

DBA Design Effectiveness Awards
2018 entry

Autistica.org.uk

Website redevelopment



Autism is a spectrum condition, as unique as it is misunderstood.

“To me it is having a mind that works for you and against you at the same time. I can retain loads of random things but it affects my senses.”

 @LottieBarker123

Background

Autistica are at the forefront of research that makes the lives of autistic people and their families better. Their new website is a key tool in communicating with a variety of audiences, so they can do more of their crucial work in this area.

Objectives

The objectives of this design project were to better showcase their research projects, their impact on people's lives and how a wide range of people can get involved.

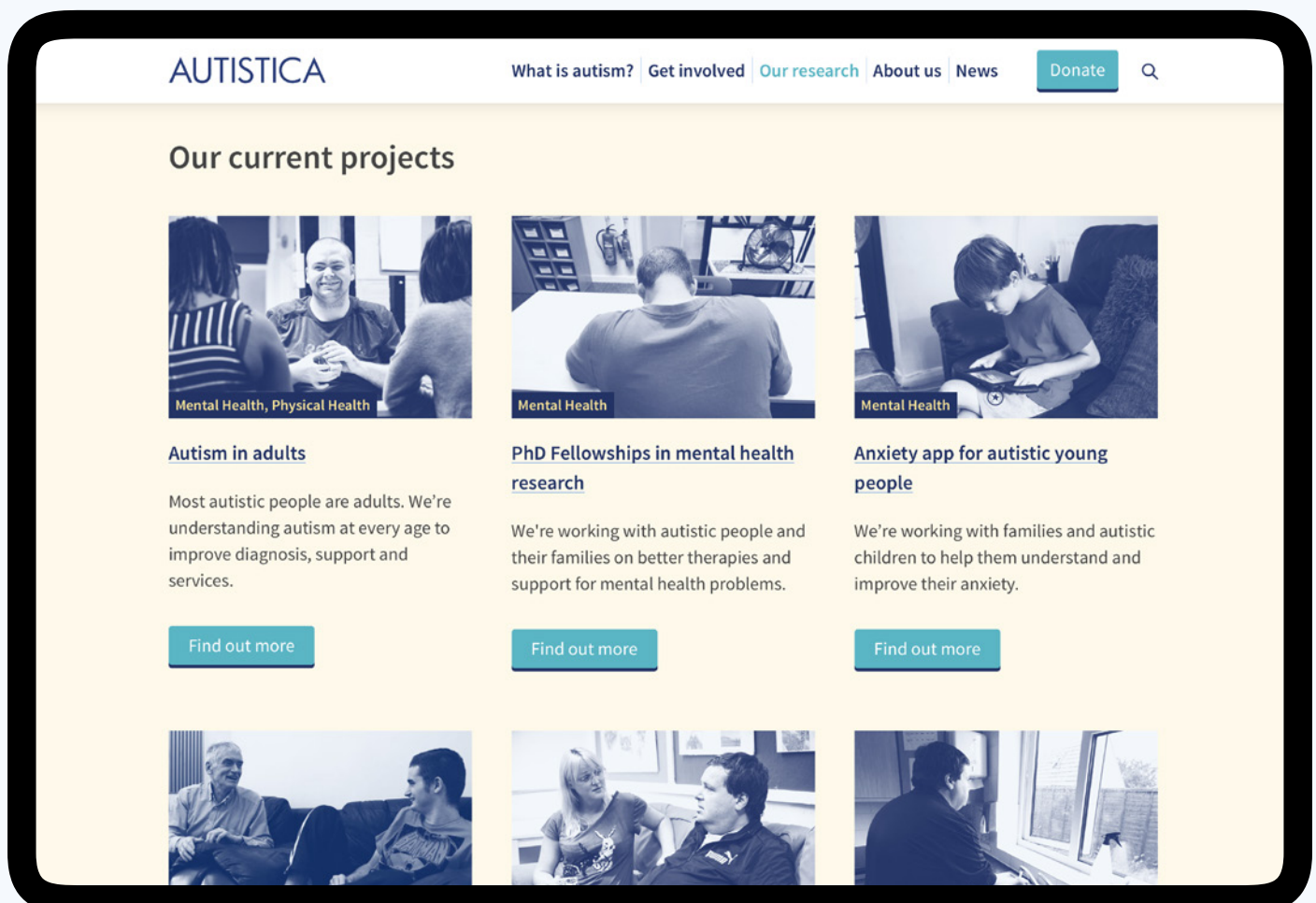
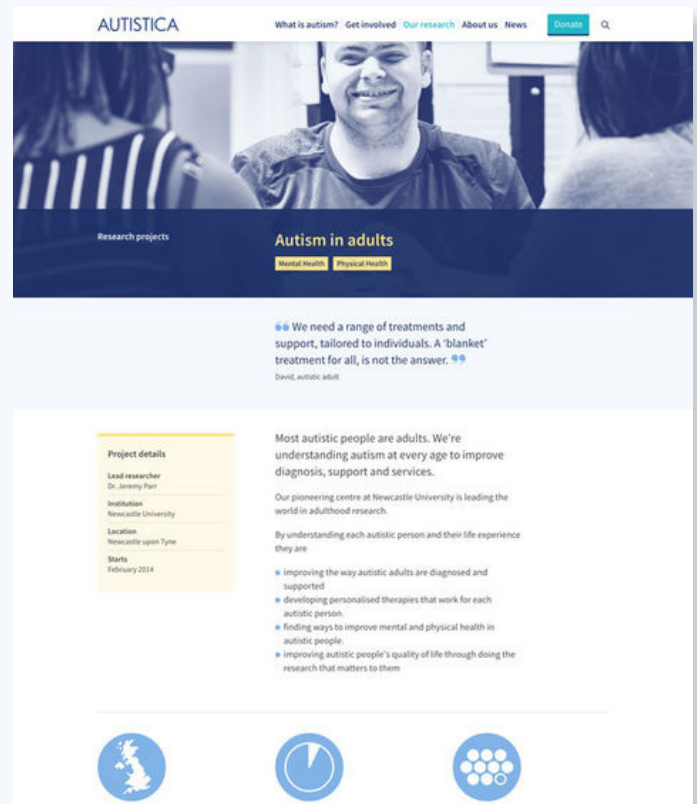
This was achieved by:

