

healthwatch

Neurodivergent spaces Report

Herefordshire Sept 2025 – March 2026



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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from engagement with neurodivergent individuals regarding their experiences when accessing public spaces, services, and venues across Herefordshire. The feedback highlights a range of environmental, social, and organisational factors that can significantly impact comfort, accessibility, and inclusion.

While individual experiences vary, consistent themes have emerged that provide clear opportunities for improvement. The recommendations outlined below are intended to support organisations and venues in making reasonable adjustments, in line with legal obligations, to create more inclusive and welcoming environments. Further detail is provided in the section Accessing Spaces in Herefordshire. Readers are encouraged to reflect on the feedback and consider how their spaces and practices may be adapted to better support a wider diversity of need.

The comments included in Appendices 9 and 10 reflect authentic lived experiences shared by participants. They are not intended to represent all neurodivergent individuals, but to offer valuable insight into common barriers and enablers. Feedback may include critical perspectives; however, this should be viewed constructively as an opportunity for learning, reflection, and service improvement.

Key Recommendations for Creating More Inclusive Spaces

The following priorities were identified as the most frequently referenced factors influencing whether spaces feel accessible and welcoming to neurodivergent people (noting that reasonable adjustments are a legal requirement):

1. Create a culture of welcome and safety

Ensure environments are characterised by respect, kindness, acceptance, and psychological safety, enabling individuals to engage at their own pace and level of comfort.

2. Ensure well-trained, consistent, and informed staff

Staff should have strong communication skills and an understanding of neurodiversity, including awareness of anxiety indicators and non-judgemental approaches. Consistency is important—minimising staff turnover helps build familiarity and trust with customers. Good customer service standards, clear boundaries, and effective crowd management are essential. Staff should also recognise tools such as JAM cards and Sunflower lanyards, actively encourage feedback, and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement.

3. Provide choice through adaptable environments

Where possible, offer alternative spaces and clearly communicate these options in advance (e.g. signage, websites, or staff explanation). Key considerations include:

- Quiet areas free from excessive noise, alarms, Tannoy's, and echoes

- Alternative entrances and exits to support those who may need to leave quickly
- Sensory considerations such as lighting, temperature, décor, seating, and clutter
- Managing strong or mixed smells (including cleaning products, food, and personal odours)
- Offering menu variety to accommodate sensory preferences and dietary needs

4. Maintain consistency and manage change carefully

Avoid unexpected changes wherever possible. Provide advance notice of alterations and ensure that systems, routines, and offerings are communicated clearly, calmly, and with sufficient explanation.

5. Implement additional reasonable adjustments to enhance accessibility

Examples of further supportive measures include:

- Quiet hours or low-sensory sessions
- Availability of headphones and fidget tools (maintained in good condition)
- Physical accessibility improvements (ramps, lowered counters, clear routes)
- Inclusive signage reinforcing welcome, behavioural expectations, and available support
- Clear information about how to access assistance and provide feedback
- Building maps or layouts to help individuals understand different environments and navigate spaces confidently

Collectively, these recommendations aim to support services and venues in creating environments that are more inclusive, predictable, and responsive to neurodivergent needs, ultimately contributing to a more accessible and welcoming Herefordshire for all.

Further Recommendations

For Neurodivergent Individuals

Many neurodivergent people report challenges in feeling comfortable in a range of public and social environments. The suggestions shared within this report reflect lived experience from others in the community and may provide useful ideas when exploring new spaces or services.

Where possible, individuals are encouraged to identify and use environments that feel more comfortable and supportive. Appendix 10 provides examples of

venues in Herefordshire that participants described positively. It is recognised that experiences are highly individual and will vary.

It is also anticipated that increased awareness and understanding among services and businesses will continue to improve accessibility and inclusivity across the county.

For the Wider Community

Greater understanding of neurodivergent experiences can support more inclusive attitudes and responses within everyday public life. Behaviours such as anxiety, distress, or sensory overload may be misunderstood; increased awareness can reduce judgement and promote empathy and appropriate support.

If someone appears to be struggling in a public setting, a calm, patient and respectful response can make a significant difference to their experience. Constructive feedback to services and venues is also encouraged where environments could be improved, contributing to wider community benefit.

For Services, Businesses and Organisations

The following recommendations are based on recurring themes identified through engagement with neurodivergent individuals. They reflect reasonable adjustments that can significantly improve accessibility, comfort, and inclusion:

Sensory environment

- Provide or identify quiet spaces, considering noise sources such as music, Tannoy's, crowding, echoing environments, electronic machines, and sudden or loud sounds
- Ensure lighting and temperature are comfortable, avoiding extremes of brightness, darkness, heat or cold
- Reduce sensory overload through simplified décor, avoiding clutter and overly stimulating furnishings or textures
- Manage smells, including cleaning products, food odours, and other strong or mixed scents, where possible offering scent-free areas
- Consider menu or service variety, including different textures and options to accommodate sensory needs

Access, movement and navigation

- Provide alternative entrances and exits where possible to support individuals who may need to leave quickly or avoid busy areas
- Ensure clear, accessible layouts, supported by building maps or plans that explain different environments and how to access assistance

Consistency and communication

- Avoid sudden or unannounced changes wherever possible
- Provide clear, timely communication about changes to systems, routines, or offerings
- Maintain consistent, clearly explained processes and offer stable, familiar options where possible

Additional reasonable adjustments

- Introduce quiet hours or low-sensory sessions where feasible
- Provide and maintain headphones and fidget resources for customer use
- Ensure physical accessibility, including ramps, lower counters, and alternative communication methods
- Use clear signage to set expectations and communicate inclusion, safety, and support (e.g. welcoming neurodivergent people, zero tolerance of bullying, availability of assistance, quiet periods, and encouragement to ask for help)
- Display clear information on how individuals can request support or provide feedback

Collectively, these adjustments support the creation of environments that are more predictable, accessible, and welcoming, helping services across Herefordshire to better meet the needs of neurodivergent people, their families, and the wider community.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to all the individual neurodivergent people for talking to us and filling our checklists online. It was fantastic to meet you and hear about your lives.

Healthwatch Herefordshire would like to thank the venues and organisations that allowed us to engage with people and the organisations, services and businesses who helped.

Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to authentic experiences and observations on specific dates by individuals.

Our report is not a representative portrayal of the experiences of all neurodivergent people in Herefordshire, only an account of what was described and contributed at the time.

