

The  
**SCOTTISH  
AUTISM**  
**Practice Framework**  
An Introductory Guide



**SCOTTISH  
AUTISM**

Centre for  
Practice  
Policy and  
Research

# Introduction

Scottish Autism’s Practice Framework articulates our approach to supporting autistic people to lead happy, healthy and meaningful lives. The framework has developed and evolved over time, building on our learning as an organisation. In recent years this has included greater involvement of autistic people in defining good practice and incorporating contemporary understandings of autism and the needs of autistic people.

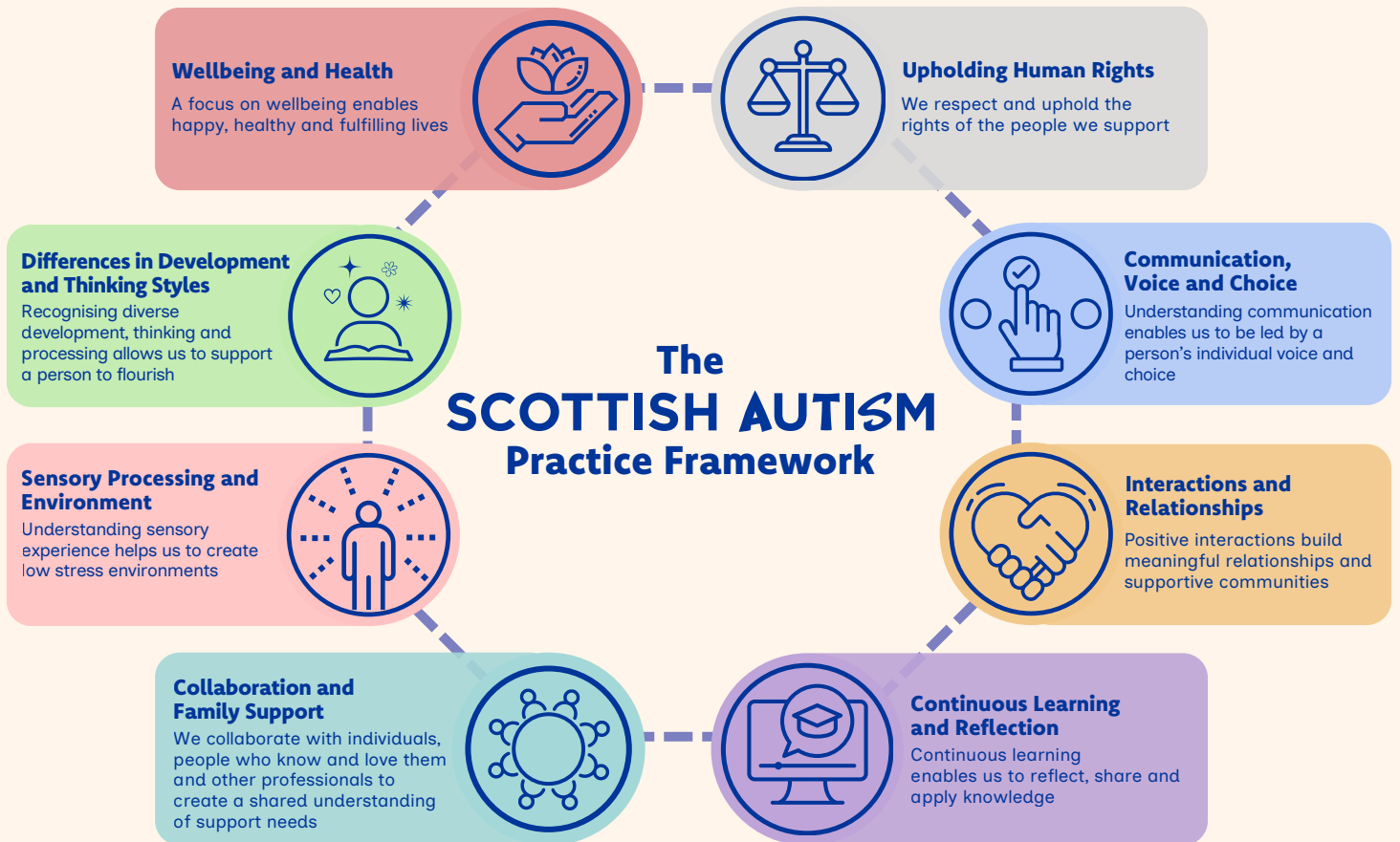
Fundamental to the framework is an understanding that the traditional learning models for autism practice did not work. Instead of starting with a clinical model of autism as a disorder and then expecting professionals to mediate perceived ‘deficits’, the eight elements of our approach define the role of practitioners to provide neuro-affirming, empathic, and ethical support. We believe that changes to practitioners’ behaviour, service environments, and co-produced support make the difference to a person’s wellbeing, rather than trying to fix or ‘treat’ those we support. By including practice relating to communication, interaction, sensory needs, and thinking styles, the framework recognises the specific needs of autistic people rather than providing a generic model of support. However, the broader focus on wellbeing, and elements of practice that re focussed on differences in thinking mean that our practice will take account of intersecting forms of neurodivergence (such as ADHD), additional learning disabilities, and broader health needs, adding up to an individualised “whole person” approach.

