

Practice-Based Article

Not Just Evidence-Based, But Experience-Based: Establishing a Neurodivergent Peer Support Network for Staff in the Library and Information Sector

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ABSTRACT

A need for peer support for neurodivergent librarians, in line with the neurodiversity movement, was identified. This article describes this need and the establishment of the Neurodivergent Library and Information Staff Network (NLISN), from initial ideas such as NeuroSpicy Libraries, to its more formal recreation as NLISN, along with a description of its current activities.

INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity as a term is relatively recent and deals with the range, or diversity, in the ways that our brains function. This is despite descriptions and diagnoses for individual neurodivergent conditions being around for over a century (Autism was first coined as a term in 1911, Evans, 2013) but tending to be classed as mental health conditions or deficits rather than part of a natural diversity in human brain functionality. Because of the newness of some key terms, we give a brief explanation of them and how we use them in this article, along with the diagnoses that might be associated with them.

- Neurodiversity – the range or diversity in human brain function across a group or population.
- Neurotypical - Someone with average, or typical, cognitive function regarding the way their brain works to learn, communicate, process information, and experience the world.
- Neurodivergent - Someone with cognitive function that differs from the average.
- Neurotype - a way of describing a type of cognitive function (includes neurotypical and neurodivergent).
- Neurodivergence - a neurotype that is not neurotypical.
- Neurodivergent - someone with a neurodivergence.

There is some disagreement around which neurotypes fall under the “neurodivergent” labels, but neurodivergence is normally classed as a difference in the way your brain processes information that is persistent, which exists from childhood onwards and which causes difficulties in navigating everyday life and work. Generally, most classifications include the following under the banner of neurodivergences:

- Autism
- ADHD
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia

But we might also include labels such as:

- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Tic Disorders such as Tourette's
- Stammering
- Acquired Brain injuries

Although awareness and diagnosis levels of the neurotypes above have increased in recent years, it is generally agreed in the academic literature, rather than the popular press, that levels of neurodivergence are generally still under-diagnosed and under-reported. For example, in a recent review looking at autism diagnoses in different age groups, Stewart & Happe (2025) found a significant under-diagnosis in middle-aged and older adults, that is, people who met the diagnostic criteria but had not previously had a diagnosis. Because of under-diagnosis such as this, it is hard to pin down exactly how many neurodivergent people are in the wider population, however, meta studies tend to come up with figures of anywhere between 15 to 25%, with dyslexia being most common at around 10%. Other diagnoses such as ADHD and autism are generally quoted as being anywhere between 3 to 7%. It is now widely accepted that multiple neurotypes can be present in one person, for example, ADHD/autism (sometimes called AuDHD), even though until 2013, the main criteria used for diagnosis from the DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), stated that it was impossible to be both autistic and ADHD. Awareness levels of neurodiversity in general, the neurotypes within this, and the benefits and differences of having an effective and neurodiverse workplace has increased over recent years. This is especially true of higher education, where the authors of this article have been largely working, and where we have sought to better support library users.

NEUROSPICY LIBRARIES (EARLY STAGES)

It is against this background of greater awareness and seeking to better support our library users that we realised that no-one seemed to be considering better support for neurodivergent library *workers* rather than *users*.

In an influential blog post, Eng (2017) interviewed Charlie Remy, an autistic librarian, who said that "*...libraries can be good places for autistic people to work,*" and recalled that during a job interview, the panel shared "*...that there were likely many faculty on the spectrum at their university.*"

Recently, Moeller (2025, p.296), a neurodivergent librarian and researcher, stated in her thesis that "*...librarianship is a field that is especially appealing to neurodivergent workers, and... there is a higher rate of neurodivergence among library workers than any existing statistics would indicate.*"

These comments, alongside our work, which we will detail below, are strong indicators that neurodivergent representation is already present in this sector, however, Moeller (2025, p.18) also highlights that "*With the goal of serving their communities, libraries have begun to practice neuroinclusion for patrons but have yet*

to do so for neurodivergent library workers.”

This is echoed in other literature, such as Anderson (2018), “...*there is a distinct lack of information about adults on the autism spectrum within the library field, and a lack of literature about neurodiversity in the library profession.*” Later, Camp and Finlay (2025) showed that this issue still prevails, asserting that “*Within the LIS domain much of the literature related to the experiences of neurodivergent individuals is focused on that of library users,*” and “...*both the skew of the LIS literature that does exist, and the scarcity of literature of neurodivergent LIS staff experiences, indicates that there is still work to be done.*”

This is an issue that applies worldwide, with similar findings in Ochsner and Dinneen (2025, p.324), who note: “*Compared to research on children, adult neurodivergent stakeholders of the academic library have mostly been omitted from LIS research.*”

With this background of limited awareness of neurodiversity in library and information work and limited support for neurodivergent library and information workers, Joanne Fitzpatrick initiated a pilot support project in late 2022 called “Neurodiverse Library Leaders: strengthening ALN leadership through neurodiversity” with the support of Academic Libraries North (ALN) (<https://academiclibrariesnorth.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/>). This came with a small amount of money for the project from ALN, but the true benefit was the requirement for two of us from different ALN library services to commit time and energy into exploring the need for support for neurodivergent library workers. Andrew Walsh came on board at this point to fulfil the requirement for collaboration as he worked for a different institution to Joanne Fitzpatrick. The project came to be known as ‘NeuroSpicy Libraries’.