Introduction

Participants and methods

This project was conducted from September 2025 to March 2026.

We wanted to find out about Herefordshire spaces:

- Where people who are neurodivergent feel comfortable and where they do not and why.
- What establishments can do to improve the experiences of neurodivergent people.
- What the neurotypical community can do to improve the experiences of neurodivergent people.

We engaged our target group by using a mix of focus groups, conducting conversations with groups and individuals and online checklists.

We personally met and listened to the views of **92 neurodivergent people**. More individuals filled checklists online (*Demographics Appendix 7*), and a few corresponded by email. **196 online checklists** with comments about different Herefordshire places or transport were completed.

To meet people, we visited:

Ross Community Garden | The Cart Shed | ECHO Rep Group | Beacon College | Star College | Hereford Make | Autism Partnership Board | HANDS Hub | Youth Employment Hub

And held focus groups in

Leominster | Ledbury | Bromyard | Hereford

We met individuals and spoke to people on the telephone including representatives of **NAS, Mind, Hands, Accessible Herefordshire**.

We heard about and recorded people's views regarding 138 places and transport types in Herefordshire. A full list is provided in Appendix 1.

This included generic comments and the following specific categories of places:

18 Cafes and Restaurants | 7 Supermarkets | 21 Shops/Shopping Centres
7 Clubs | 10 Charity and Voluntary Sector settings | 2 Employment and Voluntary Opportunities | 8 Pubs | 4 Fast Food places | 3 Community buildings,
9 Leisure Places | 7 Outdoor places | 6 Education places | 13 NHS places
1 Online support place | 6 Stadium/Festival/Entertainment venues | 3 Other and
3 Transport.

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Herefordshire

Please help to Shape More Inclusive Spaces

We need to hear from Neurodivergent people with Autism, ADHD or Sensory processing differences.

Can you spare some time to tell us about your experience of community spaces in Herefordshire including shops, cafés, leisure centres, and public transport.

Please fill a sensory check list of the places that are good and not so good. Places you use and would like to use <https://tinyurl.com/HWNeuro2026>

Improve Herefordshire environments with your feedback

Please get in touch if you need a hand filling the check lists or need a hard copy
Deadline February 27th 2026
Thank you.

Get in Touch 01432 277044
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Led by lived experience
Flexible and informal
Real local impact

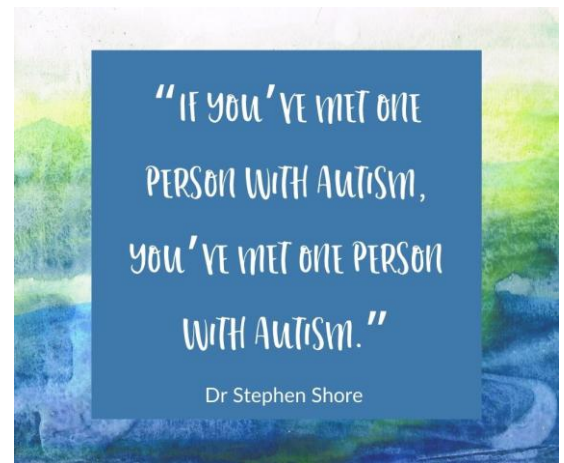
Limitations and variations

Many neurodivergent people find it very difficult to go out at all. Although we spoke with a few people representing this group we spoke mainly to people that are able to visit some places. Many people could only cite very few places that they felt comfortable going and at the other extreme some people appeared to be comfortable trying most places using strategies they've developed.

“Home is our nest – protected – all the masks come off”

Everyone is an individual, and while these results may give us pointers that will help establishments to attract more people who are neurodivergent, it is important to treat customers as individuals.

What suits one person may not suit another. We found some commonality and areas that both establishments, the general public and community can improve upon that would help neurodivergent people to access more opportunities available to the neurotypical population.



Just because problems aren't visible,
doesn't mean we don't need recognition of it.

What does it mean to be Neurodivergent?

This helpful definition is stated by the Priory Group which resonates with this project's feedback. (<https://www.priorygroup.com>)

Being neurodivergent means your brain processes, learns or experiences the world in a way that's different from what's typically expected – and this can show up in many different ways in day-to-day life.

For some, it might mean being highly focused on certain topics or noticing patterns that others miss. Others may have a strong eye for detail, creative problem-solving skills or a deep sense of empathy. At the same time, there can be challenges – such as difficulties with organisation, sensory sensitivities (like being overwhelmed by noise or lights), or finding social situations more demanding. Sometimes, neurodivergent people may hide their true selves, (Masking) either on purpose or without realising it, to fit in with others. This can, at times, affect their mental health and overall wellbeing.

It's important to remember that neurodivergence isn't one single experience – it varies greatly from person-to-person. What's a strength for one person might be

a challenge for another. Everyone's profile is different, and that's what makes understanding and supporting neurodivergence so important.

Neurodiversity – differences in how people think, learn, process information and interact with the world are a normal and natural part of being human – not something that needs to be 'fixed' or 'cured'. Every brain works differently, and these differences can bring unique strengths as well as challenges.

Neurodivergent people responding in this project were diagnosed or undiagnosed with ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia and other neurodivergent conditions. Some have mobility difficulties, and other disabilities such as Learning Disabilities and sensory impairments.

Also see helpful Herefordshire Council definitions in Appendix 2.

How many people are neurodivergent?

For some neurodivergent conditions there are no definitive statistics in the UK according to Government websites. The following estimates are taken from The Neurodiversity Directory. (Full set with sources + data limitations is in Appendix 3).

It is estimated that:

- 15% of the UK population are neurodivergent. Approximately 10 million people across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
- ADHD affects an estimated 3–4% of UK adults, approximately 1.9 million people.
- 39% of UK respondents report having a neurodivergent child demonstrating the widespread family experience of neurodivergence across UK households.

Why should places change for Neurodivergent People?

Community spaces, services, transport and other businesses would improve their offer by considering the needs of neurodivergent people. This will benefit neurodivergent people and also makes good business sense. (See financial returns of neurodiversity in Appendix 3).



“Organisations are missing out on the business of disabled consumers due to poor accessibility (both physical and digital) and not being disability confident in their customer services approach.

More than **1 in 5** potential UK consumers have a disability.

75% of disabled people and their families have walked away from a UK business because of poor accessibility or customer service”.

(<https://wearepurple.org.uk>)

In addition, whether you run a retail business, a chain of restaurants, or have clients visiting your office, or are an employer, accessibility for your customers is a top priority.

