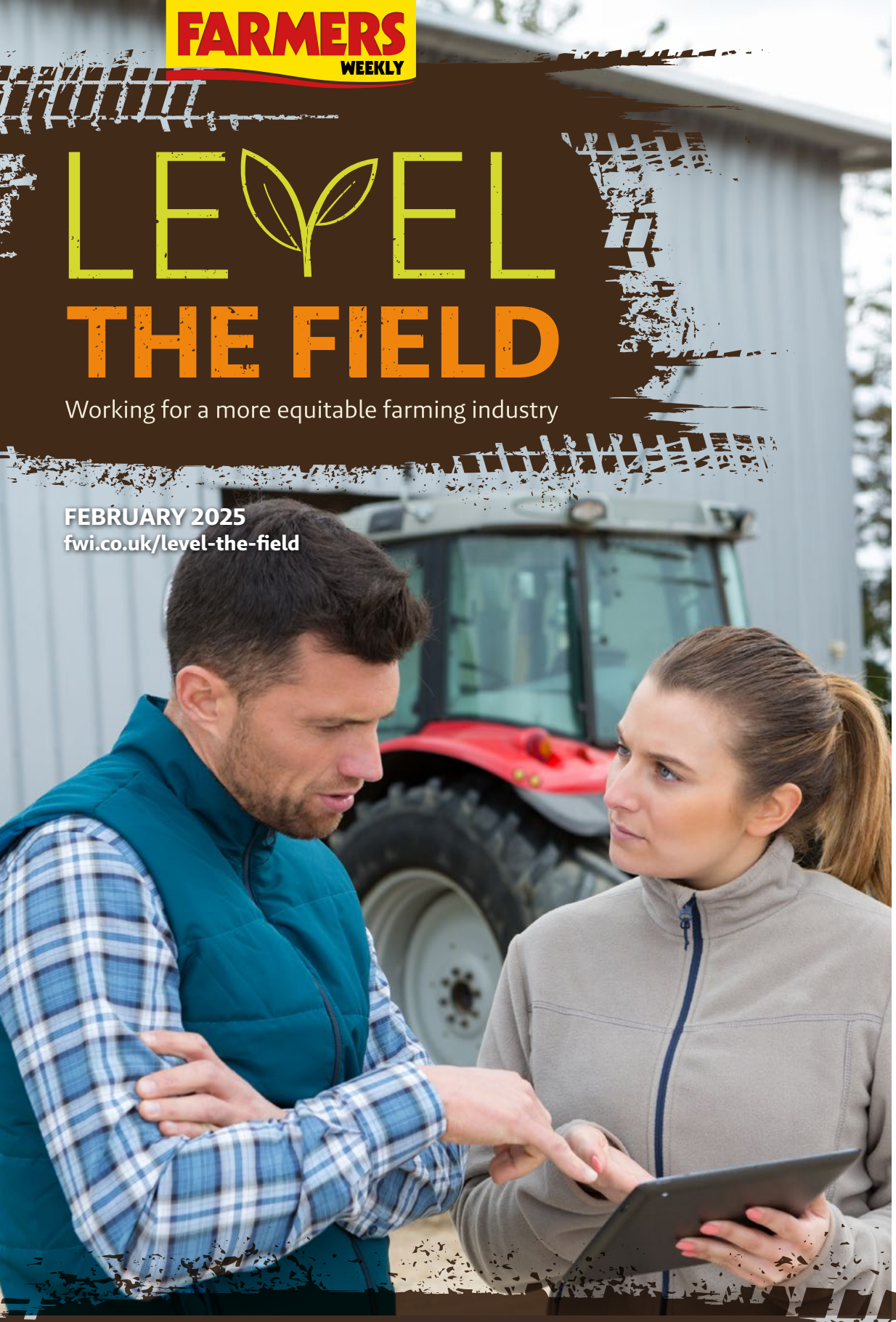
FARMERS WEEKLY

LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry



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A comprehensive guide to

Neurodiversity in farming

Why it matters and the benefits of educating your team

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that describes the infinite range of ways that individuals think and process information, and how this affects their behaviour and the way they relate to the world and other people. These differences in brain function are part of the natural variation between us all.

Variations include diagnosable conditions such as:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism
- Tourette syndrome
- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- Developmental co-ordination disorder (also known as dyspraxia)
- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar disorder
- Brain injury.

