

# Neurodiversity and Homelessness

## Summary of Findings

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# The approach we took

The National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) were asked by a local authority to do some research about neurodivergent people's experiences of homelessness and getting support.

Being '**neurodivergent**' means that someone's brain processes, learns and / or behaves differently from what is considered 'typical'. For example, they may be autistic, have a learning disability, have ADHD, have dyslexia or Tourette's.

This document is a **summary** of our full report. In the full report we focus in more detail on the local area, but the findings shared in this summary may be useful across the UK.

## The Approach We Took

There were two main parts to the research.



**1. We did a literature review** – this means we searched for and read research that has been done before. We wanted to find out if neurodivergent people are at higher risk of becoming homeless, and what stops neurodivergent people from getting work and a stable place to live.



**2. We had conversations** with people who have experienced neurodivergence and homelessness. First we asked people to draw a life map, which is a way of showing their life so far in words or pictures. Then we asked them some questions about their life maps, to find out what had worked well for them and where they might have benefitted from some different kinds of support. By talking to people who have received support, we wanted to hear their stories and give them a chance to give feedback about the services and support they had received.

# Part 1. Literature review

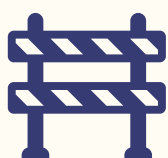
Are neurodivergent people at a higher risk of becoming homeless?

What stops neurodivergent people accessing secure housing and employment?

We searched for research and evidence to answer these questions.

Some of the main things that we found were:

## Pathways into homelessness



Neurodivergent people may be treated poorly because they are 'different' (Stone, Cameron & Dowling, 2022; Brown & McCann, 2020).

This can make it hard to get a job.



Neurodivergent people may have fewer friends and family that they can turn to for support.

(Garratt & Flaherty, 2021).



Neurodivergent people may find it hard to stay on top of the things they need to do to keep their housing, such as filling out benefits forms (Groundswell, 2022).



Neurodivergent people may be at higher risk of abuse (Groundswell, 2022).

## What makes it difficult for neurodivergent people to get support?

Some people may not qualify for extra support, if they do not have a diagnosis or if they do not know that they are neurodivergent.

(Stone, Cameron & Dowling, 2022).

Services can be complicated and confusing. Sometimes it is hard to communicate.

(McKenzie, Murray, Wilson & Delahunty, 2019).

It can be difficult for some people to live in a shared hostel, because of noise, problems with the other residents and strict rules and routines.

(Stone, Cameron & Dowling, 2022).

## Some things that services could do:

**Try to meet people in a quiet area without distractions**

(Groundswell, 2022).

**Provide information in easy-read**

(Groundswell, 2022).

**Speak to neurodivergent people to get feedback about services**

(Stone, Cameron & Dowling,

**Take time to get to know someone, and think about what they are good at, not just what they find difficult**  
(Homeless Link, 2022).

**Ask people short, direct questions and give them plenty of time to respond**  
(Homeless Link, 2022).

**Give staff training about autism and learning disabilities**

(Stone, Cameron & Dowling, 2022).

# Part 2. What we found from talking to people

## 1. Ambiguity and Grey Areas

People's experiences of **neurodivergence**, and whether they had received a formal diagnosis, often contained elements of ambiguity. Some people didn't know if they were neurodivergent or not. Others had been told different things by different professionals. This is important as it may affect whether someone is eligible for support or not.

*"It's like, I was a priority but I wasn't. There's no service to help you there, it was long."* Frankie

## 2. Things that made it easier or harder

People told us about things that made it easier or harder to cope; for example, the environment they were in and the other people in their lives. People's housing had a big impact on their mental health. Some people spoke about turning to alcohol and drugs to cope with difficult times.

*"I lived on my own and had to fend for myself, people started getting aggressive in the house towards all of us, so we started drinking and smoking and that was not good. You're protected here."* Sam

## 3. Moving through the maze

When people become homeless or unemployed, they had to find their way through a complex system of different services. People told us about long periods of waiting in unsuitable housing, which was challenging. They spoke about different paths they had taken to try and move on from their current situation, such as trying different jobs, but these often felt like 'dead ends' which was frustrating.



*"I've had the same psychiatrist here in [area] for ten years and for ten years I don't feel he's really listened to a word I say."*  
Ashley

## 4. Current Supports Not Hitting the Mark

People told us about times where they did not get the support they needed. Mental health services were highlighted as a particular area of concern, due to long waiting times and people not feeling that professionals were listening to them.

## 5. Specific Barriers

People told us about challenges that they faced in different areas throughout their lives. Not every person experienced every barrier, but together they show the disadvantages that made it difficult for people to get stable housing and employment.