The framework was originally developed for social care settings, where we seek to build a shared understanding of ethical practice among practitioners who have large differences in experience and education. Social care does not have a shared professional education, and it is down to care providers to develop specialist learning around specific needs, such as those of autistic people. However, we have since found the framework to be applicable in a range of settings including education and employment and are deploying the approach in different sectors.

We emphasise the approach as a ‘framework’ rather than a ‘model’ since we do not prescribe particular actions or processes, rather the framework outlines the underlying principles of our practice, which allow for individualised tools, approaches and environments to be used.

# The Framework

Scottish Autism’s Practice Framework comprises of eight elements, each with their own statement outlining best practice.



The first two elements – with a focus on wellbeing and human rights, represent guiding principles to our practice.

There are four autism-specific elements to the framework, focusing on development and thinking styles; sensory processing; communication, voice and choice; and interactions and relationships.

The two final elements relating to continuous learning and collaboration, represent professional commitments essential to effective support.

# Wellbeing and Health

A focus on wellbeing enables happy, healthy and fulfilling lives.



Wellbeing is one of two guiding principles that runs through our approach to supporting autistic people. We don't start with how someone behaves, but how they feel. We know that promoting physical health, employing positive psychology, and reducing stress are all key to wellbeing. We are not here to 'treat' a person's autism, or support them to follow societal expectations of a good life, but to support autistic people to flourish on their own terms.

Taking a 'whole person' approach in our individual services, we recognise the role of physical health in overall wellbeing, and promote exercise and healthy living. In many instances, this means accounting for long-term health conditions, supporting healthy ageing, and advocating for better access to healthcare where autistic people face barriers.

Our individualised support accounts for co-occurring neurodevelopmental differences such as ADHD, and learning disability where they may influence someone's wellbeing. We also know that many autistic people face mental health challenges, and address the ways that neurodevelopmental differences, societal barriers, and mental health outcomes intersect in support planning.



# Upholding Human Rights



We respect and uphold the rights of the people we support.

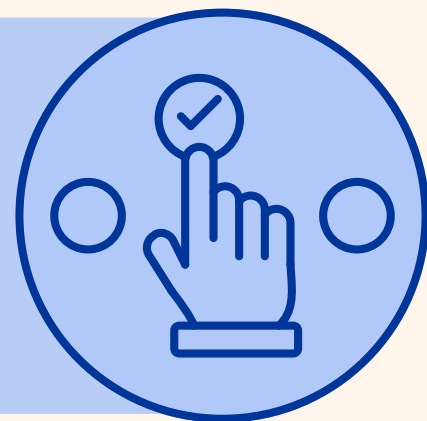
Alongside our focus on wellbeing, is a commitment to upholding human-rights – the second of our guiding principles. Autistic people have the same human rights as everybody else, and support services are here to ensure that those rights to autonomy, choice, dignity, a life in the community, and access to support are fulfilled.

We also ensure that rights to be safe from harm and abuse are respected and reflected in our practice. We follow dedicated safeguarding procedures to avoid risk of harm and we are committed to reducing restrictive practices in settings where autistic people are supported. We ensure that we have opportunities for the people we support to complain about their support should they wish to, and a commitment to respond appropriately.



# Communication, Voice and Choice

Understanding communication enables us to be led by a person's individual voice and choice.



Autistic people may have unique ways of talking and using language. People we support may communicate in ways other than using spoken words; prefer visual, written, or electronic communication; need time to process information, and prefer clear, purposeful communication from others. We use a range of individualised communication approaches, tools, and media to communicate with a person in a way that is meaningful and reflects their communication style and preferences.

But communication is not just an end in itself. By adapting to a person's individual communication style, we ensure that a person's voice is heard and listened to, that a person is meaningfully included in decisions about their life and support service, and supported to advocate for their rights and needs.



# Interactions and Relationships

Positive interactions build meaningful relationships and supportive communities.



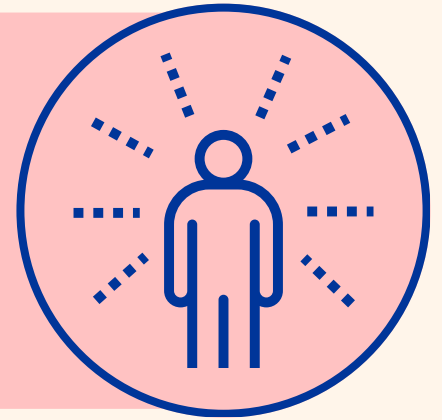
Positive relationships and social belonging are a crucial element of wellbeing for everybody. Instead of seeing autism as an ‘impairment’ in social interaction or working from a standardised idea of ‘social functioning’, we recognise that autistic people may experience meaningful interactions differently from societal norms. We nurture opportunities for such connections, relationships, and access to autistic community spaces.

At Scottish Autism, we understand that interactions between autistic people and support professionals can make a crucial difference to wellbeing and we recognise the relational aspects of support in our approach.



# Sensory Processing

Understanding sensory experience helps us to create low stress environments.