Neurodivergent people are thought to make up 15-20% of the global population. But a recent **Farmers Weekly's survey** found figures could be twice as high in farming than in the general population. It also highlighted a lack of awareness of neuro-differences within rural communities, with 68% of respondents saying awareness was low. However the chances are, if you are not neurodivergent yourself, you may well be working alongside someone who is.

Neurodivergence in farming

Neurodivergent conditions can bring huge assets to the agricultural workplace such as attention to detail, honesty, resilience, innovation and creative problem-solving. For employers

it is also important to recognise that neurodivergence brings varying levels of disability, which are defined under employment law.

It is therefore essential that employees and their teams understand the needs of individuals and offer the support they require. A positive approach to neurodiversity focuses on people's strengths and the way different skills can be enhanced and built upon rather than focusing only on challenges and what people struggle with.

Avoiding stereotypes and discrimination

The varied nature of farming careers may be why so many neurodivergent people thrive in the industry. There are common traits in neurodivergences but, for example, not all people with autism will be good at maths, and not everyone with ADHD will be constantly on the go.

The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (Tiah) describes an inclusive workplace as "one where people feel they can perform to their full potential, and that they belong in the organisation without needing to conform or mask their identities".

In the **Farmers Weekly survey**, over half of the respondents perceived the attitude of the farming community towards neurodivergent people to be neutral, with a further third believing it is negative. Such stereotypes for neurodiverse conditions are not helpful and may encourage people to hide their neuro-differences to the detriment of all involved.

The survey showed that 5% of respondents did not want to work alongside someone with a neurodivergence, and 19% were unsure. Some of the reasons given for this cited negative stereotypes, such as neurodivergent people being a safety risk or less reliable.

Seeing someone as their neurodivergent label, and that alone, misses all the other aspects to their identity and can be limiting, even if seen through a positive lens. Raising awareness among the whole workforce can help to remove the negative elements of stereotyping or harmful "banter", so that people can be seen as a whole person beyond their neurotype or label.

FIND OUT MORE

- **The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has a useful guide** on how to commit to creating a supportive culture at work where people can talk about neurodiversity and everyone can thrive.

Neurodiversity awareness in farming

Embracing the skills that neurodivergent people have can strengthen teams, bringing fresh ideas and perspectives and tap into the talents of each member of the team. It indicates that all staff are valued and encourages everyone to thrive at work.

All agricultural workplaces would benefit from being neuroinclusive, says the CIPD, which describes a neuroinclusive workplace as "one which consciously and actively includes all types of information processing, learning and communication styles".

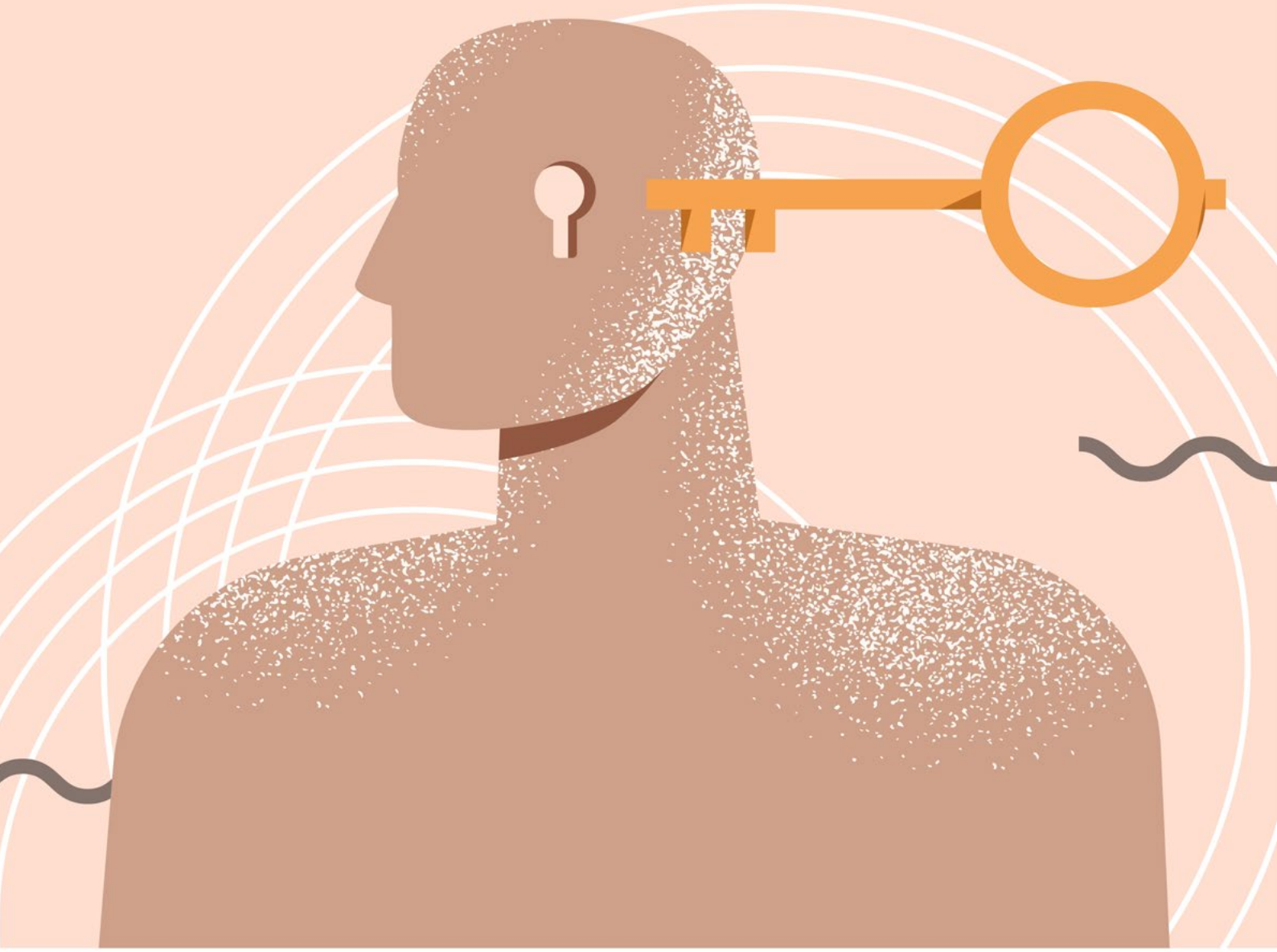
There may be some areas that neurodivergent people find difficult, but equally some attributes will make them perfect for specific roles – seeing patterns while pruning a tree, hyperfocus while picking salad leaves, attention to detail while recording information about livestock, or coming up with creative ideas to improve sustainability, for example.

