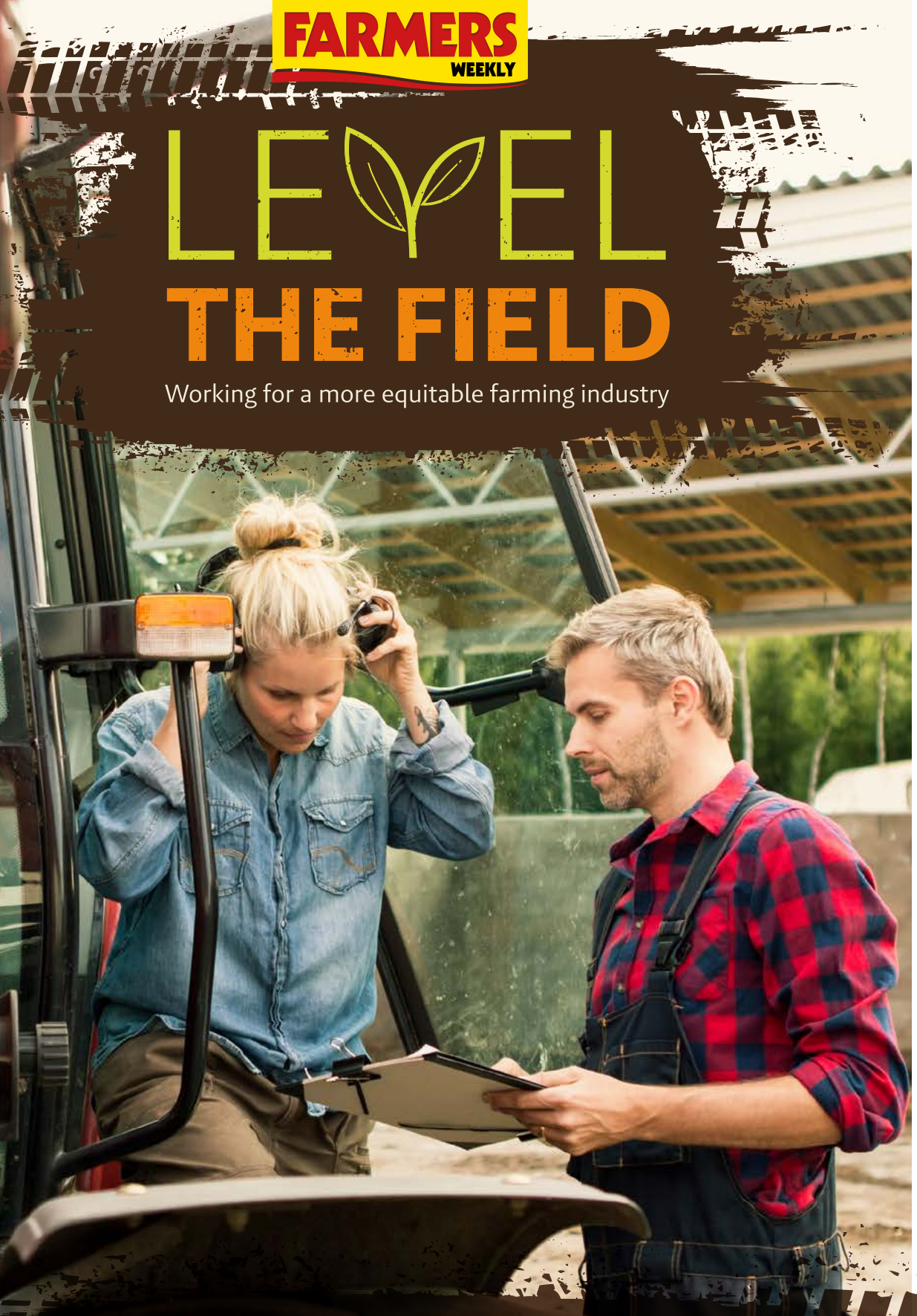
FARMERS WEEKLY

LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry



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A comprehensive guide to

Neuro-inclusive workplaces

Steps to make your farm business more welcoming and safer for everyone

The case for neuro-inclusion

Agriculture has always relied on people who think differently. On any farm, you'll find someone who's the first to spot a lame ewe, someone who can fix a machine by instinct, a person who memorises every gateway without trying, and a worker who thrives on steady, predictable routines.

These strengths often align closely with neurodivergent traits such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, yet a survey by Farmers Weekly found the industry doesn't always discuss this fact openly.

A neuro-inclusive farm isn't about giving people labels – it's about understanding how different minds work so the workplace becomes safer, smoother and more sustainable.

With labour shortages, growing technical demands and pressure on margins, the industry can't afford to overlook the talent already here. When farms are designed to suit neurodivergent people, they work better for everyone.

Why this matters in farming

Farm work is demanding – long days, weather-driven deadlines, shifting priorities, machinery hazards, livestock unpredictability and constant paperwork. In this environment, even small barriers like unclear instructions, sudden plan changes, cluttered workspaces or sensory overload can quickly become major stressors.

For many neurodivergent people, these pressures hit harder, but the truth is they affect the whole workforce. More transparent communication, better layout, and sensory-aware workspaces reduce risk and help the day run more smoothly for everyone.

Research on workplace psychology and the foundations of universal design backs this up:

- Clarity reduces risk
- Predictability boosts performance
- Sensory-aware environments improve focus, accuracy and wellbeing.

These principles also strengthen retention. Skilled workers who might otherwise feel overwhelmed or misunderstood are more likely to stay when the work environment supports them. And this approach fits naturally with farming, which already relies on systems, routines and practical design to maintain safety and efficiency.

Across multiple studies in workplace safety, psychology and rural workforce development, the message is consistent: when workplaces support different thinking styles, productivity rises, mistakes fall, and stress reduces.

