The n-POLICE study:

Neurodiverse Police Officers and staff: Learning Information about their Career Experiences.

Report for the NPAA

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Neurodiverse Police Officers and staff: Learning Information about their Career Experiences

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University of Leicester
Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust
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Foreword

Since the NPAA launched in 2015, we have been committed to supporting neurodivergent colleagues within the police service and raising the profile of autism and other neurodivergent conditions within professional vocations such as policing. I would like to thank Dr. O'Reilly and her team for this important piece of work highlighting the challenges faced by our members. The final report will be an invaluable reference for line managers, HR business partners and anyone interested in creating inclusive working environments to harness the power of those who think differently.

John Nelson
Director
National Autism Police Association

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The gaining and retention of employment is a central endeavour for many people. However, some groups in society find this more challenging than others. Those with certain disabilities or health conditions can find it especially difficult due to a range of social and societal barriers. Those with neurodevelopmental conditions like autism or ADHD have particular challenges in gaining and retaining employment (Nicholas et al., 2020). For example, the UK census (2021) showed that only 29% of autistic people were employed at the time of data collection. Evidence suggests that this is because of the way in which organisations operate within a neurotypical society.

Nonetheless, there is optimism that a strengths-based competencies approach in employment is starting to gain traction with recognition that neurodivergent employees have specific skills that are beneficial. For example, greater attention to detail (Scott et al., 2017) or excellent visual skills (Jiang et al., 2015). Arguably this strengths-based competencies approach in employment is crucial in public services, such as the police. However, much of what we understand about neurodivergence in policing contexts relates to how the police work with suspects, witnesses and victims diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental condition (Crane et al., 2016). There is, however, much less evidence regarding the experiences and needs of neurodivergent police officers and staff or how the nature of the policing role interacts with the characteristics of those conditions (Tromans et al., 2023).

Aims

The aim of our research project is to gain a stronger understanding of the perceptions and experiences of neurodivergent employees in the police from across the UK. Our objective is to identify the facilitators and barriers to strengths-based employment practices so that we can make recommendations to organisations to enable them to capitalise on the strengths within their workforce.

Methods

We partnered with the National Police Autism Association to ensure that our work was co-produced and relevant to policing. We recruited 37 police officers and staff (identified from our questionnaire project – see Tromans et al., 2023). Please note that this journal article reporting the questionnaire findings is freely accessible to all via the following link - https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.508.

Each of these 37 interviews participated in a reflective qualitative interview, which was transcribed. The interviews were subjected to reflective thematic analysis to identify the core patterns and issues of relevance to the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

This process resulted in 42 themes. These themes and their associated codes can be seen in appendix 1. All due ethical processes were followed. No names are used in this report and all participants gave consent to have their views reported in this anonymous way.

Results

Our thematic analysis and close attention to the voices of the participants led to the creation of 42 themes (see appendices) which we have synthesised into seven clusters for the purpose of this report.

First was 'the **neurodivergent identity**'. All our participants felt their neurodivergent identity was important to them and talked at length about the process by which they came to recognise their autism, ADHD, or autism with ADHD. They noted that in many cases it was a family member (typically a child) being diagnosed that led them to seek confirmation of their own condition. Not all participants had a formal health diagnosis and their reasons for this were variable. Many did however feel that the label explained how they viewed the world and some of the challenges of operating within it that they faced.

Second was the '**presentation of self'**. Our participants recognised the importance of language and how autism and ADHD were conceptualised by society generally and by police more specifically. They simultaneously noted the importance of the parameters of the condition for seeking support or reasonable adjustments (where disclosure occurred) against the tensions of using the notion of disability associated with neurodivergence. They believed that homogenising neurodivergence was inappropriate and led to stereotyping and misconceptions.

Third was '**challenges of working for the police**'. Notably participants reported both positive and negative experiences of working for the police. They believed they were highly motivated for the nature of the work and enjoyed many aspects of the role. They did however feel there were challenges that were at least in part due to the societal and organisational view and understanding of autism and ADHD. They reported that there were some issues with the culture of policing, the attitude of other officers and staff, and difficulties encountered during recruitment and/or progression interviews.

Fourth was '**benefits of neurodivergence for the police'**. An overall message from the participants was that the characteristics of being neurodivergent, either associated with autism or ADHD, brought benefit to the police organisation. They differentiated themselves from their neurotypical peers and showed how they were able to undertake tasks or roles in different ways because of their autism or ADHD. They felt that these

strengths were important to specific aspects of the role, or specific roles, and that the organisation ought to capitalise on these strengths.

Fifth was the '**need for training and change'**. There was a consistent belief amongst the participants that police forces generally did not have sufficient knowledge of neurodevelopmental conditions and neither did they have sufficient experience of working with those who were neurodivergent. They felt that this was important for organisations to address because having neurodivergent employees was inevitable and useful. Furthermore, in terms of policing as an occupation, there was a great likelihood that police officers and staff would encounter neurodivergent witnesses, victims, and suspects as part of the job. They argued therefore that police employees should have the skills and knowledge to do the work effectively and compassionately.

Sixth was '**reasonable adjustments, support and promotion**'. There was a great deal of discussion about the obligations of police forces to support neurodivergent officers and staff to maximise their potential and to facilitate their working day. Participants argued that organisations could capitalise on the neurodivergent strengths with greater support, enabling reasonable adjustments, and generally being more accepting of their difference. They noted that while reasonable adjustments are legislated for, and were often available, there were significant shortcomings in the way they were signposted to them, they way in which they were implemented, and challenges with them being ignored or failing in practice.

Seventh was '**the role of the manager and issues of disclosing a neurodevelopmental condition**'. There was considerable variability in the disclosure of any diagnosis or suspected diagnosis from the participants. Some had disclosed their neurodivergence to their line managers, several had not done this. Some had disclosed their neurodivergence to their peers, some had not. There were cases where participants believed that revealing to others in the organisation that they were autistic or had ADHD would negatively impact on them at work. There were other cases where participants were very vocal about their autism or ADHD and were actively involved in educating others, creating training, or leading support groups. A common concern however was that being neurodivergent would impact on career progression, either because their characteristics served as a barrier for aspects of promotion (like interviewing), or because of the attitudes of others around them or because of organisational lack of knowledge and understanding.

