# Nicholas Thornton’s struggle for freedom exposes wider failures in autism care system



Just a year ago, Nicholas Thornton found himself trapped in a windowless hospital room, unable to communicate or leave the confines of the facility on his own accord. For a decade, he was confined to various unsuitable settings, including mental health wards and dementia care homes, a grim testimony to a failing care system for individuals with learning disabilities and autism. Today, at the age of 29, he has emerged into a life brimming with possibilities, liberated from the clutches of institutional care.

Speaking to The Independent, Nicholas recounted his harrowing experiences and his slow ascent to freedom following his discharge from Rochard Hospital in Essex. Through the use of a laptop for communication, he detailed the inadequate care that had plagued him for years, which left him voiceless and bedridden. "It’s like I have my life back, I have my freedom back... for so long I was just stuck in the hospital," he expressed. His transformation since leaving has been nothing short of extraordinary; he can now, for the first time, navigate his world unassisted and has regained his speech.

However, despite Nicholas’s newfound autonomy, a stark reality persists for over 2,000 individuals like him who remain ensnared in hospitals across the United Kingdom. Many have languished for years—some for over five—awaiting proper community care solutions as local authorities struggle to secure the necessary funding. Recent NHS data underscores that a staggering 23% of delayed discharges stem from the lack of suitable supported accommodation, while a further 12% await placement in care homes, highlighting significant systemic inadequacies.

In an effort to address these chronic failings, ministers have introduced a new Mental Health Bill, which stipulates that individuals with learning disabilities and autism can only be detained under the Mental Health Act for a maximum of 28 days. Yet, critics argue that these changes, while a step in the right direction, do little to remedy the fundamental issues. Julie Newcombe from Rightful Lives cautioned that legislative amendments alone will not suffice without concurrent funding for community-based mental health care. “For every one of Nicholas, there are a dozen more people who are prisoners in their own homes without the proper care [packages] they need,” she lamented.

Alexis Quinn, also from Rightful Lives and a person with autism, drew attention to the implications of the new bill, which may restrict the rights of those with learning disabilities to receive fully funded community care. “Eliminating access to Section 117 will mean that the 2,000 people currently in the same situation Nicholas was in will suffer even greater barriers to getting out of hospital,” she stated. This reflects broader concerns voiced by various advocacy groups who argue that, without adequate community resources, vulnerable individuals will continue to fall through the cracks of an overwhelmed system.

Nicholas's previous living conditions were particularly unsuitable, triggering anxiety and leading to further deterioration in his mental and physical health. His family, acting as staunch advocates, fought tirelessly to secure the care necessary for his well-being. They faced an uphill battle against a system that often seems unable to meet basic needs. After finally securing an appropriate care package, Nicholas now benefits from the support of dedicated carers like Hayley Kitchener from My Life Choices, reinforcing the importance of tailored, responsive care.

Having spent a decade in environments detrimental to his health, Nicholas now savours simple joys, like stepping outside his own home, gazing at the stars he had not seen in years. He dreams of pursuing an e-sports degree, and engaging in physical fitness with the help of a friend who is a personal trainer. “I want to go to Disneyland... I’d like to have a dog,” he shared enthusiastically, showcasing an optimism that had long been denied to him.

As Nicholas stands on the cusp of his 30th birthday, his journey illuminates the ongoing struggle faced by many in the system, calling for urgent reforms that prioritise individual care and safeguarding the rights of those with learning disabilities and autism. His story serves not only as a testament to perseverance but also as a stark reminder of the work that lies ahead in ensuring that others may reclaim their freedom and dignity.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[5]](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/number-of-autistic-people-in-mental-health-ho-24)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/62-million-to-help-discharge-people-with-learning-disabilities-or-autism-into-the-community)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/clinical-guide-for-front-line-staff-to-support-the-management-of-patients-with-a-learning-disability-and-autistic-people-relevant-to-all-clinical-specialties/), [[7]](https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/topic/autism/inappropriate-care-settings-the-true-impact-on-a-person/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[3]](https://www.cqc.org.uk/publication/experiences-being-hospital-people-learning-disability-and-autistic-people/report)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/62-million-to-help-discharge-people-with-learning-disabilities-or-autism-into-the-community)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/autism-hospital-nhs-mental-health-b2645224.html> - This article discusses the case of Nicholas Thornton, a man with learning disabilities and autism who spent over a decade in various hospital settings due to inadequate community care. After leaving Rochard Hospital in Essex, he regained his independence and speech. The piece highlights the systemic issues leading to prolonged hospital stays for individuals with learning disabilities and autism, emphasizing the need for suitable community-based care options.
3. <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publication/experiences-being-hospital-people-learning-disability-and-autistic-people/report> - The Care Quality Commission's report examines the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities and autism in hospital settings. It reveals inconsistencies in involving patients and their families in care planning and discharge processes. The report underscores the necessity for improved communication and tailored care to ensure better outcomes for these individuals.
4. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/clinical-guide-for-front-line-staff-to-support-the-management-of-patients-with-a-learning-disability-and-autistic-people-relevant-to-all-clinical-specialties/> - NHS England's guide provides frontline staff with strategies to support patients with learning disabilities and autism across various clinical specialties. It emphasizes the importance of individualized care, reasonable adjustments, and effective communication to enhance patient outcomes and reduce hospital stays.
5. <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/number-of-autistic-people-in-mental-health-ho-24> - The National Autistic Society reports on the increasing number of autistic individuals in inpatient mental health hospitals in England. As of September 2024, 2,020 autistic people and those with learning disabilities were in such settings, highlighting the urgent need for community-based care solutions.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/62-million-to-help-discharge-people-with-learning-disabilities-or-autism-into-the-community> - The UK government announced £62 million in funding to accelerate the discharge of individuals with learning disabilities or autism from mental health hospitals into community settings. The initiative aims to establish community teams, fund accommodation, and provide staff training to support these transitions.
7. <https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/topic/autism/inappropriate-care-settings-the-true-impact-on-a-person/> - This article discusses the adverse effects of inappropriate care settings on individuals with autism and learning disabilities. It highlights how unsuitable environments, such as noisy and brightly lit hospitals, can trigger meltdowns and exacerbate mental health issues, leading to prolonged hospital stays.