Neuro-inclusive design isn't special treatment for a few – it's creating workplaces that work well

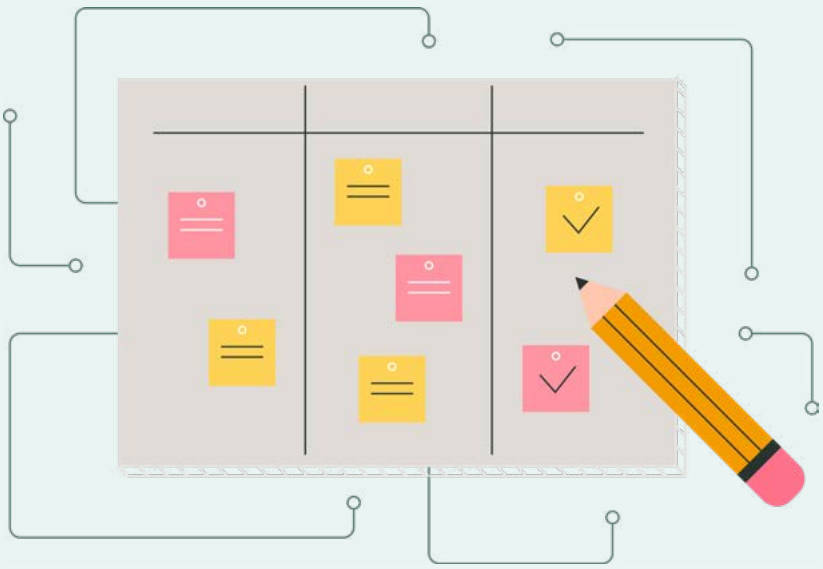
for everyone. There are many simple, practical steps to make farm work easier to understand and navigate without turning the process into a rigid checklist.

A universal design approach

Universal design (UD) means to "design once, benefit many". Instead of waiting for individuals to request adjustments, the workplace is set up so that those adjustments are built in from the start. What this might look like on the farm:

- **Clear, predictable routines** for feeding rounds, bedding-up, machinery checks or yard jobs so tasks rely less on memory and unwritten rules
- **Flexible communication methods** – written lists, laminated check sheets, voice notes or simple photo guides
- **Practical options** such as allowing workers sensitive to noise to take quieter tasks away from the grain dryer or workshop, where possible.

This approach reduces the pressure on individuals who may feel uncomfortable asking for exceptions. It aligns naturally with farming's preference for systems that save time, reduce errors and keep people safe.



Visual management

Visual management is one of the most effective ways to support neurodivergent workers. It removes "hidden information" – the assumptions only long-term staff know – and makes tasks easier to follow, especially in busy areas such as parlours, lambing sheds or workshops.

Offering visual clarity can reduce uncertainty and create consistency for every worker, from apprentices to relief staff.

Consistent visual cues:

- **Colour-coded zones** in the workshop (for example, green for hand tools, blue for PPE, red for electrical kit)
- **Labelled storage** in the chemical shed, feed store or dairy parlour
- **Shadow boards** showing exactly where tools belong.

Picture-based standard operating procedures (SOPs):

- Laminated, step-by-step photo guides beside the equipment might include instructions on how to start the generator, run the parlour wash cycle, set up the sheep race, or fill the sprayer correctly.

Intuitive and straightforward visuals:

- **Clear sight-lines** in the collecting yard, lambing shed or grain store
- **One tidy, well-maintained information board,** not layers of outdated posters
- **Consistent symbols and headings** so workers recognise information instantly.

CASE STUDY: ROSEMARY SCRIMGEOUR

Designer and neurodiversity advocate Rosemary Scrimgeour has spent years helping organisations understand how to support dyslexic talent, driven by a belief that when the conditions are right, people who think differently can thrive.

"You wouldn't plant barley and potatoes in the same soil at the same time," she explains. "They have different needs. People are no different. No one excels at everything, but teams with complementary strengths can achieve almost anything."

For Rosemary, the issue is not dyslexia itself. "Dyslexia is still framed through what's 'wrong'. When we focus only on deficits, we miss the remarkable capabilities that often sit alongside them."

Home truths

With many dyslexic members of her own family, she knows only too well that people with dyslexia can leave education being told for years they are "slow, lazy, or stupid".

"They often enter the workplace lacking self-belief, hesitant to ask for the tools or clarity they need because they've learned to doubt themselves," says Rosemary. "The reality is more complex. Dyslexic minds work differently. They're brilliant at some things, challenged by others. Overwhelm can mess everything up, especially when the instructions pile up.

"Give someone four jobs in one breath – shift bales, head to the next field, pick someone up, drop something off – and their mind can swing open like a gate," she explains. "The issue isn't doing the jobs. It's trying to keep the whole list held in their head at once."

Something as simple as texting the list takes the pressure off a leaky memory. People want to succeed. With simple changes like this, they can.

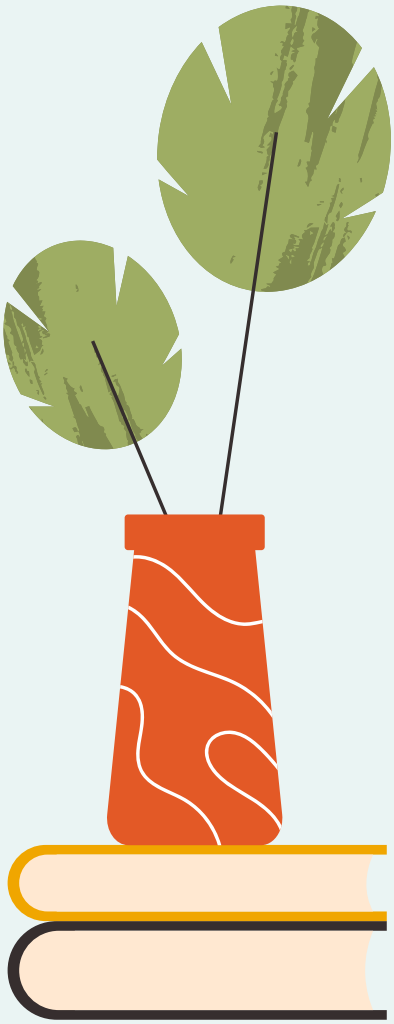
"Ask people what works for them – just don't expect them to know straight away. Most people don't realise we all process the world differently, which is why misunderstandings and frustrations happen. In an industry rich with neurodiversity, like farming, morale and retention rise when leaders lead with compassion and curiosity. Make it clear that you're willing to adapt and find solutions together. Everyone wins."

