Neurodiversity Guidance

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# Introduction

The aim of this guidance is to help support managers and employees with any queries regarding neurodiversity in the workplace. We aim to promote a greater understanding of neurodiversity and seek to eradicate any discriminatory practices.

Neurodiversity is a relatively new term that many people may not yet know much about. Learning more about neurodiversity and taking steps to understand how to best support everyone in workplaces can be hugely beneficial for employers and employees.

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# What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways the brain can work and interpret information. It highlights that people naturally think about things differently. People have different interests and motivations, and are naturally better at some things and struggle with others.

Most people are neurologically typical or “neurotypical”, meaning that their brain functions and processes information in the way society expects.

However, it is estimated that around 1 in 7 people (more than 15% of people in the UK) are neurodivergent, meaning that their brain processes information differently and as a result they are observed to have a different learning style. Neurodivergence includes, but is not limited to, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism (including Asperger’s Syndrome), Epilepsy, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia.

# Types of neurodivergence?

Each form of neurodivergence has a range of associated characteristics and these can vary from individual to individual. For example, the effects of dyspraxia experienced by one person can be different to that of another person with dyspraxia. It is also recognised that the effects on the individual can change and be experienced differently over time.

Additionally, individuals may often have the characteristics of more than one type of neurodivergence. It is therefore important that people are not stereotyped according to the better known characteristics. For example, not all autistic people will be good at maths.

It can be helpful to have an awareness of some of the indicative traits that each type of neurodivergence can have:

## ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

People with ADHD can often be good at completing urgent, or physically demanding tasks, pushing on through set-backs and showing a passion for their work.

It is estimated that about 4% of the UK population have ADHD. It affects the person's ability to control attention, impulses and concentration, and can cause inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. Some people have problems with attention but not the hyperactivity or impulsivity and this is sometimes referred to as Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD.

## Autism (which includes Asperger's Syndrome)

Many people with autism can be very thorough in their work, punctual and rule observant. Many have skills, abilities and interests which are deemed very useful within the workplace.

It is estimated that about 1-2% of the UK population are autistic. Autism impacts upon how a person perceives the world and interacts with others. They can have problems with processing and responding to social information and using language socially. It can be difficult for them to pick up and interpret social cues and detect implied meaning. Social interactions can be difficult as they can have difficulty 'reading' other people and expressing their own emotions. They can find change or new and unexpected things difficult and uncomfortable.

Some people on the autism spectrum can encounter problems with organising, sequencing and prioritising.

It is worth noting that historically it was thought that women and girls were less likely to be autistic, however recent research has highlighted the challenges in identifying autism in women and girls. It is now recognised from research, clinical practice and anecdotal reports that many autistic females or those who demonstrate the less traditionally obvious traits of autism are not recognised. This can result in misdiagnosis, late diagnosis, or women and girls not being diagnosed at all.

## Dyslexia

People with dyslexia can often be very good at creative thinking and problem solving, story-telling and verbal communication.

It is estimated that 10% of the UK population are dyslexic. It is a language processing difficulty that can cause problems with aspects of reading, writing and spelling. They may have difficulties with processing information quickly, memory retention, organisation, sequencing, spoken language and motor skills.

Dyspraxia (also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder)

People with dyspraxia often have good literacy skills and can be very good at creative, holistic, and strategic thinking.

It is estimated that up to 5% of the UK population are dyspraxic. It relates to issues with physical co-ordination, and for most, organisation of thought. People with dyspraxia may appear clumsy or have speech impediments and might have difficulties with tasks requiring sequencing, structure, organisation and timekeeping.

## Other forms of neurodivergence

Other forms of neurodivergence include Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, Hyperlexia, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, epilepsy and Tourette's syndrome.

As with those outlined above, these can bring strengths as well as difficulties.

# Everyday actions that will help neurodivergent employees

A manager should be effectively supporting employees to enable them to carry out their roles as expected and perform at their best.

To achieve this, a manager should be:

* improving awareness of neurodiversity and the different forms of neurodivergence
* communicating clearly at all times
* approachable, available and encouraging staff to come to them if they have questions or difficulties
* building good working relationships by getting to know each employee
* responding to each team member as an individual and identifying what they each want and need from a manager
* monitoring staff workloads to ensure they are not overloaded or placed under excessive time-pressures
* regularly holding one-to-one supervisory meetings to discuss how work is going, identify upcoming challenges and agree how best to provide support.
* continually reflecting upon how they can better manage and support each employee

While this can be of benefit to all staff, it can be particularly beneficial for neurodivergent employees by offering the right platform for issues to be identified early and allowing any misunderstandings to be resolved before they escalate.

# Supporting a team member disclosing their neurodivergence

A manager should never assume that a team member is neurodivergent or take it upon themselves to diagnose an employee with a form of neurodivergence.

Although many individuals may have been diagnosed prior to starting employment, it is important that managers consider that some individuals are not aware that they are neurodivergent or may have only recently been diagnosed.

Managers may need to support an employee whilst they await a diagnosis. As an employer we are unable to directly refer an employee for diagnosis, however we can signpost them to their GP and start supporting them in the workplace immediately through reasonable adjustments.

