Neurodiverse Friendly Town Toolkit

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term which describes several variations in how people's brains process information. The 'neurodiversity umbrella' is broad and there is no right or wrong answer for what can be considered an inclusion of neurodiversity.

- Here are some commonly understood types of neurodiversity:
  - Autism
  - ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder)
  - Dyscalculia
  - Dyslexia
  - Dyspraxia or DCD (Developmental Coordination Disorder)
  - Dysgraphia
  - Tourette's Syndrome
  - Misophonia

Common strengths of neurodiversity

- Detail orientation
- Pattern recognition
- Deep focus
- Memory skills
- Logical thinking
- Persistence
- Specialised knowledge
- Honesty
- Loyalty

Common challenges of neurodiversity

It is important to recognise that many stereotypes exist within discussions and understandings of neurodiversity. Each case of neurodiversity is unique. However, some common exhibitions of neurodiverse traits can help our identification and acceptance of neurodiverse individuals within the community.

- Communication: difficulties with eye-contact; inability to function in a multiple-voice scenario; adversity to small talk; lack of awareness of social cues.
- Sensory issues: aversions to bright light, temperature, crowds, certain noises, background distractions.
- Nonlinear thinking: difficulties with 'thinking outside the box' and finding original ideas or solutions.
- Interests: neurodiverse people can become hyper-focussed on their interests which can be perceived as a fixation or obsession. This can lead to over-animation, excessive excitement or language garbling when discussing interests.
- Surprising reactions: difficulties with processing emotions in commonly accepted ways. This is often due to overstimulation, caused by too much noise or several simultaneously occurring activities. This can lead to a requirement to remove themselves from a situation, or unexpected behaviour (e.g., verbal or physical outbursts; or 'clamming up').

- Physical tics: facial tics, leg tremors, eye-blinking, jumping, vocal tics, etc.

Why is it important to understand neurodiversity?

- 1 in 7 people in the UK have some kind of neurodivergence
- Recognising the importance of neurodiversity can create a more equitable society that values and celebrates the differences.
- Society can be made stronger by encouraging neurodiverse people to flourish, share their thoughts and feelings and self-advocate in an accepting and respectful society that is willing to make adjustments.
- Neurodivergent individuals can experience social isolation through challenges associated with communication and relationships. Through acquiring a better understanding of neurodiversity, barriers can be overcome, and more inclusive communities can be created.
- Having an effective, wide-reaching understanding of neurodiversity means that neurodivergent individuals can instantly feel comfortable within their community and do not feel pressured to explain themselves or avoid certain areas or businesses.

Achieving a Neurodiversity Friendly Town

The Neurodiverse Friendly Community Initiative, established in 2022 between Cullen Communications and Neurodiversity Ireland, follows a series of principles which aim to promote inclusion and improve the everyday experiences of neurodivergent people in local communities.

As a result, Sandymount in Dublin was the first neurodiversity-friendly village that 'welcomes and celebrates different brains and unique thinkers'. We wish to do a similar initiative here in Alcester and agree to the following principles:

- Promoting understanding on the small but valuable changes that can be done to achieve neurodiversity friendliness.
- Improving communication: WhatsApp groups of parents with neurodiverse children; monthly meetings which provide a great channel of support, place for sharing tips, and experiences.
- Working with local businesses to garner their support to be neurodiversity friendly: creating accommodations that can make a meaningful difference; displaying the initiative's infinity sticker in the window to demonstrate support to neurodivergent individuals; being assistance dog friendly.
- Working with local community groups and sports clubs to enact local, tangible inclusivity through programs and activities.
- Working with local schools to drive understanding at a grassroots level with local children.

A spotlight on local businesses

Within the hospitality and retail sector, changes can be made to create a neurodiversity-friendly environment for customers and colleagues:

- Provide staff with neurodiversity training: developing skills, awareness, situational judgement, etc.