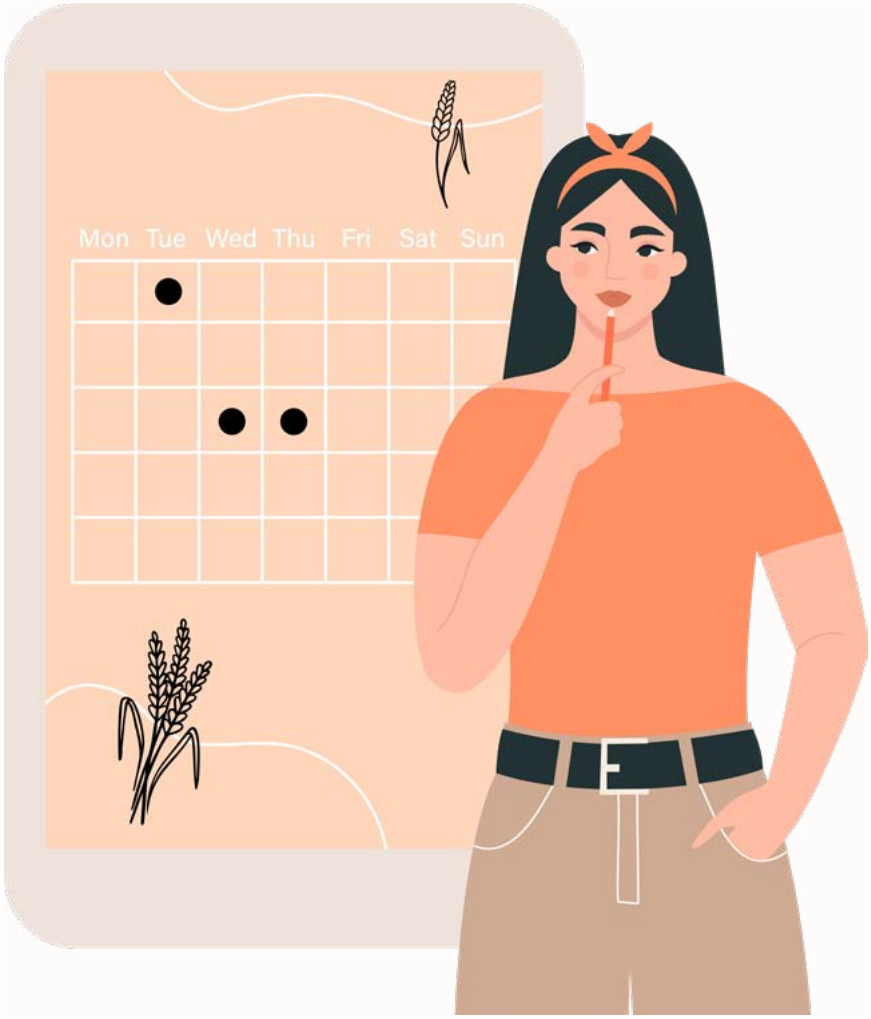
Beyond the workplace

Rosemary's work goes far beyond individual workplaces. She collaborates internationally on research to unlock neurodiverse strengths and coaches on a neuroscience and leadership course at Stanford University.

It was through Stanford's Schwab Learning Centre that she met Dr Nicole Ofiesh, and the pair initiated a programme with Scottish Enterprise supporting dyslexic rural entrepreneurs. Rosemary is now preparing to teach a workplace neurodiversity module on Brain Explained – a platform designed to help people understand how their brains work, identify strengths and learn practical management strategies.

What is clear is her unwavering conviction that dyslexic minds have enormous untapped potential. "Lightbulbs, cars, aeroplanes, iPhones – the inventions that changed everything – came from dyslexic minds," she says.





Information accessibility

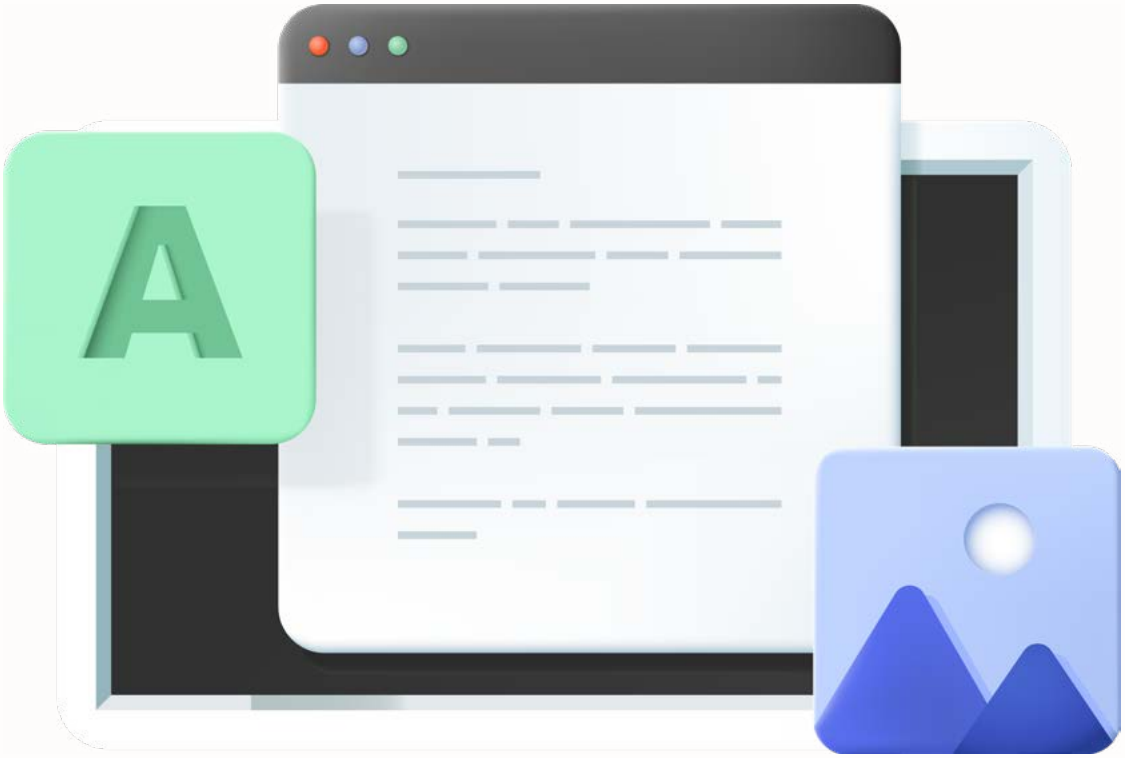
Strong communication is the backbone of farm safety, yet instructions are often rushed, assumed or delivered over noise. For neurodivergent workers, rapid verbal information can be especially hard to process, but clearer, more predictable communication benefits everyone. How might it look in the workplace.

