significant. It shifts attention away from what culture may do to autistic people and towards the role culture can play in enabling participation, reducing exclusion, strengthening belonging and supporting connection within families, communities and wider society.⁶

Viewed through this lens, arts and culture are not simply activities that people consume. They are part of how people participate in community life, express identity, build relationships, share experiences and contribute to society. This aligns closely with the rights-based approach outlined in Article 30 of the UNCPRD and with the wider ambitions of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme.

⁵ UNICEF Innocenti, *Arts and Culture for Inclusion: A Systematic Review on Children with Disabilities* (UNICEF Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight 2025) <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/arts-and-culture-inclusion> accessed May 2026

⁶ Ibid

The evidence therefore supports several broad conclusions. Arts, culture and creativity can contribute positively to wellbeing, belonging and social participation. However, these benefits should not be assumed and cannot be separated from questions of accessibility, inclusion and the conditions that enable participation. The key policy challenge is not simply whether cultural opportunities exist, but whether autistic people are able to access, experience and contribute to them in ways that are meaningful, welcoming and relevant.

Limitations of the Evidence Base

The evidence base relating to arts, culture and disability continues to develop and should be interpreted with appropriate caution. While there is a growing body of research supporting the potential benefits of cultural participation, much of the available evidence consists of small-scale studies, pilot projects, qualitative research and programme evaluations. Longitudinal evidence remains relatively limited in some areas, and outcomes may vary depending on the nature of the activity, the environment, the support available and the characteristics of participants.

In addition, autistic people are not a homogeneous group. Experiences of cultural participation may differ considerably depending on factors such as communication differences, sensory profile, learning disability, age, geography, socio-economic circumstances, ethnicity, gender and prior experiences of inclusion or exclusion. The evidence should therefore not be interpreted as suggesting that any single approach will meet the needs of all autistic people. Rather, the most consistent finding across the literature is that accessibility, flexibility, predictability and meaningful inclusion play a significant role in shaping participation and experience.

Importantly, the limitations of the evidence should not be interpreted as a reason for inaction. Instead, they reinforce the importance of ongoing engagement, co-design, evaluation and continuous learning as cultural organisations seek to improve participation and inclusion over time.

4.What the Evidence Says About Autism, Access and Public Cultural Spaces

The evidence relating to autism and public spaces points to a consistent conclusion - access is not secured simply by making cultural opportunities available. For many autistic people, the ability to participate in arts, heritage, museums, libraries and

cultural activity depends on whether the entire experience is accessible, predictable and welcoming.

Participation is shaped by a series of interconnected factors before, during and after a visit. These may include:

- access to clear and accurate information;
- transport and travel arrangements;
- booking systems and ticketing;
- arrival and wayfinding;
- sensory characteristics of the environment;
- communication and staff interactions;
- flexibility of participation;
- access to quiet or low-stimulation spaces;
- opportunities to leave and return if needed; and
- confidence that support will be available if difficulties arise.

Taken together, these factors form what might be described as the **participation journey**. For many autistic people, barriers at any stage of this journey may limit or prevent participation, regardless of the quality of the cultural offer itself.



Research exploring autistic adults' experiences of public spaces demonstrates that sensory characteristics such as noise, lighting, crowding, smells, movement, unpredictability and lack of control can significantly influence participation.⁷ Public environments can become disabling where sensory demands exceed an individual's

⁷ Keren MacLennan, Catherine Woolley, Emily @21andsensory and others [“It is a big spider web of things”: Sensory experiences of autistic adults in public spaces](#) (2023) 5(4) *Autism in Adulthood* 411–422 accessed May 2026.

capacity to process or manage them.⁸ This is particularly relevant to cultural settings, which often involve crowds, queues, announcements, changing lighting conditions, visual displays, performance effects, unfamiliar spaces and complex social expectations.

A cultural venue may therefore be experienced very differently by autistic people depending on its sensory, communication and social demands. A museum exhibition with echoing rooms, bright lighting, screens, crowds, unclear routes and limited seating may be difficult to access. A theatre performance with sudden sound, darkness, intense lighting, strict behavioural expectations and no quiet space may be exclusionary.

