

NEURODIVERSITY

NICS Line Manager's Toolkit



Contents

Foreword	3
1. What is Neurodiversity?	4
1.1. Inclusive Language	6
2. Autism	7
3. ADHD	10
4. Dyslexia	12
5. Dyspraxia	15
6. Lesser-known neurodivergent conditions	17
(a) Dyscalculia	
(b) Dysgraphia	
(c) Tic disorders	
7. Your role as a line manager	18
8. Reasonable adjustments	20
9. Managing neurodivergent staff	23
10. Workplace examples	25
11. Useful links and resources	33
12. Glossary	34

Foreword



DR CAOIMHE ARCHIBALD MLA
MINISTER OF FINANCE

The Civil Service can deliver better policies and public services if it is more representative of the society it serves. A diverse workforce brings together people from different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, all of which help shape and inform policies and services to better serve the needs of everyone in our society.

The 2021 Census recorded 1.9% of people here with Autism or Aspergers syndrome (35,400 people). However, as neurodivergence covers many more areas than Autism, the percentage of neurodivergent people in our society is likely to be higher. Given the size of our workforce, it is likely that many of our colleagues will be neurodivergent. Neurodivergent colleagues are an important part of our workforce, and I want to ensure that their talents and perspectives are celebrated and harnessed in an inclusive working environment.

Embracing neurodiversity is a key part of the Civil Service's commitment to diversity and inclusion - it reminds us all that there is no such thing as a "normal" brain or "right way" of thinking/learning, in the same way there is no "normal" or "right" religion, gender, sexual orientation or race. We all have unique strengths and talents and deserve to be accepted for who we are and treated with dignity and respect.

In living out the Civil Service's commitment to creating a truly inclusive workplace, we must all become more informed to create, welcoming, safe, and supportive workplaces where everyone can thrive. While many of us may feel that we have a certain level of understanding of neurodiversity, often these views are based on stereotypes created by tv, film and media or on outdated beliefs.

This guide has been developed to improve your understanding of neurodiversity including the support neurodivergent colleagues might need in our workplaces. The toolkit includes suggestions throughout each section of what possible support could be provided, however, this will vary from person to person and should be discussed with the individual member of staff.

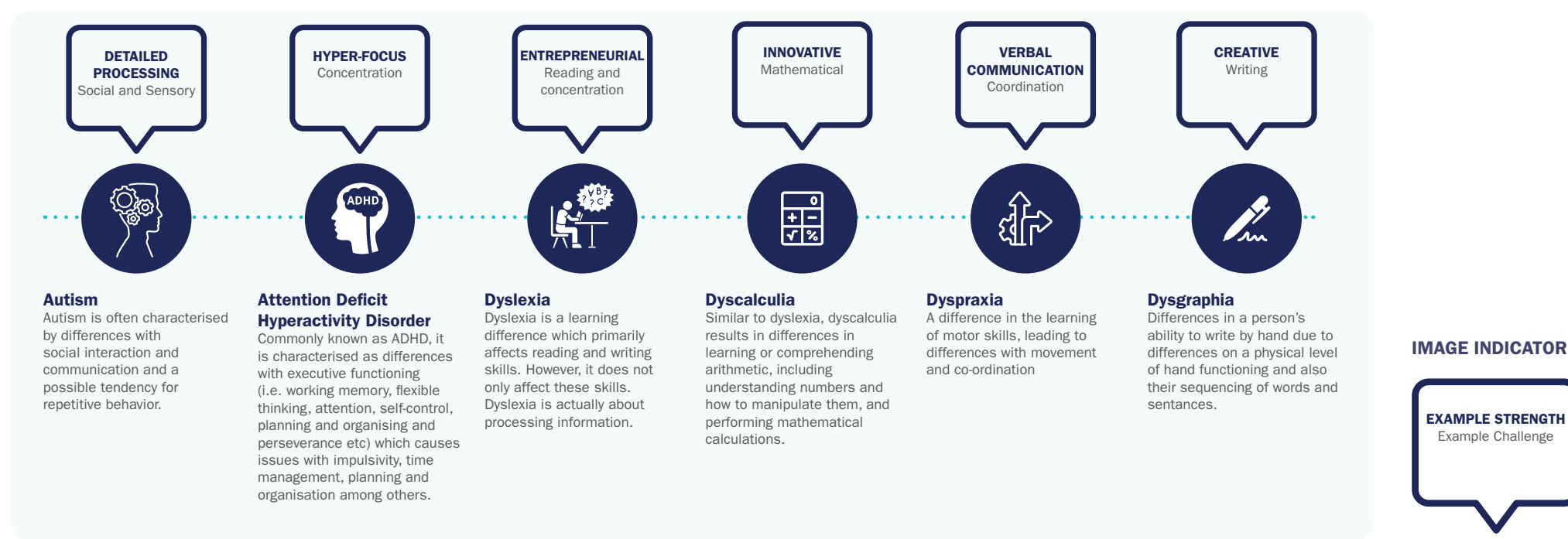
While the toolkit has been designed with a specific focus on line-managers, the learning it offers to support neurodivergent colleagues applies to us all. I would therefore encourage everyone to read this guide - by increasing our knowledge and understanding of neurodivergence and the barriers neurodivergent colleagues face will improve how we engage with our neurodivergent colleagues, customers, friends, and family members, and most importantly will help create a more inclusive Civil Service and society generally.

1. What is Neurodiversity?

Many people think and behave in a similar way to one another (neurotypical) and society, education systems and workplaces are often designed with them in mind. Neurodiversity, however, recognises that our brains work differently from one another and that people learn, think and process information differently. As a result, people experience and interact with the world around them in different ways.

People whose brain differences affect how their brain functions and differ from what is considered “typical” are neurodivergent. Alternative thinking styles should be respected and valued - acknowledging and supporting them allows unique strengths to be embraced and maximised.

Neurodivergence covers a broad range of areas which express themselves in various ways, including Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia (amongst others).



Other areas include for example learning disability (intellectual disability) and many are of the view it also encapsulates mental health issues such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), bipolar, schizophrenia, etc. This toolkit however focuses on those areas outlined above.

There are many incorrect assumptions or stereotypes about neurodivergent people, for example consider the following statements:

- “they could not be dyslexic, they can spell”;
- “Autism is a mental health issue”;
- “they cannot have ADHD, they are not hyperactive”;
- “all neurodivergent people are the same ”; or
- “neurodivergence is just about Autism”

By better understanding neurodivergence we can challenge stereotypes.