Recommendations

We make five core recommendations in this report and details of these can be found in the main report. These were influenced by the work of Kirby and Smith who wrote about neurodiversity in the workplace, and by Milton's work around autism acceptance

and are primarily founded on the voices of our participants. Central to our recommendations is an emphasis on strengths and the neurodivergent identity in the workplace, recognising that autism and ADHD are part of natural human diversity. The recommendations are grouped under five headings as follows:

1. Recruitment – optimising diversity in the police to capitalise on strengths brought by neurodivergent officers and staff and making adjustments to recruitment processes to encourage recruitment and facilitate retention.
2. Support systems – support needs to be available to officers and staff and signposting to sources of support can be helpful. This is multilayered and can include peer support.
3. Reasonable adjustments and managing these in the workplace – reasonable adjustments are legislated for and these need to be managed effectively for those individuals requiring them.
4. Culture, organisational systems, and training – as society hopefully becomes more inclusive it is necessary for organisations to also take a strengths-based approach to autism and ADHD. Training may be needed to facilitate a cultural shift.
5. Optimising the strengths of neurodivergent employees – consultation, dialogue and working with neurodivergent officers and staff can help to identify tasks and roles to which individuals are well-suited. This can be beneficial to the organisation.

PART TWO: THE MAIN REPORT

1.0. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1: Key terms and notes on our language use

The language used in the report is important as it frames how we think about the issues under discussion. Language choices need to be transparent, but they are also always problematic as they may not represent the preferences of everyone. With this caveat, we briefly explain the choices made. In this report we have used identity-first language when referring to autism (i.e., 'autistic person'), rather than person-first language (i.e., 'person with autism'). This is in line with survey research findings that report that identity-first language is preferred by the majority of the autistic community (Kenny et al., 2016). In contrast we have used person-first language when describing people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as this is more consistent with the general literature around that condition.

Our perspective on autism largely aligns with the neurodiversity approach. This approach views autism as a neurodevelopmental 'difference' that alters how people think and process the world. Neurodevelopmental is a scientific word to describe functions of the brain that exist from birth. It is widely held that autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that is present from early childhood. The main difference between a neurodiversity and a medical approach is that the former describes differences as part of natural variation found in all humans while the medical approach views autism as a group of impairments compared to non-autistic or neurotypical persons.

In this report we talk about autistic individuals and persons with ADHD as neurodivergent because they are positioned as different to the neurotypical norm. We respect that within the neurodivergent community there are varying opinions, experiences and positions and use language as respectfully as possible to account for those (see for example, Lester et al., 2015). Neurodiversity describes a group of people and encompasses autism, ADHD, and other specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

1.2: Inequalities and employment

It is well known that some groups in society have greater challenges in gaining and retaining employment. In part these inequalities are driven by a neoliberalist ideology that constructs normative notions of economic viability and creates a political landscape that proffers a rhetoric of hostility toward those who do not contribute to societal capitalism in expected ways (Thomas et al., 2018). An especially contentious area in terms of neoliberalism and employment is that of employment and disability – particularly autism, but to some extent other forms of neurodivergence.

The tension here is twofold. First, there are broader debates driven by political discourses of neurodiversity that resists the clinical classification of neurodevelopmental conditions in disability terms. Indeed, some advocates actively speak out against such narrow definitions of their identity. Second, there are challenges in understanding inequalities in employment in relation to neurodivergence as often the conceptualising of these is subsumed within broader discussions of disability, and in relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion considerations.

In that wider context of inequality and employment for those experiencing a physical health, mental health, or neurodevelopmental condition, there are many contributing factors to the economic situation. This includes the challenge that for some the impact of their condition is simply prohibitive for seeking employment (Russell, 2014). Russell noted however, that for those who can work there are many barriers including a lack of opportunities, transportation issues, structural inequalities in the school system which contribute to lower academic attainment, employment barriers, stigma, and misconceptions as well as personal challenges like anxiety and lack of confidence.

1.3: Neurodevelopmental conditions and employment

More specifically in relation to those with neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism or ADHD, there is a body of evidence that shows that these individuals have much greater challenges in gaining and retaining employment (Nicholas et al., 2020). Much of the evidence we have has focused more specifically on autism. However, the specific statistics are limited, with older evidence suggesting that 50% of autistic school leavers had not managed to progress into employment within two years of leaving school (Shattuck et al., 2012). Newer work from the ONS UK 2021 census reported autism and employment showing that only 29.0% of autistic people are employed and thus they are the second lowest employment rate amongst the 'disability' categories (ONS UK census, 2021). The recent Buckland report (2024) suggests that only three-in-ten autistic people of working age are employed, which compares to five-in-ten for disabled persons, and eight-in-ten for non-disabled persons.

Evidence suggests that the reason why those with neurodevelopmental conditions face such difficulties in gaining and retaining employment is due to the neurotypical society within which organisations operate (Lorenz et al., 2016). The small, growing, body of research that is exploring neurodivergence and employment is promoting a strengths-based competencies framework, recognising that the characteristics of these conditions brings positive skills to the workplace. For example, some neurodivergent workers have excellent visual skills (Jiang et al., 2015) and some have greater attention to detail (Scott et al., 2017).

1.4: Neurodivergence and jeopardising careers

We argue that part of the challenge in supporting and promoting neurodivergence in the workplace is that employment is often treated in a homogenous way, with evidence and discussion focusing on facilitators and barriers of supporting autistic persons or those with ADHD into the workplace. Problematically, this does not give sufficient attention to the different benefits and challenges different kinds of employment and workplace might bring.

