

Neurodiversity in the boardroom: A short guide

ADVICE

NEURODIVERSITY IN THE BOARDROOM: A SHORT GUIDE

Encouraging and benefitting from
neurodivergent boards

CO-OPERATIVES UK



Introduction

Encouraging and benefitting from neurodivergent boards

This guide is designed to help boards create practices that encourage the recruitment and retention of neurodiverse members while maintaining high standards in governance.

It emphasises leadership, transparency, and accountability, in line with the UK Corporate Governance Code and the Co-operative Code of Governance and aims to foster democracy and inclusion as strategies for positive change.

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that differences in brain function – such as Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia – are natural variations in human diversity, while neurotypical describes individuals whose brain function aligns with what is considered typical or average.

Recognising the value of these differences, neurodiversity emphasises that people with varied neurological makeups bring unique perspectives, skills, and strengths.

An estimated 15-20% of the UK population is neurodiverse. Therefore, to ensure strong and

ethically sound adherence to the co-operatives values of member voice, participation and engagement – and to continue in the ever-evolving work of creating a governance toolkit rather than individual tools – we are providing this guidance to help members realise, navigate, embrace and ultimately include all differences that make up co-operatives membership at board level and beyond.

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This resource was commissioned by Co-operatives UK's Co-operative Governance Expert Reference Panel. It was written by Sarah Musique, Think Musique.

Got any questions? Our expert team is here to help with governance advice and support

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The case for change: Why encourage neuro-inclusion?

We are living in a world of increasing rates of identification and eventual diagnosis of neurodiverse conditions.

Some are confident in disclosing this information to employers, but many are still reticent. This has led to a tendency of bottom-up pushes within organisations for adjustments and more inclusive practices but organisations aren't always best equipped for this.

What is needed in conjunction with this movement of the workforce is change at board, policy and culture level to enable full inclusion and for organisations to fully benefit from the differences neurodiversity can bring.

Despite some progress, a significant employment gap persists.

Only 53.7% of disabled individuals are employed, compared to 82.7% of non-disabled people (ONS, Jan-Mar 2023).

Among autistic individuals, only 30% are employed (Buckland Review, 2024).

To address this, the Disability Employment Charter proposes nine key changes, such as employment and pay gap reporting – see Appendix 6 Disability Employment Charter for the full listing). Moreover, companies are increasingly joining the Neurodiversity Employers Index (NDEI) to measure and demonstrate neuro-inclusivity.

These statistics show that there have been and still are significant barriers in place to the employment of neurodiverse people.

Change must begin with Neuro-inclusion at the board level and extend through the organisation.

Co-operatives, with their election-based recruitment strategy, face challenges due to low neurodivergent employment rates. Additionally, some older neurodivergent adults may not yet be diagnosed or self-identified, adding further barriers to board participation.

This demonstrates a number of risks in play to the progression and success of UK co-operatives and below is an outline of some of these, along with the benefits of bringing in a neuro-inclusive culture from board level and beyond.

The benefits of Neuro-inclusion

Being ahead of the curve when it comes to understanding societal and legislative change as it occurs rather than after the fact.

The risks from Neuro-exclusion

Not aligning with legal and social trends The introduction of the employment charter [1] and the general increasing awareness of the UK workforce of their own Neurodiverse conditions.

The benefits of Neuro-inclusion

The diversity of experience, thought and innovation from Neurodiverse people is a strong mitigator of group think.[2]

Through other co-op publications, group think is something that we strive to mitigate against.

Greater organisational adaptability through trends and gaps in the market being identified more efficiently with the attention to details to back thoughts up with data. This would engage the Neurodiverse members, drive positive leadership and mitigate risks.

Due to the current underemployment of Neurodiverse talent, availability in this market will be higher than in others.[3]

Employing more Neurodiverse people at board level increases the visibility of Neurodiversity in the workplace, invites initiatives to adapt policies, workplace adjustments and culture to eradicate ableism by embracing neuro-inclusion.

Neuro-inclusion encourages disclosure. If people become comfortable to disclose, conversations about the effects of conditions become possible and not looked upon as 'difficult conversations' from both sides.