Neurodiversity: refers to the concept that brains function in different ways which determine how we think, act, feel, process information and experience the world. Neurodiversity can be broken down into two categories of people: those who are neurodivergent and those who are neurotypical.

Neurodivergent: simply means a person processes the world in a different way than what is considered “typical” which brings both strengths and challenges. A person should not be referred to as ‘neurodiverse’.

Neurodivergence: is the state of being neurodivergent - you would refer to ‘an individual’s neurodivergence’ rather than “an individual’s neurodiversity”.

Some neurodivergent individuals may need little or no support throughout their lives, while others may have more complex needs requiring specialist support. No two people will be the same and some individuals may have more than one condition.

There are a broad range of neurodivergent characteristics but there are some common traits which can also co-exist for example a person with dyslexia can also have ADHD. However, the way a person experiences them and the impact they have vary as they occur on a continuum. You should therefore focus on the individual, their strengths and abilities and any support they need.

It is also important to remember that a neurodivergent person may be classified as disabled, depending on the impact of the condition on them. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) defines disability as:

“A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

The social model of disability recognises that barriers faced by disabled people such as communication, prejudice, negative and derogatory attitudes are created by society rather than the person’s condition. Societal barriers can lead to exclusion and disadvantage, and so, increasing our knowledge of neurodivergence builds empathy and understanding to create a more inclusive working environment.

Not all neurodivergent people regard themselves as disabled. If however they meet the legal definition of a disability, they are protected with the the same level of protection against discrimination as people with other disabilities, and the employer duty to make reasonable adjustments still applies (refer to section 8).

The following sections provide suggestions on how you can provide support as a line manager. You should however discuss any adjustments with the individual as they will be specific to them and adjustments will be considered on a case by case basis.

1.1 Inclusive Language

The language used in society around disabilities and neurodivergence unfortunately is often stereotypical and negative – the language you use is extremely important as it can make someone feel included or excluded. A person's neurodivergence is just one aspect of their identity - it does not define them.

Each person will have different ways that they wish to be referred to, for example, some will prefer “autistic person” whereas others will prefer “person who is autistic” or “person with a disability” versus “disabled person”. The agreed terminology in the Civil Service and the NICS Disability Working Group is “disabled person/people”. Either of the autism phrases “autistic person” or “person who is autistic” can be used.

A full glossary of terms has been included in **Section 12** - you can read more about inclusive language in the Civil Service Inclusive Language Guide (due to be published May 2024). Although labels can be useful, these can also be restrictive and people's opinions will vary around language, so it is important to always check what terminology they are comfortable with and respect their choice, and if you are unsure about how to say something, ask first.



2. Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. For example, autistic people may find it difficult to cope with change or unfamiliar situations or have difficulty recognising and expressing their needs or feelings - they may want to interact with others but are unsure of how to do this.

Autism can also impact a person's executive functioning i.e. working memory, flexible thinking, attention, self-control, ability to plan and organise etc.

Autistic people can be either sensory avoidant/defensive or sensory seeking, or a mix of both. When experiencing sensory sensitivity, it can make the individual feel overwhelmed or anxious.

Some autistic people when feeling overwhelmed may shutdown or withdraw until they feel calm. They may use stimming behaviours to do this which can take various forms. Meltdowns/shutdowns are short-term, however, autistic burnout happens over a longer period (can be 3+ months) when “the pressures get too much” and the person suffers from extreme exhaustion. Autistic shutdown and burnout are not voluntary – these can be painful and exhausting for the person, therefore as a line manager it is extremely important for you to be patient and supportive during these times.

The National Autistic Society has published a video to help explain how sensory overload can affect people with autism – [click here](#) to watch the video.

Autism is not a mental health issue, but it is important to be aware that it is common for autistic people to experience mental health issues such as anxiety.



Source: Cross Government Autism Group 2023

(Source: National Autistic Society)

Common Strengths

Autistic people can be creative, analytical and methodical thinkers with strong research and problem-solving skills. Some may have a strong ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time and can have an exceptional ability to absorb and retain detailed information. Autistic people can find enjoyment and satisfaction from working on tasks or projects that they find engaging, especially if that work is linked with their own personal interests.

Supporting people with Autism

As a line manager you can support a team member with Autism by:

- Completing the [Supporting Autistic People e-learning module](#) available on LInKS to build your knowledge on autism and how best to support colleagues.
- Providing timely, clear and concise written (as well as oral) instructions which outline what is expected along with an estimate of how long the task should take – be clear about your expectations.
- Avoiding allocating multiple tasks at once. If this cannot be avoided, prioritise them and allow your member of staff time to process this information and ask questions.
- Establishing communication protocols – it can be confusing and difficult for an autistic person to follow the conversation when multiple people are talking at the same time or are having side conversations. Set rules that clearly state how to participate in meetings and take turns speaking, for example, one person speaks at a time; you must raise your hand if you wish to speak and wait until you are called on before speaking etc.
- Using straightforward language and avoiding slang, sarcasm, jargon and metaphors which may not be understood and/or cause confusion. Some autistic people may have a literal understanding of language – expressions such as “raining cats and dogs” or “pigs will fly” could be taken literally and be confusing.
- Allocating a “buddy”, that is, an experienced colleague who is a designated point of contact for guidance, advice and encouragement and who they can seek clarification from.
- Providing one-to-one training rather than group training.
- Holding regular one-to-one meetings for feedback and monitoring - provide timely feedback and avoid framing it in a personal way which could be misinterpreted. Autistic people may appear blunt or insensitive and may not recognise that they have expressed themselves in such a way - be prepared to provide specific, clear, honest and non-judgmental feedback as this can support your member of staff to learn to better participate in complex social situations and interactions.
- Considering factors which could trigger sensory issues in the working environment (noise, light, smell and movement) and what action you could take to minimise them, for example:
 - can the temperature be regulated by fans or heating?
 - is their desk near a window or other source of natural light or are desk/floor lamps available to allow them to adjust the light around them?
 - is their desk located in a noisy area of the office? – if yes, consider an alternative desk and/or provide noise-cancelling headphones.
 - have they a designated desk or are they “hot-desking” - hot desking can be challenging for autistic people keep this in mind when considering work patterns and locations.