Readable and accessible formats:

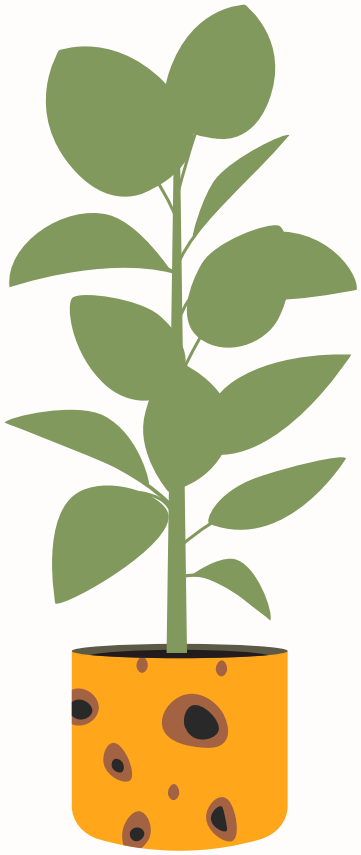
- **Use simple sans serif or dyslexia-friendly fonts** – clean letter shapes reduce visual clutter and help readers process information more easily
- **Avoid fully justified text** – uneven spacing makes reading more challenging; use 1.5 line spacing and larger font sizes (16+ for wall-mounted information)
- **Rely on icons wherever possible** – strong visual cues cut through literacy, language and processing barriers instantly.

Clear signage:

- **One clear message per poster** – people often read signs while moving, so the message has to land instantly
- **Use minimal text** – overloaded posters get ignored; a few well-chosen lines support action far more effectively than long explanations
- **Break information into bullet points** – this highlights essential information, especially useful in high-pressure moments.



- **Opt for short, strong headlines** – workers should grasp the point in seconds. If they have a pause to interpret it, it's too long
- **Photo-based standard operating procedures (SOPs)** – photos reduce uncertainty and work well in noisy or distracting conditions where reading is harder. They show exactly what "good" looks like and help standardise work across the team.



Reducing jargon:

- **Avoid unnecessary acronyms** – farming already has plenty. Reducing them prevents extra mental effort and keeps meaning straightforward
- **Write acronyms out in full on first use** – a small step that gives new staff the context they need
- **Limit documents to four or five acronyms at most** – beyond that point, people start to lose track. A cleaner document improves understanding and reduces errors
- **Provide a simple glossary on the noticeboard** – a quick reference helps workers confirm meanings without having to ask repeatedly, which supports confidence and independence.

Editable templates:

- **Quickly adjust routines or layouts** – whether a handling area moves, a treatment routine changes or the harvest plan shifts, templates allow managers to adjust information while keeping the look and structure consistent.
- **Use on-farm photos** – real, recognisable images remove guesswork. Workers do not have to interpret generic diagrams or stock photos that do not match your equipment, layout or animals.

CASE STUDY: DR KIRSTIE PICKLES

As equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) lead at Harper and Keele Vet School – and a neurodivergent vet herself – Dr Kirstie Pickles brings lived experience to a profession still catching up.

Autistic and ADHD, she did not receive a diagnosis until adulthood. "I didn't get my diagnosis till I was in my 40s, so I'd spent many years being misunderstood and not understanding myself." That experience now fuels her work to improve awareness and support across the sector. In 2024, she led the "Bridging Understanding Breaking Barriers" neurodiversity awareness campaign within the veterinary sector, which won Campaign of the Year from the Association of Charity Organisations.

The campaign delivered written guidance, webinars, videos and conference talks to help workplaces support neurodivergent colleagues and meet their duty to provide reasonable adjustments. At the same time, Kirstie worked with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to improve support for veterinary and veterinary nursing students on placements. Universities and colleges currently communicate reasonable adjustments in different ways, leaving placement providers with inconsistent information and students unsure how to advocate for their needs.

To address this, she helped convene a major stakeholder event bringing together educators, students and placement providers to define best practice. For Kirstie, none of the findings were surprising. "It's what we already know, but it just needs to be applied consistently," she says.

Responding to the findings

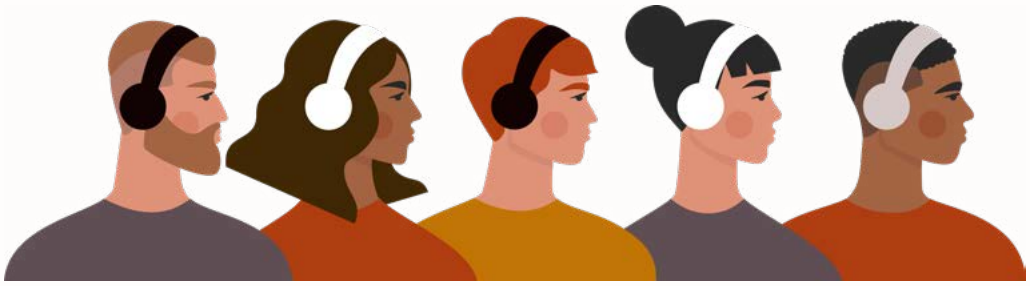
Students frequently reported limited neurodiversity awareness among placement providers and the difficulty of self-advocating within a power imbalance. Kirstie argues that placements should be inclusive by default, rather than relying on students to ask.