In this project, we tried different ways of communicating with other neurodivergent librarians through social media, a closed online network, and email lists. We carried out some research into how neurodivergent library and information workers experience the workplace environment, manage their workload, and recruitment and interviews (Fitzpatrick & Walsh, 2023, a, b & c). We presented at the ALN Conference that year, as well as at multiple webinars, wrote guest blogposts, and generally tried to increase awareness of what we were trying with NeuroSpicy Libraries (<https://nlisn.org/outputs/>).

In this initial phase, we were pleased by how much interest there was in a group aiming to support neurodivergent library and information workers, not just in our core, Higher Education, library-dominated networks, but across a range of information and archive work and in a range of different sectors. It was also clear, however, that although we found a large number of neurodivergent library and information workers were engaging with us, no one knew how many neurodivergent people worked in these settings, or what the mix of neurotypes might be.

At the end of our first year of NeuroSpicy Libraries, there was a meeting to discuss what people would find useful, would like us to focus on, and how we might be most valuable to them as a group. This fed into our creation of NLISN (see below), which was set up as a longer term network, to go beyond the end of this initial project.

We finished the project with a strong sense from the people engaging with us that there was a need and desire for a group or network that:

1. Acted as a peer support network for neurodivergent library and information workers
2. Worked across sectors and job roles
3. Facilitated training for neurodivergent workers
4. Enabled informal networking
5. Evidenced representation and impact

Underlying this seemed to be that people often knew what they struggled with as neurodivergent workers but didn't know how others in similar situations dealt with those challenges, what accommodations might be reasonable to ask for, or how to advocate for their strengths at work. So, sharing these things with others was at the core of much of NLISN's value as a peer support organisation, through networking, training or just evidence that neurodivergence was widespread through our profession.

We were also told by our members that with the limited time available for committee members to spend on NLISN activities, it was important not to get diverted into activities aimed at allies, employers, or interested third parties, such as training organisations in how to create library services aimed at neurodivergent users or build collections with neurodiversity as a topic.

NLISN BEGINNINGS

This clear interest for a peer support group or network led to us transitioning from a limited project into something that could be clearly defined and sustainable in the medium to long term, and which is now the Neurodivergent Library and Information Staff Network, NLISN (pronounced as en-listen). We recruited a committee of volunteers, created our new identity as NLISN, and started a much longer-term scheme of work, with our first official meeting in March 2024. We focussed on expanding and developing the activities that people told us were most valuable in our initial project over the first year.

Our jiscmail list (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/nlisen>) has nearly 300 subscribers and we have supplemented that with a membership platform (172 members) and a Discord server (58 members), all of which are intended only for neurodivergent library and information workers, with the variety enabling people to choose the platform through which they most want to engage with us. More publicly, we use Bluesky as our main social media platform (1,583 followers) as well as a LinkedIn page (161 followers). All figures were correct January 2026. We also have monthly informal "coffee catch-ups", run regularly over MS Teams, where anyone is welcome to drop in and talk "live" about anything they want to. We have seen members of the network overwhelmed by unexpected levels of communication through certain platforms, so this choice has helped us meet our members' needs in a more controllable way.

We regularly run training sessions for our members, largely as webinars, but with at least one in-person event each year, particularly to help facilitate informal networking. There were 6 training events (excluding coffee catch-ups) in 2025 (<https://nlisen.org/past-events/>).

We have experimented with different ways of enabling direct peer support across members, with a pilot buddying scheme, pairing up people to have informal discussions about shared workplace experiences. Growing out of this was the realisation that there was a desire for a more strongly structured and guided experience, rather than the informal pairing of equals that we had envisaged.

Additionally, we have had some significant turnover in committee members during 2024/2025, as we established the network and people struggled to combine their day jobs with volunteering. Neurodivergent people are often prone to being overwhelmed and burnt out, with the additional stresses of navigating neurotypical expectations and structures in the workplace. Even so, committee members, who are all neurodivergent themselves, have increased their profiles, talking at events about our work (e.g. at the CITE conference run by the Copyright Licensing Agency), making guest appearances in podcasts (e.g. <https://hiringlibrarians.com/2025/03/18/hiring-librarians-podcast-s02-e05-joanne-fitzpatrick/>), presenting at conferences, such as UKSG, about neurodivergence in libraries (Ball et al, 2025), and even writing a peer-reviewed article about information literacy as autistic library professionals (Haire, 2025).