A heritage site may present barriers through uneven access, unclear wayfinding, lack of advance information, unpredictable tours, limited transport or limited staff understanding.

A library may be calming and accessible for some autistic people, but difficult for others if rules, noise levels, lighting, staff interactions or social expectations are unclear.

The evidence also shows that access barriers are not only sensory. Participation may also be influenced by communication barriers, limited pre-visit information, unclear signage, unpredictable routines, inflexible rules, staff attitudes, anxiety about being judged, transport difficulties, cost, digital exclusion and previous experiences of exclusion or misunderstanding.⁹ Importantly, these barriers rarely occur in isolation. They often combine and reinforce one another.

For example, an environment that might otherwise feel manageable may become inaccessible if a person does not know what to expect, where quiet spaces are located, how long an activity will last, whether they can leave and return, or how staff will respond if support is needed. Conversely, relatively small adjustments can reduce uncertainty, increase confidence and make participation possible.

This highlights **predictability as a key condition for participation**.

For many autistic people, clear, accurate and practical information before a visit can help reduce anxiety and support autonomy. This may include information about entrances, lighting, sound, expected duration, busy periods, seating arrangements, toilet facilities, quiet spaces, transport links and available support. Predictability is not

⁸ National Autistic Society, *Too Much Information: The Impact of Information Overload on People with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (National Autistic Society 2007) [Too much information](#) accessed May 2026

⁹ Tirill Bjørkeli Svaler, 'On Making Libraries and Museums More Accessible for Autistic People' (2023) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374760432 On making libraries and museums more accessible for autistic people](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374760432_On_making_libraries_and_museums_more_accessible_for_autistic_people) accessed May 2026; Motability Foundation and Autistica, *Neurodivergence and Public Transport* (2025) <https://www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk/media/t5yowvej/autistica-transport-report-2025-final.pdf> accessed May 2026.

simply a customer-service enhancement. For some people, it can be a prerequisite for participation.

The evidence also highlights the importance of organisational culture and staff confidence. Cultural environments may unintentionally exclude autistic people where distress, direct communication, movement, stimming, use of headphones or the need to withdraw are misinterpreted as disruption, non-compliance or poor behaviour. By contrast, staff who are informed, flexible and confident can significantly influence whether autistic people and families feel welcome, respected and willing to return.

Research and practice relating to relaxed performances provide useful lessons in this regard. Evidence from academic evaluation and cultural organisations demonstrates that relatively modest environmental, communication and operational adjustments can improve participation. These may include advance information, sensory-aware design, adjusted lighting and sound, flexible audience expectations, staff preparation and access to quiet spaces.¹⁰

Importantly, the significance of these approaches extends beyond theatres and performance venues. They illustrate a broader principle: inclusion is often achieved not through major structural change, but through thoughtful design, flexibility and an understanding of how people experience environments differently.¹¹

Dedicated quiet sessions, relaxed performances and sensory-considered events can therefore be valuable and should continue to be supported. However, they should be understood as one component of a wider inclusion strategy rather than the sole route through which autistic people participate in cultural life.

Where mainstream provision remains inaccessible, there is a risk that autism-specific activity becomes a parallel offer rather than a pathway to equal participation. The policy objective should therefore be twofold - to provide targeted adjustments where these are beneficial while progressively improving inclusion across mainstream cultural environments.

Transport and affordability also require explicit consideration. Participation often begins long before a person arrives at a venue. Uncertainty about travel, inaccessible transport systems, rural isolation, the cost of travel, ticket prices, the need for a companion and

¹⁰ Fletcher-Watson B, May S and Benford S, 'Enhancing Relaxed Performance: Evaluating an Autism Arts Festival' (2018) *Research in Drama Education* [Enhancing relaxed performance evaluating the Autism Arts Festival.pdf](#) accessed May 2026; British Council, *Relaxed Performances: International Comparative Study and Toolkit* (British Council 2017) <https://arts.britishcouncil.org/resources/relaxed-performances-international-comparative-study-and-toolkit> accessed May 2026; Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Relaxed Performances' <https://www.rsc.org.uk/your-visit/access/assisted-performances/relaxed-performances> accessed May 2026.