A category of employment that we believe requires more focused attention in the research sphere is in 'jeopardising careers'. While our definition of this is a working one and is still subject to critical reflection, we define a jeopardising career as:

> 'a job role whereby there is a greater than typical possibility of potential direct harm to others, including death, in the daily activities conducted as part of that role, by virtue of the occupational requirements but also the risk of human error leading to personal or organisational accountability'.

Thus, careers whereby human input may result in poor outcomes for those subject to the activities of those holding the role. This may include occupations like surgeons, nurses, paramedics, social workers, pilots, and of course, the police.

1.5: Neurodevelopmental conditions and the police

Most of what we know about neurodivergence, and the police is about how police employees typically interact with victims, suspects or witnesses who have a neurodevelopmental diagnosis (Crane et al., 2016; King and Murphy, 2014). There is considerably less work that has explored the experience of neurodivergent employees within the police force or how the nature of the stressful, demanding and potentially jeopardising role interacts with those neurodevelopmental characteristics (Tromans et al., 2023).

1.6: Aims of this report

The aim of our research is to strengthen our understanding of the experiences and perceptions of neurodivergent employees within the police force. Our core objective is to identify the facilitators and barriers to good employment practices and to make recommendations for senior leadership teams to capitalise on the strengths of their neurodivergent workforce while supporting the welfare of those individuals.

The aim of this report is to describe the interview-reported workplace experiences of UK-based police force employees who are autistic and/or have ADHD, and report

recommendations on how to further develop approaches to supporting this group in the workplace.

Through our research design and working collaboratively with the NPAA, we achieve our aims and objectives by adopting a person-centred and strengths-based approach. In so doing, we recognise the importance of a neurodiversity position and value hearing and responding to the voices of experts by experience.

Thus, we are very grateful to those voices of our experts by experience, the officers and staff who took the time to talk to us about working with the police.

2.0. METHODS AND PROJECT DETAILS

2.1: Participants

Aligned with our reflective approach to promoting participation and inclusion we used a qualitative approach to the research as this allowed us to centre the voices and perspectives of neurodivergent police officers and staff.

We therefore partnered with the National Police Autism Association (NPAA) to sense-check our methods and provide a supportive approach to our work, as well as to read through this report and contribute to it.

With the support of the NPAA we recruited 37 police officers and staff to our project, identified from a wider sample of 117 questionnaire respondents (see Tromans et al., 2023 for details on that strand of the study). Please note that this journal article is freely accessible to all via the following link - https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.508.

2.2: Data collection

To truly focus on individual experiences and voices we utilised the qualitative interviewing approach of reflective interviews. Reflective interviews allow the interview schedule to be guided by the responses of participants and do not rely too heavily on the research agenda, encouraging interviewer and interviewee to collectively delve into issues of interest (Roulston, 2021). To facilitate inclusion interviews took place over the video-conferencing platform Microsoft Teams.

2.3: Analysis

Analysis of the entire data corpus was the reflexive thematic analysis approach as this is an inductive and participant-driven way of interrogating data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This was especially useful due to the emphasis on language and meaning and a reflective approach to coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Two members of the team independently coded all transcripts produced from the interviews and through constructive dialogue and team consensus a final coding framework was produced. This process resulted in 42 themes. These themes and their associated codes are in appendix 1.

2.4: Ethics

Ethical governance for the project was provided by the University of Leicester Ethics Committee and approval was granted to proceed. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity in all dissemination activities.

3.0. FINDINGS

The 42 themes produced from this study had considerable depth and detail. In this report we synthesise these 42 themes into seven core clusters to facilitate a meaningful understanding of the central issues raised by the participants. Here in this report, we only refer to the data collected through the interviews (not from the survey).

3.1: Cluster one: The neurodivergent identity

The participants talked at length about their neurodivergent identity, in terms of how the identity came to be through diagnosis or screening tests, and the associated challenges of acquiring or seeking a label to explain their way of seeing the world.

A real-world experience of raising an autistic child and discovering I'm autistic through that – PO7

my daughter, she's diagnosed ADHD, autism ... and then I was diagnosed with ADHD - PO10

most of my family are up there, spectrum wise – PO17

I just always knew that something wasn't right – PO6

If I was growing up as a kid today, I'm sure I'm would have been spotted and assessed and all the rest of it – PS5

Diagnosed before I joined, yeah. It caused some issues actually – PO17

At 45, the pieces all fit in, it's like 'oh yes that explains this, that explains that' - PO8

The label's good to have when you need it to navigate the world of red tape – PO14

I was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult – PO4

but it was just the final straw that I thought 'yeah I need to know for my own self'– PO10

Sought out a private diagnosis, because I didn't fancy waiting for 4 odd years on the NHS – PO11

In adopting a neurodivergent identity there were a range of ways in which the participants discussed the labels of autism and/or ADHD. Interestingly, the idea of acquiring a formal diagnosis was challenging for some, and while for many it provided a sense of explanation for historical versions of themselves, for others it was less important to have a validated concept attached to their identity. Many of the participants were encouraged by others to explore the possibility of neurodivergent conditions because a family member acquired a diagnosis, typically (albeit not always) a son or daughter. Almost all the participants were recognised as autistic or ADHD in adulthood and almost all after serving in the police for several years.

3.2: Cluster two: Presentation of self

Important to the participants was the way they conceptualised their sense of self and how others might see them. They recognised the importance of language in relation to neurodivergence and found the tensions of 'disability' challenging.

Every autistic person is different in the same way that everybody neuro-typical person is different –

Once you've met one person with autism you've only met one person – PO2

I don't think there is such a thing as a neuro typical – PO12

I didn't know these words existed 'I'm neuro diverse' - I've never heard of that before in the whole of my life – PO16

because obviously females present differently – PO1

I didn't know how it showed itself in females – PS1

I didn't like that, seeing neurodiverse as disability. I must admit I didn't like that– PO12

I think that neuro diversity is a spectrum – PO18

A fundamental issue raised across the interviews was the heterogeneity of the neurodivergent population. Participants believed that each person is unique whether neurotypical or neurodivergent and that homogenising populations was not only inappropriate, but also problematic. They argued that the language around autism and ADHD was sometimes inappropriately used and that others frequently made assumptions about them simply based on a general label. Many felt that the notion that autism or ADHD were classified clinically as disabilities was also problematic and

thought there were considerable issues that it was only via a label that resources and support might be mobilised.

