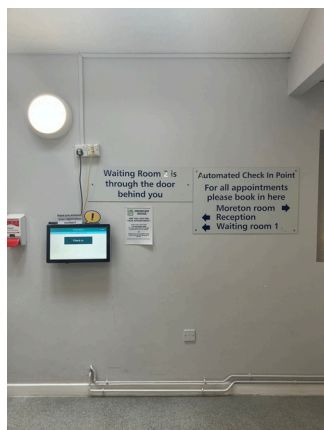


Shout Out for SEND: How primary care can be more SEND friendly

September 2026



shoutoutforsend@buckinghamshire.gov.uk



**Buckinghamshire
Council**



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Young Inspector's Foreword

Why this matters

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The world wasn't designed with us in mind. Like many young people with SEND, I am constantly adapting myself to environments, systems and ways of communicating that weren't designed for me. Healthcare is no different. A GP appointment might look simple from the outside: you book an appointment, turn up, sit in the waiting room and see the GP. Except it isn't that simple for me.

Before I have even left the house, my brain can already be spiralling. Where do I go? What does the building look like? Who am I going to see? What will they ask me? Where will I wait? How long will I be there? What if I can't find reception? What if I don't understand what someone says? What if the plan changes? What if I become overwhelmed?

Young Inspector's Foreword

Why this matters

2

And then I arrive, the lights might be bright, the TV is on, someone is talking, a phone rings, a door slams and people are moving around me. Things that might barely register for someone else can feel like a constant stream of information that my brain is trying to process. And I'm expected to sit there, wait, regulate myself, remember why I'm there and somehow hold everything together until my name is called. Then I need to walk into a room, sit opposite someone I have never met before and explain what is wrong with me. By that point, I may have already spent so much energy navigating the environment, managing my anxiety and trying to stay regulated that there is very little left for the appointment itself.

A quieter place to wait, clear information about what will happen, a choice of where I sit or lighting that doesn't overwhelm me might seem like small adjustments, but they can make a huge difference. They can mean I arrive regulated rather than overwhelmed; I can communicate and actually engage with my GP rather than spending the entire appointment trying to recover from the environment around me. I can just be a young person who needs healthcare. And we all have the power to create that difference.

By Louise Chandler



Designing Inclusive GP Services with Young People

Summary

One of our SEND Young Inspectors visited two GP Surgeries in the Thames Valley Region, to give feedback on the accessibility of these surgeries, comparing and contrasting between the two. What followed were thoughtful, yet easily achievable, adjustments which may help improve accessibility across the Thames Valley and beyond to make sure that primary care can be as inclusive as possible to people with SEND.

Louise identified five key themes across GP inspections. While staff culture was welcoming and supportive, barriers remained around:

- Signage
- Visibility of reasonable adjustments,
- Information organisation,
- Sensory environments
- Pre-visit information.

These barriers can increase anxiety and make healthcare more difficult to access. This report shares practical recommendations from young people about how GP surgeries can become more inclusive and accessible.

We thank the GP Surgeries who hosted us, and our visits have led to staff making changes in their practices. We hope that in reading this, you and your surgery will implement some of these to make your service more inclusive!

Setting the Scene

Everyone deserves access to healthcare that is safe, equitable and accessible. However, national evidence continues to show significant health inequalities for people with learning disabilities and other SEND-related needs.

The Learning from Lives and Deaths (LeDeR) programme found that adults with a learning disability die, on average, 19 years younger than the general population, and that 39% of deaths were considered avoidable, compared to 21% in the general population.

While there are many reasons for these inequalities, access to healthcare remains a significant factor. NHS England states that all health and care providers, including GP surgeries, have a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people can access services as easily as everyone else.

Importantly, reasonable adjustments are not an optional extra or an example of excellent practice. They are a legal requirement. NHS guidance highlights that these adjustments are often simple changes to the way services are delivered, such as providing longer appointments, offering quieter waiting spaces, using accessible information, providing written summaries, or adapting communication methods to meet an individual's needs.

Setting the Scene

The law also places an anticipatory duty on services. GP practices should not wait until difficulties arise before making changes; they should consider in advance what barriers patients may face and what adjustments may help remove them.

Through our inspections, we found that GP surgeries were often staffed by committed professionals who were genuinely passionate about improving accessibility. In many cases, reasonable adjustments already existed. What became apparent, however, was that young people were not always aware of them. Support was frequently available, but it was not always visible, understandable or easy to access.