- 1 Focusing on accessible design principles.
- 2 Creating content which effectively explained complex scientific information, in ways that anybody could understand.
- 3 Allowing the people whose lives are impacted by Autistica's research explain its importance and impact.



“Autistica are listening to adults diagnosed late like me to improve support and services for mine and future generations.”

Carrie, a site user



Achievements

In the six months since launch, the impact of this new site has been significant:

282%

increase in the proportion of traffic visiting information about Autistica's research.

65%

improvement of drop-off rates on research pages.

49%

increase in the number of sessions.

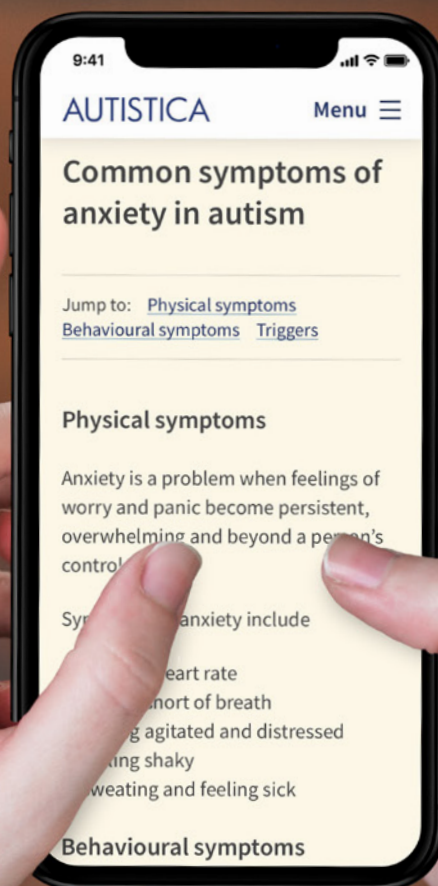
62%

Bounce rate improving by over 62% for the site.