3.3. Cluster three: Challenges of working for the police

The participants simultaneously reported both positive and negative experiences of working for the police. While there were aspects of the role and organisation that was seen as beneficial, they also reported many challenges.

I really, really hate being interviewed, I hate it – PO17

'Well first of all I'm not suffering' – PO18

The whole culture and attitudes need changing, you can't do that overnight, can you? But I think starting with training would be big thing– PO7

A lot of people view it as a negative thing. When it isn't – PS2

My autism is a blessing and a curse at the same time in the job – PO23

I know for a fact if I want to for a job and I said ADHD, they'd probably look twice and think about it – P04

I have never been successful when only interviews were used, I've rarely been unsuccessful if an aptitude test(s) is used – PS4

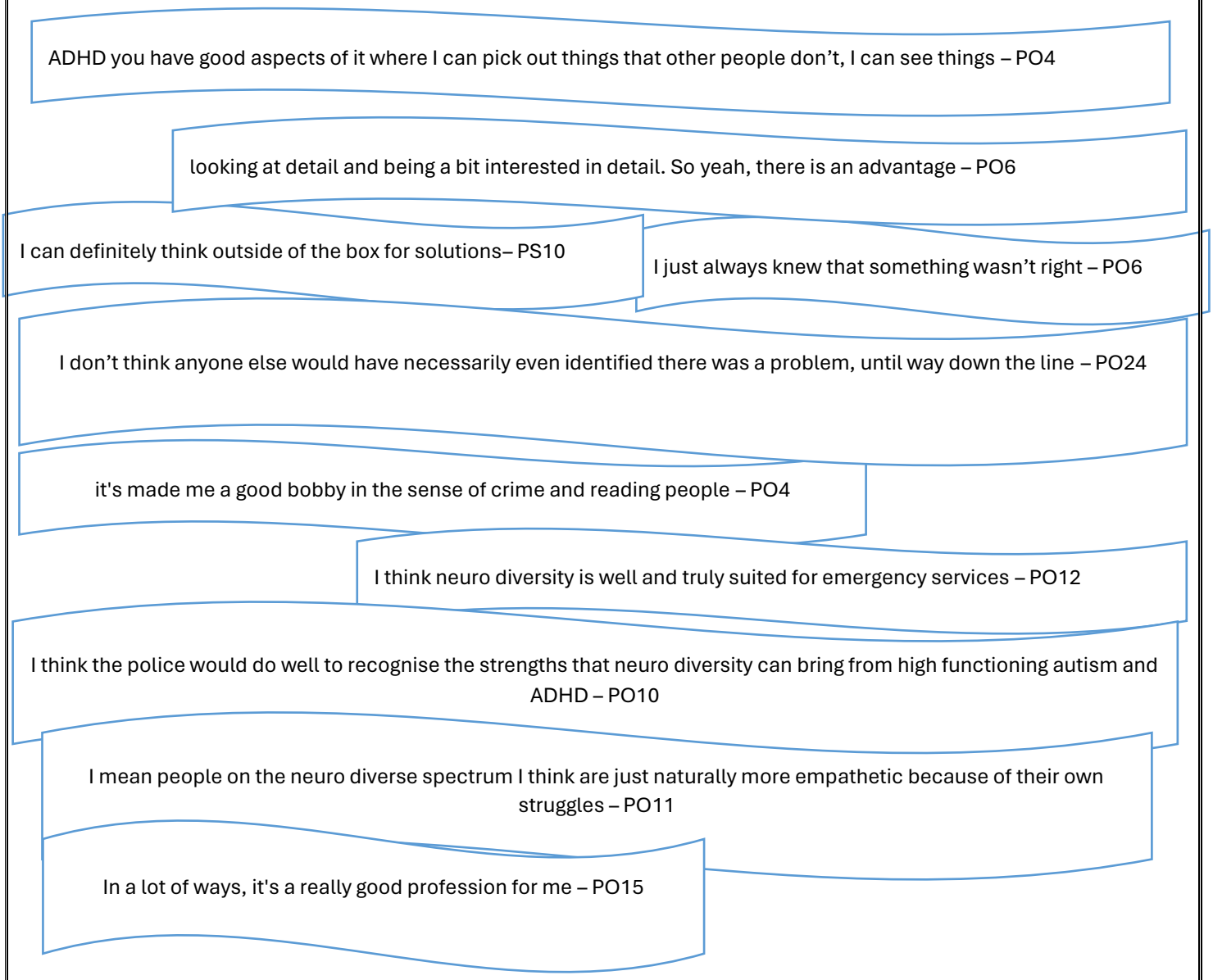
the whole recruitment process I don't think is fair to autistic people – PS8

I think it's the culture that needs ..I just don't think there is a real acceptance of difference – PS11

The participants reported a wide range of challenges of working for the police. Some of those challenges related to some of the characteristics associated with autism or ADHD, but many were at an organisational level. This included problems with the culture and ethos of the organisation, attitudes of others (which transcended the police and filtered through society), and difficulties in recruitment interviews.

3.4: Cluster four: Benefits of neurodivergence for the police

The participants recognised that while the characteristics of their condition might bring some challenges to performing in the role, overall, when placed in the right kind of position, they believed that their neurodivergence was a strength.



Not only were there benefits to the organisation from the neurodivergent characteristics, but it was argued by some that the strengths they were able to bring to certain kinds of roles was above anything their neurotypical peers might accomplish.

3.5: Cluster five: Need for training and change

It was agreed by participants that police forces generally did not have sufficient knowledge or experience of neurodivergence, and this was important not only for working with their neurodivergent peers, but also for doing a job whereby there would be neurodivergent victims, witnesses, and suspects.