In my work with young people with SEND, I repeatedly hear similar concerns about accessing primary care. Young people tell us they do not know how to book appointments independently, what happens when they transition into adult services, what confidentiality means once they turn sixteen, or what support is available if they become anxious or overwhelmed. Many describe uncertainty around telephone appointments, where they may be waiting for hours without knowing when a clinician will call, or feeling worried about asking for things such as a longer appointment, written information, a quieter place to wait, or additional processing time.

Setting the Scene

These concerns may appear small in isolation. However, when combined with bright lights, unfamiliar environments, background noise, uncertainty and complex systems, they can create significant barriers to healthcare.

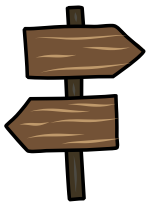
What we hear, and our inspections highlighted, is a gap between policy and lived experience. National guidance tells us that services should be accessible and that reasonable adjustments should be provided. Yet young people are still telling us that they often have to ask, guess and navigate unclear systems to access the support that already exists.

The recommendations in this report are therefore not about large-scale transformation. They are about making support clearer, more visible and easier to access. Many are low-cost, practical changes which could make a significant difference to the experience of young people with SEND, while also improving access for many other patients.

Whilst you read our recommendations, Louise and I encourage you to consider how these can be implemented in your own service to make healthcare a more equitable place for all.

1: Signage

Signage can be one of the first things you notice when entering a GP surgery. For SEND young people, the unknown can be particularly difficult, so clear and consistent signage can reduce the need to rely on asking others for help, which may be particularly anxiety-provoking. When reviewing signage, imagine you are visiting the surgery for the first time. Consider whether the signs clearly tell you where to go and what to do.



1 - Provide clear, consistent signs for key areas.

Use clear signs and arrows to direct people to key areas such as reception, waiting rooms and toilets. Make sure signs use consistent names. Provide clear information about car parking, including whether parking is free and if patients need to register their vehicle.



2 - Provide a map

Have a simple map of the practice available in reception and on the website, so patients can understand the layout before they arrive.



3 - Explain where to wait

When a patient checks in, let them know which waiting room they need to use (where there are multiple) and give clear directions.

2: Reasonable Adjustments are hidden

Support may already exist, such as dimmed lighting, written information, appointments at a quieter time of day, or alternative ways to communicate. However, we (young people) may not be aware of the available support. We may also feel intimidated or worry that we will not be believed. If adjustments are not clearly displayed, young people may not know what is available or feel comfortable requesting it.

In the car on the way to the GP appointment, I rehearsed the phrase 'I find the lighting difficult. Would it be possible to dim the lighting?' over and over again. It sounded like a simple sentence, but when I arrived, the phones were ringing, people were talking, and a queue began forming behind me. My heart started racing. The receptionists looked busy, and I was nervous they would think I was being difficult or making a fuss. I imagined someone saying that I don't 'look autistic' or strangers tutting and shaking their head while I explain myself.

So I said nothing. The lights burned my eyes as I sat in the waiting room. By the time the doctor called my name, I was already overwhelmed. I forgot what I wanted to say and agreed to things I didn't understand because I needed to leave. It was too much.

2: Reasonable Adjustments are hidden

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Young people may not know what reasonable adjustments are available or feel confident asking for them. Here are some examples of ways to make reasonable adjustments less hidden:



Reasonable Adjustments Menu

Having a reasonable adjustments menu poster displayed in the waiting room so that young people can see what reasonable adjustments are available.

Ask Us

Asking everyone at the start of appointments or at reception, 'Is there anything we can do to make this appointment easier for you?' Giving examples of what you could do can help us understand what you mean.

Reasonable Adjustments Sign

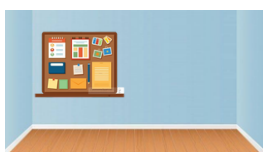
Having a sign at reception which says 'Do you need any reasonable adjustments? E.g. dimming the lights or being able to wait in the car until your appointment time'

Share information on the website

Share information on your website explaining what reasonable adjustments are and the types of reasonable adjustments that can be made.

Being able to access information about your health is really important. Here are some tips for displaying information in a way that is clear and accessible:

Consider the balance of blank wall space and relevant information



Having a balance of relevant information and blank wall space. This gives people the choice of engaging with information if they would like to, without making the environment too over-stimulating.