- what quiet space is available for the person to use when they feel overwhelmed and need to calm and regulate?
- is the office (bathrooms, entry/exit points etc) well signposted to overcome any difficulties with sense of direction?
- avoid strong smells for example air fresheners, lunches etc.
- Structuring the working day – create a regular timetable of tasks, meetings, breaks etc and use shared calendars to support this.
- Avoiding approaching the person with surprise questions – if possible, email in advance and clearly explain any changes in plans.
- Agreeing strategies for a meltdown/shutdown, and if they occur allow time and space to recover, removing any immediate demands and pressures.
- Arranging social events at autism friendly venues (not too busy, noisy, or bright) and plan in advance to allow sufficient notice and alleviate any concerns over social situations if they wish to attend.
- Respecting the need for and benefits of predictable routines and intense interests.
- Giving advance notice of fire drills to those with noise sensitivity.
- Encouraging the use of memory aids, for example calendars / alarms / text reminders to remind them of important deadlines.
- Regularly reviewing priorities to overcome any difficulties with prioritising tasks, meeting deadlines etc.



3. ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a condition which includes persistent patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. Different subtypes of ADHD exist – inattentive, hyperactive and combined. Although not mainstream, some people prefer the term VAST (Variable Attention Stimuli Trait) in place of ADD/ADHD, as they perceive the term “deficit” and “disorder” as negative and inaccurate.

ADHD affects a person's behaviour, and they may have difficulty keeping quiet and may speak out of turn. ADHD can also cause difficulty with concentration levels. Some people with ADHD may experience problems with focus or be distracted from some tasks which may make them seem restless, whereas others may “hyperfocus” by having a very high degree of focus on a task.

Common Strengths

People with ADHD are typically creative, have strong problem solving skills with the ability to think in creative and unique ways. People with ADHD can be risk takers, have high levels of energy (physical and mental) and be persistent, with an ability to hyper focus, especially on activity seen to be highly rewarding. The stereotype that people with ADHD cannot focus is false.

ADHD lived experience

“Having an environment tailored to our brains is crucial for being able to work with it, instead of against it. Managers can be the key to unlocking these working environments”

Leanne Maskell, Author, and ADHD Coach

“Despite what the words “attention deficit” imply, ADHD is not a deficit of attention, but rather a challenge of regulating it at will or on demand.”

Jenara Nerenberg, author

“ADHD is really like a superpower — whether you're an artist or entrepreneur — our brains allowing our minds to wander is what helps us come up with these good ideas.”

Miriam Schulman, Artist, and entrepreneur.

Supporting people with ADHD

As a line manager you can support a team member with ADHD by:

- Reducing distractions – consider the office layout and location of the individual's desk location and allow the use of earplugs/headphones etc.
- Providing clear instructions around priorities and deadlines using bullet points.
- Encouraging regular structured short breaks to avoid burnout due to high energy levels and hyperfocus.
- Following up meetings with emails to overcome any issues with remembering verbal instructions given.
- Creating where possible, routine and structure to help time management, organisation/planning issues – daily and weekly/monthly work plans will be useful.
- Having regular check-ins (possibly on a daily basis) to discuss tasks for the day, priorities, and progress.



4. Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling ([British Dyslexia Association](#)). While it primarily affects reading and writing, a dyslexic person may encounter other challenges connected to cognitive tasks, working memory (making them appear forgetful); the speed of processing of information (slower to process and possible difficulty multi-tasking); and rapid naming.

Dyslexia can also impact executive functioning skills (i.e. working memory, flexible thinking, attention, self-control, planning and organising etc). therefore, a dyslexic person may have difficulty with organisation, time-management, planning and prioritisation. This may result in them being late for meetings, mislaying important information or missing deadlines.

Dyslexia affects how a person learns, processes and remembers information. It is not linked to intelligence or poor education; it occurs regardless of gender, age, ability, race, ethnicity or background. The British Dyslexic Association's 'See Dyslexia Differently', video illustrates the effects of dyslexia. [Click here](#) to watch the video.

Dyslexia can occur alongside other learning difficulties and can range from mild to severe. It is best thought of as a continuum and there are no clear cut-off points.

Dyslexic thinking skills

Dyslexic thinking is an approach to problem solving, assessing information, and learning, often used by people with dyslexia. The skills associated with dyslexic thinking bring many benefits to our workplaces:



VISUALISING

Interacting with space, senses, physical ideas & new concepts. (75% of people with dyslexia are above average at Visualising)



REASONING

Understanding patterns, evaluating possibilities & evaluating possibilities & making decisions. (84% of people with dyslexia are above average at Reasoning)



IMAGINING

Creating an original piece of work, or giving ideas a new spin. (84% of people with dyslexia are above average at Imagining)



CONNECTING

Understanding self; connecting, empathising & influencing others. (80% of people with dyslexia are above average at Connecting)



COMMUNICATING

Crafting and conveying clear & engaging messages. (71% of people with dyslexia are above average at Communicating)



EXPLORING

Being curious & exploring ideas in a constant and energetic way. (84% of people with dyslexia are above average at Exploring)

Source adapted from

[Made By Dyslexia – Redefining Dyslexia](#)

Common Strengths

Dyslexic people are typically highly creative and innovative. They can have a strong ability to visualise, an intuitive understanding of how things work and can 'see the big picture' more clearly. They can be strong lateral and critical thinkers with practical problem-solving skills. People with dyslexia tend to be better articulating ideas verbally as they can find it easier to communicate this way than putting their ideas into written words.