Coupled with these key performance indicators are the cultural shifts that the website project was able to achieve within the charity. By taking a genuinely collaborative approach to the process, Autistica have made lasting changes which ensure their content is user centred and better meets their organisation's goals.

“It's interesting to see it laid out in plain terms, because my brain is usually all over the place.”

Charlotte, an autistic teenager in design User Testing looking at the [‘Anxiety and autism’ page](#)



Project brief

Key business objectives

- Grow the understanding of Autistica's brand as the major funder of autism research in the UK.
- Demonstrate the breadth and depth of research that Autistica is already enabling.
- Illustrate the uniqueness of their research strategy: being driven by the needs of the autism community.
- Encourage autistic people and their families to get involved with research and clinical trials, through the Autistica Discover network.
- Create an autism friendly website design which is accessible to and meets the needs of those with disabilities.
- Design a site that attracts more traffic and retains visitors for longer.
- Reduce Autistica's reliance on paid search for driving traffic

Business challenge to be solved

How to communicate the detailed scientific research that Autistica deliver, in a way that is accessible and interesting for all audiences.

Scope of work

A full website redevelopment including design, build and content creation.

Upfront strategic work

When Autistica came to us, they had a clear idea of the objectives of the new website. What they hadn't appreciated was the work outside the design and build of a site that would need to be done to ensure it met these objectives.

As such, we spent time developing and then communicating a process which would help better understand the audiences that they were building the site for. In order for this to be agreed, we illustrated how this up front Discovery and Definition work would ensure that the final deliverable was bought into by all at the charity and their users.



Description

Who are Autistica?

Autistica are the UK's largest charitable funder of autism research. They have massively increased their impact over the last three years, and are growing their reach across the whole of the country.

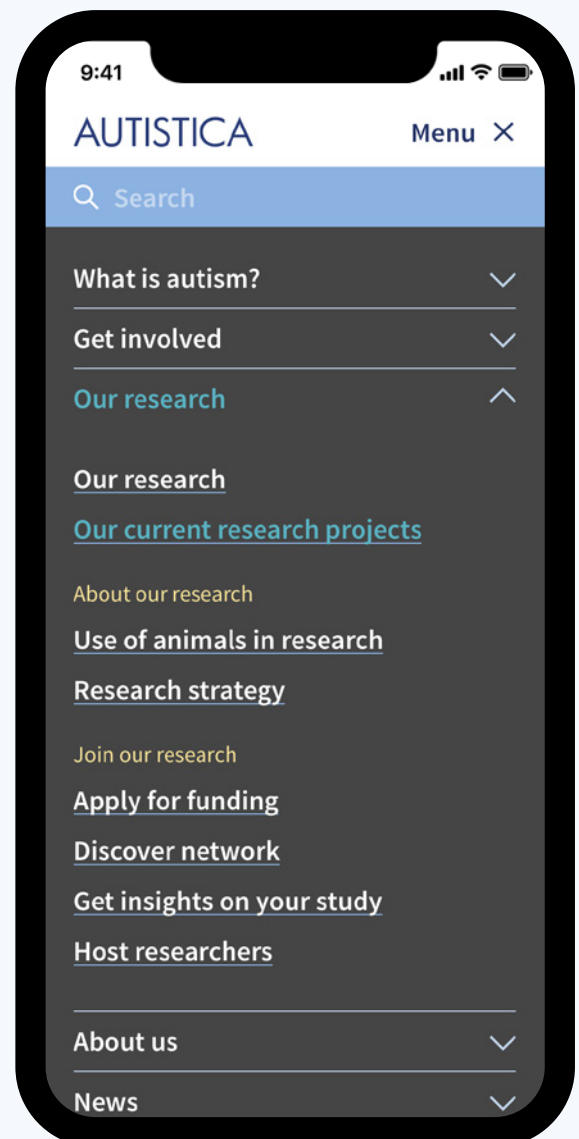
What sets Autistica apart from other research charities is that the focus of their research is 100% directed by the members of their community, which means that they prioritise what matters most to families living with autism.