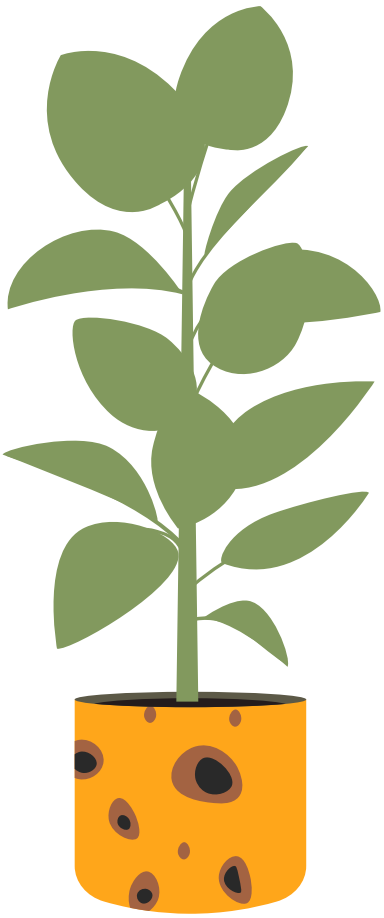
Cathy Magee from Dyslexia Scotland says: "A neurodiverse workforce in agriculture and the farming sector is as important as other types of diversity. People with neurodivergences bring different thinking, problem-solving and innovative approaches. By embracing all different ways of thinking, we can unlock new and varied perspectives on farming practices and create a more equitable workforce, which is vital for our local communities."

Without an awareness of neurodiversity across the whole workforce, people's talents will go untapped. A useful way to look at it is that you don't just need people who are good with livestock, you need someone who can work alone on a tractor and has good engineering skills, and others who are good at accounting or record-keeping.

FIND OUT MORE

- **The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (Tiah)** has a free online training course that addresses why inclusion matters and has practical steps people can take to make their workplace more inclusive.
- Nuffield Farming has an online course on **AgDiversity**, which has three modules covering the importance of diversity in UK agriculture, mistakes and biases, and how to be an ally.
- Bespoke neurodiversity training is available from a range of organisations, such as **Lexxic**.





Employers' legal responsibilities

The 2010 Equality Act is the key piece of legislation regarding neurodivergence at work. It combined previous legislation on equal pay and discrimination related to sex, race or disability. It is relevant to all employers, no matter the size of the workplace – so will affect small family farms through to larger corporate businesses.