Although some neurodivergent people do not see themselves as disabled or are formally diagnosed, being neurodivergent will often amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

All businesses have an obligation to make reasonable adjustments to help disabled individuals access their goods, facilities and services. (See Reasonable Adjustments in Appendix 3).

We hope that improvements will be made considering the recommendations of this report and will be a win-win for all. Many of the improvements are of interest and would improve the experiences of Neurotypical customers too.

Accessing spaces in Herefordshire

People told us their experiences of being neurodivergent and accessing spaces and transport in Herefordshire and how it affects their senses, emotions and energy levels as well as how it feels to have a meltdown. By reading these accounts it can bring an appreciation and understanding to neurotypical people and business staff about how aspects make people feel and can form barriers.

The following environmental factors and areas are typically mentioned remembering that not all of them affect everyone to the same extent. But some exist in combination to form a multitude of reasons not to enter a space. In addition, once put off it is a strong feature of neurodivergence to never return.

My son joins a group and if they don't have the support, they then have the desire to stop. They don't have the ability to then change or be flexible to go back and therefore never go back.

Common Recurring Themes

Many common recurring themes were identified and the way that they can affect neurodivergent people are explained in the sections that follows:

- Over stimulation
- Noise and Crowds, Light and temperature
- Smells
- Queues

- Coping with change
- Communication and being given time to respond, consider, think
- People's Attitudes
- Descriptions of build up to a panic attack or meltdown, Disassociating or shutdowns and masking
- Feeling Safe
- Space
- Other associated conditions and Accessibility
- Food and texture sensitivity

"The biggest issue is CHANGE, over- stimulated areas – noise/crowds, lights".

Over stimulation, Noise and Crowds

Nearly everybody mentioned noise and crowds as difficulties for them. The only notable exceptions for a few people were venues or activities where everyone was present with a unified experience even though the place was crowded and noisy for example music festivals or musical gigs or sports fixtures. It was still important to have space and areas where people could retreat and the way that the event was stewarded for a feeling of safety.

Issue and recommendations:

Over stimulation is a big issue.

Recommendations include:

- Having somewhere quiet people can retreat to, so that they can settle, prepare and recharge is enough for some. Having a quiet separate area completely to enjoy is best for many. Many said it does not have to be silent but not have loud noises or unexpected sudden noises including doors slamming, coffee machines, loud music, announcements, staff calling out. Provide option in booking.
- Having a quieter less crowded alternative entrance that people can use is reassuring for others as well as offering a means of quick escape if getting overwhelmed.
- Alerting people to when the businesses quiet times are or having silent hours or low noise hours. And people request that some should be at sociable hours and not times when families can't access them e.g. preschool or late at night.
- Vigilance by friendly welcoming staff when there are crowds to look out for people struggling and manage crowds safely.
- Clear boundaries and behaviour expectations.



- Encourage feedback about noise and respond kindly. Consider acoustic-damping furniture in places that echo.
- Keep places tidy. Decor not too busy or stimulating.
- Varied entry times, entrances and exits.
- Engender a sense of community, common purpose and friendly well-behaved participants.

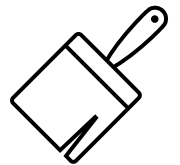
Illustration Quotes

"Not being able to interpret people can make us very hyper vigilant (trying to pick up on subtle nuances all the time) so it's exhausting being around people we don't know, and who don't know us. Not to mention the sensory awareness".

"When you have a child with high support needs it can be about less sensory stimulation not being quiet".

"I love the natural light that comes through all the glass and being able to focus on the trees and sky outside when I'm making my way through crowded areas, instead of looking at all the people. I also wear a wide brimmed hat or baseball cap to block out the bright lights above, and keep focused, like a horse in blinkers!! At the end, people tend to congregate and can block the way out, but I can focus on the trees outside and stay calm until I'm outside in the fresh air again".

"Hate mess". "Colours are individual preferences".



"Generally, I don't go anywhere on a Saturday because it's very busy and difficult, so I go at different times and often try to get places very early".

"I'm very sensitive to noise I have tinnitus continuously as well as I'm very sensitive. I use earplugs and ear defenders a few years ago I needed both of them. This year earplugs only recently".

"I love a coffee shop, but the people talking, coffee machine noise and music is too much. If you can have an area for dogs, you can have a quiet area for people (with no speakers)".

"Don't like loud noises".

"Happy with silence – don't have that uncomfortable feeling of being in silence".

"General environmental noise is very difficult for my children and me. Things like music blaring, the unexpected, fighter jets, and cars and motorbikes with loud exhausts are awful. It can be very hard to walk around with headphones all the time".

Echoes: "(Place) is a bit echoey, which is a shame. They could do with some acoustic-damping furniture, which would make a difference. The space is nice and open".

"I struggle with music blaring. Anything unexpected is hard".

"If it is busy. You can't always choose where to sit".

"It's so crowded, it makes me anxious and I'm impatient to get to my seat".

Light and temperature

Issue and recommendations:

We had varied comments about lighting. People mainly had difficulties with flickering or buzzing lights and lights that were too bright or too dim. Fluorescent strip lights often flicker but getting high frequency ones solves this issue. People commented that they do need to see what they are eating or choosing in shops.



Temperature can affect people greatly overheating was more often mentioned than being cold exceptions being buses and outside seating in winter where no dogs are allowed in venues.



Recommendations include:

- Lights that are bright enough for activity but not too bright or too dim. Lights that don't flicker or buzz.
- Overall, not too hot but if there are variations, e.g. fires. Alternative places to sit that are cool indoors.
- Buses and other places keep windows closed in the winter.

Illustration Quotes

"Big lights in rooms – too bright".

"Lighting in Supermarkets is quite warm lighting and I like bright light. I don't like it too bright, but you have to be able to see what you are buying or eating. I don't like candlelight at the diner; I have to see what I'm eating. But there can be a lot of visible information that can be difficult".

"I need dog-friendly places that are not cold e.g. often told to eat outside. Service dogs".

"Lots of people get overwhelmed when it is too hot, for example, don't like to sit by the fire".

"I get stressed in the winter when they leave the bus windows open".

Smells

Issue and recommendations:

There were not a very large number of comments about smells, but some individuals find them extremely challenging. They are also connected to being in crowds which were mentioned previously.