¹¹ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, *What is Universal Design?* [About Universal Design - Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](#) accessed May 2026

the complexity of navigating multiple transitions may all influence participation.¹² HCC policy should therefore avoid treating access as something that begins only at the venue door.

The evidence ultimately points towards a practical conclusion. Cultural inclusion depends upon more than the availability of cultural opportunities. It depends upon whether people can realistically access, navigate and participate in those opportunities.

For autistic people, participation is often shaped by the cumulative effect of information, environment, communication, flexibility, transport, cost and organisational culture. Without attention to these factors, cultural provision may exist in principle while remaining inaccessible in practice.

In this context, accessibility should not be understood as a specialist add-on or occasional adjustment. It is one of the conditions that enables meaningful participation in cultural life.

5. Benefits for Autistic People

Arts, culture and creativity can provide meaningful opportunities for autistic people to express themselves, develop skills, build relationships, explore interests and contribute to community life. These opportunities are most likely to arise where participation is voluntary, accessible, respectful and aligned with individual interests, preferences and circumstances.

The evidence should not be overstated. Arts and cultural activity should not be presented as a universal intervention, nor should participation be assumed to produce the same outcomes for every individual. Rather, arts, culture and creativity should be understood as part of the everyday opportunities through which people learn, connect, express identity, develop confidence and participate in society.

Wellbeing and Self-Expression

Arts and cultural activity may support wellbeing, enjoyment and self-expression for many autistic people. Creative and cultural experiences can provide opportunities to communicate ideas, explore interests, process experiences, regulate emotions and

¹² Motability Foundation and Autistica, *Neurodivergence and Public Transport* (2025) <https://www.motabilityfoundation.org.uk/media/t5yovvej/autistica-transport-report-2025-final.pdf> accessed May 2026.

engage with others in ways that are not dependent upon conventional forms of social interaction or communication.

For some autistic people, cultural participation may offer opportunities to engage through strengths, interests and creativity rather than through deficit-based assumptions about ability. This can be particularly important in environments where autistic differences are understood and respected rather than viewed as barriers to participation.

Identity, Belonging and Community

Arts and culture can also contribute to identity, belonging and community connection. Research suggests that positive identification with autism and connection with other autistic people may be associated with stronger feelings of belonging, collective self-esteem and psychological wellbeing for some autistic people. While the evidence remains developing and largely association-based, findings are broadly consistent in highlighting the importance of acceptance, shared understanding and community connection.¹³

Cultural spaces may contribute to this by enabling autistic people to see themselves represented, encounter diverse autistic experiences, connect with others who share interests and participate in environments where authenticity is valued and difference is accepted.

Skills, Confidence and Opportunity

Arts, heritage, museums and libraries can provide opportunities to develop a wide range of skills, including creative, technical, digital, research, performance, writing, organisational, curatorial and leadership skills. Participation may also create pathways into volunteering, employment, self-employment, creative practice, commissioning and public contribution.

This is significant because discussions about autism are often dominated by need, vulnerability and service demand. Cultural participation provides opportunities to recognise capability, talent, expertise and contribution. It highlights what autistic

¹³ Kate Cooper, Ailsa J Russell, Jiedi Lei and Laura GE Smith, 'The Impact of a Positive Autism Identity and Autistic Community Solidarity on Social Anxiety and Mental Health in Autistic Young People' (2023) 27(3) *Autism* 848–857 <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221118351> accessed May 2026; Monique Botha, Bridget Dibb and David M Frost, 'It's Being a Part of a Grand Tradition, a Grand Counter-Culture Which Involves Communities': A Qualitative Investigation of Autistic Community Connectedness' (2022) 26(8) *Autism* 2151–2164 <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221080248> accessed May 2026.

people bring to communities rather than focusing solely on the support they may require.

Family and Community Life

Accessible cultural activity can support participation in ordinary community life for autistic people and their families. Museums, libraries, arts venues, festivals and heritage sites can provide opportunities for shared experiences, common interests, enjoyment and connection across generations.