It can be difficult and stressful for a neurodivergent employee to talk to their manager about their neurodivergence. Getting to know the employee and learning how the neurodivergence affects them in the workplace will make it easier to provide appropriate support. It can also make it easier to spot and sensitively resolve issues before they become serious. There is still a general lack of awareness and so they may have significant concerns about being treated differently or unfairly.

While finding out may take a manager by surprise, it is important that they stay calm and reassure the employee.

To make it easier for the employee to talk more about it, a manager should:

* move the conversation to a private space, where they will not be disturbed (if not already somewhere appropriate)
* allow the employee as much time as they need
* listen attentively and be open minded
* ask the employee if they have thought about what support might help e.g. how information can be best presented to them
* make clear what they will do next
* suggest a further meeting to discuss what support could be provided.

Although managers are not expected to have expert knowledge and understanding of the many forms of neurodivergence, they can improve their awareness of an employee’s neurodivergence and this can help them to respond better and provide more appropriate and beneficial support.

**If there are no performance or conduct issues** then there is no need for a manager to do anything except:

* discuss with the team member what they can do to support them
* continue to build a good working relationship, where the team member feels safe and empowered to talk to them about any issues they may have.

**If there are performance or conduct issues**, a manager should give the team member the opportunity to discuss possible reasons behind the issue (which might be due to a form of neurodivergence). It is essential that a manager has explored what reasonable adjustments may benefit the employee in their position to help resolve the performance or conduct issues before considering whether to take the matter further.

## Does an employee need to disclose this to their manager?

If employees know that an organisation is committed to supporting neurodiversity, there is a greater likelihood that employees will disclose their neurodivergence at an early stage

Managers should not pressure employees into talking about it if they do not want to.

# Identifying what actions and support they need?

Each form of neurodivergence (such as dyspraxia and ADHD) has a range of associated characteristics and these can vary from individual to individual. This means that the effects of dyspraxia on one person can be different to another person that also has dyspraxia.

Therefore, when considering what actions and support may help, the best place to start is with the employee and focussing on:

* how their neurodivergence affects them (being aware that employees themselves may not be able to fully understand or explain this)
* what difficulties they have experienced in the workplace
* what previous support they have had and whether they think it would still be appropriate now
* what other types of support and adjustments would help.

ACAS have a [tips on how to sensitively talk to a neurodivergent team](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/m/e/Tips_on_how_to_sensitively_talk_to_a_neurodivergent_team.pdf) document, which managers may find useful.

# Making reasonable adjustments

An employee’s neurodivergence will usually amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010. This means the Council must consider making 'reasonable adjustments' to help them carry out their job without being at a disadvantage.

However, whether it amounts to a disability or not, Managers are guided to consider making changes that will help an employee improve their performance and/or improve their health and wellbeing.

It may be that small, simple changes to working arrangements or responsibilities are the only requirements. For example, allocating them a work space away from noisier areas of the office.

All employees will have different needs, but to provide an idea of the types of accommodations or additional support that may be appropriate, see [Appendix 2: Reasonable Adjustments](#_Appendix_2:_Reasonable)

**Managers should be aware that due to the complex nature of neurodiversity, Occupational Health are unlikely to be able to provide advice on what reasonable adjustments may be required and a specialist assessment would need to be carried out by the appropriate professional. For example, an employee with autism may require an assessment to be carried out by the National Autistic Society, following this assessment Occupational Health would be able to provide advice on how to implement the recommendations of the assessment if required.**

**Remember**, any adjustment should only be made with the agreement of the employee. Managers and employees may wish to consider completing an [employee passport](#_Employee_Passport) to keep a record of which adjustment have been agreed.

Additionally, in situations where the employee has had performance issues, they should be given a sufficient amount of time to get used to any new adjustments before any further performance management is initiated.

An employee does not need to have a diagnosis before reasonable adjustments can be made, however, it may be difficult for the most suitable adjustments to be identified without a professional assessment being carried out.

# Considering the rest of the team

Neurodivergent employees may find aspects of their role more challenging to carry out. However, they may find some aspects of work easier to complete than their colleagues.

It can be helpful if the rest of the team know that a colleague is neurodivergent, and how they can best support them.

Managers need to establish that the employee agrees to share their information with the rest of the team and confirm:

* what they do and don't want to share with their colleagues
* who will be told, who will do the telling, where, when and how
* whether the employee will be present.

Managers must not tell other staff about an employee's neurodivergence without their agreement. It is essential that any information shared with a manager by an employee is treated confidentially. Breaching an employee’s trust and confidence by misusing the information (for example, sharing with colleagues without the employees consent) would be investigated and appropriate action taken.

## Raising awareness within the team

A manager can help the rest of the team understand more about neurodiversity by:

* arranging and prioritising meetings and/or training sessions
* providing information and/or fact sheets.

Raising awareness can promote relationship building as well as improve the understanding and acceptance of neurodiverse employees within the workplace.