As such, Autistica identified their website as a key channel of communication that needed to be improved to better engage this community, and to make the most of their growing reputation.

They were recently named Fundraising Charity of the Year at the 2017 National Fundraising Awards and so naturally wanted to ensure their website was able to generate support for their cause and better meet the needs of their audiences – both existing and new. They have massively increased their impact over the last three years, funding more research than ever around the UK and campaigning for policy change in vital areas of need.

A design solution for autistic people and their families

Given Autistica's cause, it was essential that the new site was accessible to families and individuals affected by autism. By testing the designs and content with this community throughout the project, we ensured that their needs were being met. This was done through in-person and remote testing on the flat design files, the initial web builds and the information architecture.



All design choices in the look of the site were made with consideration for a potentially autistic audience and conformed to the Home Office's guidelines for 'designing for users on the autism spectrum':

- Use of a humanist sans-serif font with rounded forms, excellent screen legibility and with clear distinction between characters; for example, a double story 'a' to avoid confusion with an 'o', and easily distinguishable ascenders and descenders.
- Introduction of softer, more muted pale blue and yellow into the colour palette; avoiding strong, bright, contrasting colours.

- Large spacing and type sizes, and simple layout to be as easy to read as possible.
- Distracting movement or animation kept to a minimum.

As newly commissioned photography did not fall under the scope of the project, we knew imagery would be coming from a wide range of sources. To bring consistency to the photography on the site, a series of colour treatments were applied reflecting the new palette. Content-wise, greater focus was also given to showing people together, rather than alone.

Project details

Lead researcher
Dr. Jeremy Parr

Institution
Newcastle University

Location
Newcastle upon Tyne

Starts
February 2014

Duration
Ongoing

Category
Ageing

A research team at Newcastle University, that includes autistic co-researchers, are interviewing autistic adults, their families and carers.

They want to find out more about their:

- health needs
- life experiences
- priorities for research

Autistic people consistently say they want to be better understood so that research addresses what matters to them.

Their involvement is at the heart of the ageing and autism programme – the best research happens when autistic people, families and researchers work together.

A national cohort makes the information available to other researchers and speeds up progress to identify the best ways to support autistic people at every stage of their lives.




500,000

There are 500,000 autistic adults in the UK



7%

The UK only spends 7% of autism research funding on adult research



9 in 10


90% of autistic adults would participate in research if they were asked

With your support we can change lives. Please give today.

Donate

The research process

The team have already recruited over 800 autistic adults of all ages and almost 300 family members.



💬 If research can help autistic people to communicate better, children like Emilia can look forward to a happy, more independent future 🗨️

Common symptoms of anxiety in autism

Jump to: [Physical symptoms](#) [Behavioural symptoms](#) [Triggers](#)

Physical symptoms

Anxiety is a problem when feelings of worry and panic become persistent, overwhelming and beyond a person's control. Symptoms of anxiety are:

- A racing heart rate
- Feeling short of breath
- Feeling shaky
- Sweating and feeling sick

Behavioural symptoms

Anxiety can lead to behaviours that help a person feel more in control like:

- Seeking lots of reassurance

Overview of market

Giving autistic people a voice

Through our initial user research, it became clear that there is no single way to define autism. It is a truly personal situation that is as unique as the individuals who experience it. As such, we quickly realised that the people best placed to describe the importance of Autistica's work were those benefiting from it.

This led to a series of design choices where we gave heavy prominence to user quotes and stories across the whole site. This was an obvious development for certain templates, such as the homepage. However it was a new way of thinking to present the research projects in the words of autistic adults, children and their families.

A collaboration with the entire organisation

As with many medical research organisations, Autistica has separate departments that look after their research projects and then communicate them to the public. In order for the new website to illustrate these pieces of content in a way that was relevant to all their users, these teams needed to come together in a way they hadn't before.