Many people mentioned that they avoid using public conveniences where at all possible partly because of smells, hygiene concerns and noises of dryers and machines that puff out strong air fresheners and cleaning fluid smells. People avoid eating or drinking too much to survive till they get home.

NHS settings can have strong smells which contribute to other over stimulating factors and cause distress.

Recommendations are:

- Ask staff to avoid wearing strong-smelling perfumes or aftershaves.
- Limit or cease the use of strong-scented cleaning fluids.
- Offer seating away from strong smell areas like near the kitchen or coffee machines.
- In trains consider having no eating carriages.
- Ensure toilets are clean and free of unpleasant odours.

Illustration Quotes

"When I'm at home natural smells are OK but perfume or deodorant or washing up or laundry powder are not good. I find them repulsive. It is difficult to cope with it and understand why, but I find it really difficult and offensive. I don't eat meat, so any really meaty smells are difficult but are not repulsive not like cleaning products. I take my own flask if I go out anywhere if they have outside tables, I can eat my food and drink there".

"I have a really high sense of smell".

"...there is a cleaning smell that gets on my chest".

Dentist: "It's difficult. Noise, smells".

Smell: "Not so good, it's not nice, just yuck".

"The toilets are always smelly. I only use them if I am desperate".

"The ladies' toilets are very busy and tight to get in and out. They are hot from the hand dryer and often have loos broken down which makes queue worse. They feel a bit grubby and smelly".

Queues

Issue and recommendations:

Many people who are neurodivergent mentioned difficulty standing in a queue. For some it is about over stimulation of a crowd and often proximity of people, for others it is a feeling of being trapped, having to stand still and being over regulated.

Recommendations are:

- Devise ways to manage turn taking without the need to physically line up e.g. using tickets to denote people's turns. Display on a screen to avoid loud shouting.
- Develop online booking and timed arrivals.
- Offer special schemes to avoid queuing e.g. access cards as are offered at some visitor centres with a quiet waiting area. Consider accompanying carer/friend or family when setting up such schemes.
- Trained staff to be prepared to explain system without exposing people to undue attention.

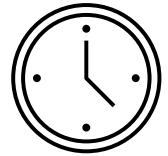


Illustration Quotes

"I wouldn't be able to stand in a queue – it's not about being impatient, it's about feeling over regulated, trapped, having to stand still and feeling of having to vomit".

"Don't like crowded places – Wouldn't go into long queues".

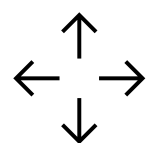
"Too impatient for queuing".

"I can use masking for queues".

"Queues – minute we see a queue we walk away".

"I book tickets online as (Place) can be stressful with things like queuing and overwhelming feelings".

"You can get an access card if you are in receipt of PIP payments – means you don't have to queue at things like (Visitor attractions). It was for the child, and they need someone to be with him".



Coping with change

Issue and recommendations:

Coping with sudden unexpected change is difficult for many people who are neurodivergent. People often expressed their liking for places that they could depend upon being consistent e.g. with menus that will not change too much or always offer certain dishes. Parents particularly pointed out the importance to them for a family outing if one member of the family has a limited dietary requirement. It is important to remember a change may be small but may follow on from a string of uncertainties and be the last straw as with the meltdown illustration later.

Public transport is particularly challenging to neurodivergent people and in this sample very few used it for that reason. Being able to plan, to know what to expect and limit periods when you may have to mask is important. On most modes of transport there are too many variables, being forced to sit next to strangers, not knowing who will speak to you and what they expect as well as traffic delays.

Recommendations are:

- Avoid sudden changes where at all possible. Let customers know well in advance and explicitly on websites of proposed changes. Be prepared to support customers and personally explain changes.
- Explain clearly outside service or on website the system operated and expectations – how it works – so that people can plan and be prepared. If there are often variations explain what these are (e.g. menu change each season), so they are not seen as unexpected. Stick to these procedures and systems.
- Maintain regular items or portions of menus or products and beware of constantly changing displays or placement.
- Stick to agreed times and inform customers of changes sensitively with the kind offer of help to navigate consequences for example in transport delays/ connections.
- Staff training to understand what may seem overreactions at relatively minor changes. Staff to be understanding, kind, nonjudgemental, supportive and aid to a safe calm space. Ask how you may help.
- Neurotypicals to avoid staring if somebody is in distress, avoid criticising or eye rolling e.g. if a child is having a meltdown – don't assume they are badly behaved. Quietly and calmly ask if and how you

may assist if it feels appropriate and you feel able. Discreetly make staff aware if they are busy.

- If somebody is not interested in talking or has headphones on or looks anxious, smile, maintain a friendly face and give them space.

Illustration Quotes

“Don’t use buses – too overwhelming – having to sit next to someone who may start a conversation with you is daunting – this builds anxiety and fear”.

“At the platform – worried I will do something wrong (am a massive planner). Can’t do a change at a station”.

“When they make up their mind about something they want it now, but it is not about impatience. The difference is wanting something and needing it to be imminent. Example – Disney – if my son could go on a ride straight away, then great, but if they have to think about it, he will change his mind”.

“My child went to rugby and went to get a particular wrap from Tesco beforehand, had it in their head that they were going to have it, it wasn’t available, but couldn’t adapt to getting something else. The process of WHY is missing. The issue of adapting to unforeseen circumstances. The challenge of A to B is SO much that if one thing goes wrong it’s too much”.



“I get anxious if I’m not told about changes”.

“don’t like as there are bright lights, they keep changing layouts and messy displays”.

Communication and being given time to respond, consider or think

Issue and recommendations:

The most frequently mentioned determinant for whether a particular space is deemed comfortable to be in by the people who responded to this survey was the quality of the staff communication and attitude. The consequent atmosphere and feeling of safety in a place were set by the staff. From the positive welcome, being given a choice of where to sit, explaining systems, being helpful, clear boundaries for dealing with disruptive or unruly presences firmly but politely, all were extremely important to make people feel safe, accepted, welcome and not judged or different.

Listening skills and allowing time to reflect and respond patiently are important to many people who are neurodivergent. One impatient response, a sharp word or body language that says hurry up are enough to put somebody off for good. Treating customers unprofessionally is in any case bad practice for all customers especially elderly, hearing or sight impaired, anyone with additional needs or a person just having a bad day!