By summer 2025, we felt we were in a more established position so produced our first (now annual) cycle of

reporting, creating a plan for the coming year, and holding an AGM (<https://zenodo.org/records/16919160>). This was not just an opportunity to let our members know what we had done and intended to do in the near future, but a chance to reflect on our activities, our capacity to carry out the work, and what we thought was most valuable to build upon in the coming year.

NLISN GROWTH AND LOOKING FORWARD

In addition to establishing this new cycle of review, plan and AGM, the key areas we planned to develop and grow for mid-2025 to mid-2026 were:

- The membership offer
- Evaluate our pilot buddying scheme
- Carry out some statistical research
- Collect and disseminate case studies
- Develop our events
- Carry out Forum development
- Maintain and grow our online presence

Already half way through our reporting and planning year at the time of writing, we are progressing well with these.

One of the most common questions we get asked is: “How do I join NLISN?”. From the start, the process of becoming a member has been quite informal. People can join our JiscMail discussion list, come along to events, follow us on social media, or engage with us any way they wish, and we will consider them part of the network. To satisfy people who seemed to need a more formal membership option, we launched a membership platform this year (<https://membermojo.co.uk/nlism>), which includes the option to donate towards our costs. Alongside other ways to keep in touch with us and with other members, as mentioned above, we initially had an online forum for people who wanted to visit a specific place for discussion, rather than having potentially overwhelming levels of discussion pushed to them via email. This had low levels of usage, so we shifted to trying Discord mid-2025 instead, setting up a Discord server that members could join, with the aim of developing that as our forum and assessing if it would work better for our members.

Peer support is central to our offer, with the most explicit example of this being our buddying pilot. We have reviewed this and as mentioned above, we think we need a more formal offering delivered by professionals, so we are currently investigating options such as coaching for members and are hoping to have something definitive in place by the end of our reporting year in mid-2026.

During the second half of 2025, NLISN ran a survey, which reached over 1,000 neurodivergent library and information workers in the UK and Ireland, and which aimed to get a clearer picture of neurodivergent representation in library work. Members of the NLISN committee are currently analysing the data and writing up results, with publication planned for later in 2026.

Alongside the quantitative data gathering that we have been carrying out, we have also begun to collect case studies of NLISN’s impact and the experiences of neurodivergent library workers. The first three of these have been published on our website and we will collect more in the future. These case studies are overwhelmingly positive, with one sharing that *“I connected deeply with these strangers and the topics we discussed, which led to a profound sense of belonging...”* and another emphatically stating that *“These changes saved my life.”*

Our events and training are the most visible and successful parts of our offering. Feedback shows that

attendees really value being in all-neurodivergent spaces and networking with people like them in the same sector, with comments about what they enjoyed including:

“Feeling like part of a community that genuinely get what it's like to be ND at work.”

“The feeling that I was with my people.”

“...sense of belonging that other librarians have the same experiences as me.”

Network members at events have also praised the content of the presentations, which are delivered in the majority by neurodivergent people;

“Honestly it was the most useful leadership training I've been to for a long time.”

“The content was great.”

“The personal stories of participants were really powerful.”

Also highlighted in feedback was our inclusive approach to planning events;

“What really stood out for me was the 'social contract': expectations intro, agenda, access, language, respite break, Q&A guidelines...”

“The support from colleagues was amazing.”

“Everything made sense.”

We are continuing to develop our events, and as part of this we are piloting a conference in Leeds, in July 2026, over two days, the core of which will be to help develop the contacts and meaningful networks that contribute to our members' progression in their careers. If the event is successful, we will build future conferences into our plans each year.

Finally, in our aims for the current year, we want to build on our successful online presence in a sustainable way, in particular by ensuring our resource lists are manageable for the volunteer team to maintain, as well as being easy to navigate and use for our members.

We would like to encourage library and information workers who know, or suspect, that they are neurodivergent to follow and join in with NLISN in whatever way they find most useful and accessible. No official diagnosis is needed, recognising that people have financial, social, and other barriers to diagnosis, or they may just suspect they are neurodivergent and wish to talk to others as their first step towards self-diagnosis or “official” diagnosis. We are primarily focussed on the UK and Ireland, but we have welcomed both attendees and speakers to our online events from all over the world.

We have also developed links with similar organisations elsewhere for sharing ideas, primarily ANDPA in Australia (<https://andpa.org/>) and NeuroGLAM in Canada (currently on Discord by invite link only). NLISN continues to learn from our colleagues across the world and welcomes any connections readers can help us make with similar organisations we have not yet discovered.

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