

Editorial

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Neurodiversity encompasses the entire spectrum of human brain variation, and these individual differences amongst us all should be celebrated. However, to date, within the Criminal Justice System (CJS), there have been concerns about the experiences and outcomes of people with neurodivergence in prison and on probation. In recent years there has been increased focus and attention on neurodiversity, which has been much welcomed. This focus has been on improving the experiences and outcomes of neurodiverse people within the CJS.

The review of evidence of neurodiversity in the CJS published in 2021 perhaps fuelled the speed of this movement.¹ This review concluded that whilst there was evidence of good local practice in some areas, this was not consistent. Too often, too little was being done to understand and meet the needs of individuals. The recommendations from this report included adopting a coordinated, cross-Government approach, developing a common screening tool, gathering data systematically, improving awareness and training of staff, making adjustments to meet the needs of individuals, and improving joined up, collaborative working to do so.

It's been 4 years since this review, and this special issue of the Prison Service Journal examines the current situation on this topic. There have been developments which are reported on which we hope will begin to improve outcomes for people with neurodivergence. But most importantly, this special issue puts lived experience at its heart. Working with, and using the insights of, those with lived experience will be the best way to ensure we build an inclusive and accessible CJS for all going forward. The edition also has a particular practitioner-focus. It attempts to highlight what we can all be doing to ensure that we are being as responsive as possible. Many of the articles include and discuss key definitions such as *neurodiversity*, *neurodivergence*, and *neuroinclusive/responsive*. We felt it necessary to keep these discussions in each article, helping to contextualise the writing from the authors on their topics.

The edition has seven articles and interviews. We hear from **Usman** and **Kirsty** first in: *The experience of prison by individuals with neurodivergence: A lived*

experience perspective. In these two interviews, Usman and Kirsty, diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) respectively, share their struggles with serving prison sentences. Hearing their stories provides a powerful description of the difficulties which neurodivergence can create for people and helps us understand what changes might be most helpful. Ensuring the lived experience of being neurodivergent is recognised and harnessed features strongly in all articles in this edition, therefore starting our edition with these insights helps to keep this focus.

The importance of good assessment and identification of neurodivergence amongst criminal justice populations is clear. In *Screening for neurodivergent traits: The Do-It profiler*, **Professor Amanda Kirby** discusses why screening and having an embedded system in prisons is so fundamental. She introduces the Do-It-Profiler system and importantly describes the learning that has been gleaned from gathering data using this tool. She shares findings around young people, women, men, as well as the links between neurodivergence and mental illness.

Rachael Mason, Dr Siân Allen, Dr Niko Kargas and Dr Lauren Smith from the University of Lincoln and the NHS report on *Supporting autistic people and people with learning disabilities in prison: Service evaluation and care pathway development*. They identify key issues such as inconsistent screening and support services, and a lack of staff training. Recommendations included the testing and evaluation of a universal care pathway, enhancing staff training, improving information sharing, and increasing resources. The work conducted in both the evaluation and the development of the care pathway emphasises the benefit and importance of peer-led initiatives, consistent assessment approaches, and multi-agency collaboration, aiming to improve care and outcomes across the CJS. The article concludes with recommendations for practice, highlighting the importance of involving people with lived experience in service design and delivery.

It becomes clear from the papers as we progress through this edition that staff training is essential to

1. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection. (2021). *Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: A review of evidence*. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection.

help equip people with knowledge and skills to support neurodivergent people. We hear this from Dr Luke Vitner in *Learning from lived experiences: Using the voices of autistic people in prisons to inform staff training*. Luke presents a summary of his extensive and fascinating research examining the experiences of autistic people in prisons, and within the context of programmes and rehabilitation. The article highlights that autistic individuals are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of crimes and face unique challenges in prison environments. The article also addresses the challenges faced by prison staff, such as compassion fatigue and the need for better training. This work has culminated in the development of training workshops and training materials for prison staff, to enhance awareness and understanding of autism amongst prison staff, a key priority for His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

One of the key developments across our prisons in recent years has been the introduction of Neurodiversity Support Managers (NSM) in HMPPS prisons. This was one key part of the Cross-Government Action Plan, produced in response to the aforementioned evidence review.² In *Neurodiversity Support Managers: Improving support for neurodivergent people in prison*, **Lucy Chadwick** and colleagues (**Donna Smith-Emes, Holly Owen, Rosalind Collier, Liz Duffy-Griffiths, Dainya Pinnock, Louise Henson, and Rebecca Stokes**) present seven case studies, each written by an NSM in post, providing examples of the fantastic work they currently do including improving the induction processes, enabling access to purposeful activities, enhancing prison safety, developing supportive environments, delivering targeted workshops, addressing barriers to sentence progression, and preparing people for release. These case studies highlight the varied areas of focus required to support neurodivergent people depending on differing needs of prisons and their populations. It is exciting work and progress to see.

Responsivity has to be the cornerstone of working with neurodivergent people. In *Responsivity in HM Prisons: From neurotypical to neurodivergent*, **Laura**

Ramsay and **Dr Karen Thorne** advocate for a shift to a neurodivergent-centric framework, arguing for the importance of a strengths-based approach which celebrates unique abilities. The paper also presents practical strategies for prison staff, senior leaders, and policy teams to implement neuroresponsive practices in their everyday work. The article concludes by advocating for neurodivergence to be considered mainstream in prison practice, encouraging reflection and continuous professional development to enhance support for neurodivergent people in prison.

The special edition ends with an article by **Dr Tom Smith** and **Dr Nicole Renehan**: *The neurodivergence in criminal justice network: Connecting research, professionals and lived experience to improve criminal justice practice*. In this article the authors describe the development and work of the Neurodivergence in Criminal Justice Network (NICJN), which is a group of researchers, practitioners, and community members who are interested in addressing the challenges faced by neurodivergence in the CJS. With over 300 members, NICJN engages in various activities, including resource collection, newsletters, and advisory group meetings, to raise awareness and drive positive change. The network is open to anyone interested in neurodivergence in criminal justice, and information on how you can get involved is included in the article.

Finally, we do not pretend that this issue covers all the important aspects of neurodiversity; it doesn't. It is mainly based on men living in prison. There is not enough in here about women, or young people, or about experiences and developments in probation, or about the numerous ranges and types of neurodivergence or intersectionality. We also do not cover neurodiversity amongst staff in the CJS. These are all important areas where we know great work is being done and which we need to learn more about. But we hope this special edition provides a starting point from which to enhance our understanding of neurodivergence in the CJS. Through highlighting lived experiences and practical strategies, we hope to inspire ongoing dialogue and action towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

2. Ministry of Justice (2022). *A Response to the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection: Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System, A Review of Evidence*. Ministry of Justice.