We understand that autistic people may experience high or low sensitivity to noise, light, smell, taste, or texture. This may result in autistic people avoiding stressful environments but seeking out intense sensory experiences that bring comfort and joy. Providing low stress, safe environments means paying attention to light, noise, heat, and smell and ensuring that people we support have control over these things in the places where they spend time.

We recognise that sensory stress will impact the possibility for people we support to communicate and process information and seek to reduce that stress. We know that autistic people may also need support in interpreting or expressing signals from the body – like pain, temperature, hunger or emotion in maintaining their health and wellbeing. We provide opportunities for sensory experiences that the autistic people we support find calming or bring joy.



# Differences in Development and Thinking Styles

Recognising diverse development, thinking and processing allows us to support a person to flourish.



Understanding autistic cognitive processing and developmental trajectories allows us to provide the tools and supports that mean a person can thrive.

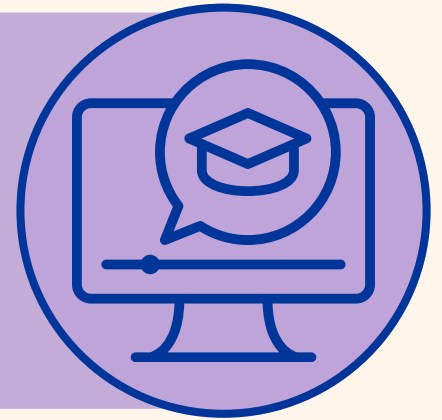
We recognise that autistic people may need support with planning ahead, prefer to have information in advance of something happening, require help dealing with uncertainty and change, and have preference for predictability. Where helpful, we offer visual tools tailored to an individual's needs to support them to feel more in control during these situations or in unfamiliar environments.

We also account for differences in attention, celebrating passionate interests and activities that bring joy, while recognising that support may be needed when switching attention, or being in environments where there is lots of information to process. We understand that people we support may find comfort in repeating sounds, movements or other actions like listening to music (stimming) that can help them to self-regulate.

Understanding different developmental trajectories helps us to identify that people we support may have highly developed skills and understanding in some aspects of their lives, but require significant support in others.



# Continuous Learning and Reflection



Continuous learning enables us to reflect, share and apply knowledge.

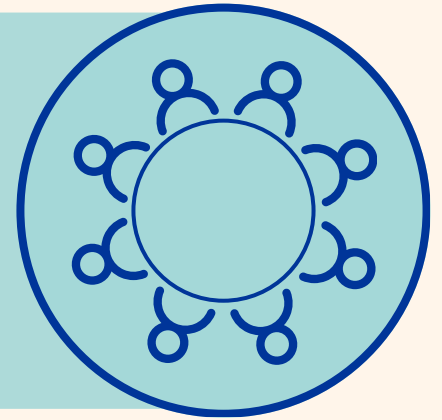
A commitment to continuous learning and improving the support we provide is core to our approach. Maintaining curiosity about why we do what we do, learning from autistic people about their experience, and changing our practice as we learn are fundamental to effective support provision.

At Scottish Autism we provide opportunities for continuous learning for our practitioners through our own learning and development programme, with a suite of resources available through our online learning platform. In 2025 Scottish Autism launched Elevate - Training and Consultancy service, with its sole mission to work closely with organisations, communities and individuals, providing them with the same dedicated learning pathway as we offer our own colleagues, alongside our Autism Practice Improvement Programme and nationally recognised Autism Practitioner Award.



# Collaboration and Family Support

We collaborate with individuals, the people who know and love them, and other professionals to create a shared understanding of support needs.



Good support provision will always be led by the needs and aspirations of the person being supported. Around that person, family, carers, people important to that person, and professionals will need to hold a shared understanding of those needs in order to meet them.

Where family are involved in a person's life, it is vital that practitioners understand a family's story and experience, respect family relationships, and keep an open and honest channel of communication. Regular liaison with family carers is not an additional part of support provision, but a core element of our practice. Maintaining positive and open relationships with other health and support professionals involved in a person's life is also essential to effective, holistic support as people's needs evolve and change.



# Responding to acute risk and dysregulation

Autistic people supported in social care and education settings can sometimes experience acute levels of stress, distress and dysregulation. In some instances, this will present risk of harm or injury to supported people and practitioners. Such moments of risk are sometimes labelled as ‘behaviours of concern’ or, in the past were labelled ‘challenging behaviour’. However, our practice framework – with its emphasis on wellbeing – focuses less on changing the outward behaviour than reducing the stress or distress that underlies such incidents. Scottish Autism does not employ explicitly behaviourist approaches (such as Positive Behaviour Support) in our own support provision. This stance aligns with consistent feedback from within the autistic community.

The Low Arousal approach developed by Studio III offers techniques and skills that allow us to prevent and reduce incidence of risk. Where such incidents do occur, Studio III training offers physical skills to de-escalate and manage such situations as safely as possible, while respecting the rights of supported people and practitioners and protecting the trusted relationship that has been created.

The approach does not sit outside of our practice framework, rather the Studio III focus on reducing stress, understanding autistic thinking and safe management of physical harm sits within our wellbeing and rights-based approach.

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