Protected characteristics

There are nine "protected characteristics" covered by the Act, and neurodivergence comes under disability as it is "a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on the ability to do normal daily activities". Long-term is classed as 12 months or more.

Workplace adjustments

The legislation protects people from discrimination in all areas of working life, including recruitment, working arrangements, hours, career development, appraisals and grievances.

It states that "reasonable adjustments" must be made by an employer to eliminate any barriers that might prevent someone doing their job to their full ability because of the effect of their disability.

People may need adjustments that are the complete opposite to what another person requires, even when they share a diagnosis, so adjustments should always be tailored to the

individual. Someone may only be able to concentrate on paperwork if there is background music on, for example, whereas for others that might be an unbearable way to work.

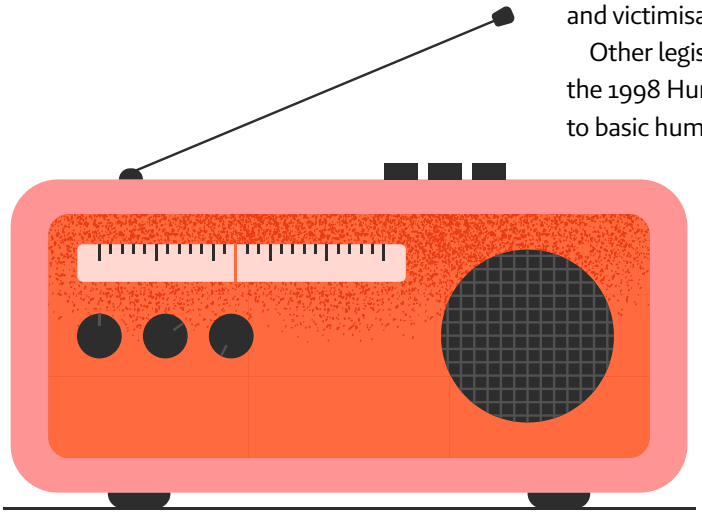
Examples of adjustments that might be made on farm include someone who has sensory overload from the sound of farm machinery wearing noise cancelling headphones, or someone who finds spoken instructions difficult to process and may need them to be written down.

Adjustments can cover time management and organisation, social issues, language and communication, numeracy and literacy challenges and sensory issues. They might be related to the work environment, equipment or extra training.

It does not necessarily have to be an expensive solution, and when there is a need to spend money on an adjustment – for example, a text reader for a dyslexic worker, there is a government scheme called **Access to Work** that can help with costs.

Other legal protection

The Equality Act 2010 also protects against discrimination – be that direct, indirect or by association arising from a disability as a protected characteristic, and this includes harassment and victimisation.



Other legislation that covers neurodivergent employees includes the 1998 Human Rights Act which states that everyone is entitled to basic human rights regardless of different circumstances, such as disability, and the **Health and Safety at Work Act 1974** puts the onus on employers to keep employees safe at work, which might affect the type of adjustments that are put in place.

The common neurodivergent conditions

The most common conditions reported in the Level the Field survey among the 563 respondents who considered themselves neurodivergent are: ADHD (45%), dyslexia (42%), autism (32%), dyspraxia (9%), dyscalculia (6%), brain injury (4%) along with learning disability, bipolar disorder, Tourette syndrome and dysgraphia.

ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactive disorder is characterised by difficulties staying focused and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. It is estimated that about 3-4% of adults in the UK have ADHD. It is more prevalent in childhood but 65% will have ADHD traits that continue into adulthood.

Someone who has ADHD or has ADHD traits may have difficulty with processing instructions, time management and remaining on task, being easily distracted as the brain races to find a different stimulus. It may involve being fidgety and having difficulty sitting for long periods.

Not everyone with ADHD will have all these traits – and there are different sub-types that have different dominant behaviours – someone with inattentive ADHD or attention deficit disorder (ADD) would have difficulty concentrating and in others hyperactivity and impulsiveness will be the stronger traits.

Contrary to the stereotype of ADHD, it does not necessarily have a hyperactive element to it, and hyperactivity can be internal (with racing thoughts), or verbal (talking loudly, fast and interrupting), rather than physical. Symptoms may manifest differently for women and it is often missed as they are less likely to be externally hyperactive and may have grown used to masking their traits.

Communication issues can manifest as excessive talking, interrupting people's conversations, predicting what someone is going to say during a conversation or speaking out of turn.