Supporting people with dyslexia

As a line manager you can support a team member with dyslexia by:

- Providing instructions/directions, verbally and in writing.
 - Encouraging the use of memory aids, for example calendars / alarms / text reminders to remind them of important deadlines.
 - Regularly reviewing priorities to overcome any difficulties with prioritising tasks, meeting deadlines etc.
 - Providing a quiet space to aid concentration, where possible.
 - Allowing breaks and varying computer tasks with other tasks to avoid information overload.
 - Allowing plenty of time to read documents and providing copies of written materials in advance of meetings as reading quickly and accurately may be challenging.
 - Seeking their prior agreement to reading aloud or acting as a note taker in meetings as they may find it challenging to focus on the conversation as well as taking notes at the same time. As with all members of staff, allow them time to ask their own questions to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the discussion.
 - Asking for volunteers to be note takers during training/ team planning sessions as these activities (recording information on flipcharts / providing feedback etc) can cause anxiety for those who have concerns about their spelling or writing.
- Using coloured overlays (thin sheets of coloured transparent plastic which are placed over white sheets of text) as these can be helpful for some dyslexic people - an alternative is printing resources on coloured paper.
 - Considering and sourcing assistive text software.
 - Providing opportunities for hands on learning as individuals with dyslexia may take longer than their colleagues to learn something new and for it to become automatic.
 - Considering the format of how you present written information in documents and emails –
 - Use bullet points, headings and sub-headings; and highlight important points through charts and diagrams rather than lots of text.
 - Use Arial or Tahoma font; font size 12+; 1.5 line spacing; and avoid underlining, italics and using uppercase letters for continuous text.
 - The British Dyslexic Association's style guide provides tips on how to make all written communication easier on the eye for everyone. [Click here](#) to access the style guide.



5. Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia (or Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, DCD) affects movement and co-ordination and occasionally, speech. It can affect how a person learns new skills, thinks and remembers information; their ability to write or type; their organisational skills including time management and planning. The impact of dyspraxia may vary and change over time.

Dyspraxia potential workplace challenges

Movement / motor skills

- extra physical and mental effort is required to carry out movements that others manage easily.
- poor balance and co-ordination can mean more trips, bumps and bruises.
- difficulty learning the movements required to carry out new practical tasks.
- difficulty transferring motor skills to new situations or activities.
- difficulty using office equipment such as a keyboard or mouse or may have difficulty gripping pens, using stationary etc.
- challenges with handwriting – can produce lots of writing or neat writing, but not both at the same time.

Organisation and planning skills / concentration

- following multiple instructions may be difficult and tasks may take longer to finish.
- difficulty organising themselves, their equipment and their thoughts.
- problems with memory, time management and attention - can be easily distracted and lose focus.
- can be fidgety.
- sensory sensitivity.
- can be over (or under) sensitive to light, noise, touch, taste, smell, temperature, or pain.

Communication

- difficulty keeping up with conversations - there may be long, awkward pauses before responding to a question or comment.
- may be awkward in social interactions.
- appears not to listen and has difficulty following simple instructions.
- words can get muddled.

Common Strengths

People with dyspraxia are often extremely creative, motivated and strategic thinkers. They are known to have a good long-term memory and due to their different way of thinking can often notice details that neurotypicals may not. Dyspraxia is linked with awkwardness in social interactions and sensory sensitivity (significant noise, fluorescent lighting etc).

[Click here](#) to watch a video from someone with lived experience of dyspraxia.

Supporting people with Dyspraxia

As a line manager you can support a team member with Dyspraxia by:

- Allowing regular short breaks to help maximise their productivity and concentration.
- Breaking down tasks and projects into manageable pieces of work.
- Helping them plan their working day and prioritise daily tasks - give advance notice and reminders of deadlines to aid time management.
- Clarifying instructions in writing with important points highlighted.
- Assigning a designated colleague to act as a proof reader in addition to use of spell check functions.
- Considering their working hours - early starts or late finishes may help avoid distractions from colleagues/office environment.
- Considering the office layout and desk location – are there surrounding distractions and how could they be minimised?
- Considering any specific equipment (for example ergonomic keyboard or mouse given possible issues with motor co-ordination) or additional physical storage (e.g. locked pedestal/cabinet etc) or digital equipment storage (e.g. provision of a second screen which they use to refer to information during virtual meetings) which will reduce the level of information they have to memorise.



6. Lesser-known neurodivergent conditions

(a) Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia impacts the ability to do maths-based/number-based tasks such as arithmetic, calculations, reading and writing numbers. It can also impact tasks such as remembering basic facts, map reading, telling the time, understanding measurements and estimating the passage of time. This can result in not knowing when to move onto the next task, punctuality issues and time management issues.

Dyscalculia can occur singularly but is often experienced alongside dyslexia and/or dyspraxia. People with dyscalculia can be fast problem solvers, with the ability to think in creative and unique ways and can often be exceptional at reading, writing and spelling.

As a line manager you can support a team member with dyscalculia by:

- Keeping messages clear when presenting numerical data and only include necessary figures.
- Using visual cues (for example bar graphs, pie charts etc) to interpret data and explain what they mean.
- Allowing the person sufficient time to complete number-based tasks.
- Using calendars, alarms and reminders to help with time management.
- Explaining and demonstrating how to do things - avoid just saying “do it like this” - explain why which will help understanding.
- Identifying and explaining errors, avoid saying simply “that is wrong”.
- Encouraging the person to take notes in meetings of any numbers or queries around figures and follow up with them separately.

(b) Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia affects a person's handwriting, for example: writing grammatically correct sentences, writing in a straight line or spacing letters correctly. It can impact the person's ability to translate what they want to say into written words which can also impact accurately copying information. People with dysgraphia can have good listening skills and a good memory to recall details. As a line manager you can support a person with dysgraphia by minimising writing tasks and facilitating the use of assistive software.

(c) Tic Disorders

Tics can be involuntary, sudden and uncontrollable sounds (for example talking, coughing, or laughing) and/or movements (for example shoulder shrugging). Tourette's syndrome is probably the most well-known form. Tics can increase with stress, anxiety or excitement and can be painful and tiring. It can impact executive functioning skills such as organisation and planning. The severity of tic disorders varies significantly, meaning milder cases can go undetected. To support someone with tics, be patient with them, build structure and routine into the working day with regular breaks and give advance notice of changes to allow time to prepare and organise. If you notice that they are having a tic attack, this may be because they are more nervous or anxious – if so, try to find a subtle way to remove them from the situation. You should follow up with them and work together to identify the cause and how best to support them to reduce their anxiety/nervousness.

7. Your role as a line manager

The Civil Service aims to create an inclusive environment where colleagues feel confident and comfortable discussing with their line managers and peers their disabilities, health conditions and any support they need.

Neurodivergent conditions are often invisible, and you may therefore be unaware that someone is neurodivergent. Many neurodivergent people will also often have developed coping strategies which can ‘mask’ the effects of their condition(s). Whether someone shares their neurodivergence with you, may be influenced by a range of factors such as the nature of the condition or the impact it has on them; the relationship they have with you as a line manager; or the culture within your team. Your actions, behaviours, decisions and language are therefore crucial.