We ran a series of workshops which explored the perspectives of each group, to make sure that they were considered within the design and content. We also invited all parts of the organisation to participate in the user testing of the website designs. This allowed everyone to see the positive impact of this new way of presenting information to users.

Ensuring value for money

Charities are rightly under constant pressure to keep their overheads as low as possible. Members of the public are usually unwilling to see their donations being used for items such as websites or design projects.

As such, the budget for the entire website project was initially very small. In our view, it was at the level which would have meant no time was able to be set aside for generating insight into the user base and testing our designs with them once developed.

By working with the team at Autistica, we were able to illustrate the value of these activities. In particular we showed how they would ensure the effectiveness of the solutions we created, thus demonstrating the value of the work.

Key facts

Launch Date: September 2017

Design Fees: [Redacted confidential data]

Objectives 1

- Grow the understanding of Autistica's brand as the major funder of autism research in the UK.
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- Illustrate the uniqueness of their research strategy – being driven by the needs of the autism community.
- Encourage autistic people and their families to get involved with research and clinical trials, through the Autistica Discover network.

Results

- Traffic going to pages about Autistica's research projects: 1.5% → 5.73%
- The drop off rates on research pages: 65% → 23%



282%

increase in the proportion of traffic visiting information about Autistica's research.



65%

improvement in drop-off rates on research pages.

Cause and effect of design solution

- Card sorting and treejack tests were run to build a navigation that allowed users to easily find what they were looking for – whilst highlighting Autistica's research.
- Current research projects were highlighted on the homepage.
- By creating an easy to build, update and manage list of research projects, Autistica have consistently kept the site up to date with their latest research.
- A template was designed that could highlight and explain Autistica's research strategy and highlight why it is so progressive.
- The Discover Network was highlighted and signposted from each research project – with an easy to use form designed and built alongside content.
- Content on the research projects pages themselves was designed to be accessible to those without a scientific background. Easy to understand statistics were highlighted, quotes from autistic people were used and the people running the research were profiled – all to reduce the barriers that many feel when engaging with this content.

A note about our statistics

All Statistical Data is comparing 1 Oct 2016–31 March 2017 with 1 Oct 2017–31 March 2018 and taken from Google Analytics.

During this time, there was no significant marketing push or product launches to the website. Autistica however have been steadily raising their profile within the sector. As such the metrics which

relate to traffic growth cannot be solely attributed to the website redevelopment.

However, the key performance metrics of content (bounce rate, session time etc) are only enhanced by this situation, as the new audiences that are coming to Autistica's site are likely to be 'further from the cause'.

Objectives 2

Create an autism-friendly website design which is accessible to and meets the needs of those with disabilities.

Results

Statistical analysis to back up the success of this objective is harder to uncover. However, given that Autistica know a large proportion of their users have accessibility needs, the other goals could not have been met without a site that meets their needs.

In particular, when running user testing, we saw a range of positive comments about the designs and content that had been created:

“This is really well explained.
I’m not very good at explaining my anxiety and this does it really well.
This layout is really good – the three points that are laid out like that and then the quote from someone who’s actually autistic. Then the points about what you can do about it are good as well.”

Charlotte, an autistic teenager
in design user testing

“All the pictures, the bullet points and the nice big headings for relevant things are good. It’s interesting... I didn’t realise that all this research was going on. It’d be useful for fundraising as well – this is saying where the money is going. It also says there’s a national database that gives families a chance to take part in research. The Discover network. That’s quite good as well because you can have a look at what’s right for you.”

Susan, parent of Charlotte, an autistic teenager
in design user testing

Cause and effect of design solution

- The majority of copy, especially on the longer research project pages, sits within a single column. This ensured that users’ focus did not have to dart about the page to find the information they were looking for.
- The site’s content was entirely rewritten using plain English language, rather than scientific terms, to make sure information throughout the site is accessible to all. Particular care was given to avoiding metaphor, idioms and figures of speech.
- The designs all used colour choices which were tested to meet a minimum of AA contrast accessibility standards, and font sizing and families that had excellent screen legibility.
- The site was coded, structured and labelled in accordance with web standards for automated screen readers.
- Animation was kept to a minimum, to ensure an environment that wasn’t distracting to a user with a limited concentration span.