Recommendations are:

- Staff be polite, welcoming and respectful and speak clearly.
- Staff give people enough time to think before replying. Be patient and kind. Be careful about your body language so that it does not portray impatience or judgement.
- Check your understanding of what a person is saying if there are different interpretations. Don't jump to negative conclusions. Don't assume your understanding is right. It's good to say back, "can I just confirm that this is what you want to say" or "is my understanding correct?"
- Allow for different forms of communication e.g. writing down.
- Learn what a Jam card is and become a JAM card friendly business <https://www.jamcard.org/for-business> Display a sign saying we are a JAM card friendly business to encourage your neurodivergent customers. Consider e learning for your staff to inform them about hidden disabilities and use of the JAM card and other symbols e.g. sunflower lanyard.

Illustration Quotes

"There are very few I can go. The hardest thing is people's attitudes, the eye rolling when you say we need a bit more time, people look annoyed".

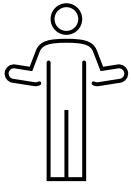
"Sometimes there is a standoff – Autism – quite often is seen as being blunt and rude but not being rude".

"It's also about the intense joy you can get from something (for example, wind turbines, lifeboats, the film Zootropolis. Hypersensitivity that causes these things – 2 extremes to everything. Not having to explain yourself so much – you don't want to explain it. Look into Jam card app".

"Potentially need more time, with others wanting you to be faster".



"It depends on who they are. I'm very sensitive to people's energy and their personality or character it's like a physical energy emanating off of them. If they are soft and gentle and kind and respectful and listen (allowing time to formulate thoughts), that helps come across as genuine, not rushed, but patient and kind".



"Something really fundamental is the use of language and it's really...do you remember the two Ronnies four candle sketch? It's very close to what it is like being autistic. A neurotypical person is convinced they are right and that the neurodiverse person has heard words but somehow it goes wrong. Like it's different for each party. You're living in a parallel universe. Must be like Hindu people in the UK we nod up and down to indicate yes and shake to indicate no but Hindus do the opposite. Must be very confusing. There is a mismatch in the way neurodivergent person uses language in a very logical way and neurotypical interpret differently. So, another example I know from a programme on autism and communication; someone says, "I've arrived on a train late to meet you on this station" the neurodiverse person might say "why are you late?". It doesn't mean they're annoyed but a neurotypical person would interpret as disgruntled or annoyed. There is a way round that. Don't assume their understanding is right. It's good to say back, "can I just confirm that this is what you want to say" or "is my understanding correct?"

People's Attitudes

Issue and recommendations:

The way that staff behave sets the tone in any service, community place, travel or business setting. Many people said they could adjust to a new place if the people there were kind, supportive and unjudgmental. People need to feel safe and respected and it helps if they get to know a few familiar friendly faces (there is not huge turnover) and if there is some sign that staff are aware of neurodivergence and make an effort to see things in their eyes and understand it.

Recommendations are:

- Kind and understanding staff that make customers feel safe.
- Staff that encourage feedback or requests without being defensive. A sign that says we encourage feedback and requests. (This will offer valuable intelligence to improve your service or business).
- Therapeutic and engagement organisations: Allow people to share information and engage when they are ready.

- Train staff and show sign or indication that staff have been trained to understand Autism and ADHD e.g. Autism Friendly environment badge; Be respecting of difference notices; Antibullying; Autism champions. Gain Autism friendly status through the local National Autistic Society. (See local training offers in Appendix 6).
- Consult with staff who are neurodivergent and employ a diverse workforce to better understand customers.

Illustration Quotes

"It's all about the people, there are places I can adjust to".

"It's not just all these things – it's about the professionals looking after people and getting more understanding from them (e.g. school staff)".

"Work it out. – How to get people out of the house; understand the person has a story that explains their behaviour and it's the staff understanding. Example – a tapping noise was annoying, she told someone, someone understood and even though she couldn't stop the tapping noise it was having someone who understood and that calmed them down".

"Everything feels like a fight – people don't understand".

"Always seen as the rude one".

"The most difficult thing is when staff react badly to my child's meltdown. An example is when the one thing they could eat wasn't available on the menu in our usual cafe.

The staff reacted to offer alternatives, saying things like – good little girls can eat this. They don't realise when they see no visible disability that they are masking their neurodivergence. Some people have masked for decades. Also, some parents and carers don't help by insisting there is nothing wrong with them. It stops them getting understanding and support".

"The reception staff are polite, kind and helpful. It is a place where I would feel able to approach them if I was unwell or struggling or had a problem".

"...the staff are very polite and respectful and give you enough time to reply. Staff are understanding and kind and encourage feedback".

"Here there is no judgement. No gameplay. You are talked to and treated as an adult".

"It's different than the (Place name). Not the same, but you can sit and reflect, and staff will pick up on when you are ready to discuss things".



Description of build up to a panic attack or meltdown, disassociating or shutdowns and masking

Issue and recommendations:

People mentioned how environmental factors can build up to meltdowns. Alternatively, the effort of masking and closing down to avoid over stimulation can leave people exhausted and unable to respond to the next request or situation. They literally shut down. The examples here graphically explain this.

A useful short read is referenced in Appendix 5 with an excerpt of advice for those witnessing a meltdown.

A neurodivergent meltdown is a complex and deeply distressing experience that is often profoundly misunderstood. It is crucial to recognize that a meltdown is not a tantrum, nor is it a deliberate act of defiance or manipulation. Rather, it is an involuntary, physiological response to an overwhelming burden of cognitive, sensory, or emotional demands that have exceeded the individual's capacity to cope.

The nervous system becomes flooded, leading to a fight or flight response that can manifest as intense crying, shouting, shutting down, or even self-injurious behaviours.

This is not happening because the person is "bad" or seeking attention, it is happening because their brain and body are in a state of acute crisis and dysregulation. Understanding this neurological reality is the first and most critical step toward responding with effective compassion instead of harmful judgment. (www.serenitysomaticpractice.org)

Recommendations are:

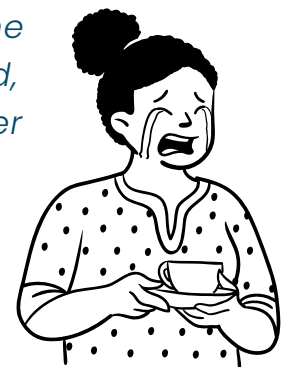
- Staff and neurotypical public to be aware, tolerant and supportive when people exhibit behaviours that may be unusual to you. Consider that people may be experiencing or building up to a panic attack, meltdown, disassociating or struggling to mask. Understand and appreciate the exhaustion and disorientation it can cause and that it may manifest in different ways.

