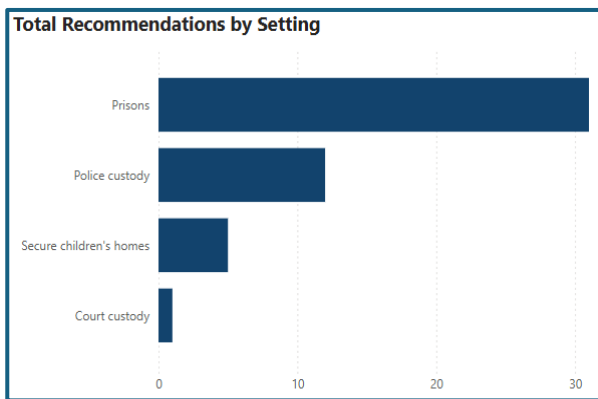


Good Practice: Neurodivergence

Neurodivergent people continue to face significant and often disproportionate barriers across places of deprivation of liberty in the UK. These challenges are frequently rooted in environments and processes not designed with diverse cognitive, sensory, or communication needs in mind. As a result, neurodivergent detainees may experience heightened anxiety, increased vulnerability, and a greater risk of misunderstanding or disciplinary escalation.

World Autism Awareness Day 2026 provides an important backdrop for this paper. This year’s focus on *Autism and Humanity* affirms the dignity of autistic and neurodivergent people. On this important day, the UK NPM calls for increased recognition of the inherent dignity and equal rights of every neurodivergent person deprived of their liberty.



Findings from UK NPM bodies throughout 2025 and early 2026 show a growing recognition of neurodivergence and an increasing number of establishments introducing more nuanced, person-centred practices. The examples below reflect a system that is slowly becoming increasingly attuned to the rights and needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Number of good practice examples relating to neurodivergence by deprivation of liberty setting.

Staff Training and Awareness:

Thanks to a 2024 national roll-out, many prisons across England now have dedicated neurodiversity support managers (NSMs) that can provide expertise and support for neurodivergent individuals. NSMs At Brinsford, Thameside and Wymott were reported to be especially engaged, with Thameside demonstrating a particularly impressive approach: the NSM had worked with individual prisoners, contributed to prison training programmes and meetings, and introduced “neurodiversity champion” roles within the staff and prisoner population.

Similar developments were noted elsewhere. At Littlehey, the recruitment of a neurodiversity support officer (as well as the NSM), enhanced the care provision available to neurodivergent prisoners. HMPs Hollesley Bay and Brixton had invested in staff training focused specifically on improving interactions with neurodivergent prisoners. At Brixton in particular, staff were offered training on dealing with neurodivergent prisoners in use of force incidents. Over a third of Brixton’s officers were taught specific deescalation techniques and about neurodivergent needs – an important step given the heightened vulnerability of some neurodivergent individuals during high-stress encounters.

Onley prison also demonstrated a promising peer-led model by training prisoners to be neurodiversity ‘red bands’, increasing visibility and informal, proactive support opportunities across the establishment.

In the young people’s estate, such as at the Atkinson Unit, mandatory training for all staff, and appropriate adjustments within the home, helped foster an environment in which neurodivergent children were better understood and supported,

These approaches reflect an emerging shift toward embedding neurodivergent considerations into routine training and operations, rather than relying on ad hoc adjustments, which formalises and strengthens the provision of appropriate care for neurodivergent individuals.

Supportive Environments:

Environmental adaptations have also shown meaningful progress. In Avon and Somerset police custody suites, new signage was introduced that allowed staff to display a neurodiversity symbol on cell doors where a detainee may have been neurodivergent. This simple change helped create a more inclusive and supportive environment for neurodivergent individuals in custody.

Nottinghamshire police custody suites were also enhanced, with a focus on neurodivergence and hidden disabilities, to create a more calming atmosphere. This included the installation of motivational artwork in vulnerable wings and exercise yards, as well as grey acoustic panels to reduce noise levels – a strong example of how environmental modifications can help to reduce sensory overload.

Several prisons have also developed dedicated wellbeing or sensory hubs. At Leyhill, for example, a former palliative care unit was repurposed for use by multiple teams, including the neurodiversity team. Planned features included a sensory room, sensory gardens, one-to-one therapy spaces and breakout rooms, creating a more supportive environment for people with additional needs.

These developments signal a growing recognition that the physical environment plays a crucial role in supporting neurodivergent people. By introducing sensory-aware spaces and calming design features, establishments are beginning to move beyond minimal compliance and toward environments that actively reduce distress for neurodivergent individuals.

Daily Life Adjustments:

Small changes to normal processes or regime often make the experiences of neurodivergent detainees more positive. For example, the use of “passports” for those with neurodivergence at HMP Usk gave staff a better understanding of their expected anxieties in stressful situations, like adjudications. At Send, neurodiversity support plans and “My Experience” documents (a self-developed overview of experiences in life and responses to situations) were also used in adjudication hearings to help to understand the reasons behind certain behaviours and provide

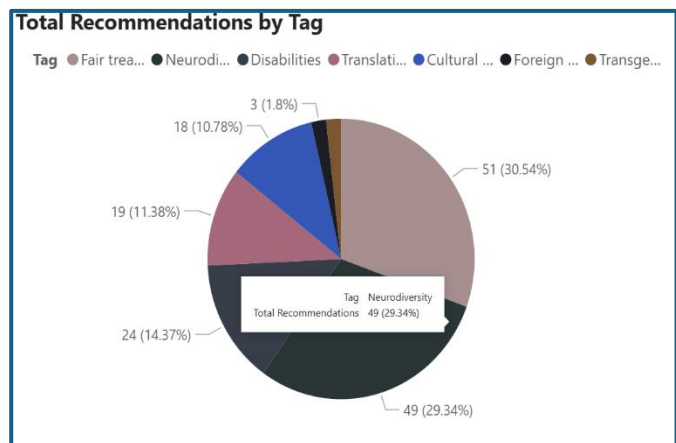
a more informed responses, which could also reduce the likelihood of punitive outcomes rooted in misunderstanding.

At HMP Usk, several exclusive support groups for neurodivergent individuals were on offer, including crochet, yoga, therapy dogs, football, and gym activities. Other establishments offered targeted workshops or education-based support, such as HMP Nottingham’s weekly “calm” sessions or HMP Cardiff’s expanded literacy and numeracy provision, which allowed prisoners to use reading pens and laptops and provided additional outreach support for those with neurodivergent challenges across the wider education, skills and work activities.

Police custody suites in Sussex had introduced sensory aids, handheld items, and modified refreshments to help detainees remain regulated during inherently stressful detention periods.

Communication aids, such as visual symbols, talking mats, simplified written materials and tablets, were increasingly used across secure children’s services (specifically at Rossie and the Atkinson Unit) and police custody suites in the Thames Valley. These tools supported individuals who struggle with “normal” conversation, and reflect a move towards more accessible communication.

These practices demonstrate a growing recognition that neurodivergence is not only a clinical consideration but also an operational one, requiring adjustments across regimes and processes.



Good practice examples in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion tag. Examples relating to Neurodiversity make up almost 30% of examples.

Concluding remarks:

Meaningful progress is being made across deprivation of liberty settings to better recognise, understand, and support neurodivergent people, and this year’s World Autism Awareness Day theme *Autism and Humanity* is a reminder of the values that should underpin this progress. While there remains much work to do, a growing number of establishments are adopting proactive, informed approaches that embed neurodivergent considerations into staff training, environmental design, and everyday operational procedures. These developments illustrate how thoughtful, and at times simple, adjustments can enhance wellbeing, and promote fairer detention environments.