

Why are private assessments so expensive?

We often get asked this question at Autism Oxford UK or we see this question being asked on social media, especially by parents who are trying to access an assessment for their young person, after spending years on a waiting list in the NHS or not even managing to get on the waiting list.

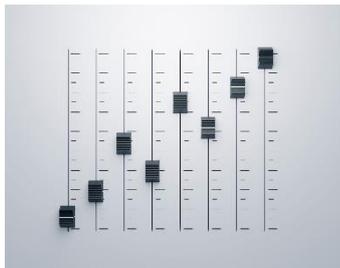
As a parent myself who sourced a private assessment for their daughter due to the NHS waiting times, I was overwhelmed with the volume of private organisations offering diagnostic assessments and also overwhelmed by the cost of an assessment! I was working in the NHS at the time, but it felt like the service that I worked in was letting me down, and that I would need to remortgage to fund the assessment on an NHS nurse's wage at the time.

There are many reasons why

1. The cost varies so much for a private assessment
2. Why it is so expensive
3. More money does not equal better assessment
- 4.

The cost varies so much for a private assessment

If you have done some homework on the cost of a private autism assessment, you will know they start at around £800 up to £4,000. This is a significant variation in costs, which can then fill you, with many anxieties about going with the right organisation and quite frankly, not being ripped off. So as a clinician and leader of an organisation that now provides these assessments, I wanted to share with you some of the things I would have found useful to know when deciding how much to pay for an assessment and which organisation to go with.



- The assessment will cost more if it has more members of the team completing the assessment.

This seems obvious, right? But some organisations do not make clear on their websites or social media who is involved in the assessment

process, so it can make it difficult to ascertain if this is the reason for a higher costing assessment.

For example, at Autism Oxford there will be contact with at least 4 team members; Administrator, Clinician 1 and Clinician 2, as well as a Peer Support Practitioner. There is then the added cost of a Clinical Psychologist to oversee the assessment and review the information gathered during the assessment and chair the team discussion (known as an MDT). So that is a lot of people's salaries to cover. In some organisations, the assessment will only be completed by 1 clinician, for example a Psychiatrist or Psychologist. These professions will attract a higher pay rate, but as it is only 1 person the cost for this assessment is likely to be lower.

- Why use a team with more people involved?



You could go for the clinician or organisation that is cheapest and is done by one person such as a Clinical Psychologist or a Psychiatrist. This would be a good assessment no doubt, as they will be trained in the assessment tools like other clinicians. However, it would not be NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) compliant if assessing a young person. (NICE are the organisation who set the professional standards for assessments, treatments, and support for a range of health diagnoses). This is important if you are wanting to use the report as evidence to support an EHCP application or to access support based on the outcome. NICE recommends best practice that assessments should be completed by an MDT (multi-disciplinary team), so this equates to needing at least 2 clinicians involved in the assessment process.

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- You will pay a premium to access a specialist, for example, someone with additional experience and knowledge in PDA or Camouflaging.

For any clinician to become suitably qualified and competent in assessing autism, they need to have had several years of experience with working with autistic individuals, be degree level qualified health professionals and also have a good understanding of the early developmental period. These are prerequisites to access training in the specialist diagnostic tools such as the DISCO, ADOS and ADI-R. The clinician is then assessed and 'consistency checked' in their skills and competence in using these skills throughout their assessing careers.

Most clinicians will develop an interest in particular strengths or needs that autistic people can experience including profiles of presentations ie PDA . They would need to obtain further training and experience to become competent in assessing these, and unfortunately the cost of this experience and continued professional development is passed on to people wanting a specialist assessment/opinion.

In summary, the more specialist assessment you are seeking the more it is going to cost.

Why is it so expensive?



Other than the team costs as discussed above, the tools themselves are incredibly expensive. For example, the cost of an ADOS kit (the tasks and tools used in the assessment) is £2,817.60! The organisation then needs to purchase the assessment booklets at nearly £80 for 10 (and there are 4 module booklets to choose from depending on the individual speech and language

levels) - expensive right? And this is just one of the tools, the others are equally as expensive,

There will be other costs too, such as space to complete the assessment or licences to virtual platforms if completed virtually which will need to be accounted for.

The one aspect which I had not realised when sourcing my daughter's assessment was the amount of time it takes to write up a good quality report. For a thorough NICE compliant report, you are looking at around 15 hours of write up time. Private organisation's reports tend to be more thorough as they know the NHS, local authority and education services can be curious in 'accepting' private assessments with some strange notion they are not independent as they have been paid for. (Note, you pay for the NHS diagnostic assessment - just through your taxes instead), so this idea is ridiculous and quite frankly insulting to the clinicians that have trained for years to specialise. (You would not say to a private Bupa Healthcare surgeon that the hip replacement he did was 'not good enough' because it was private - indeed with physical health there is a notion of private health care being elite over the NHS – despite often sharing the same clinicians).

More money does not equal better assessment.

Taking everything, we have discussed into account, it still does not mean the most expensive

assessment is the best one. While there are lots of costs involved in an assessment that are not always obvious, you can still access a robust, good quality assessment within the middle range of costs quoted.

From my own personal experience and as a professional, I would always advise the following "checklist" is used to decide who you decide to proceed with

- Is the organisation NICE compliant?



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- Does the organisation screen for other co-occurring needs?
- What support is available during the assessment process? (This point is one I underestimated the importance of when deciding who we went with for my daughter)
- Do you warm to the service on first contact? This is hard as it is subjective and will be different for everyone. What I mean by this, is that you will be sharing A LOT of information about yourself during the process, and you will also be sharing some of your worries and vulnerabilities, so you need to trust them and feel able to be open and honest with them.

We have to acknowledge that while the majority of clinicians and organisations act in the best interest of the people they offer services to, there is also a minority of organisations that will hike prices up to drive significant profits and will not offer value for money. (This is not to say any limited company or for profit company does not act in your best interest. It's the companies that exploit the high demand, not in the interest of individuals accessing their services).

I hope this has helped to give some insight into the costs of a private assessment and why these are so important.

Best wishes
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Autism Oxford UK