- Offer kindness and support and ask gently if you can help. Offer a quiet calm area to recover. Support carers and companions where possible or appropriate.
- Maintain friendly nonjudgmental body language and always be kind doing what you can to make the person feel safe. Allow space and protect individuals from any unkind or gawking crowds.
- Be compassionate but allow space to recover. If outdoors make sure they are warm, dry and safe.
- Ask what they need as some people carry cards to explain what they'd like you to do if they are unable to speak at that moment or explain. E.g. they may wish you to call a friend or relative to come to help them. Allow plenty of time to answer and try not to press them.
- Afterwards offer unconditional support. Later, when everyone is regulated, you could offer a collaborative conversation about triggers and support needs. Your compassionate response can help rebuild trust and mitigate the shame that often follows these intensely vulnerable episodes.

For those witnessing a meltdown, your response can significantly influence its duration and intensity.

Illustration Quotes

"Example – last Thursday – early start, Person drove, new road, people in the car, a lot of pressure, then did a speech in front of a room full of people, had to sit with people all day so no time to herself all day. Then went to rugby, the person who normally gives them a lift couldn't do it so another person said they could give them a lift to the train station but needed to go to a different train station than they were used to. Then the train was delayed – ended up having a panic attack and phoned their Mum, crying. The delay of the train was the final straw as it was only 5 mins delayed, but it got so much that the Mum ended up booking a taxi to deliver them to their front door. If she had known she would be using the train that day, she would have brought her earphones. Also, the night before, the Wi-Fi had been down, and she didn't manage to do the things she would normally do as part of her routine".



"Sometimes the stimulation of excitement or overwhelming feeling can cause seizures."

“Sensory sensitivity can vary throughout your lifetime. It depends on your traumas or different difficulties, which could be months earlier and then something triggers it”.

“I am good at masking for about 45 minutes”.

“I did go on a public bus last September and a minibus and I found it really difficult. I can do it but I'm very anxious before and I don't function and it makes me not able to concentrate and I take a while to recover often a couple of hours. I have done a plane it can vary. Although it's confined and I can't escape there are systems that can be supportive. So, for example, in order to get through the plane trip, I disassociated and that is a survival tactic to get through. But it ends a lot of sensory stuff so I couldn't speak when I got out of the plane and went through passport control. They asked where you're born and where you have flown from and I couldn't answer. I couldn't speak. My friend appeared and she could see I was struggling and tried. Then I had a very anxious trip back it can be a result of too much sensory to cope with and I lose the ability to speak”.

“As someone with ADHD, I do things that are natural to me but seen negatively. You do things that you weren't aware was wrong. Outside of work is Ok as there's no expectation of behaviour. Workplaces are more difficult, for example, there are expectations in relation to your behaviour, like talking too loudly. You do something without realising, then get a name for being disruptive, so this is where masking come in (acting in a way not natural to you, so you then get anxious about this)”

“My son gets punished at school for behaviour he didn't have control over (and didn't want to be like that). Every behaviour has a reason”.

Life is such a fight, I'm always tired.

Feeling Safe

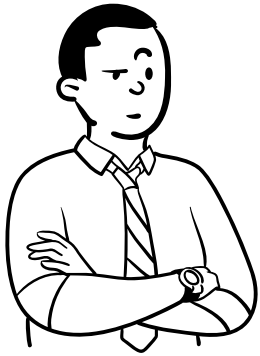
Issues and recommendations

It is important for all people to feel safe but for people with hypersensitivity it is even more important. They commented often about places that they felt comfortable also felt safe.



Again, staff attitude is important. People needed to feel that if they are unsure or feel unsafe there are people and places that they can happily go to gain help, to ask or to seek support.

Several people reflected that autistic women are more likely statistically to be abused, and others said that people can try to borrow money or take advantage of you knowing that you are likely to accept them at their word. There were a few worries expressed about mate crime and financial abuse.



But there were also often fears and mistrust of going to authorities and official organisations and being misunderstood and not listened to.

Feeling ordered about or told to join in or feeling those expectations can be difficult too. Having a culture and atmosphere where you can relax, sit and participate/engage or not is most comfortable for many.

Some said they were comfortable with focus groups or discussions as long as they understood the boundaries and better still helped to set them.

Recommendations are:

- Create an atmosphere of welcome, respect for others, acceptance, kindness and safety.
- Allow people to relax and engage at their own speed.
- Take actions to limit staff turnover or shift rotations so that customers can become familiar with staff. Encourage staff to recognise and get to know the preferences of customers with hidden disabilities.
- Display signs to indicate inclusivity, to indicate how help can be requested easily, to set out behaviour boundaries/ expectations and to encourage mutual respect.
- Offer staff safety awareness training.
- Be alert to bullying and exploitation of vulnerable people and have policies and practices to deal with them effectively.
- Make sure there is clear signage of any difficult door furniture or locks e.g. in toilets especially if they vary.

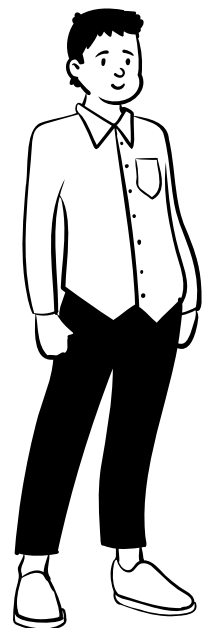


Illustration Quotes

"Feeling Safe: People can take advantage of you e.g. borrow money off you".

"Atmosphere is the important part".

"I like to just be – Don't like being made to participate".

"I go nowhere as I am agoraphobic".

"Don't go into town when it is busy, for example, people playing music, lots of people having coffee in the centre of the street. Like safe spaces and quiet rooms".

"It is a place I feel I can go on my own and feel safe and welcome without having to divest energy in interacting too much with others! There's also a small park close by for my assistance dog".

"I got stuck in the toilet on the train because the buttons were confusing. They are different at each train. People don't move their bags to let you sit. I travel with my sister, so I don't panic – I never travel on my own – too scared to".

"The staff know me and I know them by first names. Staff are friendly and kind. I've experienced special assistance when going to unfamiliar station in Worcester. Service was great. Easy to book and use".