The adjustments students requested were often simple. Clear orientation information was one of the strongest themes, including location, hours, equipment, what to bring and whether a quiet space was available. Noise-reducing headphones, the option for short breaks, and access to a calculator – especially for students with dyscalculia during drug calculations – were also common.

A significant development is the RCVS's new reasonable adjustments "health passport", which Kirstie describes as an HR resource. While many sectors already use passports, the veterinary profession has lacked a unified version. Larger corporates may have templates, but many small practices do not.

The RCVS passport aims to give practices a standard, simple, accessible template. It documents the adjustments agreed between an employee and the organisation, why they are needed, and how they will be reviewed. Crucially, it removes the burden from the individual to repeatedly explain or defend their needs.

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers must provide reasonable adjustments, even without formal disclosure. The passport gives practices a clear way to meet that duty. "This is about preventing others from going through years of misunderstanding and normalising support. We want neurodivergent people to thrive in this profession, not just cope."



Sensory-aware farm environments

Farms can be overwhelming for anyone, but individuals with sensory sensitivity may experience headaches, fatigue, distraction or shutdown much more quickly. Small changes can make a big difference – and when managers use these spaces themselves, it signals that regulation is normal, not a weakness.

Lighting

- **Use diffused lighting** – think about in offices, break rooms and welfare spaces and not just noisy tasks. Diffused lighting creates a calmer atmosphere where people can rest, focus on paperwork or take a proper break.
- **Replace flickering tubes or harsh fluorescent tubes** Even faint flickering can be stressful and often instantly obvious to neurodivergent workers. Replacing faulty tubes or outdated fluorescent panels reduces eye strain and prevents unnecessary discomfort.
- **Add task lighting in workshops to reduce glare** Focused lighting lets workers carry out precise tasks like machinery repairs or tool maintenance without flooding the whole space with bright light. This reduces overstimulation and helps maintain concentration.

Noise

- **Make ear defenders widely available** These will help workers operating machinery or doing other jobs where noise is prevalent, and can also aid concentration.
- **Provide at least one low-noise space** A bench in a quiet corner, a small office or even an available tractor cab can offer essential sensory reset time.
- **Keep announcements short and predictable** Sudden noise blasts, unclear messages or loud verbal instructions can be startling and stressful. Short, predictable announcements, or written alternatives where practical, reduce unnecessary pressure.
- **Rotate staff away from long, noisy tasks** Jobs such as operating machinery, working near grain dryers or handling livestock in enclosed spaces can be mentally draining over long periods. Rotating staff helps prevent sensory fatigue and supports consistent focus.

Layout and clarity

- **Keep walkways clear** Keeping routes clear through sheds, workshops, and yards reduces cognitive and physical hazards.
- **Reduce visual clutter on noticeboards** Remove outdated, duplicate or irrelevant posters so new information stands out.
- **Normalise short, frequent breaks** Taking a five-minute reset can prevent the build-up of stress that leads to mistakes or accidents later. When brief breaks are seen as routine rather than exceptional, workers feel able to proactively manage their wellbeing.

CASE STUDY: MIKE DUXBURY, THE INCLUSIVE FARM

When you talk to Mike Duxbury, it becomes clear that inclusion is not a design principle for him – it is a way of living.

Blind since he was six, Mike has spent his life adapting to a world built largely without his needs in mind. Now, through the Inclusive Farm in Aberdeen, he is reshaping that world from the ground up, creating environments that meet real sensory, physical, and emotional needs rather than assumptions.

Since opening in 2021, the farm has supported students and individuals who were told there was no career in agriculture, helping them build confidence and practical skills through hands-on experience on a mixed farm.

"What we've created is a new building developed into a full working environment," he says. "We look at acoustics, sound, lighting, temperature, and stress points where people can get away."

These features sit alongside a no-step policy, adjustable lighting, sound-absorbing materials, and carefully planned layouts so people never feel watched or overwhelmed.

Mike's starting point is always an individual assessment. "The first thing I do is find out what triggers their particular things."

The triggers differ widely and can vary from the size of an open space to communication styles, smell, white noise, voice frequency, or visual clutter. So he designs spaces that flex, lighting that dims or brightens, rooms with predictable acoustics, and quiet, calm layouts.

Poor acoustics

Sound is one of the most significant issues Mike addresses. As a musician and someone who relies heavily on hearing, he understands how disruptive poor acoustics can be.

"I struggle with rooms that have tiled floors, because the acoustics drive me crazy." White noise can even wipe out his navigation.

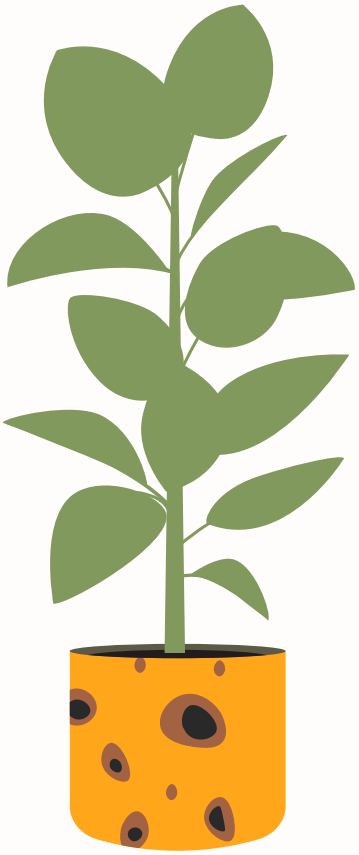
On the farm, he uses carpet tiles, acoustic pads and soundboards to prevent noise from bouncing. Outdoors, textures and materials act as orientation tools as different pens use different wires or rails so people can feel or hear subtle differences.