A neurodivergent person may be classified as disabled, depending on the impact of the condition on them. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) ([DDA](#)) protects disabled people from discrimination in the workplace. Under the DDA, discrimination in employment occurs when:

- a disabled person is treated less favourably than someone else on grounds of his/her disability - **direct discrimination**;
- a disabled person is treated less favourably than someone else and the treatment is for a reason relating to the person’s disability, and this treatment cannot be justified (**disability related discrimination**);
- there is a **failure to make reasonable adjustments** for a disabled person;
- **a disabled person is subjected to victimisation**; (a disabled person is treated less favourable because they have complained about an instance of discrimination); and

- a disabled person is subjected to **harassment** for a reason which relates to their disability.

The duty to make reasonable adjustments arises where:

“a provision, criterion or practice applied by or on behalf of the employer, or any physical feature of premises occupied by the employer, places a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage compared with people who are not disabled”.

As a line manager you have a legal obligation to fully consider what steps/actions (“reasonable adjustments”) could be taken to prevent the disadvantage. Reasonable adjustments could include changes to work patterns or duties, physical changes to the working environment or provision of different equipment. It could mean adjusting your management style to adopt different practices around how you communicate, allocate work or approach tasks.

It is your responsibility as a line manager to understand and comply with the legislative requirements to make a reasonable adjustment. Further information on the DDA duties is available from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland³. A range of new resources on reasonable adjustments (including a new e-learning module) will be launched in 2024 on LInKS and will be available to all staff.

Supporting neurodivergent people

There are some basic actions you can take as a line manager:

Ask, don't assume – You should keep an open mind and never assume or create stereotypes - while some areas of neurodivergence have common behaviours / characteristics, **everyone is individual**. As with all your team, provide timely feedback on performance and have discussions around career aspirations.

Be informed – build your knowledge and understanding of neurodivergent conditions, terminology, and the practical and emotional effects they may have on someone in the workplace. Better understanding will help you have more useful discussions around how best to support your member of staff if they chose to discuss this with you.

Hold regular one-to-one meetings – encourage regular dialogue and review of any reasonable adjustments that have been implemented. Check how the person is doing, consider any forthcoming planned changes or new pieces of work which may present challenges, and how best you can provide support. Being approachable and available will help build strong trusting working relationships and create a safe space where the individual feels able to be open about their neurodivergence, their strengths and where they might need extra support to achieve their best.

Think through what you can do to help – consider the individual's particular strengths and the type of work, tasks and routines which would work best for them and meet the team's needs. You could consider the work of the entire team, reshaping roles to remove the elements of their role which they find particularly challenging and replacing them with other duties which play to their strengths. As with all team members, you should monitor workloads to avoid anyone feeling overloaded and if there are performance concerns, consider if they could be linked to the person's neurodivergence and if reasonable adjustments could be implemented to address these.

Discuss with the person what barriers exist in the office environment or within their role which present challenges and explore together how they could be overcome through the implementation of **reasonable adjustments**. Reasonable adjustments will be specific to the individual – you should not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.



8. Reasonable Adjustments

As a line manager, you have a personal and legal responsibility to consider and implement reasonable adjustments for your disabled staff under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 - failure to do so could amount to discrimination.

Reasonable adjustments are about being inclusive and fulfilling our duties under the Act, they are not about creating an advantage for the disabled person. Reasonable adjustments aim to 'level the playing field', by removing any substantial disadvantage a disabled colleague may face when compared to those who are not disabled.

As each person will be affected in different ways and to different degrees by their disability, a reasonable adjustment will vary according to the needs of the individual and their job role. As a result, there is no blanket approach to reasonable adjustments for a specific condition. It is important that you discuss with the individual what challenges they face in the workplace and work together to identify and co-develop solutions to remove or reduce them. You must consider reasonable adjustments on a case by case basis, and any adjustments put in place will be tailored to the individual. An adjustment which is appropriate for one colleague may not be for another and it may be reasonable to make multiple adjustments for one individual.

What could a reasonable adjustment be?

Reasonable adjustments could include providing additional software, equipment or support; finding a different way to do a task/work; varying targets or allowing extra time to achieve them; flexibility in working hours/patterns; adapted communication methods etc. The purpose of any reasonable adjustment is to minimise the challenges a disabled person faces to enable them to perform at their best in the workplace.

What is reasonable?

There are common misunderstandings that reasonable adjustments are challenging; create more work for those who have to organise them; and are costly and inconvenient. However, often small, simple adjustments to a colleague's working environment or conditions is all that is needed to make a huge difference to help them do their job and remain in or return to work.

There are a number of factors which determine whether an adjustment is reasonable:

Effectiveness of the step in preventing disadvantage

- Will the adjustment work, i.e. does it remove/ reduce the disadvantage/barrier and if yes, to what extent?
- In the case of an absent staff member, will it enable them to return to work?
- It is unlikely to be reasonable to make an adjustment that would have little or no benefit in overcoming the barrier/disadvantage.

Practicality of the adjustment

- Effective and practicable adjustments often involve little or no cost or disruption. However reasonableness is not solely determined by ease of application - the key factors are how practical is it to make the adjustment and is this the most straightforward way to remove the barrier / disadvantage.

Financial /other costs required and the extent of any disruption it may cause

- What are the costs? (financial , staff, time etc) and what resources are available to the Branch/Department/Civil Service to fund?
- Cost can be a factor in determining the reasonableness of an adjustment but potential adjustments should not be immediately dismissed before being fully costed.
- Although there are schemes available to fund adjustments (e.g Access to Work etc.) departments should consider covering the costs of the reasonable adjustments themselves.

There is a legal and business case for being proactive in considering and implementing reasonable adjustments - not only does it ensure you comply with your legal duties, but it prevents financial costs to the Civil Service such as sickness pay, cover arrangements to fill the post and potential litigation. It also avoids a negative workplace culture with low morale and engagement which may affect not only the disabled colleague but possibly the entire team.

Understanding the nature of an individual's disability and which aspects of their role / workplace and / or working conditions create challenges for them will help you better consider reasonable adjustments. Section 9 provides a range of workplace scenarios with tips on how you as a line manager could provide support.

If an adjustment is required, you should discuss this with your member of staff to learn more about what barriers they face in the workplace and what support they require to enable them to work at their best.