For families who have experienced exclusion from leisure, education or public spaces, welcoming cultural environments may help reduce isolation and strengthen confidence in community participation. Conversely, repeated experiences of exclusion can reinforce withdrawal and reduce opportunities for shared cultural and social experiences.

Contribution, Visibility and Cultural Citizenship

The benefits of cultural participation extend beyond those experienced by individual participants. Cultural life itself benefits when autistic people are visible, represented and able to contribute.

Autistic people contribute as artists, performers, writers, makers, researchers, historians, volunteers, cultural workers, curators, leaders and community knowledge-holders. Their perspectives, experiences, creativity and expertise enrich cultural institutions, challenge assumptions and broaden understanding of the communities those institutions serve.

This is particularly relevant to the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme. Inclusion is not simply about enabling autistic people to access culture. It is also about ensuring that autistic people are able to help shape, create, interpret, preserve and contribute to cultural life.

Where autistic people are excluded, the loss is not experienced solely by autistic individuals and families. Cultural organisations, communities and society may also lose valuable creativity, insight, talent, lived experience and contribution.

The evidence therefore supports a clear policy direction. Arts, culture and creativity can contribute to wellbeing, identity, confidence, skills development, community connection and quality of life for many autistic people. However, the most significant opportunity may be broader than these individual outcomes alone. It lies in creating cultural environments in which autistic people are recognised not only as participants,

but as contributors whose presence, perspectives and creativity form part of the cultural life of Northern Ireland.

6.Access Conditions that Enable Participation

The evidence reviewed throughout this briefing suggests that autistic participation in cultural life is most likely where accessibility is considered across the entire participation journey rather than treated as a single adjustment at the point of entry. Participation may be influenced by information, transport, booking systems, arrival experiences, communication, sensory environment, organisational culture, flexibility and opportunities for feedback and co-design.

There is no single model of accessibility that will meet the needs of all autistic people. However, several enabling conditions are consistently identified across research, disability guidance and inclusive cultural practice.

These conditions should not be viewed as a prescriptive checklist. Rather, they represent recurring themes identified across research, practice guidance and lived experience evidence.

Information and Predictability

Clear and accessible information before a visit is one of the most consistently identified enablers of participation. This may include practical information about venue layout, transport, sensory characteristics, duration, quiet spaces, facilities and available support.

Sensory Consideration

Sensory accessibility should be understood as a core inclusion issue rather than an optional enhancement. Consideration of noise, lighting, crowding, visual complexity, waiting times and opportunities for regulation can significantly influence participation.

Communication Accessibility

Communication accessibility extends beyond written information. It includes clear signage, flexible communication approaches, accessible digital engagement, processing time and staff confidence in responding to different communication styles.

Staff Confidence and Organisational Culture

Staff attitudes and organisational culture can strongly influence whether autistic people feel welcome, respected and safe. Practical training informed by autistic lived experience may help organisations respond more confidently and flexibly to different communication, sensory and behavioural needs.

Flexibility

Flexible participation approaches may include relaxed performances, flexible entry and re-entry, companion access, varied seating arrangements, alternative formats and opportunities for both individual and group participation.

Transport, Affordability and Rural Access

Participation often begins before arrival. Transport, geography, poverty and digital exclusion may significantly influence who is able to participate and who remains excluded.

Co-design and Continuous Learning

Accessibility is strongest where autistic people are directly involved in shaping cultural environments, programmes and policies. Co-design, evaluation and ongoing feedback can help organisations identify barriers and adapt over time.

The evidence therefore suggests that accessibility should be understood not as a specialist add-on, but as one of the conditions that enables meaningful participation in cultural life.

7.From Access to Inclusion

Removing barriers is an important first step, but inclusion requires something more.

Access asks whether autistic people can participate.

Inclusion asks whether autistic people are welcomed, represented, valued and able to contribute meaningfully within cultural life.

This distinction is important because cultural policy can sometimes unintentionally position autistic people primarily as audiences, visitors or recipients of support. A genuinely inclusive approach recognises autistic people as active contributors to arts, heritage, museums, libraries and cultural life.