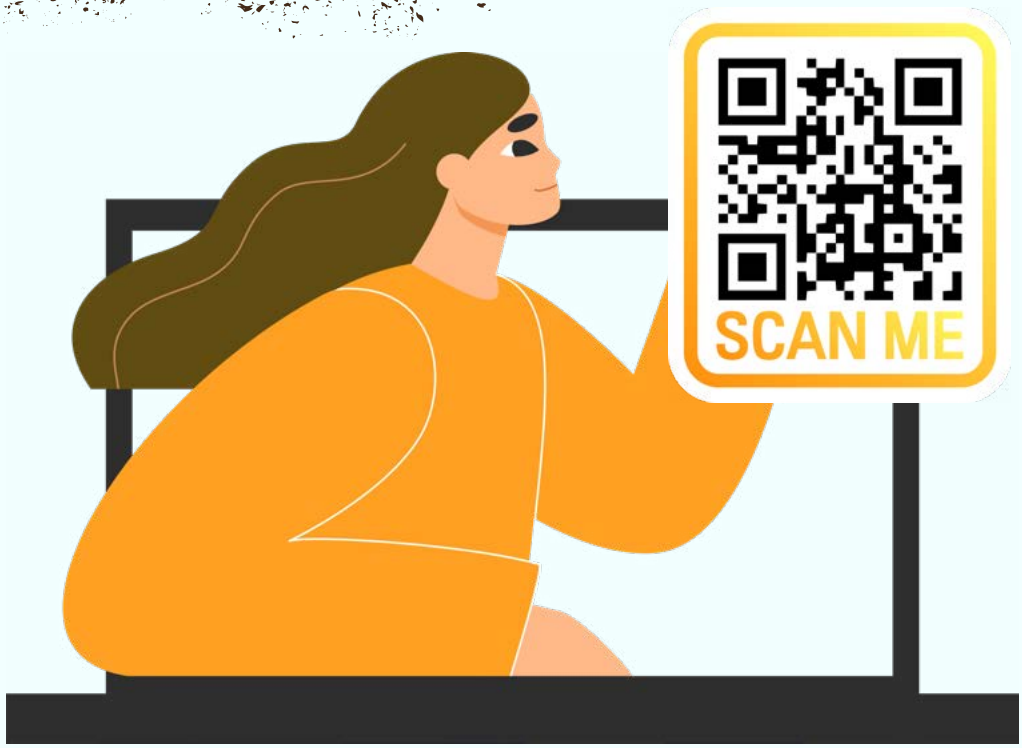
Underfoot textures help too: gravel gives audible feedback, and rubber matting steadies wheelchairs and helps Mike orient himself. Even farm machinery is chosen with sensory needs in mind. "I've got an electric digger, so I'm not overloading somebody's senses by using a diesel-powered motor."

This blend of detail and empathy came through five years of learning. Mike and his wife invited more than 40 groups to their former Bedfordshire farm, bringing together people with varied physical and mental health needs, from autism, Down syndrome, hearing and sight loss, poor mobility and wheelchair users.

Each group explored the space and shared what worked and what didn't. Mike made changes, invited them back and tested again. In one visit with students from Harper Adams University, he asked them to spot five inclusive design features. Still, the highest score was two, proof that the best inclusive design is almost invisible.

The result is a place where one can learn and work without battling their surroundings. "Ninety per cent of blind people, and 78 per cent of autistic people are unemployed – but it doesn't have to be this way. We're determined to let their voices lead the way."





Inclusive technology and digital tools

Digital tools are no longer "extras" – they are simple, low-cost ways to remove barriers, improve safety and make everyday tasks easier for everyone. On farms where information changes quickly, work is physical, and instructions are often verbal or rushed, accessible technology helps staff process information in ways that suit their thinking style.

For neurodivergent workers, these tools can be the difference between coping and thriving. For employers, they support consistency, accuracy, retention and confidence across the whole team. Accessible technology works because it:

- Reduces reliance on memory or rapid verbal instructions
- Makes safety-critical information easier to absorb
- Supports workers with dyslexia, ADHD, autism, processing differences and visual impairments
- Standardises communication, especially under pressure
- Helps new, seasonal and relief staff get up to speed quickly
- Creates predictable systems that benefit every worker.

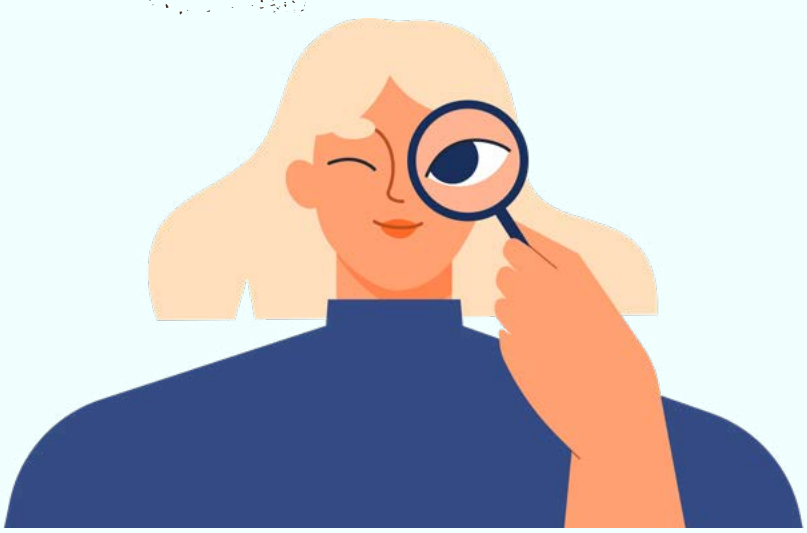
Descriptive signage and accessible QR codes

Providing information in multiple formats, whether audio, visual, or large print, ensures staff can access guidance in the way that works best for them.

This allows workers to access information quickly, even when their hands are dirty, reading is difficult, or the environment is noisy and busy.

Use QR codes to provide multi-format instructions that can link directly to:

- Audio descriptions
- Short how-to videos
- Large-print versions of SOPs, safety checks and emergency procedures.