The responsibility on deciding whether an adjustment is reasonable resides with you and your department. In all cases, you must demonstrate that the request for the adjustment has been properly considered and if it could not be made, there must be legitimate reasons to support this position. Inconvenience is not an acceptable reason.

Agreed reasonable adjustments are subject to regular review as this will ensure they continue to meet the needs of the individual and the business. You can learn more on the Reasonable Adjustments section on the Diversity and Inclusion intranet hub [here](#).



9. Managing neurodivergent staff

(a) You have a new member of staff who is neurodivergent joining your team

- Starting a new job can be daunting for anyone. Neurodivergent individuals, however, may find it more difficult to adjust to change, new routines, systems and processes and navigate new social interactions.
- If you know that someone identifies as neurodivergent, factor this into their induction. You may want to arrange for them to come into the office in advance of their official first day to familiarise themselves with the office environment or colleagues. Having a structured induction programme may be important – prepare a timetable for the first week so that they know what to expect; build an introduction with each team member into the schedule; and provide a map of the building/office and where each person sits.
- You may need to be clear about the formal and informal routines and structures that already exist in the team/office but reassure them that you are open to discussing how they could potentially be amended so that the right support is in place for them. Long established processes can go unnoticed because you have been working with them for a long time therefore you may need to re-assess them, for example, it could be the norm for meeting papers to be received at short notice, however, this can be stressful for neurodivergent individuals, so you may need to amend the approach to allow more time for review.
- When the person joins the team, allow time to discuss how they like to be communicated with, their routines etc and identify a buddy who will be their designated point of contact for questions, advice and guidance. Discuss and agree adjustments at the outset - keep a written record and record them on HR Connect.

(b) You think your member of staff is neurodivergent but has not told you

- Colleagues may be neurodivergent but have chosen not to share this with you. Alternatively, they may not have been assessed so are not recognised as being neurodivergent. You should take care to avoid applying your own biases or stereotypes. You cannot and should not try to diagnose someone. Being better informed, however, will assist you in identifying any signs or areas where the individual may need support.
- There is no legal or professional obligation for someone to share their neurodivergence – it is up to them to decide how much personal information, if any, they share with you. Creating an inclusive working environment in which people feel able to share information without fear of discrimination will encourage this.

(c) Managing performance

- If there are performance concerns which could be due to a person's neurodivergence, you should discuss the performance concerns with the person in a private space, where you will not be disturbed. As with all performance concerns this should not be delayed until a formal performance mid-year/end-of-year review meeting.
- Consider and prepare for the discussion.
- Explain the reason for the conversation i.e. that there have been issues around performance and provide specific examples. Be open, honest and unambiguous around any engagement, performance or conduct concerns.
- Keep the meeting as informal and relaxed as possible.

- Ask similar questions that you would ask if completing a reasonable adjustment application, for example, are they facing any barriers in carrying out their role and how could they be overcome?
- Ensure they are aware that any information will be treated confidentially if they wish.
- The relationship you have is important - positive working relationships where you are approachable can make difficult conversations easier.
- Listen attentively and be open minded.
- You must respect someone's choice not to share if they are neurodivergent. If they do not share any new information, you should discuss and agree what action/support is needed to address the performance concerns.
- Develop a communications pathway to provide regular feedback - this should be in advance of any formal performance reviews.
- Continue to monitor performance and allow time for improvement. If under performance continues, you should manage this in line with the [Performance Management Policy](#).
- Be open minded – do not assume or generalise the support they will need.
- Agree to work collaboratively with them to explore what support and adjustments might be beneficial, rather than offering a 'one size fits all' solution.
- If the person has only received an assessment that they are neurodivergent this can be difficult and confusing as an adult. They may be adjusting to their neurodivergence and may be unsure of what adjustments they need in the workplace. They may need support to identify their needs and explore options - consider if a referral to the Occupational Health Service or discussion with Employers for Disability NI would be beneficial.
- Signpost them to additional sources of support within the organisation including Welfare Support Services. Information is also available on the intranet pages for the [Autism Working Group](#) and [Disability Staff Network](#).
- Agree with them if and how they want to tell people in the team about their neurodivergence. Keep all information they have shared with you confidential unless they agree to you informing other colleagues – never disclose without their consent.
- Agree actions for moving forward.
- Keep a note of what was discussed and agreed. Educate yourself and learn more about how you can best support them.

(d) Your member or staff has shared that they are neurodivergent

- Listen to them and allow as much time as they need to discuss this with you. If they do not want to discuss it in significant detail, do not pressure them to.
- Discuss their current strengths and how these can be utilised.
- Ask them if they experience difficulties in the workplace, and if so, have they thought about what support or adjustments might help them in their role.

10. Workplace examples

The following examples aim to provide some practical tips on addressing issues which may arise when managing a neurodivergent member of staff. The list of tips in each scenario provide guidance on how you can provide support, however as the type and level of support is individual to the person, you should have open conversations about their specific needs and how best you can meet them.

Example 1: Work environment

You have noticed your neurodivergent member of staff is becoming increasingly agitated when in the office which is affecting their ability to do their role. You identify several issues in the working environment which could be causing sensory overload - multiple conversations; an audible ticking clock; the radio continuously playing and noise emanating from the street outside.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Consider and identify what factors in the work environment could cause involuntary meltdowns, fatigue and burnout (for example noise, bright lighting, strong smells and movement).
- Offer flexible working such as early starts or late finishes when there would be fewer people both in the office and on the commute to work. As open plan offices can be noisy and distracting, the option to work from home may also help if possible.
- Hot-desking should ideally be avoided where possible. Ensure their designated desk is away from printers, loud equipment, windows and office footfall. Allow regular breaks to avoid feeling overwhelmed and provide a quiet space to take time out if they are feeling anxious or overstimulated and need to calm or self-regulate.
- If colleagues are being excessively loud, address this as the noise is likely to be distracting to others too.
- Provide noise reducing headphones.
- Help them structure their day so that they can work on tasks which need more concentration during quieter periods.

Examples adapted from [Civil Service Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia Line Managers Toolkit](#)

Example 2: Reading

You have asked your member of staff to read a document and draft a written response urgently. The individual finds it difficult to process information at pace - this means they may read sections of the document incorrectly or skip over them completely. They feel pressured to respond quickly which means their response is not communicated clearly, includes spelling and grammar errors and is of a lower standard than what is expected.