I'm qualified to act up but what they've done is in my place, they've given it to people that are not even qualified – PO19

There is no neuro diversity awareness in [force] police - PO13

Dyslexia is seen as an inconvenience – PO10

We've got a neuro diversity group, support group – PS9

We also have a lot of like networks as well. So, we have a disability network, we have a LGBT one – PS2

We don't give any mandatory neuro diversity awareness and so we're letting down staff – PO24

That is the biggest struggle, is they are very resistant to change – PO10

I don't think there's a desire to learn either if I'm brutally honest – PO13

I've never had a training course about any kind of neuro divergence – PO20

There's still a big gap in that knowledge – PO26

It's really difficult because I think [Force] are trying. Apparently, they've got a guy that teaches students when they come in – PO19

A challenge encountered by the participants was the perceived lack of knowledge and understanding of autism and ADHD, and neurodivergence more generally within the police force. While this was thought to impact the work with the public, they also believed that this impacted them in their daily engagement with their peers, with the job and with the organisation. The participants advocated that specialist, high quality training was needed to bring about a change in attitudes and practice, as well as to influence police culture.

3.6: Cluster six: Reasonable adjustments, support, and promotion

As with many other conditions, there is a case for those diagnosed with autism or ADHD to have support from their employer and to have reasonable adjustments (sometimes referred to as workplace adjustments). However, while these were available, they were argued to be insufficient in many cases, especially in the challenging environment of

promotion applications. This is consistent with the recent Buckland report (2024) that showed that one third of autistic employees (in general organisations) felt unable to discuss their adjustment needs and more than one-in-ten found any adjustment poorly implemented.

But they need to be the right reasonable adjustments for the right person – PO18

my daughter, she's diagnosed ADHD, autism … and then I was diagnosed with ADHD - PO10

I have no idea what a reasonable adjustment for me would look like – PS4

I mean I did have adjustments for that. I asked for the questions in writing in advance – PO23

people come and say 'I've asked for this, and I've been told no because I'd be getting preferential treatment' – PO26

I was also stressed because they refused my reasonable adjustment– PO18

Promotion is inaccessible to me if I'm honest – PO1

Not at all I wouldn't go for promotion. Because of the recruitment process - PS8

I passed my interview, passed the presentation, was borderline for the management exercise but failed the partnership exercise – PS3

I think the barriers for promotion in terms of my autism I think is just I think I struggle to get people to understand just the point we were dealing with – PO25

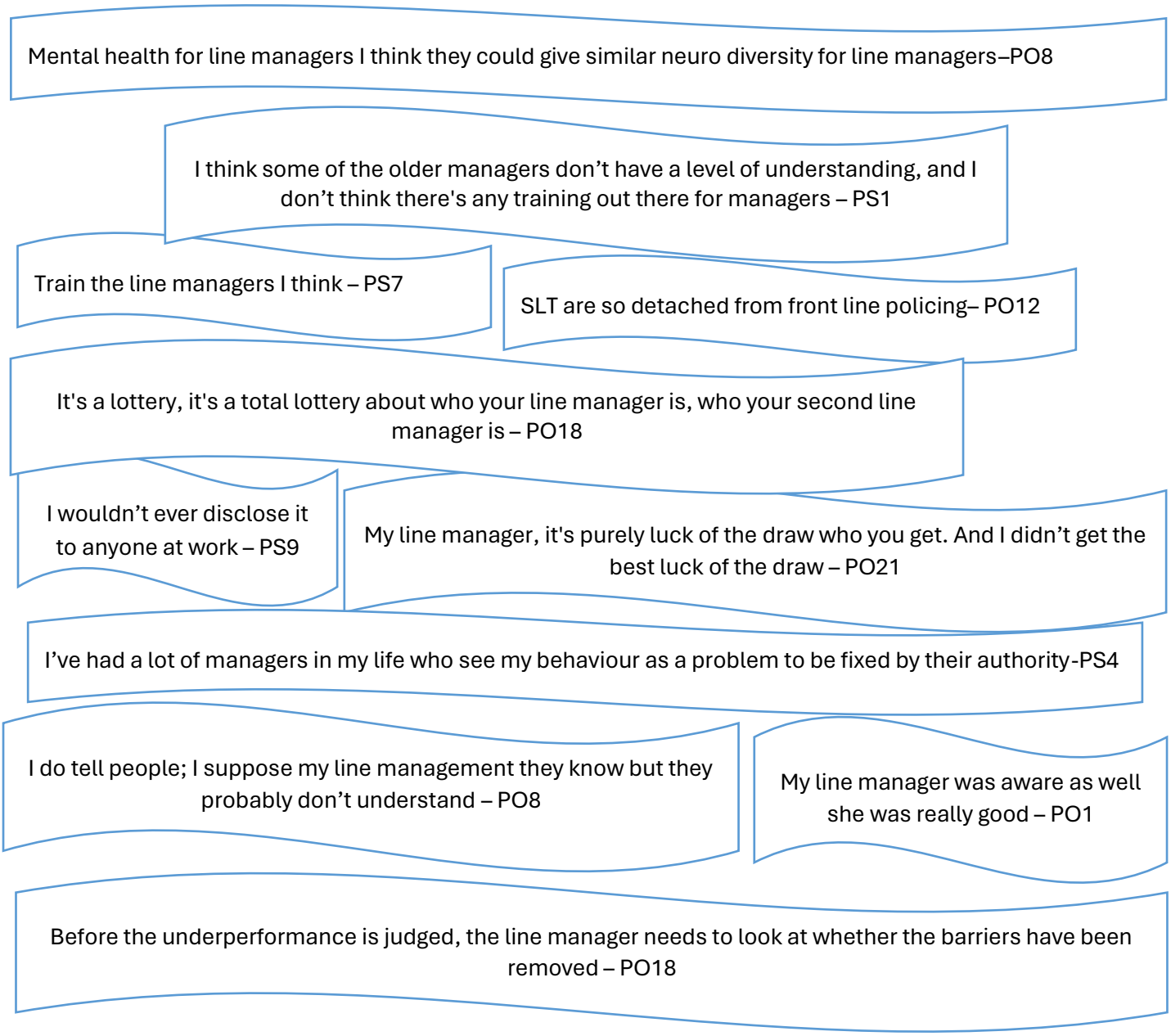
Inevitably whoever is interviewing is going to have a personal bias, that's the thing isn't it? You can't dehumanise it, it's not an algorithm'– PO10

The views around support and reasonable adjustments were quite mixed among the participants. Some participants felt that they had been supported to some extent by their organisation and that they had actively sought reasonable adjustments to help them in the job. However, there were many reports where reasonable adjustments had been sought but these had failed because of inadequate implementation or knowledge

sharing. This was especially prominent in relation to promotion, where many participants felt that promotion was out of their reach for a range of reasons.