Neurodiverse people and their families look to be employed by and buy from organisations that have a good reputation for neuro-inclusion. This will keep increasing as awareness continues growing and in the workplace and will increase team cohesion.
[4]

Incorporating neurodiverse members on boards not only reduces the risks listed, but also positions our member organisations as forward-thinking, inclusive, and innovative leaders in industry, no matter the size of the organisation, further embedding the principles listed within the co-operative corporate governance code.

References

See [Neurodiversity in the boardroom: Appendices](#) page for full references and links.

[1] Appendix 2: Addressing disability employment disadvantage

[2] Planning for board Excellence, Co-operatives UK

[3] Appendix 2: Addressing disability employment disadvantage

The risks from Neuro-exclusion

A lack of diverse perspectives means organisations risk missing out on opportunities to do things differently, stand out from the crowd and meet their full potential.

Being less adaptable. Neurodiverse people are often known for their ability to see patterns emerging quickly, this includes within evolving markets and societal trends. Missing out on these could have serious implications to financial management.

Talent pools - Not fully tapping into currently untapped pools of talent.

Increasing levels of bias and discrimination - A lack of neurodiverse representation may reinforce workplace ableism and bias, creating barriers to inclusivity throughout the organisation. This can lead to higher turnover, lower employee morale, and challenges in attracting top talent.

Non disclosure makes it harder to gain a true picture on both numbers and to track how changes are benefitting the individuals and the organisations.

Reputation and stakeholder trust – the boards and organisations are made up for members, there is a risk of the members losing trust but also of reputational damage outside of membership.

Overcoming the current barriers

In order to address overcoming the current barriers, the key is to take a two-pronged approach that incorporates starting with identifying the barriers neurodiverse people face and then considering actions in the employee lifecycle that will help, concerning:

- How to recruit more neurodiverse people to boards; and
- What can be done to support once neurodiverse people are on the boards

The barriers experienced

Their effects on neurodiverse people

Psychological safety

This allows individuals to speak up, share ideas, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear.

This trust enables effective teamwork and prevents surface-level behaviours from causing conflict.

Repeated instances of psychological danger

Many neurodiverse people through their lifetimes have been told their thinking is wrong or dysfunctional in some way. They may have experienced ideas being laughed at, comments being dismissed, or their questions or concerns ridiculed.

This makes it much harder now to feel safe to either be themselves, or express themselves in many environments, much less make any mistakes.

Exclusion

We are often unconsciously biased towards excluding differences in other, both in life and in work. If we find ways to flip this and work towards inclusive practices, we can mitigate its negative effects.

Feeling alone

Many neurodiverse individuals feel singled out, rejected and alone leading to a longer-term sense of isolation. Organisational cultures for the most part encourage fitting in, being a team player and does not provide clarity on the unwritten rules of the organisation.

When it comes to hiring practices, many people look to hire others that are like them (this can often be on an unconscious level) and so differences show up, leading to more rejection thus increasing the negative experiences of neurodivergent people in workplace situations.

The barriers experienced

Their effects on neurodiverse people

Ableism and being undervalued

Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities, often leading neurodiverse individuals to feel undervalued and discouraged from board roles. These can range from:

- Microaggressions that build over time such as comments like “You look smarter with those glasses”
- Stereotyping people with mental health disabilities as perceiving them as lacking the capacity to make decisions for themselves; or
- Not complying with disability rights laws

Masking or veiling behaviours

This is the act of concealing or suppressing neurodivergent traits or conditions to appear neurotypical. Although this is something that all people experience at some point or another, it is a much more frequent and heightened experience for neurodiverse people.

Developing the ability to balance out masking behaviours takes time, effort and most of all, an environment where the individual can feel safe.

Discrimination

Where neurodiverse people don't feel included, they develop a sense that they will experience this kind of discrimination or devaluing of their abilities and potential contribution. This can lead to a reticence about joining particular groups.

The fear that it creates makes it difficult to have any kind of positive mental attitude which is in effect, the individual preparing themselves for the worst at all times.

Trauma inducing

A common experience for people with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia, brought on by negative past experiences leading to neurodiverse individuals worrying about how their authentic behaviours, such as directness or focus, will be perceived.

Challenges in expectations of what it is to pay attention, have impulse control, or sensory sensitivities can add to this concern. It can lead to extreme levels of anxiety, catastrophic thinking and at worst, physical illness.

The more a neurodiverse person masks, the more fatigue they continue to experience and the less they are able to bring out their true selves and be at their best in any situation, particularly in employment.