How can you help as a line manager?

- If you are the type of manager who works flexibly with limited planning or who frequently adapts and changes plans, recognise the potential impact this will have on neurodivergent staff. Neurodivergent people often enjoy the comfort of routine and change can be substantially disruptive and stressful.
- Where possible, avoid giving reactive work with tight deadlines or if possible, give advance warning if urgent pieces of work / responses are anticipated - this will help them plan their time better and factor in extra time where possible.
- Discuss with the individual how much time they need to read, process and draft the response.
- Provide templates which can be reused or can provide guidance on structure etc.
- Provide screen readers which can help with processing reading material.
- Offer a colleague to help mentor them in the task.
- If colleagues are being excessively loud in the office, address this as the noise is likely to be distracting to others too.

Example 3: Writing

Your member of staff finds literacy and sequencing challenging, which means they have a tendency to miss out letters or words, repeat certain words or mix up the order. You have asked them to write a report. They are concerned their report is significantly shorter than they think it should be. You review the report, and their writing style is not the format or standard which you expected.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Provide clear instructions on what is required including how long the report should be, the format, the structure and the deadline – use short sentences and avoid the use of jargon.
- Allow sufficient time for the person to process what you are saying and the opportunity to ask questions.
- Follow up instructions in writing - read and re-read them to ensure there is no ambiguity or that anything could be misinterpreted.
- Provide a previous example for reference or create template documents that have the required structure and format.
- Allow time to write the report to meet the deadline as their neurodivergence can make it harder for them to write the document and proof-read for errors.
- Demonstrate and supervise tasks or provide a buddy who can assist with sense checking/corrections and can confirm if their understanding of what is required is correct. Knowing that someone will proof-read (in a non-judgmental manner) can help prevent anxiety and stress.
- Provide software to dictate the tasks or online tools to help identify alternative words to avoid repetition.
- Provide a quiet space where possible, away from their desk and distractions for tasks which need a greater level of concentration.
- Consider whether everything you think needs to be corrected is essential - are the changes only a personal style preference?
- Do not use a red pen to correct errors on hard copy papers.
- Be patient and understand that it might take time for them to learn a task.

Example 5: Focus and concentration

Your member of staff has been trying to complete a range of tasks but is becoming easily distracted. They are aware that they have been working for some time and have not actually completed any tasks.

The individual is experiencing sensory overload which is stopping them from concentrating. Their working term memory does not allow them to remember all of the information needed to think about a large number of tasks at once. This is making them even more stressed and mentally tired, so they are even less able to concentrate.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Build planning time into each day, offer to help prioritise their list of tasks and break them down into smaller tasks. Regularly review priorities.
- Set reminders for important deadlines and appointments or use wall planners to visually highlight them.
- Suggest focusing on smaller tasks that can be easily completed before tackling bigger tasks.
- Be flexible – is their workload level unsuitable for the pace at which they can work or are there elements of their role which are not their area of strength? You may have to consider adjustments to the role to play to their strengths and if there are substantial elements of their role which they find difficult or unmanageable, you may have to consider a new role for them altogether.
- Allow for regular short movement breaks throughout the day, especially if their role involves sitting at their desk for a long period of time. If the person has difficulty sitting for too long, they can benefit from chairs which have a range of movements or an adjustable desk which allows them to stand up.

Example 6: Following instructions

You have given your member of staff a long list of requests and instructions all at once. They have difficulty processing information and short-term memory issues. They cannot recall everything you have asked them to do. When you ask for an update on progress, they tell you they could not remember what they were asked to do and so only did part of one of the tasks.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Break requests down to one or two at a time to make them easier to remember. Communicate instructions slowly and clearly and in a quiet location.
- Clarify what the asks are and ask them to feedback what they are tasked to do.
- Follow up with concise written instructions for tasks with clear deadlines - read these several times to ensure there is nothing ambiguous which could be misinterpreted.
- Build planning time into each day and make tools available to assist to highlight appointments, deadlines and daily tasks (for example calendars, planners, visual timetables etc) and set reminders for important deadlines.
- Hold regular 1:1 meetings to review priorities and progress.
- Identify any upcoming changes which might be challenging and agree how best to support them.
- Allocate a mentor or buddy that they can approach with queries.
- Monitor workloads to ensure they are not overloaded or placed under excessive time-pressures.

Example 7: Communication and social interactions

You are holding an in-person meeting with external stakeholders in your office. Your member of staff is not sure how they can contribute to the discussion as they are finding it difficult to fully understand what is being said so they cannot judge when to join in. This is a sign of sensory overload as there are lots of things happening at once - multiple conversations, different tasks to think about with no opportunity to prepare in advance. They may also not be comfortable in a large social setting.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Have a discussion with the individual before the meeting to clearly discuss its purpose and what you expect from them at it.
- Create an agenda to provide structure.
- Provide clear and specific information that is broken down into bitesize pieces to aid the processing of written and verbal instructions.
- At the outset of the meeting agree protocols around meeting participation - for example attendees have to take turns speaking with only one person to speak at a time; an attendee must raise their hand if they wish to speak and wait until they are called on before speaking etc.
- If it is a lengthy meeting, provide breaks for people to regroup and focus.
- Avoid using jokes, sarcasm or ambiguous statements.
- Do not put people on the spot to answer questions.
- If they look like they may need help during the meeting offer help discreetly.
- Suggest meeting them beforehand and travel together if the meeting is in premises which they are not familiar with.
- Agree in advance that the person can leave the meeting and rejoin if needed.

Example 8: Well-being

You are out of the office and ring your member of staff asking to speak to them when you return. You do not say what you want to speak to them about. They start to feel anxious and stressed.



How can you help as a line manager?

- Be clear about the reason(s) you want to meet as this will stop unnecessary worry.
- Remote working can lead to less opportunity to connect and look after one another's wellbeing, therefore regular engagement can help spot the signs that someone may be feeling anxious or under pressure.
- Provide regular feedback to give reassurance on performance, help build confidence and ease any low self-esteem /anxiety.
- Hold regular 1:1s and allow the individual an opportunity to provide feedback too as this will allow you to consider how you can better support them.
- Deal with any performance issues directly and sensitively, providing factual information rather than just your opinion. Ask the person if they can relate to it and work together to see if there is additional support required. Try to focus on the person's strengths and what they can do, not what they cannot do.
- If you need to discuss changes to roles/team you should carefully consider the potential impact and how best to communicate this at an early stage. Ongoing communication will be essential during any transition period.
- In performance reviews, use objective criteria for assessment. Be mindful of the phrases you use and terminology (both verbal and written). Include career or personal development discussions to help support them achieve their career aspirations.
- If your member of staff is experiencing health issues, signpost to sources of support available (overleaf).