CASE STUDY: MOLLY MEAD

PHOTOGRAPHY: VETPARTNERS

Twenty-five-year-old Molly Mead is in her first year at Harper & Keele Veterinary School. She grew up on her family farm in Hertfordshire and, after school, completed an animal care apprenticeship, later working as a vet technician and bovine TB tester. Last year she was an NFU student and young farmer ambassador and she posts on Instagram as **@the.neurodivergent.farmer**.

Molly was 19 when she was diagnosed with autism. This gave her insight into how her brain works and sparked an interest in neurodivergence that made her realise she also had many ADHD traits, for which she gained a diagnosis at 22.

Co-occurring neurotypes

It is common for two neurotypes to co-occur and the combination of autism and ADHD is known as AuDHD. Traits can be conflicting – for example, Molly's autism side likes predictability, but her ADHD side craves new things to keep her engaged. "TB testing suited me because you have to do everything by the book, so it provided a sense of routine and consistency, and working in a vet practice at the same time meant all sorts of emergencies got called in, which satisfied the ADHD side of my brain."

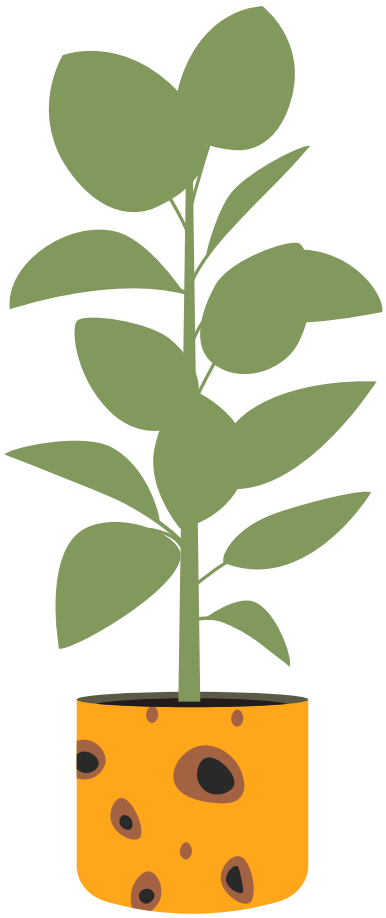
Her ADHD traits include forgetfulness, chaotic thoughts and overthinking, and her autism traits include sensory issues which can lead to meltdowns, repetitive behaviours (such as skin-picking) and a fight-or-flight response in stressful situations.

One of the biggest hurdles for Molly is facing many changes at once. Attempts to switch schools or travel abroad ended in meltdowns, and she nearly dropped out in the first weeks of her vet studies. Support from friends, family and the university's welfare team, and insights from her diagnoses, helped her to pause, reset and get back on track.

Raising awareness

Molly's awareness of the prevalence of neurodivergence in agriculture drove her to become an NFU ambassador and champion the topic. She sees the advantages it brings to the sector, such as problem-solving entrepreneurs leading the way in sustainability, and dairy farmers dedicated to their daily routine.

"While it's essential we keep educating the farming community on how we all work differently and what that enables us to bring to the table, we must not forget that these neurotypes are disabling," she says. "While my AuDHD doesn't stop me doing things, it does make my life harder."



It can have a negative impact – for example, underachieving at work, impulsive actions that may endanger health, or affecting social interactions and relationships. As with any other form of neurodivergence, when people with ADHD traits are unsupported in an environment set up with a neurotypical way of thinking, difficulties can be exacerbated.

The positive aspects of ADHD traits are many. Energy, enthusiasm, adventurousness, curiosity, resilience, hyperfocus for things that spark interest, creativity, a willingness to take risks, and empathy.

Autism

Autism is a spectrum condition and will be experienced very differently from one person to another. The main characteristics are differences in communication and social interaction. People may take things literally and have difficulties picking up on social cues or decoding other's emotions or intentions. As a result, an autistic person may come across as blunt or direct when talking.

The difficulties navigating a neurotypical world can result in feeling overwhelmed and having meltdowns, which can involve outbursts or shutdowns to escape a build-up of emotional responses that are difficult to process.

The National Autistic Society estimates that more than one in 100 people are autistic. It is a lifelong condition, but autistic qualities may be masked and many people – more girls and women – go undiagnosed until adulthood, particularly when traits aren't seen as problematic. As it is such a wide spectrum, strengths and weaknesses vary hugely. Some autistic people will have significant care needs and may be non-verbal, others will be highly intelligent, but struggle with social communication.

Restricted or repetitive behaviours are often present, and sensory differences where lights, sound and touch are experienced more intensely, which can cause sensory overload or can be used to self-regulate. Routines, repetitive behaviours, special interests and hobbies are often extremely important.

