



Date: 3 December 2024
Time: 10.00am to 12.30pm

1		<p><u>Welcome and Introductions</u></p> <p>The Autism Partnership Board (APB) discussed key themes related to improving the experiences and outcomes of autistic people across Gloucestershire. The meeting explored the intersection of sensory needs between children and adults, inclusive practices beyond diagnostic labels, and innovative strategies to foster co-production and accessibility. Participants shared insights from professional and lived experiences, highlighting collaborative approaches to address diverse needs within the community.</p>
2		<p><u>Guest Co-chair/topic:</u></p> <p>Katie Peacock (Chair of Physical Disabilities and Sensory Impairments Partnership Board) regrettably gave her apologies to this Board so Andrew introduced the topic of 'Sensory processing/differences within neurodivergent populations'.</p> <p>Andrew provided a comprehensive presentation on sensory differences, emphasising the complexity and variation of sensory pathways and their impact on individuals, particularly neurodivergent individuals. Andrew began by explaining that sensory differences are not uniform; each person's sensory profile is unique and can manifest differently depending on the individual's sensory systems and pathways. He shared that sensory life is extraordinarily varied, and it is essential to approach each individual as unique, particularly when attempting to understand how they experience the world.</p> <p>Andrew used vision as a detailed example, describing it as a highly intricate process with multiple pathways. He mentioned that vision involves more than just cones and rods, which are responsible for processing light and colour. Some processing is dedicated to recognising images, detecting movement, and processing spatial information. These highlight the complexity of a single sense as sensory differences in any of these pathways can have an effect leading to a unique difference between individuals. He also noted that vision is deeply tied to other bodily processes, such as circadian rhythms, which are strongly influenced by light. Reflex actions, such as the dilation of pupils or the blinking reflex, were cited as examples of how the body automatically responds to sensory stimuli.</p> <p>Andrew shared that disruptions or differences in sensory pathways can profoundly affect daily life, causing challenges that may not be immediately visible to others. He explained that these differences often lead to behavioural adaptations, such as sensory seeking or sensory avoidance. For instance, some individuals may crave intense sensory input to satisfy their need for stimulation, while others may avoid it entirely to prevent overstimulation. He noted that these adaptations are not just behavioural but are deeply tied to neurological and physiological responses.</p> <p>Andrew also touched on the subtleties of sensory differences, explaining that sensory issues are not binary - people are not simply 'overly sensitive' or 'under-sensitive'. Instead, sensory experiences can vary across different senses and even within the same sensory system. For example, an individual might be hypersensitive to sound but hyposensitive to touch. He emphasized that understanding these nuances is critical to providing meaningful support.</p> <p>Andrew shared that he experiences extreme sensitivity to certain sounds, particularly eating noises. Known as misophonia. He described how the sound of people chewing or eating can evoke an intense, almost primal reaction in him, ranging from a desire to leave the room to feelings of extreme frustration. He has discovered that this sensitivity is linked</p>



		<p>not only to the auditory input but also to the way his brain processes those sounds. Interestingly, he noted that the visual aspect of eating can also trigger discomfort. He recounted a time when, while sitting on a bus, he could see someone feeding a baby a few seats away. Even though he could not hear the sounds, the visual movement of the baby being fed was enough to trigger the same uncomfortable feelings. This connection between visual and auditory stimuli offered a deeper insight into how sensory pathways can intertwine and amplify sensory experiences.</p> <p>Andrew also shared a positive example of his sensory profile, noting that his under-sensitivity to certain types of pain has occasionally been advantageous. He recounted a climbing accident in which he fell from a height of 10-11 meters and sustained multiple injuries, including broken vertebrae, heel bones, ribs, and a punctured lung. Despite these serious injuries, he found that his pain sensitivity was low enough that (after a couple of days) he only required paracetamol for pain relief and was able to focus on his recovery without feeling overwhelmed by discomfort. However, he contrasted this with challenges he faced as a child, such as being unaware of when he needed to use the toilet. He described sitting on a wet patch as a child, having not realized he needed the bathroom, and how this led to feelings of embarrassment and shame. He reflected on how this lack of interoceptive awareness—his ability to sense internal body signals—remains a challenge in adulthood.</p> <p>Andrew also noted that his sensory profile leads to behaviours that might be misunderstood by others. For example, he is often sensory seeking and enjoys activities like rock climbing that provide intense physical stimulation. He also finds himself needing to constantly engage with his environment to stay focused. However, this can lead to moments of sensory overload. He shared that, at times, he will be listening to a radio program or watching a video and suddenly feel as though the sensory input fades away. He will have to refocus or restart the activity, a process he describes as his brain momentarily disengaging from the sensory input.</p> <p>Additionally, Andrew elaborated on the challenges he faces with self-care. He shared that he struggles to recognize basic bodily needs, such as hunger or thirst, which often leads to neglecting them until physical symptoms appear. For instance, he might feel a stomach-ache but be unable to discern whether it is caused by hunger, anxiety, or another issue. He explained that this is tied to alexithymia, a difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions or physical sensations. He has developed strategies to manage this, such as drinking hot drinks very regularly throughout the day regardless of feeling thirsty but noted that even these strategies require conscious effort and do not always address the underlying challenges.</p> <p>Andrew's lived experience provided a rich, detailed exploration of how sensory differences shape everyday life, demonstrating both the challenges and the strengths that come with being neurodivergent. His insights set the stage for further discussion and highlighted the importance of tailoring support and strategies to everyone's unique sensory profile.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived experience of AuADHD – Josh Jones <p>Josh also shared his sensory experiences with attendees, speaking as somebody with autism and ADHD.</p>
3		<p>GUEST TALKS: Julia Wilde - Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist</p> <p>Julia, an Occupational Therapist in the countywide Adult Autism Assessment Service, gave an overview of her role.</p>