11. Useful Links and Resources

Internal resources

- [LnKS Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion toolkit](#)
- [LnKS e-Learning – Supporting Autistic People](#)
- [NICS Disability Staff Network](#)
- [NICS Autism Working Group](#)

External resources

- [National Autistic Society: Northern Ireland](#)
- [British Dyslexia Association](#)
- [Dyspraxia Foundation](#)
- [Employers for Disability NI⁵](#)
- [Belfast Adult ADHD Clinic](#)
- [Northern Ireland Dyslexia Centre](#)
- [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)
- [Disability Discrimination Act](#)

⁵NICS EFDNI Membership Log-in details:

Username: EFDNI

Password: DisabilityEquality2020

12. Glossary

The list below is not exhaustive but will help you understand the fundamental neurodiversity related terms. People will often have different preferences and views around language and terminology, therefore you should be led by an individual around how they self-identify and language they prefer to use, and you must respect this. If you are unsure about how to say something just ask them!

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Attention Deficit Disorder) includes persistent patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. It affects people's behaviour and causes difficulty with concentration levels and may make the person seem restless and /or make them act on impulse.

Asperger syndrome: was an assessment previously given to some autistic people. It is no longer given, people who might previously have received this assessment now receive an autism assessment.

Autism: is a lifelong developmental condition which affects the social and communication centres of the brain. It can affect the way an individual relates to people, situations and their environment. It is often a non-visible condition and may not be evident to others. The phrases "autistic person" or "person who is autistic" can be used however, it is always best to check preferred terminology with the person.

Buddy: A designated experienced colleague who is a point of contact for guidance, advice and encouragement.

Disability: "A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities." Further information can be found on the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's publication "Definition of a Disability" available on www.equalityni.org. Neurodivergent conditions may meet this definition depending on the impact on the person.

Diversity: Diversity is recognising that each and every one of us is different. Diversity recognises and understands differences between people including those of different races; ethnicities; genders; ages; religions; disabilities; sexual orientations; education; socio-economic backgrounds; personalities; skill sets; experiences; and knowledge bases.

Dyscalculia: is characterised by an individual's difficulty in understanding numbers and arithmetic. Dyscalculia is not determined by age, level of education or experience, it occurs across all ages and abilities.

Dyslexia: mainly affects reading and writing skills. As it relates to information processing, it can cause difficulties with memory, speed of processing and organisational skills.

Dysgraphia: affects a person's handwriting and ability to translate what they want to say into written words. It does not affect reading comprehension.

Dyspraxia: (or Developmental Co-ordination Disorder) affects movement and co-ordination and occasionally, speech.

High/low functioning: is outdated terminology used when referring to autistic people. It is often considered offensive as it does not capture that a person's needs may vary (they may excel at certain things while finding others challenging) and fluctuate (depending on the situation/environment).

Hypersensitivity: heightened awareness, response / discomfort to a particular stimulus that others might not notice for example, smell, texture, or colour.

Hyposensitivity: A decreased awareness of sensory to a particular stimulus for example, light, pain, or sound.

Inclusion: Where differences are recognised, valued, and accepted, where everyone feels that they belong, have equal access to opportunities and can fully participate and contribute, regardless of their background, characteristics, or circumstances.

Masking: When a neurodivergent person disguises their true feelings, personality, mood or opinions in order to not be seen as neurodivergent.

Meltdown/Shutdown: when a neurodivergent person feels anxious, overwhelmed or overstimulated and finds a situation or feeling difficult or uncomfortable to manage.

Mirroring: when a neurodivergent person is copying or mimicking non-autistic behaviours (for example body language, speech patterns, jargon etc).

Neurodivergent: is the term for a person whose brain differences affect how their brain functions and differ from what is considered "typical".

Neurodivergence: is the state of being neurodivergent. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) highlights that a common misuse of language is to talk of 'an individual's neurodiversity' whereas it should be 'an individual's neurodivergence'.

Neurodiverse: A group of people who have range of different ways of processing information and experiencing the world. The word neurodiverse is not used to describe an individual or a condition; it refers to populations.

Neurodiversity: refers to the concept that brains function in different ways which determine how we think, act, feel, process information and experience the world. Neurodiversity can be broken down into two categories of people: those who are neurodivergent and those who are neurotypical.

Neurominority: A group who share a similar form of neurodivergence, for example autistic people, dyslexic people.

Neurotypical (or NT) describes a person who is not neurodivergent.

Reasonable adjustments: in an employment context are changes to working conditions including equipment, duties, hours of work or communication methods which are tailored to the individual disabled person to ensure no barriers exist to them fulfilling their duties and progressing their career. Failure to make reasonable adjustments may amount to discrimination under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995).

Self-stimulation/stimming: is comforting repetitive actions, for example pacing, folding paper, humming and rocking back and forth which can help neurodivergent people self-regulate and stabilise their emotions. Stimming is not always a sign of distress as some people may stim because they are excited or extremely happy.

Sensory avoidant / defensive: someone who is sensory avoidant/defensive will experience sensory input (taste, smell, hearing, sight, touch, body movement and awareness) more intensely than the average person and avoid it because it is overwhelming to them. Other terms which may be used are hyper-responsive, over-responsive or hypersensitive.

Sensory seeking: someone who is sensory seeking will be under-sensitive to sensory input (taste, smell, hearing, sight, touch, body movement and awareness) and will seek more sensory stimulation. For example with body movement, they may continually tap their feet, sway, or fidget.

Spectrum: was the term previously used to refer to the varying ways a condition shows itself in a person. More commonly now the term continuum is used. Neurodivergent conditions will have different traits and characteristics and to different degrees - they occur on a continuum and no two people with the same condition will be the same.

Tourette Syndrome/Tourette's Syndrome: is a neurological condition characterised by tics and involuntary sounds and movements.