Autistic people contribute as artists, performers, writers, musicians, actors, filmmakers, historians, archivists, curators, researchers, volunteers, cultural workers, leaders and community knowledge-holders. Their perspectives, creativity, experiences and expertise already shape cultural and public life.

Cultural participation also extends beyond formal cultural institutions. Research exploring autistic community connectedness and neurodivergent participation highlights the importance of interest-led communities, peer networks and spaces where autistic people can share knowledge, creativity, identity and lived experience. For many autistic people, participation may occur through digital culture, creative networks, gaming, collecting, fandom communities, maker spaces and other forms of self-directed or community-led engagement.¹⁴

Northern Ireland already provides examples of inclusive and disability-led cultural participation. Initiatives such as Young at Art's Access All Areas programme, University of Atypical's Bounce Arts Festival, Open Arts and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's NeuroVerse project demonstrate different approaches to enabling participation, expression, visibility and contribution.¹⁵

These examples are important because they illustrate a wider principle. Inclusion is not simply about ensuring that autistic people can attend cultural activities. It is also about ensuring that autistic people can help shape, create, interpret, preserve and lead cultural life.

This includes questions such as:

- Are autistic people represented within cultural programming and storytelling?
- Are autistic artists, creatives and practitioners commissioned and supported?
- Are volunteering, employment and leadership pathways accessible?
- Are autistic people involved in governance, consultation and decision-making?
- Are autistic people able to participate without unnecessary pressure to mask or conform?

¹⁴ Monique Botha, Bridget Dibb and David M Frost, "It's Being a Part of a Grand Tradition, a Grand Counter-Culture Which Involves Communities": A Qualitative Investigation of Autistic Community Connectedness' (2022) 26(8) *Autism* 2151–2164 <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221080248> accessed May 2026; Steven K Kapp (ed), *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline* (Springer Singapore 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8437-0> accessed May 2026.

¹⁵ *Young at Art – Access All Areas* accessed May 2026; *University of Atypical – Bounce Arts Festival* accessed May 2026; *Open Arts NI* accessed May 2026; *Northern Health and Social Care Trust, 'New Book Celebrates Autistic Voices Through Words and Creativity'* accessed May 2026.

Research on disability and cultural participation suggests that barriers continue to arise through organisational culture, representation, funding structures, institutional assumptions and narrow definitions of participation despite formal accessibility duties.¹⁶

The HCC Programme therefore presents an opportunity not only to improve access, but to broaden understanding of who creates culture, whose stories are told and whose contributions are recognised.

This is not solely a question of fairness. It is also a question of cultural richness and public value. When autistic people are excluded from cultural life, communities may lose valuable creativity, knowledge, talent, insight and lived experience. Conversely, when autistic people are welcomed as contributors, cultural life becomes richer, more representative and more reflective of the diversity of society.

The evidence therefore supports a clear policy direction. HCC policy should seek not only to improve accessibility, but also to strengthen representation, contribution, co-design, leadership and participation across all areas of cultural life.

8. Implications for the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme

The evidence reviewed throughout this briefing suggests that autism and neurodivergence are relevant across all areas of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme. The implications extend beyond accessibility and raise broader questions about who participates in cultural life, whose experiences are represented, whose contributions are recognised and how inclusion is understood in practice.

The evidence does not point towards a single model of inclusion or a uniform set of actions that will meet the needs of all autistic people. Rather, it highlights a number of principles that may assist policy development across Arts, Museums, Public Libraries and the Historic Environment.

Participation as a Policy Outcome

The evidence suggests that the success of cultural policy should not be assessed solely by the existence of programmes, venues, events or activities. Consideration should also

¹⁶ Ann Leahy and Delia Ferri, 'Barriers and Facilitators to Cultural Participation by People with Disabilities: A Narrative Literature Review' (2022) 24(1) *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 68 <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.863> accessed May 2026.

be given to who participates, who remains excluded and whether participation is experienced as meaningful, welcoming and sustainable over time.