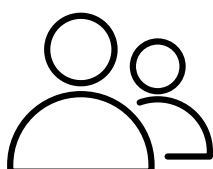
Categorise information



Organise display boards into clear topics, with clear titles at the top of each board. This makes information easier to find and helps patients quickly identify what is relevant to them. For example, categories could include:

- Surgery information
- Health information and signposting, including information about important illnesses and diagnoses
- Community support and signposting, including the SEND Local Offer

Having information aimed at young people



Consider having a dedicated young people's information board. Keep the information easy to read, visually engaging and colourful. Include practical information that young people may need, such as what confidentiality means when visiting a GP.

Environment/Comfortable Spaces

The sensory environment can have a big impact on how comfortable a young person feels in a space. Noise seating arrangements, visual clutter and lighting can have a big impact. Giving different choices over the sensory environment can help meet different needs and mean that we are more able to engage at our appointment. Here are some ideas you could consider about the sensory environment:



Control over background Noise

Having a sign letting people know they can ask for the TV or radio to be turned off. Offering a quieter room to wait or the option to wait in the car.



Provide Different Seating Layouts

Having different seating options gives people more choice. Some may prefer a quieter space, while others will be comfortable in a busier area. The position of chairs also matters. Horseshoe-style seating can feel uncomfortable as it can create pressure around eye contact, where to look and feeling watched.



Reduce visual clutter

Avoid filling every wall with posters. Leave some blank space to create a calmer environment.



Consider lighting

Provide natural lighting options. Avoid flickering or harsh lights.

5: Reducing Anxiety - Pre visit/ Knowing Before You Go

When I don't know what to expect, my brain can start spiralling through all the possible things that could happen. What if I can't find the right place? Who am I going to see? What is the place going to look like? Instead of being able to focus on why I'm there, my brain is trying to predict and prepare for every scenario. What can seem small to someone else can be a much bigger source of anxiety. Knowing what the building looks like, where to go, who I will meet and what will happen during the appointment means my brain doesn't have to work so hard to fill in the gaps. It can make the appointment feel more predictable, manageable and much easier to attend.



Having information about parking.

E.g. Do I need to pay for parking? Do I need to enter my registration number inside?



Pictures/video tour of the environment

What do the entrance, the waiting room, and the clinic rooms look like?



Who will I see?

Can you share a picture of what they look like?
Can you share any information about them?

The surgery is at Walton Community Hospital on Rodney Road, Walton on Thames.



What will happen step by step?

Can you provide a simple explanation of what will happen when someone arrives, checks in, waits and attends their appointment?

If you are given a face to face appointment you will be given a time to visit the surgery

• When you arrive you can get up to using the screen as you come in by the door.
• If you need help you can speak to the receptionist at the desk and they will help you.



The following case study follows 19 year old Daniel who is autistic, visiting his GP. It highlights how small reasonable adjustments throughout his journey can have a significant impact on his experience, reducing anxiety and uncertainty and enabling him to access health care.



Before the appointment



Daniel books an appointment online and receives a social story about what will happen. He can choose whether he would like a face-to-face appointment or a telephone appointment.

The practice website explains that he can bring someone with him and has sent him information about what adjustments could be made to make the appointment easier. This means that he arrives feeling prepared and feels more comfortable that his needs will be met. Otherwise, he might spend days beforehand worrying about what might happen or even not attending the appointment altogether.

Arriving at the GP Centre



When Daniel arrives at the GP practice, there are clear signs to help him find reception and give information about parking and what to do when he arrives. He can choose to wait somewhere that feels comfortable for him, such as his car park, and be called in when it is his turn. He knows that his appointment will take place within a 9-9:30 window, so he has a clear idea of when he will be seen.

During the appointment



Daniel is greeted by the GP, who asks whether there is anything they can do to make the appointment easier. Together, they agree a brief agenda of three bullet points for the appointment, so Daniel knows what will be discussed. The GP positions the chairs so there is less pressure to make eye contact, as Daniel finds this difficult. The GP writes an agenda of what will be discussed in the appointment. The GP gives him time to process questions and respond. The GP uses clear, direct language and avoids relying on hints or indirect communication. They check that Daniel has understood what has been discussed and allow him to ask questions.

Before Daniel leaves, the GP clearly explains what will happen next. Daniel is given a few bullet points of information about the plan so that he doesn't have to remember everything that was discussed during the appointment.