		<p>Adults assessed by the service who are diagnosed as autistic are then able to access a time-limited post-diagnostic group and are also offered an occupational therapy assessment. Part of this assessment focuses on potential sensory needs.</p> <p>The Adolescent and Adult Sensory Profile is used to help build up a picture of an individual's levels of sensitivity and how these impact on their ability to engage with their environment and to complete the tasks which are important to them.</p> <p>This information is then used to make suggestions about how the individual can adapt their routines or their environment to suit their needs best. Recommendations can also be made for employers/education providers/family.</p> <p>Sensory strategies can also be suggested to help the individual manage their energy levels or mood and this can be presented in a Sensory Ladder format, which details how the individual or those around them may notice that they are beginning to struggle more through how they behave, linking it with associated coping strategies. This can be particularly helpful for those who find it difficult to notice internal changes in their body and can then often become overwhelmed very quickly.</p> <p>During the discussion, a participant praised the sensory ladder. They inquired about its practical application, specifically whether Julia engaged individuals in completing the table collaboratively. Julia confirmed that the process was collaborative, although time constraints sometimes meant that the client may then add more information to the form after the sessions had finished, often in discussion with a family member.</p> <p>Another participant explored creative ways to adapt sensory profiling for individuals who might find structured formats, such as tables, less engaging. They suggested incorporating visual elements, such as drawings or illustrations, to make the process more dynamic and accessible. JW supported this approach, noting that sensory profiling does not need to adhere to a rigid format and could be customised with bubbles, flowers, or other visual aids to better suit the individual's preferences. Julia also highlighted the use of how sensory ladders have been helpful in her work in mental health settings.</p> <p>The session concluded with expressions of gratitude to Julia and the attendees for their contributions. The group agreed to reconvene later to further discuss strategies for sharing information on sensory differences. Julia encouraged participants to reach out via email with additional questions or follow-up requests, reinforcing her willingness to provide ongoing support. The facilitator then outlined plans for a breakout session focused on developing accessible resources for individuals with sensory differences, their families, and professionals, before transitioning to a brief break.</p>
4		<p>AUTISM STRATEGY SERVICE UPDATE – PRESENTATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeanette Welsh - Lead for Safeguarding Adults (GRH) • Martin Doddimeade - Autism Liaison Officer (GRH) <p>This was deferred to the next Partnership Board in March 2025.</p>