Guidance on creating neuro-inclusion at board recruitment level

The main goal here is to enable employment in the organisation that is as close as possible to the UK population demographic in terms of neurodiverse people and therefore recruitment practices need to take into account the issues listed in order to attract applications from talented individuals.

This will begin with the implementation of a Neuro-Inclusive recruitment policy, a sample of which has been provided as [appendix 7](#) that includes measures such as:

For the candidates

Job adverts

- Jargon free, using inclusive colours and fonts, neutral and direct language, with a focus on specificity about the role and the ethos of the company rather than ambiguity
- Adhere to the co-operative code of Governance in accordance with the ICA values and principles
- Define abbreviation
- Specify that applications from candidates of all neurotypes, with varied employment backgrounds are encouraged and welcome

Application process

- Simplify application forms, focus on essential skills and experience
- Offer alternative options for applications to be received be that in a creative format such as video, or by providing the option for oral applications
- Encourage questions from applicants to help provide clarity
- If rejecting an application, aim to give feedback as to the reasons, especially if your organisation is part of the disability confident scheme (see Appendix 8) and the candidates have disclosed conditions

Interview pack

Ensure any information sent out includes and offer for adjustments that can be provided and invite candidates to contact you if they require any of these or other options.

Adjustments

These should include but are not limited to: Sending interview questions in advance; allowing more time to complete assessments; allowing the candidate to bring notes and refer to them; making questions direct and specific; allowing the candidate to bring a stim toy; providing photos/video footage of the building the candidate will be interviewed at; providing a photo of the interviewer.

Documents

Interview process If any guides, principles, values or codes of conduct etc have been mentioned in the advert, ensure the full documents are sent as part of the interview pack. Within the pack, also include support options such as information on the Access to Work grant (see appendix 5) so that the candidate can feel comfortable in applying for additional support if needed.

Site visits

Where possible for board recruitment, invite candidates to attend the interview/meeting sites prior to the interview date as a way of them familiarising themselves with the environment and getting a feel for it from a sensory perspective, ensure you communicate that the visit is not part of any assessment.

Feedback

Ask for feedback from each candidate on their experience of the recruitment process and considerations for possible improvements that could benefit others. Build this into the review process.

Once recruited to a board role, ensure that candidate has a specific induction process to follow which includes:

Induction process

- Easy access to any employee handbooks and relevant policies
- Easy access to any guidance documents available, training on internal systems
- An introduction where possible and with any necessary adjustments to the various departments within the organisation, organisational charts, any process documents relating to the running of the board and access to all past board papers

Handover Ensure the recruitment team provide a warm handover to the board member who will become a buddy to the new candidate for their first year on the board.

For the recruitment staff and interviewers

- Provide adequate unconscious bias and interview training that includes information on the

Access to Work grant ([see appendix 5](#)) so that any questions can be supported. Training needs to include information about the Equality Act 2010 ([see appendix 9](#)) that underpins any policies around disabilities.

- Ask recruitment staff to create a guide for recruiting managers/interviewers that can be referenced each time they need to interview candidates.
- Ensure internal recruitment follows the same guidance as external recruitment.
- Create and maintain an up-to-date training log of the above guidance.

Guidance on creating neuro-inclusion at board membership level

The goal here is to be able to retain neurodiverse board members in the long term by creating an environment that is inclusive of their skills and differences. This will ultimately need to filter throughout the organisation to benefit all neurodiverse employees.

Training

- Training is the key to making a start. This will be training for board members on neurodiverse conditions, what they are, how they effect people, what other conditions often co-exist with them and understanding more about their lived experience and the equality act (appendix 9) and the Access to Work scheme (appendix 5) that will all help boards to understand an empathise with people that have neurodiverse conditions, while understanding workplace requirements and support available. In conjunction with this, unconscious bias training should also be carried out to help understand where biases we might not be aware of but still act upon can create negative experiences for neurodiverse people. Provide training on neurodiverse behaviours to help board members give and receive constructive feedback.
- Include psychometric models like the Strengths Deployment Inventory (SDI) in board training to increase awareness of diverse behaviour patterns.
- Keep the learning fresh and ongoing, utilise this guidance, other guidance from Co-operatives UK and information online regularly to keep as up to date as possible. Neurodiversity is an ever developing field of research.