3.7: Cluster seven: Role of the manager and issues of disclosure

The participants felt that their immediate line manager/supervisor, and those in senior leadership roles were instrumental in how neurodivergent officers and staff experience working for the police. This was especially pertinent in relation to whether the individuals elected to disclose their condition.



Disclosing their condition was viewed as a challenging thing to do by most participants. While some participants had disclosed to their manager and some to their peers as well, they did have concerns about how they would be treated because of it. The participants reported that the manager was a central figure in terms of the attitude and culture

within a team, and in terms of how they were treated at work. This was particularly important in terms of whether or not they sought and received support and reasonable adjustments.

4.0. RECOMMENDATIONS AND PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

4.1. Introducing our recommendations

These recommendations are based on what people said in the interviews. They are also influenced by the work of scholars such as Professor Amanda Kirby and Theo Smith on Neurodiversity in the Workplace, and Dr David Milton's work on autism acceptance. This section is written from a neurodiversity (ND) perspective on Autism and ADHD. This approach emphasises the strengths that these identities bring to the workplace, and the importance of valuing autism and ADHD as part of natural human diversity rather than viewing them as indicative of impairment or disability. In making these recommendations, we also note that the recent Buckland report (2024) has advocated that employers need to have increased awareness of neurodivergence, reduce stigma, and take steps to capitalise on the strengths of their neurodivergent employees. This report also recognises that more can be done to support neurodivergent persons in the recruitment processes, as well as supporting those persons already in the workplace.

The recommendations are grouped under five headings. As a general principle these recommendations are concerned with maximising benefits to the person and to the workplace, and minimising harm to individuals.

1. Recruitment
2. Support systems
3. Reasonable adjustments and managing in the workplace.
4. Culture, organisational systems, and training.
5. Optimising the strengths of neurodivergent employees

5.2. Recruitment

Neurodivergent persons have skills that are needed in police work. Under-employment of autistic people and persons with ADHD mean that organisations are not benefitting from the talents such individuals bring to their work. The most effective organisations are those with Disability Champions and with strong Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion policies (Accenture, 2018). There needs to be an awareness and acceptance of the value of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace at a senior management level. This needs to include recognition of the need to recruit, retain, and to support their development and promotion. The recruitment experience is very important, especially as the recent Buckland report (2024) shows that autistic people have much more negative experiences of interviews, psychometric testing, and group tasks, and find it more challenging than their neurotypical peers to navigate generic job descriptions, ambiguous interview questions, and challenging sensory environments.

Police training colleges also need to value neurodiversity and do more to support inclusion in the training of new neurodivergent recruits and promotion of policing as a career to school students considering their career options. Employers and trainers need to be encouraged to have conversations with the student officers that recognise the strengths that neurodivergent people bring to work. They also need to demonstrate flexibility in how they deliver training and assess recruits. For example, the specific wording of job descriptions needs to be checked to ensure that they are not indirectly excluding groups. There needs to be a change from the sole use of interviews as recruitment methods rather than telephone or online options. The use of personality testing that may preclude certain characteristics more often found in neurodiverse individuals needs to be addressed. Finally, it is important to check the kinds of questions being asked in interviews and to consider if they are ambiguous or irrelevant and need to be omitted. Police organisations are encouraged to consult with experts and experts by experience in implementing changes to their recruitment practices to ensure any change is informed by those who know autism and ADHD.

4.3 Support systems

It is important to provide ongoing support to a neurodivergent person once they are appointed. Ideally, this needs to be a senior manager or human resources staff member that can act as a mentor to the employee, but peer support can also be useful. This person will be a point of contact for the employee throughout their service and they will fulfil a number of roles. They will:

1. Go through the persons job description to explain exactly what is expected.
2. Provide a description of workplace acronyms and jargon and give information about unwritten ways of working.
3. Ensure timely adjustments are in place (see section below).
4. Conduct regular reviews with clear feedback. This should be about reducing anxiety for the person and not be conducted as an additional line of management.
5. Ensure that there are clear line management and support processes in place.
6. Check any changes to the job description and outcomes of annual reviews are clearly communicated.
7. Provide a space for the person to discuss if or what information is shared with colleagues and senior personnel.

(Adapted from Kirby and Theo)

The last point relates to disclosure of their neurodivergent identity. All employees need to feel 'psychological safety'. This means that informing others needs to be the person's choice, it needs to be handled sensitively and ethically by the staff member, and their needs to be a contract of trust that agreed actions are implemented. A person may disclose that they are undergoing assessment or that they believe they have traits without having a formal diagnosis. In these circumstances, the organisation should still

consider the need for reasonable adjustments even though they may not be under a legal duty.

4.4 Reasonable adjustments and managing in the workplace.

Employers need to make reasonable adjustments for individuals with disabilities under the Equality Act, 2010 (or in Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995). Autism and ADHD are technically positioned as disabilities for the purposes of this Act. It is important that neurodivergent persons are given an early opportunity to discuss their needs with their manager and for there to be a written agreement with the employee about the type of adjustments required and the timescale for implementation. These adjustments will need to be reviewed at regular intervals as job roles and the environment changes, and the individual's circumstances alter. This requires a trusting relationship between the manager and the employee that disclosure will lead to positive actions, and that these requirements will not be viewed as indicative of the employees' incompetence. Part of this conversation must focus on how the employee prefers to communicate and any expectations around communication with colleagues.