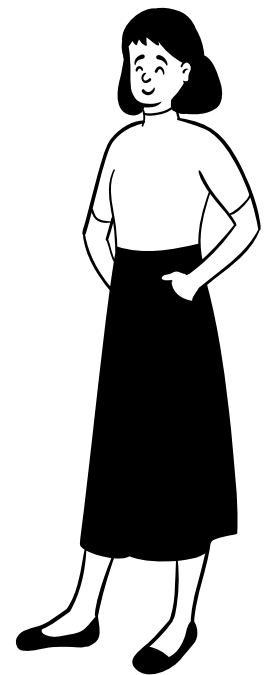
"Friendly and kind. I feel safe and cared for. Prices are reasonable, good portions and quick service".

"I recommend it as a safe friendly place when it is not busy".

"We choose safe places with familiar staff".

"Someone got kicked out and the staff seemed rude it put me off".

"In my experience the staff have been understanding and kind. They seem happy to engage with me when I want to talk about my current hobby projects, any news regarding (Shop products) questions. This in turn makes me feel safe when I visit the shop. I've not noticed anything about the staff receiving specific training, however with the way they treat me and the way I've seen them treat others I would be surprised to hear if they hadn't received such training. They always come across as approachable and have never caused me any offence".



"I find the staff are very accepting of people with differences. Although the music can be loud, we are all there for the same purpose and that feels comfortable. I have never seen any trouble there. The staff attitude and communication are very good. I feel safe there even when it is crowded".

"...the staff are polite I feel safe and happy here..."

*"People (here) are nice. I hate going out and encountering prejudice. People here are not ***** Not shallow, challenging, homophobic, judgemental. Others assume perhaps because of my age that I am as prejudiced as them. I find it hard. I try to be constructive. But it can get worse. I hate racism. A bloke gave my dog a dog treat cos I am always doing that. then launches into "I was on the phone to some **** the other day". (Racist slur) It winds me up for ages afterwards. They use woke as an insult".*



"I am basically homeless, and I live in Woodlands in the sticks. I struggle to access services because it's a long way to go. I am also scared of services. I suspect a lot of homeless people are autistic, many have PTSD, which is about 4% in the ordinary population but over 40% in the autistic community. It is important to have male and female spaces, as autistic people are more likely to be abused. 9 out of 10 autistic

women have been abused, according to services. If you go to services that have male and female facilities, it is because they are more clued up and have more training. I'd like to see services learn humility as an autistic person and say how is that for you rather than dismiss it or challenge. Being autistic shouldn't be a problem for you when you encounter neurotypical psychological theatres. But there is a lot of ableism about, and undiagnosed autistic people will also be prejudiced until they get it".

Space

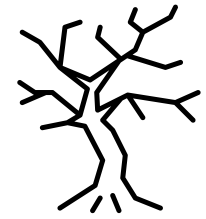
Issue and recommendations:

Conversations about space were centred on feelings of being shut in. As long as there is a means of escape and people feel safe, for many, this feeling can be acceptable.

Having space to move about and being able to feel unrestricted is helpful to many. 'Relaxed' performances allow people to get out of their seats and move about in response to this desire. It can be especially helpful to neurodivergent children.

Buildings that have plenty of space or discrete adaptable areas where people felt safe were preferred. Some people like smaller cosy areas e.g. alcoves and nooks where they don't feel watched or judged for being different.

The need for space and an intense aversion to crowds and noise has given many a strong preference for the outdoors. The majority of people felt most comfortable outdoors in the countryside or woodlands.



Recommendations are:

- Create a variety of spaces and allow customers to choose where they sit as much as possible explaining features such as where it is quieter. Where there are cosy nooks. Where they can be in a cooler area or a less crowded one. Allow people to book these areas at busy times.
- Ensure there is a calm space to escape to and if possible have more than one exit which should be kept uncluttered or blocked by crowds.
- Keep alleyways and passages free of customer bags and establishment supplies.
- Allow space to move about including open adjustable spaces.
- Consider décor and furniture so that the space does not feel too overwhelming, Echoes, transmits noise, creates noise or has textures that are too varied or too uniform and allow some choice.
- Consider a plan in bigger establishments, that customers can see the intended ambience in different areas, rooms, carriages floors.
- Consider having sheltered partially enclosed areas outdoors where people can escape but be protected from the weather away from the smell of smoking areas.

Illustration Quotes

"I need a feeling of not being confined too much. Lots of conversation or movements of people is difficult and I need to see a door or a way out".

"...the space is good, but it can be a little cramped if it's busy and no space to escape to if you need to".

"My brother likes it. It has different spaces you can choose from little spaces both indoors and outside".

"The space is nice and open".

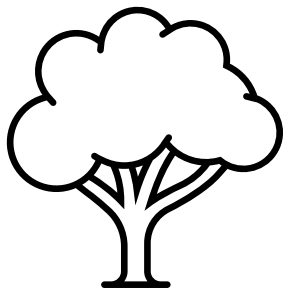
"There isn't anywhere that is really hidden, no hideaways, only the toilet".

"I'd say on the whole the entire shop is a calm space, especially considered to outside. There is no space to escape as far as I'm aware, however this isn't an issue for me. Due to the size of the shop and the number of tables and stools they have; there are certain times where moving can be somewhat hindered.

This isn't usually an issue for me and I'm happy to wait in a quieter part of the shop. Some tables are set up in more secluded parts of the shop such as corners. Most of the stools face the door which I find preferable".

"There is an exit, but you have to go all the way around the shop to get to it. The aisles are too close together. The entrance and exit are the same. Too close".

"There are clear sections of tape on the floor. I allocate walkways which are to be kept clear, this visual aid helps keep the place navigable without risk of feeling claustrophobic or tripping"



"You can move away from people if you wish. It's easier to avoid people in woodlands or outdoors".

"Being in trees is good for you. Can be busy but you can find your own space".

"While there is just the space, you can move where you want to and control the space".

"You feel you can relax and just be". (Outdoor venue)

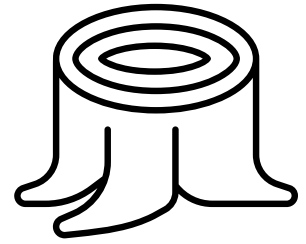
"It is peaceful". (outdoor venue)

"Woodlands are isolating. Places you can be solitary. There are some downsides to going to places on your own. Once my dog was attacked in one place I used to go, so I won't go back there. I like (woodland name) when I leave, I feel good Even if I feel dysregulated when I arrive. Anywhere else, I feel judged".