### Barriers to Education

- Differences in processing information not being supported at school.
- Being severely bullied, that led to people changing or leaving school.
- People experiencing high levels of social anxiety when meeting other students in higher education.
- A lack of support for mental health during higher education, that led to people being unable to complete their course.

### Barriers to Employment

- Vocational courses or unpaid work experience not leading to stable employment.
- Needing technology and transport in order to apply for and get to jobs.
- Experiencing stigma associated with mental health conditions and / or **neurodivergence**.
- Employers not implementing **reasonable adjustments** when asked; for example not allowing someone to change from night shifts to day shifts.
- Confusion and anxiety around the impact of paid work on benefits, which puts people off getting a paid job.

### Barriers to Stable Housing

- Lack of support for people on the verge of **homelessness**; needing to be homeless before the council can help them.
- Having to live in shared housing as a trial period before moving into their own place. This often came with difficulties with other residents who may be unpredictable and / or in crisis.
- Not knowing how the housing system works and how to bid for social housing.
- Lack of formal training in mental health and **neurodivergence** for staff in **supported accommodation**.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations about education

- Having a 'time-out card' for use in lessons. **"It would have saved me trying to hide in cupboards...I would have killed for something like that"**.
- Provide support and **reasonable adjustments** to neurodivergent students.
- Take action on behalf of students who are experiencing bullying; avoid punishing the person on the receiving end.
- Provide neurodivergent-informed therapy and support for students who are experiencing mental health difficulties.
- Provide opportunities and **reasonable adjustments** for students to take part in extra-curricular activities.

## Recommendations about employment

- Support neurodivergent people to obtain vocational experience in the workplace, beyond just doing vocational courses.
- Support people to build up their confidence and take a strengths-based approach to help people understand what skills they have to offer an employer.
- Provide clear and accurate information about how paid employment impacts on benefits, and support people to complete the necessary declarations and paperwork.
- Provide people with information about their employment rights, regarding **reasonable adjustments**, and actions that they can take if these are breached.
- Provide **reasonable adjustments** for neurodivergent people, including flexibility around working hours.
- Make sure that job adverts are accessible, and not just available online.
- Address workplace culture that may result in discrimination.

## Recommendations about housing

- Provide support and intervention for people on the verge of becoming homeless. This may include people experiencing a mental health crisis, addiction and / or family breakdown.
- Create an easy-read leaflet about what people should do and who they should contact in the event of being made homeless.
- Create an easy-read leaflet about next steps for people living in temporary accommodation. This should include information about council bidding systems.
- Provide training for housing staff about **neurodivergence** and mental health.
- Accommodation should be designed to be sensory friendly (a detailed list of sensory adjustments has been created by NDTi and LGA, 2022).

## Cross-cutting recommendations

***The empathy and sympathy mean a lot but you can't be patronising."** Frankie*

- Make it easier for people to have an assessment, to determine if they are neurodivergent.
- Provide information for people who are neurodivergent, to help them understand what this means for them.
- Understand that it may be difficult and frustrating for people to repeat their life story to lots of different professionals, especially if this involves trauma. Where possible, ensure continuity of staff so that people can build up trusting relationships.
- Ask people for their preferred communication style and try to meet this where possible.
- Provide clear directions, including pictures and maps, for people attending meetings and appointments for the first time.
- Provide education to people of all ages about **neurodiversity**, to promote understanding and acceptance.



## Further Reading & Resources

### Work

A guide to reasonable adjustments for people transitioning from higher education into the workforce:

[https://www.agcas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Resources/Disability%20TG/Reasonable\\_Adjustments\\_-\\_Neurodiversity.pdf](https://www.agcas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Resources/Disability%20TG/Reasonable_Adjustments_-_Neurodiversity.pdf)

Research-informed guidance about making interview and hiring processes neurodivergent friendly: <https://www.autistica.org.uk/get-involved/employers/register-employers>

Mencap easy-read guides about looking for work and going to an interview:

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/employment/finding-job/finding-work-easy-read-guides>

### Housing

Homeless Link Autism & Homelessness Toolkit: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/autism-and-homelessness/>

Groundswell Learning Disability & Homelessness Toolkit: <https://groundswell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Learning-Disabilities-Toolkit-.pdf>

Local Government Association information about meeting sensory needs in housing: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/partners-care-and-health/autistic-and-learning-disabilities/autistic/housing>

### General

SPACE framework for equitable access by Doherty, McCowan and Shaw (2023):

<https://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/full/10.12968/hmed.2023.0006>

British Dyslexia Association style guide for written communication:

<https://cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/uploads/documents/Advice/style-guide/BDA-Style-Guide-2022.pdf?v=1666017053>