



Ableism, Stigma and Discrimination: The Power of Language

Lived experiences, testimonies, and preferred terminology from young people with additional needs and disabilities living and accessing services in Surrey, UK.

Co-written by ATLAS members with the User Voice and Participation Team through group consultation.

Chapter 1

ATLAS: Accept, Teach, Listen, Access, Support

Who are we?

We are a network of children and young people with additional needs and disabilities who live in Surrey and/or access Surrey services. We share our experiences to bring about positive change!

ATLAS stands for: **A**cccept, **T**each, **L**isten, **A**ccess, **S**upport.

We chose these words to represent us as we feel they reflect our values and the work that we do. They also reflect the work that we ask others to do in order to reduce stigma and ableism. We liked the association with the word atlas as a map, but also in reference to the Greek demigod who holds the world on his shoulders. You can find out more about how we re-named and branded ourselves on the [ATLAS website](#).





“It represents that invisible burden that I and so many other people with AND experience, living in a world that’s not designed for us, and also the worries and responsibilities that might fall on you from a very young age.”

- ATLAS member

What is Participation?

Participation means the people who will be affected by the decisions being made can share their views, be heard, influence and take part in those decisions. For example, the users of a mental health service being involved in the design of that service.

“I think people really underestimate the impact that lived experience can have.”

- ATLAS member





You have a right to be involved in the decisions that affect you. You are an expert of your own experience.

“It is great to know that there are professionals ... trying to help get our voices heard so we can have a better experience in the services we use.”

-ATLAS member

We would like to see children and young people involved at the beginning of decision-making processes and informed about the impact that their participation has.

What are the benefits for young people?

Participation helps empower young people: it helps them build self-belief and develop the skills needed to become confident and independent.

“I like to give my opinion and offer advice to others who are struggling.”

-ATLAS member





ATLAS sessions are varied! Here are some examples of what a 'typical' week as an ATLAS member may include:

- Sharing your experiences
- Talking about our wellbeing
- Meeting new people and making friends
- Raising awareness
- Reducing stigma
- Learning new skills
- Writing blogs
- Quizzes
- Support, if we need it
- Gaining confidence
- Parties and social event

“One of the difficulties with disabilities is that it can be very isolating, but you find out so much by networking with other people.”

-ATLAS member

Language used in ATLAS

In ATLAS we self-describe using the term additional needs and disabilities (AND). AND includes special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), otherwise known as special needs or special educational needs.

As ATLAS members we would like society to stop using the word 'special'





to refer to additional needs and disabilities, as we believe this spreads ableism, stigma, and discrimination.

"Disability is not a bad word."

-ATLAS member

When we were deciding on how they self-describe as a group, there were several considerations:

- Disability is a term largely accepted by the disabled community and many of us ATLAS members.
- Some of us felt differently about the word disability, due to experiences of ableism, stigma, and discrimination that they associate it with.
- We saw a difference between how physically disabled and neurodiverse members identified with the word disability.
 - Those of us who are physically disabled seem to be more comfortable with the term disability than neurodiverse members without physical disabilities.
- We also recognised that until society is more inclusive, the needs of disabled people will be seen as additional to the 'norm'.
 - We would like society to be more inclusive.

Therefore, as a group we made the decision to include 'additional needs' alongside 'disability'. We hope that this means people who do not self-identify with the word disability, but may legally be defined as disabled, will feel that ATLAS not only represents them, but is a safe space for them to join and raise their voices on topics that are important to them!





"It is the environment that is disabling."

-ATLAS member

Overall, as ATLAS members we believe that people are disabled by society rather than themselves, for example from how buildings and public spaces are designed or from stigma and discrimination. This is in line with the Social Model of Disability.

For more information on the Social Model of Disability, we recommend you check out the information available from the charity [SCOPE's webpages](#), who give a good explanation of the model.

"You can't rewire your brain, but you can change the environment."

-ATLAS member





Join us!

If you are a young person aged 8 to 25 with an additional need or disability, and you would like to be a member of ATLAS, please get in touch! New members are always welcome and official diagnoses are not required. You can email us at: ATLAS@surreycc.gov.uk

“Without [ATLAS] I wouldn’t have been able to spread my voice, I would not have a say, in terms of what I struggle with.”

-ATLAS member

A consultation pack is made before every consultation session so that you can see what we will be discussing in advance! This can be emailed to you and is also available to download from the [ATLAS website](#).

“Participation made the most difference to my journey. I was an elective mute and now I’m off to uni.”

-ATLAS member