Inclusion

- Encourage a culture of enabling equity, which is the idea that people should be treated fairly and justly, and that everyone should have the resources and opportunities they need to address inequality.
- Equality, the idea that people are treated the same way. For this, consider putting things in place that would benefit all such as sending board papers in advance, asking for questions from board members before the meeting, ensuring everyone is called on by the chair to have a say.
- What works well for me document, using the sample (appendix 10) create a document that goes to all board members and gathers information on their individual preferences to use as a basis for accommodations.
- Board buddy, for any board member with less than a year of experience, match them up with a board buddy. Someone who has more experience in understanding the organisation and the board itself and can be on hand to support with providing clarity, being a sounding board, signposting where necessary.
- Provide mentoring training for anyone that is to become a board buddy.
- Adopt a change mentality of 'done with' rather than 'done to' by ensuring the board members are able to lead on any adjustment requirements.
- If adjustments are needed and can be accommodated, ensure these are timely (ideally within two weeks). Where some are not directly possible for various business specific reasons, seek alternatives rather than completely closing communication down.
- Putting inclusivity at the heart of any changes should remove the mentality of 'If we do this

for you, we'll be opening the flood gates'.

Meetings

- For the meetings, utilise the Effective meeting framework (appendix 4) which gives guidance on the purpose and process of a number of different types of meeting, board and governance included.
- Distribute board papers and agendas in advance.
- Share a video summary of key points to aid those with processing differences.
- Encourage questions submitted before meetings to give neurodiverse members time to process and prepare.

Guidance on the organisation supporting neuro-inclusion

The goal here is to ensure the organisation itself is able to support all of the activities listed in the previous two sections. Over time, the aim is for this to disseminate through all areas of the business.

Building the bridge between neurotypical and neurodiverse

- With support from HR establish a behaviour charter with guidelines for respectful interaction.
- Train all members in giving and receiving feedback and using inclusive communication models.
- Set up a framework for resolving conflicts or misunderstandings related to neurodiverse behaviours.
- Case studies, with permission, create case studies in multiple formats of the journey of various board members, including those with neurodiverse conditions to be used in job adverts, internal and external publications to help others 'see themselves' in existing board members and effectively encouraging more diverse applicants with the aim of replicating this across the business once established.
- Inclusion groups, create voice and action groups for minority diverse employees to be able to feel less alone, express their own concerns and needs, understand where in the business they can go if they need further support. They can also feed into the relevant policy creation and monitor progress in line with HR departments of diversity initiatives.
- Policies, create and distribute companywide policies that support disabilities, neuro-inclusion and neuro recruitment there are sample policies on appendices 7 and 11 to support with this. Where possible, utilise ISO standards as a framework for these policies which will also support with auditing requirements. Although there isn't currently a standalone ISO for neuro-inclusion, appendix 3 lists 6 current ISO standards that address the broader concepts of inclusivity.
- Share, any success stories with Co-ops UK to distribute among members and help with their journey.

Across the organisation

- Create a team of inclusion champions who support people at all levels in the organisation including board members with questions/concerns about neuro-inclusion. Ensure they are trained by external providers who have regular experience with issues around inclusion and can also provide training to the champions on how to navigate the Access to Work grant (appendix 5) application and ongoing process.
- Given the low numbers of Neurodiverse people in employment, an increase in the recruitment of board members outside of Co-op membership is recommended for the next three five years to enable parity.
- Ensure that information about the support available through the Access to Work Grant (appendix 5) is widely available throughout the organisation.
- Ensure support is provided by inclusivity champions to anyone that wants to apply for the grant.

This revised approach creates a more inclusive board and ultimately organisational

environment, ensuring neurodiverse perspectives are valued and integrated at every level.

Specific guidance for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Scotland: Information and guidance

The Equality Act 2010 is still applicable for Scotland. In addition:

- [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill consultation](#): There is a [proposed bill](#) that was open for consultation and now onto drafting provisions. The Scottish Government's Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-25 has plans to set out the legislative framework in 2025.
- Scotland has developed pathways to improve experiences and outcomes - [Adult Neurodevelopmental Pathways: Report on Actions, Outcomes and Recommendations from Pathfinder Sites in Scotland](#)
- The Scottish government website also has a big section on equality and rights: [Equality and rights - gov.scot](#)

Wales: Information and guidance

The Equality Act 2010 is still applicable for Wales. In addition, Wales has developed its own guidance:

- [National Neurodivergence Training Framework for Wales](#)
- [Niwrowahaniaeth Cymru | Neurodivergence Wales](#): Helping to improve the lives of neurodivergent people and their families in Wales.