"I find it difficult to get myself up, but I can get to (Place). I think it is calming being in nature, and nobody is judging you. If you have a meltdown there are hammocks and blankets. When I had a meltdown, they were very non-judgmental, and I was able to calm down in the hammock. Here, it is OK to be how you are".

"Even (outdoor place) can be quite noisy and challenging, but there are quiet spaces you can go to".

"I love the outdoors, the participants, the staff and the projects. I love that it's all in nature Participants and the staff and the projects the whole package. I used to be on the road. I love outdoor cooking I don't use the loo here if possible and if I'm not at home. My three children use it too. I just like the quirky. I don't mind the cold and the mud and so on. You wear particular clothes. I prefer it when there are fewer people in the group. In the group chats I do contribute".



"If you can run nobody worries how fast. You can feel part of a club. Feel included That feels nice. Where we run, we rarely encounter people we run in the countryside. It is outside so I don't worry about any buildings. I recommend it because exercise is good and I feel included, but I have my own space".

Other associated conditions and Accessibility

Issue and recommendations:

People pointed out that People who are neurodivergent can have other hidden and visible disabilities.

Wheelchair users particularly face barriers to access, limitations to choice of places to sit, consequent issues of not being able to control their environment by choosing places that are quieter or cooler/warmer/ lighter/ less stimulating and so on.

People who are neurodivergent and have a learning disability are a high percentage and clear communication in signs and speaking is important.

Recommendations are:

- Reasonable adjustments for disabled customers including, ramps, lifts, lower counter heights, consideration in creating choice in spaces that offer different ambiances.
- Ability for two friends in wheelchairs to catch the same public transport.
- Staff to understand that people are individuals that may have a combination of disabilities hidden and visible.

Illustration Quotes

"Autism often comes with hypermobility or hearing impairment so need to look at the wider conditions (e.g. Asthma, Demand Avoidance disorder). Also need to think about the levels of Autism and age groups".

"The website is easy to negotiate as you can choose your seat and time (important as I also require step free access). Normally my Walker can be folded and kept right by me. This is security, as, if there was the need for a quick exit, I wouldn't have to rely on anyone to get it, or disturb them... Also, people get distracted, and I would worry that, at the end of the film, they would forget and leave me sitting there! But they are very attentive and careful to reassure me and talk and are welcoming without being intrusive".

"Counter too high for wheelchairs. And some have steps with no ramp".



"All good features. I recommend it because it is relaxing. Recommended improvements would be better signs with bigger print and easy to see and read for sight impaired customers like me".

Food and texture sensitivity

Issue and recommendations:

Eating out can be a challenge if you have a food texture sensitivity. Families cited difficulties when a child's acceptable menu item which has been long depended upon suddenly disappears from a menu.

Fabric textures in chairs can be a difficulty for some.

Recommendations are:

- Aim to offer a variety and choice of menu items in texture and allow flexibility to request removal of an item from a plate. E.g. Tuna mayonnaise sandwich without the red onion or no mushy peas with fish and chips.
- Try to keep menus consistent and inform customers well ahead of changes.
- Offer a variety of fabrics on furniture in different areas so that customers can choose where to sit.



Illustration Quotes

"A group can eat there each having a different food based on their needs and open enough so you can distance yourself from any sensory issues, can have

quieter hours i.e. outside of lunchtime letting you enjoy your food without distraction”.

“I like the (Place name), but all the chairs have a velvety texture cover which I find very difficult. This is something I am sensitive to. It would be a great idea if they could vary the furniture covering's so people with neuro divergent texture issues could choose a different chair”.

Other specific issues

Hand dryers

“HAND DRYERS are quite an issue – they set my kids off and we have to take ear defenders in order to be around them. I have noticed more people go back to paper towels which suit us. I would like to get rid of them all”.

Logic

“I think it would help autistic people in a supermarket if there was a system that they could follow to go around it that made sense and was logical”.

Touch – Doctors, Dentist, Hairdressers, NHS, crowds

“Large entrance allowing you to have room to fit around people without touching them”.

“Talks to you as though you can't understand. I need to know when you are going to touch me. They speak to my parent and not me. They need to say before they touch me and give me time to think and talk to me not my support person”.

Being seen as difficult or abrupt

“There are some challenges in places such as pubs, relating to behaviour – being seen as difficult”.

Good and Bad days

“Book something on a good day and then don't go on a bad day”.

Delays

“Anxious as going to a service anyway, environment brings anxiety up and up so by the time you're seen, your anxiety is heightened”.

Identification

There are opposing views about the benefits or otherwise of ID cards and hidden disability identifiers.

Many prefer a venue or mode of transport to be indicating their awareness of issues, staff training and adaptations and being visibly neurodivergent friendly instead.

"People have their own spectrum – some people with autism would jump at the chance of a badge, but most people with ADHD wouldn't want that. Although would appreciate the understanding in the community".

"People have their own spectrum – some people with autism would jump at the chance of a badge, but most people with ADHD wouldn't want that. Although would appreciate the understanding in the community".

"ID cards – NAS have ID cards. Police have said that anyone can carry these and so don't accept them".

"A green button – indicating neurodiversity".

"I used to wear the sunflower lanyard. It's a hidden disability symbol. But then Covid happened and if you wear a sunflower lanyard you didn't have to wear a mask so anyone could go online to get out of wearing a mask so no point doing that now. The idea of wearing sunflowers is that they take more time and have more patience. Airports used to have a special line for sunflower people".

"Got a sunflower card (with additional information) – I'm choosy on where I use the sunflower card as don't want to make myself stand out. But I use it at places like hospital appointments as I know I need to get through those things".



JAM Card is a simple yet effective tool for people with invisible disabilities to overcome communication barriers. Show your JAM Card when you need a little extra time or help to reduce stress in social situations such as public transport, shopping, hospitals, or in the workplace

"Also think about whether you include siblings, parents, carers, cousins. Carers tickets – discounts for the carers (You mainly must be cheeky and ask). National carers ID card (Approx £20). Access / Nimbus card – has symbols on it that say if you are autistic, VI or need a plus one). Sunflower lanyards / wristbands – but need to be aware of latex allergies".

"Can't physically show. Look at the access card criteria".


"A little badge like the dementia friendly badge – coupled with a card. Person has badge. Place has a badge – so there is a match. Seated somewhere

quiet. It would be nice to make people aware so we wouldn't have to go out of our way to say it".



healthwatch

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