Flapping hands, rocking or tapping or any other repeated physical action, known as stimming, may help an autistic person deal with day-to-day life. Transitions can be testing and many autistic people will be aware of what triggers their anxiety and have developed ways to cope.

There are many autistic traits that can bring benefits to a farming team. **The website Autistica** lists 10 of autistic strengths:

- Expertise in favourite topics
- Hyperfocus
- Creativity
- Attention to detail
- Honesty and an acute sense of justice
- Loyalty
- Creative problem solving
- Less influenced by socially derived biases
- Excellent memory

CASE STUDY: DAVID NICHOLSON

David Nicholson grew up on his family's smallholding in Fife, which he works on with his father. He has a part-time admin job with the **National Autistic Society** in Glasgow and is determined to spread awareness about autism and neurodiversity in rural communities.

He struggled to socialise and make friends at school and had meltdowns when he was overwhelmed or anxious. But it was not until he was 13 that a teacher suggested he might have autism. The school put informal support in place but he did not gain an official diagnosis until he was 18. He says the diagnosis "gave me a reason as to why I was different to everyone around me. It allowed me to say 'this is who I am' and I could get the support to go forwards".

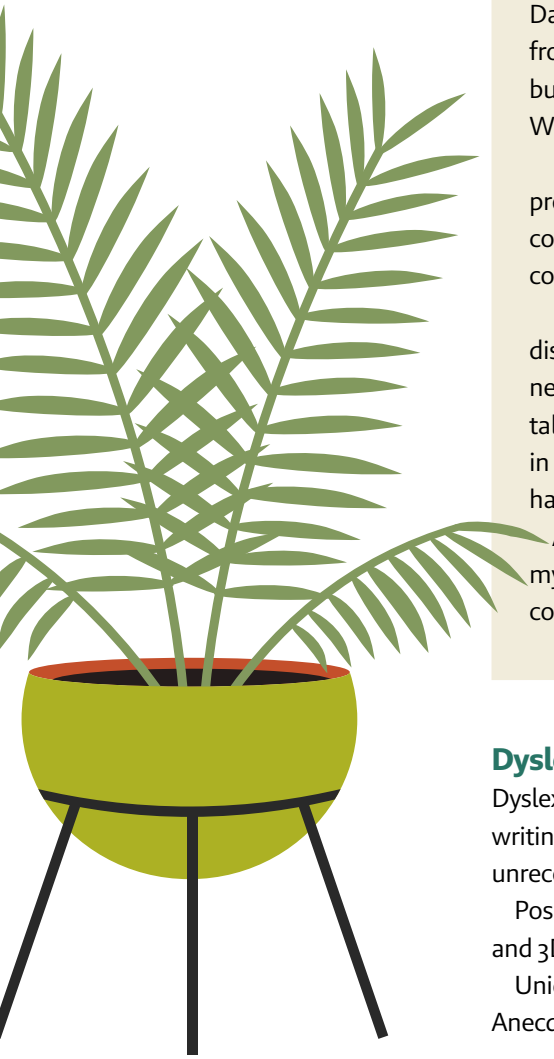
Social interaction

David was the first of his family to go to university and he gained a 2:1 in law and politics from Stirling University. The social side of student life was not easy, but it helped build his resilience and after graduating he worked as a parliamentary assistant in Westminster. While there, he got involved in raising awareness about autism.

Now aged 35, agriculture is very much part of his identity, and the smallholding provides a safe space when he is anxious. He says: "Feeling like you belong to a community helps hugely when you have felt socially isolated. Having that strong connection helps when things are challenging."

He highlights his autistic traits that are beneficial to agriculture, such as hyperfocus, discipline, problem-solving, resilience, loyalty and determination. He wants neurodivergent people who work on farms "to have the freedom to shine – letting their talents come out while also having flexibility so that if they feel anxious there are things in place to help". And it doesn't have to cost a lot to do that: "It might be as simple as having a space for time outs when things are stressful," he says.

After years of masking his autism, David reveals: "I am at my happiest when I am myself and I keep close to my passions – the smallholding, my rural roots, music, the countryside and politics – and being my authentic self."



Dyslexia

Dyslexia involves a different way of processing information, particularly when reading or writing. This can have a knock-on effect on literacy and can affect progress in school when it is unrecognised. Spelling and rote learning can be challenging.

Positives include creative thinking, problem-solving, recognising patterns, spatial reasoning and 3D-thinking, empathy, narrative reasoning and decision-making.