Northern Ireland: Information and guidance

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) is the equality law in Northern Ireland that prohibits disability discrimination against disabled people who are in work, or who are seeking work.

The DDA, as amended by the Autism Act (NI) 2011, recognises that a life-long condition like autism is a disability. [The Disability Code of Practice Employment and Occupation can be accessed here.](#)

People and businesses in Northern Ireland have the following resources available:

- [Access to Work - practical help at work | nidirect](#)
- [Workable \(NI\) | nidirect](#)
- [Support neurodivergent staff | nibusinessinfo.co.uk](#)

Some important legislation to refer to through the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland is: [The Law, Equality Legislation, Equality Commission, Northern Ireland.](#)

And guidance specific to charities can be accessed via [Neurodiversity NI](#).

Neurodiversity in the boardroom: Appendices

Appendix 1: Psychological Safety and Neurodiversity

This is a sample of the psychological safety activity pack that you can purchase for your organisation as training material on the topic giving case study examples and detailed information on the topic. [Psychological Safety Action Pack: A four page read with images.](#)

Appendix 2: Addressing disability employment disadvantage

This document gives statistics on Disability equality policy and practice adoption in British private sector workplaces, Proportion of people in employment by disability status and sector, information on the governments disability confident scheme and it's effectiveness, recommendations to parliament on changes that could be made to improve employment rates. [Link to the document – three page read with some statistics .](#)

Appendix 3: ISO frameworks supporting Neuro-inclusion

While at this point in time, there is no specific ISO standard that exclusively focuses on neurodiversity, there are relevant standards that address broader concepts of inclusivity, diversity, and non-discrimination in the workplace, which are key components of fostering an inclusive environment for neurodivergent individuals. This document gives details on how some of these standards can be adapted to support neurodiversity inclusion practices. [Link to the document](#) – a three page read with tables.

Appendix 4: Effective meeting framework

This document gives a clear framework which sets out the principles and guidelines for effective meeting management to help people to: effectively communicate and collaborate; and to make informed decisions aligned with organisational values and goals, which ultimately contributes to overall success and productivity. [Link to the document](#) – a 12 page read with various tables.

Appendix 5: Access to work factsheet for customers (gov.uk)

Factsheet about the Access to Work grant can help overcome barriers to starting or keeping a job if you have a disability or long-term health condition. [Link to the factsheet](#) – an 11 page larger print read.

Appendix 6: Disability Charter

This charter outlines the action the government needs to take to address the disadvantage disabled people encounter in their working lives. It gives information on the nine recommendations for change that have been put forward. [Link to the charter](#) – a two page read.

Appendix 7: Sample policy on Neuro-inclusive recruitment

This is a sample of a policy document that could be created within organisations to ensure that our recruitment processes are inclusive, equitable, and designed to attract, recruit, and retain neurodiverse talent. This policy aligns with the values of democracy, equality, and inclusion upheld by Co-operatives UK. [Link to the document](#) – a three page read.

Appendix 8: Disability Confident scheme easy read

This document gives information in an easy read format on the disability confident scheme and how it aims to help get people with disabilities into work and help them to stay in work. [Link to the information](#) – a 14 page slideshow-style read with images.

Appendix 9: Equality Act 2010 making equality real easy read

This document gives information in an easy read format on the equality act, what it covers and supports along with details of the protected characteristics that are covered including those with disabilities. [Link to the information](#) – a 38 page read interspersed with lots of images.

Appendix 10: Sample 'What works well for me' document

The document gives information on what is an effective way to capture and share insights from neurodiverse individuals and people with disabilities on how they can best be supported in their roles, whether at work or in board meetings. Here is a step-by-step guide using sample headings and prompts. [Link to the document](#) – a three page read.

Appendix 11: Sample policy on Neuro-inclusion

This document is a sample of a policy that could be adapted to show an organisation's commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive workplace for neurodivergent individuals, where all colleagues, regardless of cognitive or neurological differences, can contribute fully and thrive. [Link to the document](#) – a four page read.

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<https://www.uk.coop/resources/neurodiversity-boardroom-short-guide>

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