4.5. Culture, organisational systems, and training.

Policies need to be in place to state a commitment to neurodiversity as part of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. These need to be easily accessible and they should signpost support. Cultural change requires senior buy-in, and this means not only autism and/or ADHD awareness but autism and ADHD acceptance, i.e., staff believe that autistic employees and those with ADHD have talents that they bring to work. There needs to be mandatory training for all staff on Neurodiversity, Autism Awareness and Acceptance; this approach is currently being implemented for health and social care professionals across England with the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training in Learning Disability and Autism Programme (NHS Health Education England]. Those employees with managerial responsibility or in human resources need to have more extended training about their duties under the Equalities Act (or Disability Discrimination Act), and Autism Act.

4.6. Optimising the strengths of neurodivergent employees

Neurodivergent police officers and staff should be positioned in job roles that make best use of their strengths and are also conducive to their psychological wellbeing. One such example of a strength may be in working with neurodivergent members of the public, as well as training non-neurodivergent colleagues in how best to support this group. Previous research findings report autistic people being able to communicate effectively with other autistic people (Crompton et al., 2020). This supports the theory of the double empathy problem, described by Milton (2012), which suggests that whilst autistic people 'often lack insight about non-(autistic) perceptions and culture,' 'it is equally the case that non-(autistic) people lack insight into the minds and culture of 'autistic people.'

5.0. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Michelle O'Reilly (BSc [hons], MSc, MA, PhD, PGCAPHE, SFHEA., c.Psychol. AFBPSS) is an Associate Professor of Communication in Mental Health at the University of Leicester, working in both the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, and the School of Psychology and Vision Sciences. Michelle is also a Research Consultant and Quality Improvement Advisor for Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust. Michelle is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and is also a Chartered Psychologist in Health, as well as being an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. Michelle has specific interest in child and adolescent mental health and has been investigating the relationship between mental health and social media as part of that work. Michelle also undertakes research in self-harm and suicidal behaviour, neurodevelopmental conditions, and child mental health services, such as mental health assessments and family therapy. Michelle recently won the Anselm Strauss Award for Qualitative Family Research for her co-authored contribution on discursive psychology in this area. Michelle has expertise in qualitative methodologies and specialises in discursive psychology and conversation analysis. She has written several books on autism, including practical texts for parents of autistic children and inquiry texts founded in sociology on inequalities in autism.

Dr Samuel Tromans (BSc [hons], MBChB, PGCME, PhD, FHEA, MRCPsych)) is Associate Professor of Psychiatry in the SAPPHIRE Group, Department of Population Health Sciences at the University of Leicester, and Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist in the Adult Learning Disability Service at Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust. His research interests include Neurodevelopmental Conditions and Psychiatric Epidemiology, and he has over 50 published peer-reviewed journal articles and textbook chapters. He is currently working on the 2023 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, a national survey of mental health and wellbeing of adults living in England. He is an editor of 'Psychiatry of Intellectual Disability Across Cultures' (Oxford University Press), published in November 2023, and is Academic Secretary for the Neurodevelopmental Psychiatry Special Interest Group at the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Dr Alison Drewett (BA (Hons), BSc (Hons), MA, PhD, MRCSLT is a Research Associate in Visual Communication in Medicine at Loughborough University. She is working on the qualitative research work package collaborating with adults with learning disabilities for an NIHR funded project. Alison is also a practicing Speech and Language Therapist and has worked in Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, specialising in autism. She is training in autism diagnosis. Alison has recently completed her PhD on Autistic Adults' Involvement in Mental Health Hospital Care using innovative video-based research methods and participatory research techniques. She has started to publish this work in academic journals and continues to showcase this important work.

Our researcher:

Sue Elliott is the lead research assistant on the project and was responsible for conducting the interviews. Previously, Sue was a police officer for 30 years, spending 22 years as an investigator of major crime, for example murder, kidnap, and blackmail. Sue was also one of the force's interview advisors, specialising in investigative interviewing. After leaving the force Sue attained a distinction in an MSc in forensic psychology, which allowed her to take her first research role in 2015. Since then, Sue has been working as a research assistant on projects looking at gun crime across Europe and three projects regarding prisons. Sue also led the data collection for our recent research project on working with suicide (LOSST LIFFE project) and this engaged police officers and staff in the UK, New Zealand and Guyana.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Table of themes and codes

Theme	Codes
Personal information	General personal information Hobbies and leisure time Personal information -children, spouses Broader family information – parents, friendships Neurodivergent child Neurodivergent family member
Pre-policing career	Education Other achievements Previous roles outside of the police
Career history and role information	Time in policing General route through career Current role Variation and roles in the police New roles Passion for the role Need for job satisfaction
Pre-diagnosis information and reflections	Reflections on childhood Early indicators of neurodivergence Diagnosis in childhood Pre-diagnosis concerns in adulthood Own child leading to suspicions of self School information
Diagnosis	Not diagnosed or not recognised Diagnosis in adulthood Recent diagnosis in adulthood Characteristics not entirely congruent Process of seeking a diagnosis Reasons for help-seeking

Impact of the diagnosis	Value of the diagnosis – need for a label Making sense of characteristics or behaviours Lack of value of diagnosis – problem of the label Impact of diagnosis
Challenges of obtaining a diagnosis	Frustrations with the diagnostic process Slow service provision – especially in Covid Going private for the diagnosis and support
Characteristics of neurodivergence	Coordination Stimming Echolalia Micro or hyper-focused – obsessive Eye contact challenges Liking own company Being different – feeling different Social interaction and communication challenges Dislike of change Sensory processing issues Attention – concentration – executive functioning Literal thinking – rigidity of thinking Emotional processing Being overwhelmed
Co-occurring conditions	Co-occurring mental health conditions Co-occurring physical health conditions Co-occurring neurodevelopmental conditions
Presentation of self	Language of neurodevelopmental Gender Sexuality Heterogeneity in neurodivergence Difference not disability High functioning and issues
Broader inequalities in neurodivergence	General inequalities Negative attitudes in the police and society Challenges in gaining and retaining employment Insufficient policy and procedures General lack of services
Challenges of being neurodivergent	General challenges Describing the condition to others