BREAK

4	 <p>BREAKOUT ROOM DISCUSSION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If an information pack on sensory differences was made available, what topics should be covered? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ In what format? ◦ Consider individuals with sensory differences, their friends and family, and wider professionals. <p>Participants explored the content and format of an information pack on sensory differences, considering the needs of individuals with sensory differences, their friends and family, and wider professionals.</p> <p>The discussion explored the intersection of sensory needs between children and adults, underscoring the importance of sharing relevant information across groups to address overlapping challenges effectively. Participants emphasised that inclusive strategies should not rely solely on formal diagnoses but should instead focus on individual sensory needs. This approach broadens accessibility and ensures that accommodations benefit a diverse range of individuals. A transition manager shared valuable insights from both personal and professional experiences, highlighting the effectiveness of simple adjustments, such as dimmer switches or adjustable lighting, in creating more sensory-friendly environments.</p> <p>The conversation also reflected an evolving understanding of sensory issues, moving beyond their exclusive association with neurodiversity. This shift was seen as a step toward greater inclusivity, accommodating not only neurodivergent individuals but also those who are undiagnosed or do not identify as neurodivergent yet experience sensory challenges. Participants noted the importance of normalising and addressing sensory preferences as part of everyday life, fostering environments where everyone can thrive.</p> <p>Breakout groups were described as having rich and engaging discussions, focusing on collaborative and individualised approaches to addressing sensory needs. Participants stressed the significance of sensory profiling and involving individuals directly in creating tailored accommodations. They highlighted the value of using real-life examples, such as case studies, video content, and testimonials, to demonstrate the impact of inclusive practices and to make resources relatable and accessible.</p> <p>The necessity of sharing resources more widely was a recurring theme, with calls for ensuring accessibility beyond specific diagnoses. The National Star College's contributions were particularly commended for exemplifying how to address sensory needs independently of diagnostic labels. Their approach emphasises the importance of creating inclusive practices that prioritise sensory needs universally, recognising that sensory challenges can affect individuals across a wide spectrum, including those who are undiagnosed or not neurodivergent.</p> <p>The National Star College shared practical examples of fostering inclusivity, such as incorporating dimmer switches and gas lamps to accommodate individuals with light sensitivities. They underscored the value of normalising sensory accommodations within educational and workplace settings, ensuring both comfort and productivity. The college's transition to a needs-based framework, which focuses on individual sensory preferences rather than relying solely on diagnostic labels, was highlighted as a progressive and impactful model. This approach acknowledges that anyone, regardless of their neurodivergent status, can benefit from sensory-friendly practices. Their work demonstrated how thoughtful adjustments, combined with an emphasis on inclusivity, can significantly enhance individual experiences and contribute to a more equitable and supportive environment.</p>
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		<p>Updates were shared about an upcoming organised by Active Impact -Neurodiversity Network Conference - a key event aimed at bringing together neurodivergent individuals, their families, and professionals committed to fostering inclusive practices. The conference will feature workshops and panel discussions, including a session on the intersectionality of neurodiversity with LGBTQ+ identities and a workshop on practical frameworks to improve inclusivity in social and leisure activities. Participants were encouraged to contribute ideas and resources to expand the network's impact, with an emphasis on promoting well-being through access to trusted community support, rather than relying solely on statutory services.</p> <p>Additionally, the group discussed Disability History Month, which focuses on raising awareness about the experiences and challenges faced by disabled individuals. This year's themes include advocating for employment equity and addressing the persistent disability pay gap, which currently results in many disabled individuals effectively working two months of the year unpaid. Participants highlighted the need for continued advocacy to ensure disabled individuals have access to meaningful employment opportunities with equitable pay and workplace adjustments. Examples of good practices from across the country were shared, emphasising how inclusive employment strategies can support both individual well-being and organisational success.</p>
5		<p>Partner updates – Introductions and work on coproduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jo Sutherland – Adult Social Care Principal Social Worker <p>Jo, the newly appointed Principal Social Worker for Gloucestershire County Council, introduced herself during the session. She began by apologising for her delayed arrival, explaining her enthusiasm to connect with the Autism Partnership Board and expressing her commitment to collaboration and inclusivity. Jo provided a brief overview of her professional background and her passion for co-production and frontline engagement.</p> <p>Jo highlighted her diverse experience, which began in direct care work as a care assistant with the National Society for Epilepsy while attending university. She then worked her way up through various roles, including mental health practice, training delivery, and consulting. She emphasised her connection to the frontline, noting that she continues to practise as an Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) and Best Interests Assessor (BIA) to maintain her understanding of the challenges faced by social workers and carers.</p> <p>Carer Advocacy and Co-Production</p> <p>Jo shared her passion for advocating for carers and rejecting the term 'informal carers', which she believes undermines the vital, unpaid contributions they make. She recounted her work in identifying hidden carers, particularly those who do not self-identify, and highlighted the need for better awareness among GPs, schools, and hospitals to recognise carers and their needs. She referenced her previous involvement with King's Fund reports, such as those highlighting the inadequacy of short GP appointment times for carers.</p> <p>Jo emphasised the importance of co-production in her current role, particularly in shaping the Gloucestershire County Council's Co-Production Charter and broader strategy. She is working closely with colleagues, including Rich Amos from TLAP, to host three upcoming meetings—one in-person and two virtual—to gather input on what a co-production charter should include. These efforts aim to strengthen Gloucestershire's reputation for pioneering co-production initiatives in adult social care while expanding their impact across the</p>