Unidentified dyslexia can have a big impact on an individual's identify and self-esteem. Anecdotal evidence shows that many people with dyslexia feel written off by the school system.

Research from Dyslexia Scotland identified that about 25% of Scotland's farmer may have dyslexia, a rate that is much higher than in the rest of the population, and it has been working with Rsabi to provide free assessments for agricultural workers over 40 years old.

"The cost of dyslexia assessment for adults is a barrier that was evidenced by 80% of respondents in our recent survey report, **Towards a Dyslexia Friendly Scotland?**," says Cathy Magee from Dyslexia Scotland. "Clear recommendations from a dyslexia assessment report can help adults to access tailored reasonable adjustments in their work environment and provide crucial insights for the individual."

CASE STUDY: MAX CHARMLEY

Assistant herd manager Max Charmley, 24, works for a dairy farm in Staffordshire. He loves his job and has a drive to get things done swiftly and efficiently so he has time to do more, and he inspires his team to do the same.

He was diagnosed with dyslexia when he was in primary school and three years ago received a diagnosis of ADHD. He says his brain is always on the go and he finds it difficult to switch off and relax. His work suits him as he has the freedom to do different things each day, from looking after the cows to welding, building, bricklaying, and managing the team. His to-do list appears as pictures in his head and if it becomes overwhelming he has learned to stop and take a breather, but he generally likes having different projects on the go.

Paperwork challenge

Max can complete paperwork when he needs to, it just requires greater effort. He describes the words becoming jumbled when he reads, and the spaces between the words beginning to merge. He found school difficult because of this and despite being given coloured overlays and glasses to help, he says that the curriculum and the exam system are not built for people with dyslexia.

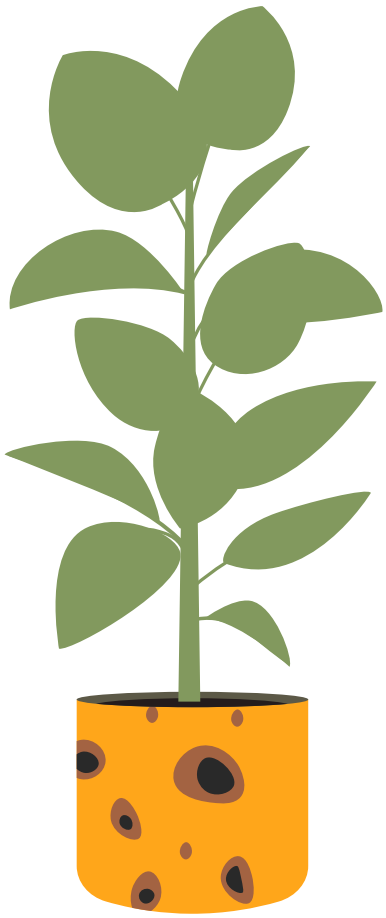
He is highly observant, and his traits suit his role. "I have always been very practical and good at problem solving," says Max. "It's such a benefit. I walk around the yard and see a problem that needs fixing and I will just know how to solve it. Ten different options will go through my brain and I can flip through them and know what will work."

His team are aware of his diagnoses. They know to tell him things rather than write things down, and that he can concentrate better while listening to music, which helps him block out distractions.

Accepting differences

His employers are always on the lookout for ways to accommodate different ways of thinking, but he believes there might be a lack of awareness in the wider farming community. He describes his experiences at Young Farmers' Clubs as isolating, and he finds the older farming community more accepting of difference.

Max finds his diagnoses useful to explain how his brain works, but says: "It's just something I have. I don't identify as neurodivergent. I am just me."



Acquired brain injury

This is when the brain is injured anytime after birth. It can be caused by trauma to the head or illness, such as a tumour, stroke or aneurysm. Brain injury can change the way the brain works and it can be seen as an acquired neurodivergence.

Effects will be varied and depend on what sort of injury has been sustained, but it can cause huge changes to executive function skills such as planning, problem solving, time management and maintaining focus. There may also be sensory issues, with some situations causing overwhelm, and social communication might also be affected. Memory, focus, resilience and empathy may be heightened. Some of these traits have similarities with neurodivergent conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

CASE STUDY: POLLY HILTON

Seven years ago, at the age of 28, Polly Hilton had a stroke-like brain injury that left her paralysed down her left side. She had to relearn how to talk and, despite regaining the use of her legs within weeks, she has been left with neuro-differences that continue today.

Two years earlier she had given up her office job to start Find and Foster, a cider-making business using waste apples from orchards near her home in the Exe Valley in Devon. The change was driven by her desire for a more active job and an interest in sustainable agriculture.