Follow RNIB guidance to ensure QR codes work reliably
The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) specifies minimum sizes, colour contrast, and placement rules so that codes can be scanned by people with low vision or using accessibility apps. Good design ensures everyone can use them consistently across the farm.

Consider accessible QR tools such as NaviLens
Systems like NaviLens support individuals whose sight is impaired and allow codes to be scanned from a distance and provide spoken instructions or location-aware cues. This can be particularly helpful in large or complex areas like sheds or yards where visual signs alone are not enough.

Tag key areas and equipment with QR-linked micro-resources
Add QR codes to gates, posters, machinery or noticeboards so workers can access essential guidance instantly. Short, structured formats work best, such as :

- a 60-second audio summary
- a three-step photo SOP
- a printable large-font version.

These micro-resources reduce uncertainty, promote consistent practice, and relieve workers from repeatedly asking for clarification.

Why this matters
Accessible QR signage supports independence and reduces the cognitive effort required to interpret written or verbal instructions.

It helps new, seasonal, or relief workers who are unfamiliar with layouts or routines, and reduces errors caused by unclear or assumed information.

Digital read-aloud and document accessibility

Many workers absorb information more effectively through audio or simplified formats rather than traditional written documents.

Digital read-aloud tools help remove these barriers by allowing workers to choose how they take in information, without needing extra support from managers during busy periods.

Use built-in read-aloud tools to support different processing styles
Modern document platforms offer built-in accessibility features that can instantly convert text to speech. Tools like Microsoft's Read Aloud and Immersive Reader allow staff to listen to

complex or lengthy documents instead of reading them, which:

- Reduce visual strain after long hours outdoors
- Helps your team process technical details at their own pace
- Supports those who find long text blocks difficult to follow.

Make use of phone-based text-to-speech tools around the farm

Most smartphones and tablets include text-to-speech settings that require no specialist equipment. These are especially helpful when:

- Workers are wearing gloves or PPE
- Instructions need to be heard while hands are occupied
- Reading signage or paperwork is impractical during a task
- English is not the first language.

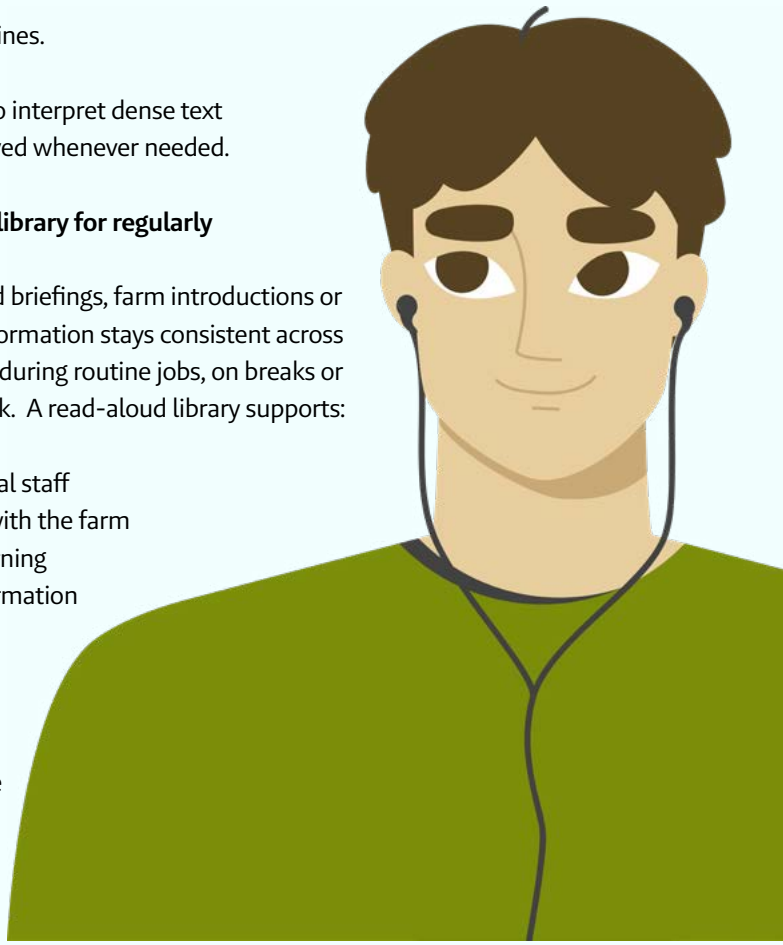
This helps ensure critical information is accessible without stopping work or waiting for clarification.

Provide audio versions of essential farm procedures

Short audio recordings saved on a shared drive, WhatsApp group or intranet give workers quick access to the guidance they need. This works particularly well for:

- Chemical handling protocols
- Daily machinery checks
- Emergency response steps
- Welfare standards
- End-of-day shutdown routines.

Audio files reduce the need to interpret dense text documents and can be replayed whenever needed.



Create a simple read-aloud library for regularly accessed documents

A small collection of recorded briefings, farm introductions or seasonal updates ensures information stays consistent across the team. Workers can listen during routine jobs, on breaks or when preparing for a new task. A read-aloud library supports:

- Onboarding new or seasonal staff
- Relief workers unfamiliar with the farm
- Staff who prefer verbal learning
- Supervisors who need information delivered consistently.

This reduces the need for repeated verbal explanations and helps everyone feel more confident and prepared.

CASE STUDY: MOLE VALLEY FARMERS

The moment employee engagement specialist Jess Bond realised just how much Mole Valley Farmers' approach could change someone's life came from one single story: a young man – and colleague at the Liskeard store.

Autistic, quiet and unsure of himself when he arrived on work experience, he had found school extremely challenging. He recalled connecting more with teachers than classmates and feeling as if he was "wearing a mask that was too tight".

Social cues confused him when he joined the team; even someone clearing their throat left him wondering what it meant. But in the store, something shifted.