	Perceptions and misconceptions of others Visibility and invisibility of the condition Masking behaviours Disparaging or negative language from others Neurotypical people do not understand neurodivergence
Medication and healthcare interventions	Medication Medication for co-occurring conditions Challenges of medication Medication impacting police work No medication Lack of support generally Therapy or counselling Coaching
General experience of working for the police	General challenge of police work Difficulty in employment interviews Need questions in advance Politics of policing – bureaucracy
Culture of the police – nature of the job and organisation	Historic culture of the police – then and now Nature of the job and organisation Type of people – hierarchical culture Challenge of conforming to expectations Not valued by the organisation Need for cultural change
Experience joining the police	College of policing and neurodiversity Initial challenges in recruitment to the police Being young when recruited Neurodivergence as a challenge to recruitment Problematic process of recruitment Being unprepared for realities of police work Career aspirations and motivations
Technology, computers and digital	Structure – computer work suited Changes in technology over time Challenges of learning new systems Digital policing and cyber crime Technology facilitating the job – or making it harder

	Role of social media and media
Neurodivergent benefits and strengths in the role	Thinking outside of the box Being good at the job and working with the public Police is a suited role for neurodivergent people Strengths and weaknesses general Persistence in getting the job done Good memory Investigative skills and problem solving Appreciation of structure and method Sticking to rules, punctuality Good results Focus on details – analytic mind Sense of detachment Quick learning Asking questions others do not ask
Frontline policing – benefits and barriers	Comparing response to other roles Working in response general Pressure – stress – unpredictability Unprepared for response Liking the response role
Working with autistic victims, suspects or witnesses	Good at working with those with vulnerabilities Identifying with those with the condition Frequency of contact with neurodivergence Limitations working with neurodivergence Adjustments, strategies working with neurodivergence
Challenges working for the police	Favours neurotypical people Barriers of systems and structures Trying to fit in Speaking up or speaking out Challenge of socialising – face not fitting Regret joining the police
Challenge of going above and beyond – workload	Being efficient and meticulous Going above expectations Greater workload increases challenges Doing more to make a difference Need for work life balance

Lack of confidence	Understanding the self Lack of confidence Low self-esteem
The police do not understand autism and ADHD	Becoming typecast as a certain kind of person Little understanding of neurodivergence Frustration about lack of understanding Limited knowledge Experience improves understanding Problems arise because of lack of understanding Police do not care about neurodivergence People do not believe police can be autistic or have ADHD
Areas of policing – higher risk	Issues or benefits of working with firearms Issues and benefits of working with tasers Driving – blues and twos
Neurodivergence interfering with the work	Concerns about reactions of others Personal challenges in managing characteristics at work Organisation issues creating challenges Struggle with role requirements
Neurodivergent characteristics as a barrier in the police	Being blunt with others Challenge of failure Need to consult with neurodivergent people to improve things Need for space, peace, solitude Need for recognition and praise
Roles and skills	Roles unsuitable for autism or ADHD Roles more suitable for autism and ADHD Being right for the role Pressure or challenges of being in the wrong role Being happy and suited with skill set
Promotion and progression	Challenges in the promotion process Human side of the promotion process Needing support for promotion Resisting promotion

	Challenge of taking exams Promotion inaccessible Encouraged to apply for promotion Failures in the promotion process
Detrimental impact of police work	Feeing tired or exhausted Pressure to perform Feeling overwhelmed and difficulty coping Exposure to difficult material Trauma of the work Depressive thoughts – suicidal ideation
EDI issues - inequality	Privilege and inequality Inclusion and diversity PR – trying to look good Teams need diversity Neurodiversity is not prioritised like race and gender Positive and negative of 'woke'
Bullying and discrimination	Bullying or in receipt of inappropriate behaviour Stigma of the condition – fear of judgement Risk of discrimination
Support networks	Knowledge sharing through local hubs and networks Taking an active role in support and networks Knowledge sharing through national networks Supporting each other Resource issues in support Value of neurodivergent peer understanding Value of inclusion
Training and training issues	Limits of inclusion and diversity training Police need training in autism and ADHD
Support and coping outside of the organisation	Issues with coping – self care Family and personal support Exercise Psychological strategies Using hobbies as coping Coping strategies specific to work

Support – or lack of – in the organisation	General support or no support in the organisation Things have got better Supportive others – supportive peers Challenges of working with peers Neurodivergent police supporting neurodivergent police Support needed for new recruits Police need mental health support – formal and informal Lack of support for mental health or trauma Hiding things -fear of help-seeking
Role of the manager	Hierarchies in the force leads to favouring some Neurodivergent people educating managers Manager responsibility
The management lottery	Manager lottery Poor management Manager lack of knowledge Lack of support from manager Supportive line manager
Reasonable adjustments	Not knowing entitlements Misconceptions of reasonable adjustments Responsibility of the organisation to oversee Importance of early intervention Provision and recognition they are needed Seeking them actively Need for choice in reasonable adjustments HR and OH in reasonable adjustments Failure in reasonable adjustments Not needing them
Disclosure of the diagnosis	Value of disclosure Manager aware or not aware Disclosure to peers and others Disclosure tackles stigma Dilemmas of disclosing – fears Difficulties or concerns in making others aware Not wanting to stand out or be treated differently Having to prove diagnosis to be taken seriously

	Negative impact of disclosure
Impact of Covid-19	Personal impact or not Covid impacting mental health and/or neurodivergence Reduction in social pressures Transitions out of Covid Role changes due to Covid Work life during Covid Challenges of workload and fear Lack of leadership in Covid Working from home
Participation in research	Being a participant in research