Starting over

When she came out of intensive care, she was dogged by constant fatigue. The injury affected the basal ganglia, the part of the brain that controls movement and aspects of executive function, such as co-ordination, planning, multitasking and management skills. This inevitably slowed the trajectory of Polly's young business. "What happened to my brain affected all those abilities that make you able to run a business," she explains.

She also now finds big social situations difficult. "Even one or two new faces can be overwhelming, and lots of loud noise and a bombardment of stimulus makes me need to be in a silent dark room to switch my brain off."

Road to recovery

Having spoken to people with ADHD, she has found there are a lot of similarities regarding executive function and sensory processing. After the stroke she says she was "hyperaware of the differences it has made to my brain and the way I am". Things did improve after about five years as her brain adapted to the injury, but she still has difficulty with co-ordination, multitasking and organising.

Today, the business is thriving. She has a flock of sheep that have taken on mowing duties, and she finds the physical aspects of the job, and being outdoors in a peaceful environment, restorative. Asked how the injury affected her identity, she says: "It completely took over my life and I had to become OK with being the new version of me."

Dyspraxia

Developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD) is the diagnosis given for what is informally called dyspraxia, and although they are often used interchangeably, the terms do not always refer to the same thing. DCD is a neurodevelopmental condition where learning and motor skills are severely affected.

It will vary in the way it presents, but will affect daily activities such as writing, dressing, typing, self-care, play and sports. It may also affect social communication and executive function in areas such as time management, organisation and planning. There is no agreed definition for dyspraxia and it can be used broadly to describe issues with motor difficulties as well speech and executive function, and other social and emotional problems.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia involves a difficulty processing information relating to numbers and difficulties with maths.

Learning disabilities

Mencap describes learning disabilities as "a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities... which affects someone for their whole life" and can have mild, moderate, severe or profound effects on an individual.

Bipolar disorder

This is a mental health condition which used to be called manic depression, and it is characterised by extremes in mood and energy levels. High moods can be characterised by high energy, racing thoughts, euphoria, impulsivity and restlessness. Low moods can present as depression, with a lack of energy, sadness, sleeplessness and an inability to concentrate.

Tourette syndrome

Tourette's is characterised by involuntary tics, which vary from person to person but may involve grimacing, grunts, blinking, animal noises, repeated phrases or swear words. Most people get a strong urge – called premonitory sensations – before their tic occurs.

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia is difficulty surrounding the production of words and can affect writing, typing and spelling.

Terminology in a rapidly changing landscape

As awareness of neurodivergence spreads and neurodivergent communities have greater opportunity to connect on social media and online forums, new terminology is appearing rapidly. From neurospicy and neurotwinkly to indicate someone with more than one type of neurodivergence, different terminology can be controversial – and some terms may be more useful than others.

Less than 10 years ago, for instance, it may have been preferable to say someone was a "person with autism" rather than labelling them as "autistic". The term has now been reclaimed and is used as a proud descriptor by many and identity-first language is common – although it may be seen as a way of being defined only by their neurotype by others.

Another example is the disappearance of the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, which has been replaced in medical diagnostic guidance with a broad diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Despite being a useful description for people who have the diagnosis (some of whom may still identify as having Asperger's or being Aspie), the name has been dropped after the doctor Hans Asperger was discredited for his association with eugenics in Nazi-era Vienna.

A criticism is that by ending this more specific diagnosis the now blanket diagnosis covers extreme variations within autism. Asperger's was a diagnosis of autism without learning disability and it is extremely different to a diagnosis of level 3 autism where people may have high support needs, perhaps being non-verbal with limited levels of communication.

Breaking down language barriers

There are criticisms that some terms may minimise the considerable issues some neurodivergent people have. There can also be issues with the language of disability as it has negative associations. Reasonable adjustments, for example, may also be problematic as there is an element of subjectivity; who decides what is unreasonable? Workplace adjustments can be used instead.

It is very individualised. One person may find the term neurodivergent empowering, another may find it offensive. Some people say they are neurodiverse – which technically anyone can say as it incorporates every different way that a human brain functions – but we can determine that they mean they have neurodivergent traits.

This may all seem like a minefield but it can just be a case of being open and asking people about their preferred terminology – and identifying your own. The most important thing is to have the conversation.

SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY

- Autistica
- British Dyslexia Association
- Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD)
- Defra
- Dyslexia Scotland
- Mencap
- Movement Matters UK
- National Autistic Society
- NHS
- The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (Tiah)