The team welcomed and understood him, and slowly his self-assurance grew. He can now make eye contact, speak confidently to customers, and receives positive feedback. Recently, he secured a full-time position at the store. "He said working here is the best prescriptive medication he's had in a long time," says Jess. "To me, it's a real success story."

Powerful stories

Stories like his has helped shape Mole Valley Farmers' approach to neurodiversity. During the UK's wider National Inclusion Week, Jess invited colleagues to share their experiences if they felt comfortable doing so.

"People have been so brave and the stories were powerful," she says. Many centred on ADHD, autism, and late diagnosis, which have sometimes been mistaken for mental health issues until people recognised the underlying traits.

These stories were added to the learning system and shared across the business, generating overwhelmingly positive feedback. They encouraged more conversations during Neurodiversity Celebration Week, **supported by a webinar** from Liz Haines and further learning resources.

Jess also helped set up a neurodivergent peer-to-peer network. Early sessions were small but meaningful, bringing together neurodivergent colleagues and carers to discuss education, diagnosis, and charities that had supported them. "It was just about people being able to talk," she adds.

But with over 1,600 employees spread across stores, offices, mills and fields, reaching people remains a challenge. "That complexity makes engagement tricky" Jess says, especially when agricultural workforces are busy and dispersed. Yet the issue matters immensely: survey findings across agriculture suggest that **one in three people identify as neurodivergent**, far higher than the 20% seen in the wider population."

Training for managers

Looking ahead, Jess wants to enhance manager confidence. "I'd love to put on some neurodiversity-for-managers training," she says. Not formal instruction, but shared experiences and open conversations, something that helps managers feel comfortable asking questions without worrying about 'saying the wrong thing'.

"Neurodiversity isn't a niche issue, nor does it stop at the workplace gate. People bring their whole selves to work, and when organisations genuinely listen, like the team at Liskeard did, a work experience placement can become a turning point in someone's life." And that, she says, is exactly why this work matters.

The role of advocacy

Advocacy is a powerful force within the neurodiversity movement, helping turn individual experiences into collective progress. Encouragingly, more agricultural businesses are now taking practical steps to make inclusive practice part of everyday working life.

When lived experience is brought forward and is supported by practical guidance, clear signposting, and open discussion it shows what becomes possible when organisations commit to listening and learning. Together, these actions offer a blueprint for building recognition, strengthening inclusive practice, and championing neurodiversity as a shared responsibility.

CASE STUDY: MICHELLE WING, AHDB

AHDB is one of the first organisations in agriculture to host its own Neurodiverse Awareness Week, with valuable lessons learned to strengthen future initiatives.

From the outset, the atmosphere was collaborative. A call went out for colleagues to get involved, and a small team of six was formed. Their aim quickly became clear: to spark conversation, build understanding, and help managers and employees feel more confident in supporting one another around neurodiversity.

Two cornerstone sessions were delivered – one focused on managers, whose confidence, it turned out, was low. "The big surprise was that managers didn't feel confident supporting their team members in doing something different with one person, not because they didn't want to, but because they didn't want to get it wrong," says Elaine McGladdery, AHDB's learning and development business partner.

"Neurodivergence does not lead to performance management," says Michelle Wing, HR manager. "People will do things differently, and it's about finding the right balance within the team."

A second webinar invited all employees to explore how to support themselves and each other. Both sessions attracted strong attendance.

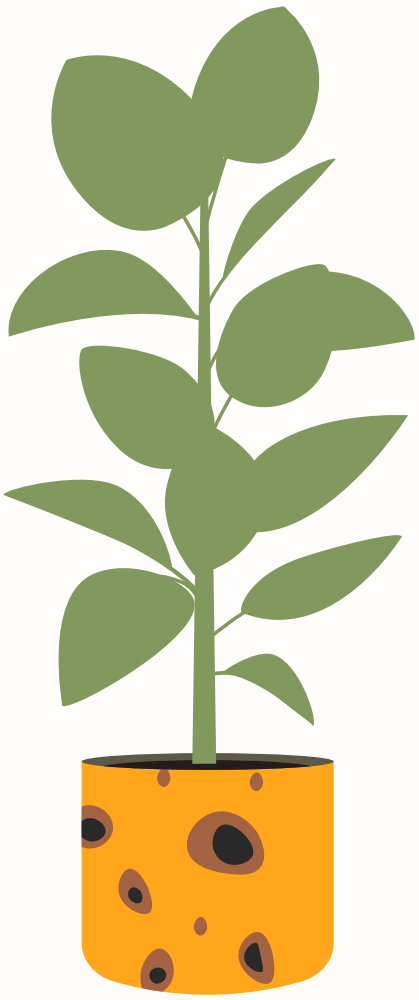
Personal stories

Personal stories brought depth to the week. A filmed conversation between Michelle and leadership sponsor Ken Boynes opened up a thoughtful discussion. His reflections on supporting his neurodivergent son and how that shaped his leadership struck a chord across the organisation.

Workshops and informal sessions helped people connect on a personal level too. Important conversations were unearthed about imposter syndrome, and how past experiences can stop people applying for roles. Colleagues recognised shared experiences, from family stories to school struggles, late diagnoses, and long-held self-doubt.

The week also sparked thinking about the future and how to reach the organisation's levy payers in more accessible ways. Michelle acknowledges that some people prefer to read and reflect, while others engage better with podcasts, videos or conversation.

By the end of the week, the shift was clear. Neurodiversity support is now embedded in the organisation's manager essentials programme. "Neurodivergence doesn't turn on and off at the entrance, and it isn't just a workplace thing. This is society," says Michelle.



YOUR COMMENTS WELCOME

REGISTER FOR FUTURE LEVEL THE FIELD GUIDES

GIVE FEEDBACK ON THE CAMPAIGN

SOURCES AND EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY

- Dr Kirstie Pickles , equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) lead, Harper and Keele Vet School
- Jess Bond, employee engagement specialist, Mole Valley Farmers
- Michelle Wing, HR manager, AHDB
- Mike Duxbury, The Inclusive Farm
- RNIB
- Rosemary Scrimgeour, co-founder, The Building Workshop