How did this make a difference?



These adjustments reduce uncertainty, anxiety and sensory difficulties. Daniel is now able to attend the appointment and communicate what is happening rather than becoming overwhelmed and distressed. Due to a positive experience, Daniel will be able to return for future appointments when he needs them.

Inclusion Audit for GPs



How SEND-friendly is your surgery? Complete this self-assessment by scoring each statement as Yes (2), Partly (1) or No (0). Use the results to celebrate strengths and identify opportunities for improvement. Consider each question from the perspective of a young person with SEND visiting your surgery for the first time.



1. Can patients easily find their way around the surgery?

Are signs clear, consistent and easy to understand?



2. Can patients easily find information about reasonable adjustments?

Are available adjustments clearly displayed in the surgery and on your website?



3. Are they actively asked what would make their appointment easier?

Are adjustments routinely offered before patients need to ask?



4. Is information on display boards laid out clearly?

Are information boards organised clearly and not overwhelming?



5. Do patients have choices about the sensory environment?

Can they request changes to lighting, noise or where they wait?



6. Are there different seating and waiting options?

Can patients choose a quieter area or wait somewhere else such as their car?



7. Does the surgery provide enough information before an appointment?

Can patients find information on parking, the layout, what to expect on arrival?



8. Does the surgery involve young people with SEND in improving accessibility?

Does lived experience influence service improvement?

If I were a young person with SEND visiting this surgery for the first time, would I feel confident, comfortable and supported?

Total Score: ____/16

(13–16) Excellent
(9–12) Good foundations
(5–8) Improvement needed
(0–4) Action recommended

Professional's Reflections

Thank you to Shout Out for SEND for their invaluable work in highlighting the real experiences and needs of young people with SEND. Their insights and recommendations have already inspired positive changes in local GP practices.

The adjustments highlighted in this project are essential for some but will be helpful for all. By implementing these recommendations, GP surgeries can make a significant difference to the experiences of young people with SEND and reduce health inequalities.

We encourage all primary care providers in Thames Valley to review this report, use the audit tool, and help make GP services more inclusive for all.

Caroline Hart,

Designated Clinical Officer for SEND,
Buckinghamshire Council & Thames Valley Integrated Care Board

*If you found this useful or are implementing some of our recommendations we'd love to hear from you at
ShoutOutforSEND@buckinghamshire.gov.uk*

Impact So Far

The impact of this project can already be seen in practice. Following the inspection, one centre established a dedicated task-and-finish group to review and implement the Young Inspector's recommendations. As a direct result of the inspection, the practice has:

- Reconfigured waiting room layouts.
- Introduced a quieter waiting area and improved sensory considerations through softer artwork.
- Begun redesigning signage, including clearer internal and external wayfinding.
- Developed colour-coded zoning to help patients navigate the building more easily.

Further improvements scheduled include:

- Digital information displays in waiting areas.
- A dedicated accessibility page on the practice website.
- A filmed 360° virtual tour to help patients know what to expect before attending.

This project has shown that when young people with SEND are given the opportunity to share their experiences, their feedback can lead directly to meaningful and lasting improvements in healthcare accessibility.

What's next?

On 9 September, we are sharing our findings with primary care across the Thames Valley, which we hope will reach over 100 GP surgeries. We invite our partners across health to share this report with their networks and consider how GPs can take steps to make their centres more inclusive

We are creating three resources:

- Our webinar detailing this project with guidance for health professionals
- A top tips flyer for GP staff to display in their surgeries
- Our audit tool for staff to review their accessibility in their practice

All of which will be available on our [**SOfS Learning Hub**](#) in October 2026.

We hope to run further inspections with NHS settings, so keep up to date with our work or to find out more, email; ShoutOutforSEND@Buckinghamshire.gov.uk

GP Reasonable Adjustments Menu

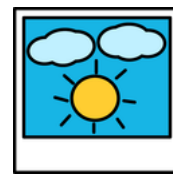
Created by young people with SEND



First or last appointment of the day



A longer appointment



Photos of the surgery before attending



Agenda before the appointment



Information in easy read format



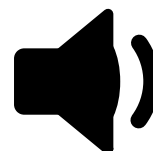
Text message before a phone call.



Reduced lighting where possible



Wait in my car until called



Quieter waiting space



Alternative communication methods (email, video call, text)



Bring someone with me for support



Written summary after the appointment



Buckinghamshire Council