This distinction is important because provision and participation are not synonymous. Cultural opportunities may exist while significant barriers to participation remain. The evidence therefore supports a greater focus on participation as a policy outcome rather than provision alone.

Accessibility as Core Cultural Infrastructure

The evidence consistently identifies accessibility as one of the conditions that enables participation. Accessibility should therefore not be viewed solely as a specialist service, additional feature or reasonable adjustment. It should be understood as part of the cultural infrastructure through which people access, experience, contribute to and help shape cultural life.

This includes consideration of information, communication, sensory environments, staff confidence, flexibility, transport, affordability and opportunities for feedback and continuous improvement.

Viewed in this way, accessibility becomes relevant to the design and delivery of cultural policy rather than solely to individual venues, programmes or events.

Autistic People as Contributors to Cultural Life

A recurring theme within the evidence is the importance of recognising autistic people not only as audiences, visitors or beneficiaries, but also as contributors.

Autistic people participate in cultural life as artists, performers, writers, makers, researchers, historians, volunteers, cultural workers, curators, leaders and community knowledge-holders. Their perspectives, experiences, creativity and expertise contribute to the richness, diversity and vitality of cultural life.

The evidence therefore suggests that policy should consider not only how autistic people access culture, but also how autistic people create, shape, interpret, preserve and contribute to culture.

Inclusion as a Whole-System Responsibility

The evidence indicates that inclusion is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including policy, funding, governance, workforce development, organisational culture, communication, design and participation opportunities.

Responsibility for inclusion therefore extends beyond individual organisations or isolated initiatives. It requires consideration of how cultural systems, structures and practices operate collectively to support participation and contribution.

This includes ensuring that autistic people are involved in consultation, co-design, evaluation and decision-making processes, and that their experiences help inform future policy development.

Relevance Across the Four HCC Policy Areas

These implications are relevant across all four Heritage, Culture and Creativity policy areas.

Within Arts, they relate to participation, commissioning, creative practice, representation and pathways for autistic artists, performers and creators.

Within Museums, they relate to visitor experience, interpretation, representation, co-curation and opportunities for autistic people to contribute to the telling of cultural stories.

Within Public Libraries, they relate to inclusive community participation, access to information, lifelong learning, creativity and opportunities for connection and contribution.

Within the Historic Environment, they relate to accessibility, interpretation, heritage participation, storytelling, volunteering and ensuring that a wider range of voices and experiences are reflected in how heritage is understood, preserved and shared.

A Wider Opportunity for the HCC Programme

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme presents an opportunity to embed participation, inclusion and contribution within future cultural policy from the outset.

The evidence does not suggest that autistic people require separate cultural systems or entirely different forms of cultural participation. Rather, it highlights the importance of creating cultural environments that are sufficiently flexible, accessible and inclusive to accommodate different ways of experiencing, understanding and contributing to cultural life.

The central question is not simply whether autistic people can access cultural opportunities. It is whether autistic people are able to participate in, contribute to and help shape the cultural life of Northern Ireland on an equal basis with others.

Viewed through this lens, autism and neurodivergence should not be understood as specialist considerations sitting alongside cultural policy. They provide an opportunity to consider how cultural policy can better reflect the diversity, creativity, experiences and contributions of the communities it seeks to serve.

9.Strategic Considerations for Future Policy Development

While the evidence base continues to develop in some areas, several consistent themes emerge across the research literature, practice examples and lived experience evidence reviewed within this briefing. These themes may assist future policy development across the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme and support consideration of how participation, inclusion and contribution can be strengthened across Arts, Museums, Public Libraries and the Historic Environment.

Embed Participation and Co-Design

The evidence suggests that policies, programmes and services are more likely to be effective, relevant and sustainable when autistic people are involved in shaping them.

Future policy development may therefore benefit from ongoing engagement with autistic children, young people and adults, alongside families, carers, autistic-led organisations, disability organisations, artists, cultural practitioners and community groups.

Participation should extend beyond consultation alone and include opportunities for co-design, feedback, evaluation and continuous improvement. This can help ensure that policy development is informed not only by assumptions about need, but also by lived experience, expertise and practical insight.