		<p>Council.</p> <p>Commitment to Engagement and Education</p> <p>Jo shared examples of her proactive engagement, including monthly Principal Social Worker drop-in sessions. During a recent session, a guest speaker raised awareness about the risks associated with older drivers, highlighting the significant percentage of road traffic incidents in the region caused by individuals over sixty-five. JS encouraged attendees to propose topics or share their passions at these drop-ins to help inform and educate the social work workforce on critical issues.</p> <p>Accessibility</p> <p>Jo concluded by reiterating her commitment to accessibility and collaboration. She invited attendees to contact her directly with suggestions, ideas, or concerns, emphasising her openness to learning and working together to improve services and outcomes for individuals, carers, and communities. Her introduction set a collaborative tone and underscored her dedication to advancing inclusivity, co-production, and social work practice within Gloucestershire County Council.</p> <p>Questions and Next Steps</p> <p>Andrew invited questions from attendees. A participant raised a query regarding the potential collaboration relevant contacts, particularly focusing on access to care act assessments and transition support. They highlighted the importance of addressing transitional needs identified by the board and noted that this could assist colleagues in children's services.</p> <p>Jo responded, confirming their close working relationship with their counterpart in children's services the Principal Social Worker, Rob Tyrrell. They emphasised the importance of adopting whole-family approaches to ensure continuity of support for individuals and families. JS expressed their commitment to improving collaboration between children's and adult services, stating that support should not cease due to arbitrary age limits. They stressed the need for more cohesive work between services to enhance outcomes.</p> <p>Andrew queried the progress of co-production work. Jo outlined plans to attend an upcoming collaborative meeting and proposed holding an online session shortly afterward to accommodate seasonal challenges, such as shorter days and colder weather. They suggested delaying in-person sessions until the weather improves to encourage broader participation. They remarked on Gloucestershire's variable microclimates, noting how these could affect attendance and accessibility.</p> <p>Refer to Actions Table (Below)</p>
6		<p>OTHER BUSINESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newsletter Feedback Any other business



		<p>We would welcome your feedback on our newsletter's content. Either by email neurodiversity@gloucestershire.gov.uk or complete a short survey by visiting this link https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=VMeuX-NkFECbzOcvxzujEojj_MhinhFJi5-pxINO4YZUNFFHMlaR0U4WEtRUTJTR1UzUVpZRUZCSC4u</p>
7		<p>MEETING ENDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Next Meeting: Tuesday 4th March 2025 (Online)

Action	Responsibility	Deadline	Notes
Share relevant information between Children's and Adults' services to address overlapping challenges.	Partnership Board Members	Ongoing	Ensure better collaboration and sharing of resources across age groups.
Include transitional support and Care Act Assessments in future discussions.	Principal Social Worker and Children's Team	Future Partnership Board Meeting	Explore opportunities for collaboration and practical resources for transitions.
Develop a Co-production charter through virtual and face-to-face meetings.	Jo Sutherland	February 2025	<p>Engage stakeholders to gather feedback and create a framework for Co-production efforts. The dates are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuesday 11 February: 10am to 3pm, Online on Microsoft Teams Friday 21 February: 10am to 3pm – in person at Shire Hall, Gloucester Monday 24 February: 10am to 3pm – Online on Microsoft Teams
Share resources related to sensory needs beyond diagnoses in the newsletter.	All Partnership Board Members	Before next newsletter publication	Focus on inclusivity by addressing sensory needs for all individuals, diagnosed or not.
Submit items and feedback for the next newsletter.	All Partnership Board Members	Before the next publication	Provide relevant content and comments to improve the newsletter's reach and quality.
Explore opportunities to connect Principal Social Worker Jo Sutherland with key stakeholders.	Autism Partnership Board Chair/Relevant Members	Ongoing	Facilitate discussions on topics like transitions, assessments, and support services.



Gather and share feedback from the Diversity Network Conference.	Active Impact & Organisers of the Diversity Network Conference	After the conference	Use feedback to shape future events and initiatives.
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