## Organising tasks within the team

To ensure a neurodivergent employee is enabled to be successful in the work environment, a manager should organise the work of their team to ensure that:

* strengths are identified and utilised
* everyone does their share of work, even if the tasks they carry out are different
* difficulties are minimised or additional support provided
* each team member has a variety of duties and feels motivated to perform at their best.
* inadvertent deskilling of an employee is avoided

# Responding to issues or problems fairly

When discussing issues or problems with a neurodivergent employee, a manager should be sensitive and consider if they:

* need guiding towards a particular resolution, or
* would want to have an input and involvement in finding an appropriate solution themselves.

For example, autistic employees can find it difficult to identify solutions to behaviours or actions that are related to their neurodivergence and so often need their manager to work with them to develop management strategies that work for both parties.

Where the matter cannot be resolved, a manager should consider:

* [speaking](http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=6678#Seeking expert opinions) with Occupational Health, for more information see appendix 2
* gathering further information, this may include requesting a specialist assessment
* whether further support or adjustments may improve performance or conduct
* whether other duties or a transfer to different role may be appropriate and available.

# Appendix 1: Where to go for additional support and information

For more information about specific forms of neurodivergence

### ADHD Foundation - [Adults section](https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/information/adults/)

### British Dyslexic Association - [Employer section](https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/employer)

### Dyspraxia Foundation - [Adults section](https://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/dyspraxia-adults/)

### National Autistic Society - [Support for employers](https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/employer)

### [Hyperlexia – Spangle Fish](http://www.spanglefish.com/hyperlexiauk/index.asp)

### Tourettes Action - [Employers section](https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/84-advice-for-employers.html)

### NHS website and [search for the specific form of neurodivergence](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/)

Access to Work can provide advice and an assessment of workplace needs for individuals, with disabilities or long-term health conditions, who are already in work or about to start. The Department for Work and Pensions may also be able to offer some support to employees in the workplace.

# Appendix 2: Reasonable Adjustments

Each employee will be different. Even staff with the same form of neurodivergence will often have different needs. It is always best for a manager to talk to the employee about what has worked for them before, they may not have all the answers but they could help identify some adjustments that would help.

Any adjustments should only be made with agreement of both the manager and the employee.

## Employee Passport

Employees may find it helpful to complete an Employee Passport, the purpose of this passport is to provide a documented record of an individual’s support requirements, which can be used to support them throughout their career, allowing them to work successfully and well in an understanding environment, without prejudice or discrimination.

There is no requirement for employees to complete an employee passport. It is essential to establish that the employee is in agreement with this document being developed.

You can access the [Employee Passport Document](http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/536/5901/6049/43483112932.docx) and the [Employee Passport Guidance](http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/536/5901/6049/43483112843.docx) on the [People Management Absence and Wellbeing](https://staging.waf.ccc/employeeinformation/wellbeing/support.asp) webpage.

## Potential reasonable adjustments

HR and Occupational Health may be able to provide some advice in relation to potential reasonable adjustments however as neurodiversity covers a wide range of conditions and every individual may require adjustments unique to them therefore it may be necessary to request an assessment from a specialist service.

For example, where an employee has autism it may be beneficial to request an assessment from the National Autistic Society. They will be able to provide further information and recommend adjustments.

Staff Network Groups

Staff network groups represent the diverse nature of our workforce and give staff the opportunity to have their say on issues affecting them. Feedback from the focus groups will help us to shape and design new approaches and review existing procedures to ensure that they meet the needs of our workforce. If you are interested in joining a staff focus please visit the [Staff Network Group](https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/employeeinformation/Staff_Focus_Groups.asp) page.

### Adjustments to work schedule

* Consider extra breaks and allow for breaks to be taken when needed, rather than a pre-determined schedule
* Where possible encourage flexible working arrangements e.g. hours to suit employee needs

### Adjustments to roles and responsibilities

* Create user guides for the tasks which employees are expected to complete as part of their role. Where possible user guides should be created with input from the employee.
* Review the employees workload, trying to prioritise tasks that make the most of their strengths
* Where possible, allow flexibility in the order and ways tasks are completed.

### Adjustments to working environment

* Working from home may be an option for some employees.
* Position employees as far away from noisy machinery or strong smells as possible.
* Provide a private space for employees to use when they need privacy or quiet.
* Provide day light desk lamps or adjustable light levels.
* Allow standing desks
* Provide whiteboards, cabinets, lockers, post it notes and/or coloured pens to assist memory and organisation
* Provide visible instructions next to office equipment and machinery, such as photocopiers.
* Research and request specialist equipment/software which may support the employee in the workplace.
* Traffic light system on your desk – Depending on your current mood you can change which colour you are showing. Green – Open to general conversation, Amber – Only work related conversation and Red – Do not disturb.
* Make information available in alternative formats – for example allowing the font size or background colour of documents to be amended.
* When safe to do so, employees may find it helpful to wear headphones whilst working. Noise cancelling headphones.
* Is there a quiet room available, perhaps booking a meeting room for the employee to work from during extra busy/noisy times if appropriate.
* Colleague support – You may find it useful if there is a nominated colleague who you can go to for support. They may be fully aware of your adjustments and how to respond to you during different circumstances.