Measure Participation, Not Simply Provision

The existence of cultural programmes, venues, activities or accessibility measures does not necessarily indicate meaningful participation.

Consideration may therefore be given to how participation is understood and measured. This could include exploring who participates, who remains excluded, how participation is experienced and whether autistic people are represented across different forms of cultural activity and contribution.

A focus on participation outcomes may provide a more meaningful indication of inclusion than measures of activity alone and may help identify where barriers continue to exist despite the availability of provision.

Support Mainstream Inclusion Alongside Targeted Provision

The evidence suggests that autism-specific, sensory-considered or targeted opportunities can play an important role in enabling participation for some individuals and families.

However, targeted provision should complement rather than replace efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion across mainstream cultural environments.

Future policy may therefore benefit from supporting both approaches: targeted opportunities where appropriate and progressive improvements to mainstream participation across Arts, Museums, Public Libraries and the Historic Environment.

Recognise Autistic People as Contributors

A recurring theme throughout the evidence is the importance of recognising autistic people as contributors to cultural life.

This includes participation as artists, performers, writers, makers, researchers, historians, volunteers, cultural workers, leaders and community knowledge-holders.

Future policy may wish to consider how commissioning, programming, volunteering, employment, governance and leadership opportunities can support autistic contribution alongside cultural participation.

Promote Representation and Visibility

The evidence suggests that inclusion is influenced not only by access to cultural opportunities, but also by whether people see themselves reflected within cultural life.

Future policy may therefore benefit from considering how autistic experiences, histories, perspectives and contributions are represented within programming, collections, interpretation, storytelling, exhibitions, performances and public engagement activities.

This is particularly relevant to Museums and the Historic Environment, where decisions about interpretation, heritage, memory and storytelling can influence whose experiences are visible, recognised and valued.

Address Intersecting Barriers to Participation

Autistic experiences are shaped by a range of factors beyond autism itself.

Geography, poverty, transport, digital exclusion, learning disability, communication differences, age, ethnicity, gender and wider life circumstances may all influence participation.

Policy development may therefore benefit from considering how multiple barriers can interact and affect access to cultural opportunities, particularly for individuals and communities who may already experience disadvantage or exclusion.

Promote Learning, Evaluation and Continuous Improvement

The evidence base relating to autism, culture and creativity continues to develop. While there is encouraging evidence regarding participation, wellbeing, inclusion and contribution, some areas remain under-researched and further learning is likely to emerge over time.

Future policy may therefore benefit from embedding mechanisms for evaluation, learning and continuous improvement. This can help ensure that cultural policy remains responsive to emerging evidence, lived experience and evolving practice.

Continuous learning may be particularly important given the diversity of autistic experiences and the absence of any single approach that will meet the needs of all individuals and communities.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Taken together, the evidence reviewed within this briefing suggests that arts, culture, heritage and creativity have the potential to support participation, expression, learning, wellbeing, identity, connection and contribution for many autistic people.

The most significant policy opportunity may not lie in creating separate cultural opportunities for autistic people, but in ensuring that cultural life is designed, delivered and experienced in ways that enable autistic people to participate, contribute and belong on an equal basis with others.

Ultimately, the ambition should be a cultural landscape in which autistic people are recognised as valued contributors to the communities, stories, histories and creative life that cultural policy seeks to support. Such an approach would not only support autistic participation, but would also contribute to a richer, more representative and more inclusive cultural life for everyone.

ANNEX

STATUTORY CONTEXT AND REMIT

Northern Ireland's Statutory Framework for Autism

Prior to 2011, Northern Ireland did not have a statutory framework for autism as a cross-government area of responsibility. There was no legal requirement for a coordinated, cross-departmental strategy and no formal mechanism for reporting to the Assembly. Planning and service development operated on an administrative basis, with limited structured accountability across government.

Evidence provided by families, advocates and representative organisations brought these limitations into clear view and demonstrated the need for coordinated, accountable cross-departmental action.

The introduction of the Autism Act established autism within a statutory framework for the first time. It placed a legal requirement on the Department of Health ("the Department") to prepare and report on a cross-departmental Autism Strategy and required Northern Ireland departments to co-operate in the preparation, and implementation of the Strategy within their areas of responsibility.