- Consider sensory stimuli: to combat overstimulation, businesses could offer a calm area away from the main activities of the site or they could provide sensory-friendly items such as noise-cancelling headphones or fidget cubes.
- Provide clear communication: venues should be set up with clear, visual cues to enable customers' navigation when using signage and menus. Furthermore, avoid using solely auditory cues to convey information.
- Maintain inclusive hiring practices: fostering a neurodiversity-friendly environment starts from within. It is important for businesses to recognise that many traditional job interview advice (e.g., maintain eye contact, smile) can be difficult and exclusionary for neurodiverse people. Therefore, businesses should be aware of the struggles that neurodiverse individuals typically experience and avoid unconscious bias.
- Cultivate an open and adjustable environment where both neurodiverse customers and colleagues can feel comfortable: neurodiverse individuals may find bright lights or loud music troubling. Businesses should be willing and available to adapt their surroundings to the people who are interacting.
- Encourage feedback: this allows for continuous refinements and improvements to the neurodiversity-friendliness of businesses. Also, allowing for business developments to be guided by public advice can strengthen community values.
- Consider hosting fundraisers, events or workshops to raise awareness and funding for neurodiversity and modifications that can be made to improve access and inclusion.
- Enforce anti-discrimination policies: this will protect neurodiverse colleagues and customers, increase awareness of neurodiversity and ensure that everyone is treated with respect.
- Try to ensure that venues are physically accessible: whilst this tip relates more to physical disabilities, it is crucial in the wider development of inclusive environments to account for all members of society. This can be achieved through the provision of flexible seating arrangements, wide doorways, accessible bathrooms, ramps and lifts.

Local resources and services available to neurodivergent individuals and their families:

- Community Autism Support Service (CASS) is open to young people aged 7-18 who are on the waiting list for assessment as well as young adults and adults aged 18+. Support is also offered to parents and carers.
  Telephone support line: 0247601 2333, open Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm
- Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust
  RISE Neurodivergent Team: put together useful videos on understanding neurodevelopmental disorders.
  RISE Community Support: offers 121 consultations and workshops for parents to discuss related concerns as part of their early support offer.
- Act for Autism groups in Stratford-Upon-Avon
  https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/news/article/3325/act-for-autism
- Dimensions, free online tool https://dimensions.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/
- Hub of Hope database of support https://hubofhope.co.uk/
- Warwickshire's Family Information Service (FIS) provides information, advice and one-to-one support on issues including family relationships, finance, housing, parenting support and more. https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/directory-record/40/family-information-service
- Barnardo's *Alcester* Children and Family Centre, St Faith's Rd, *Alcester* B49 6AG. 01789 764093

- Parenting Project https://parentingproject.org.uk/
- ILEAP www.ileap.co.uk Inclusive activities for children and adults with mild/moderate learning disabilities
- MASH Team (multi-agency safeguarding hub) https://schools.warwickshire.gov.uk/directory-record/2097401/multi-agency-safeguarding-hub 01926 414144
- Healthwatch Warwickshire, have your say https://www.healthwatchwarwickshire.co.uk/
- Childline https://www.childline.org.uk/
- Homestart South Warwickshire https://www.homestartsouthwarwickshire.org.uk/
- If you provide regular unpaid emotional or physical support to a friend, neighbour, family member or member of the community, you are a carer. You may qualify for free support including opportunities to meet other carers, specialist information and advice and more. Find out more: https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/beingacarer
- Parent and Carer Support Pathway https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/carers/parent-carer-support-pathway
- If you are struggling with your mental health, remember you are not alone. There's support and help available to you and it's just a click or phone call away – visit https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/mentalhealth to find out more.
- Psychological Treatments https://www.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/iapt/ 02476 671 090
- Talking Therapies https://www.talkingtherapies.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/ 02476 671 090
- South Warwickshire MIND https://swwmind.org.uk/contact-us/
- Studio 3 mental health and well-being support (Alcester): neurodiversity pathways approach can offer support(Private Practice):
  - Diagnostic and Assessment Pathway (for diagnostic assessments for autism, ADHD, ADD, ARFID, PDA, developmental trauma, complex trauma, and more)
  - Family Pathway (for support for families, carers, advice, training and support with transitions, mediation and advocacy)
  - Therapy and Counselling Pathway (for post-diagnostic support including one-to-one therapy, counselling and ongoing support)
  - Organisations and Providers Pathway (for staff training, clinical input and advice, debriefing services, supporting transitions and working with organisations to create unique solutions to complex cases).

References

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https://www.thrivelearning.com/blog-news/how-to-create-inclusive-hospitality-environments-for-neurodiversity