Objectives 3

- Design a site that attracts more traffic and retains visitors longer
- Reduce Autistica's reliance on paid search for driving traffic

Results

- Users: 41,655 → 61,964
- Sessions: 51,610 → 79,105
- Minutes per session: 1:48 → 2:01
- Bounce rate: 60% → 23%
- Paid search proportion: 56% → 39%

49%

Increase in users

53%

Growth in number of sessions

12%

More minutes per session

62%

Reduction in bounce rate

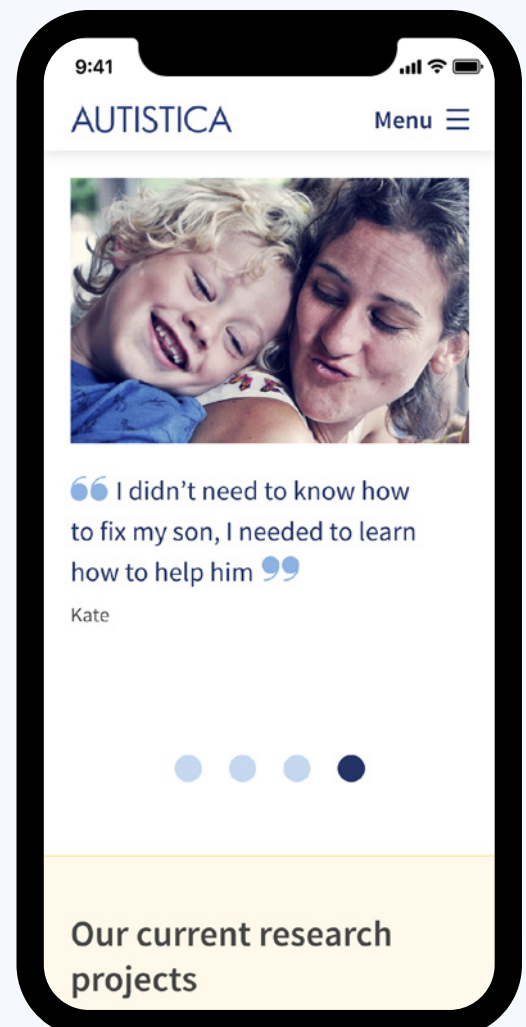
30%

Improvement in proportion of paid search

Cause and effect of design solution

At the heart of Autistica's success has been a focus on effective social media content. They are highly active in a variety of communities across Facebook and Twitter in particular. The new site was built to ensure that all links back to its content featured the necessary metadata make the most of the effective imagery and copy used.

By creating a site which Autistica can easily manage, it has given them a new nimbleness to develop content that they are seeing a need for. This allows them to make further asks on social media – in particular about getting involved in research.



Establishing a user-centred culture at Autistica

By running the project with a fully collaborative approach, we were able to make significant improvements to the content produced for the website. This also meant that relationships and ways of working were built, which have continued after the initial redevelopment. Most important of these has been Autistica's user led approach to content.

Pair writing

The research and communication teams now work together, to create and update content on the website. They do this largely through a process of pair writing.

This involves agreeing up front:

- The Audience
- The Aims of the piece
- The Key Performance Indicators
- The topline structure

From here, the individuals then take turns to be copywriter and editor allowing each a chance to contribute their perspective. This has resulted in content which makes the best of everybody's perspectives whilst also saving on hundreds of emails back and forth between teams.

User testing

The team at Autistica were fully involved in user testing throughout the project. We worked with them on the scripts, the assets to be tested and the logistics of running tests in a lab setting. As such, the team felt fully capable of running their own set of tests for their upcoming Molehill Mountain app. This type of specific tool and activity has been key in embedding a user centred culture in the Autistica team.