The Autism (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 ("Amendment Act") strengthened that framework by enhancing monitoring and accountability arrangements and establishing the Autism Reviewer as a statutory mechanism for independent scrutiny.

This legislative framework defines how responsibility for autism is exercised across government and provides the statutory basis for independent scrutiny.

The Role of the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland

The Amendment Act required the appointment of an Autism Reviewer as an **independent scrutiny mechanism** within Northern Ireland's statutory autism framework.

Ema Cubitt, LLB, was appointed as the first Autism Reviewer by the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt, in August 2024, and she took up office in September 2024.

Remit and Scope of the Independent Autism Reviewer

Statutory Remit

The remit of the Autism Reviewer is set out in the Autism Act.

The Autism Reviewer:

- **monitors** the implementation and effectiveness of the autism strategy
- **assesses** the efficacy of funding arrangements in respect of autism
- **keeps under review** the adequacy and effectiveness of the **law, policy and practice** relating to autism
- **keeps under review** the adequacy and effectiveness of **services** for autistic people, their families and carers

- **commissions** independent research on best international practice
- **advises** the Northern Ireland Assembly, where requested, on matters relating to autism
- **performs** any other functions conferred in accordance with the Autism Act¹⁷

This report demonstrates how these statutory functions have been exercised in practice during the reporting period.

The Autism Reviewer does not exercise executive, regulatory or complaints-handling functions. Responsibility for policy development, service delivery and operational decision-making rests with Ministers, Departments and relevant public authorities.

Scope of Activity

The Autism Reviewer applies the statutory remit across systems that affect and impact the lives of autistic people.

Autism intersects with multiple areas of public policy and service delivery, including **health and social care, education, justice, employment, housing, transport and community life**. Support and services are delivered through a combination of mainstream and specialist provision operating across the life course and within a wide range of public services and sectors.

The statutory remit of the Autism Reviewer provides independent, system-level oversight across these areas.

In exercising this remit, the Autism Reviewer:

- **examines** how law, policy and services operate in practice
- **draws on** engagement, lived experience, administrative material and research evidence
- **analyses** information from multiple sources to assess consistency and system interaction
- **monitors** legislative, policy and fiscal developments relevant to the remit

The Autism Reviewer **determines the focus, sequencing and depth of scrutiny** within the statutory remit.

What's Not Within the Remit of the Autism Reviewer

The Autism Reviewer:

- **does not investigate** individual complaints or casework
- **does not direct** public authorities or exercise enforcement powers

¹⁷ During the reporting period, no additional functions were conferred on the Autism Reviewer under Section 3D(1)(g) of the Autism Act.

- **does not undertake** operational decision-making within Departments or services
- **does not represent** sectional or advocacy interests

Individual experiences are considered as evidence of system operation.

Independence of the Autism Reviewer

Independence underpins the credibility, authority and effectiveness of the Autism Reviewer and the Office of the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland (“the Office”).¹⁸

The Autism Reviewer **acts independently** of Ministers, Northern Ireland Departments and public authorities in the exercise of statutory functions.

The Autism Reviewer:

- determines the matters subject to scrutiny
- determines the timing, focus and depth of scrutiny activity
- forms independent judgements based on the available evidence
- reports those judgements publicly to the Assembly

The Autism Reviewer **does not act on behalf of** any Department, public authority or stakeholder interest and is not subject to direction in relation to the exercise of statutory functions.

The Autism Reviewer operates within a statutory framework established by the Assembly and is **accountable through formal public reporting**. The Autism Reviewer is non-partisan and does not operate as an advocacy function.

This framework secures independent statutory scrutiny as part of Northern Ireland’s public accountability system, enabling responsibility across government to be examined and report publicly on it.

¹⁸ The Office of the Independent Autism Reviewer (“the Office”) refers to organisational and operational arrangements established to support the Autism Reviewer in exercising the statutory functions set out in the Autism Act.



Independent Autism Reviewer
for Northern Ireland



autismreviewer-ni.org.uk



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