



The Define Project:

identifying best practices and
learning outcomes from Police
Scotland's Define Pilot



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Executive summary

This report details findings from a qualitative project that explored the implementation of the 'DEFINE Pilot' in Police Scotland. The DEFINE Pilot aims to promote inclusion for officers and staff who may be neurodivergent, or may be supporting a colleague who is, by creating a supportive framework and a network of Ambassadors who act as a first point of contact. These Ambassadors provide information, guidance and practical signposting to help colleagues access the support they need in the workplace.

Through interviews with Ambassadors and senior officers involved in the design and implementation of the DEFINE Pilot, the research found that the Pilot is driven by motivated and informed officers who are committed to improving awareness of neurodiversity within Police Scotland and fostering an inclusive workplace environment. Ambassadors offer formal support, such as information on navigating referrals and how to request workplace adjustments, and informal support through open and inclusive conversations to reduce stigma and build confidence. However, the study also identified several enduring institutional challenges, such as long wait times for assessments, organisational barriers to promotion and progression for neurodivergent officers and staff, and the risks of emotional demands placed on Ambassadors.

Finally, increased awareness of neurodiversity within Police Scotland may be contributing to improved policing practice with the public. Ambassadors shared examples of where they have contributed their knowledge to help officers engage more effectively with neurodivergent individuals in operational contexts, leading to better outcomes and safer interactions. Future research should explore neurodivergent individuals' experiences of policing in Scotland, which will provide a more detailed account of the success or otherwise of these changes.

Overall, the project identifies both best practices and learning opportunities for the future implementation of neurodiversity support in Police Scotland.

Introduction to the DEFINE Pilot

The DEFINE Pilot stands for '**Develop, Encourage, Foster Inclusivity for Neurodiversity in Everyone**' and was designed and implemented by officers in Police Scotland, with executive support. The intention of the pilot was to promote and embed an inclusive ethos and support framework for neurodiverse officers and staff and to raise awareness of neurodiversity within the organisational culture and structure of Police Scotland. To achieve this, the DEFINE Pilot recruited officers and staff to the role of 'Ambassadors' to act as a special point of contact for officers and staff regarding neurodiversity.

Ambassadors were supported in this role through an input provided by disability co-ordinators in Police Scotland, providing information on types of neurodiversity and support available within Police Scotland that could be shared with those who contact Ambassadors. The Pilot was implemented within one division in Scotland in summer 2024 and has involved approximately 12 Ambassadors and has been supported by senior officers. The Pilot continues to support officers and staff to date. The Pilot demonstrates and embodies a recognition of the need for policing to ensure wellbeing and organisational support for neurodiverse officers and staff, and aligns with [Police Scotland's 2030](#) vision to ensure a thriving workforce through contributing to milestone 1.22 'continue to support our neurodivergent colleagues and communities'.

CONTEXT

Neurodiversity refers to and recognises diversity in neurotypes in the general population and can include autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia (non-exhaustive list). Neurodiversity does not always and necessarily meet the legal requirements for 'disability' under the Equality Act 2010, but according to [ACAS](#) can often 'amount to a disability' under the act within the workplace. Under this understanding, neurodivergent individuals will therefore likely be entitled to the protections under the Equality Act, such as the right not to be discriminated against and the right to reasonable adjustments in the workplace. However, it is important to note that whilst neurodiversity may be usefully framed as a 'disability' under the Equality Act to enable access to workplace rights, the conflation of neurodiversity with disability is contentious for some neurodivergent individuals, who may not describe or consider themselves to be 'disabled'. This project uses the [social model of disability](#) (SCOPE, n.d.) as a lens to understand neurodiversity. Under this model, neurodivergent individuals are disabled by barriers to access and support within society, and not because of their neurological differences. In other words: society is disabling to individuals. The impact of this model is that societal institutions, such as the police, and not the individuals themselves, are responsible for enhancing inclusion and accessibility, and removing disabling barriers, whether they be structural or cultural.

In recognition of enabling and empowering neurodivergent individuals in Scotland, [The Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill Consultation \(Scotland\)](#) (Scottish Government, 2023) is currently considering the introduction of a requirement for a national strategy on neurodivergence in Scotland. In particular, the consultation has so far highlighted that employment experience is an area in which neurodivergent individuals often face barriers, including gaining and retaining employment, as well as barriers to promotional opportunities. Moreover, academic evidence consistently finds that lack of appropriate support in the workplace is associated with poor wellbeing and high levels of burnout, and this may be particularly exacerbated by the unique

stressors in policing ([Tromans et al., 2023](#)). Whilst understanding of neurodivergence is becoming more mainstream within UK workforces, there are several challenges that continue to profoundly affect neurodivergent individuals, which include: prohibitively long wait times for NHS diagnosis and expensive private diagnosis ([Crane et al., 2018](#)), a sense of both validation and grief following diagnosis ([Cage et al., 2024](#)), and discrimination, lack of reasonable adjustments, and blocked promotional or recruitment opportunities following disclosure in the workplace ([Romualdez et al., 2021](#)). Together, this contemporary context underscores the need to explore, understand, and support the workplace and wellbeing needs of neurodivergent officers and staff within policing both in Scotland and across the rest of the UK.

THE DEFINE PROJECT

This report is drawn from qualitative research designed in collaboration with Police Scotland, and with funding support provided via The Scottish Institute for Policing Research Early Career Researcher Grant. The report draws on insights gained from seven semi-structured interviews with Ambassadors (x5) and senior officers (x2) involved with the design and implementation of the Pilot. The project received institutional support from Police Scotland in November 2024, and ethical approval from Edinburgh Napier in December 2024. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2025. All data for this research was analysed using an inductive approach to thematic coding ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)), where key themes are identified in the data to reveal meaningful patterns. These themes formed the basis for the findings detailed below, where best practices and learning opportunities are identified to inform the future implementation and delivery of this Pilot.

Police Scotland policies and processes as outlined in this report reflect activities undertaken through the DEFINE Pilot as of January 2025. Police Scotland keeps these under review and are subject to change.

Summary of findings:

- The DEFINE Pilot is comprised of highly motivated and well-informed officers and staff who are dedicated to the promotion of neurodiversity in Police Scotland.
- The input for the DEFINE Pilot reflected an appropriate degree of caution regarding the Ambassador role, but future developments for the Pilot may need to transform the input to a more formalised training that recognises and harnesses the skills and lived experiences of Ambassadors.
- Co-creation of the role of Ambassadors, with input from Ambassadors and neurodivergent officers and staff, may enhance the future delivery of the Pilot.
- Executive support for the Pilot symbolises and motivates institutional commitment to enhancing neurodiversity inclusion across the organisation.
- The formal support offered by Ambassadors enables the consolidation of, and access to, information regarding neurodiversity support pathways in Police Scotland.
- This formal support may mitigate the adverse impacts of long-wait times for referrals, ensuring continuity of care during a period which may be challenging for officers and staff.
- Informal support takes the shape of open and authentic conversations with Ambassadors to break down stigma, enhance individual awareness, reduce the harms associated with not disclosing, and improve confidence in accessing support.
- Whilst informal support is a vital aspect of the Ambassador role, Ambassadors may require their own support network to ensure they are not at risk of emotional harm from providing informal support in this way.
- Line managers and senior managers are invested in supporting neurodivergent officers and have sought out support from DEFINE Ambassadors to enable this. This has enabled proactive workplace adjustments to empower neurodivergent officers.
- The DEFINE Pilot is well placed to support constables undergoing their probation, though enhanced capacity to provide this support may be needed in future.
- The probationary period may be an operational area that further requires additional consideration as it may be uniquely experienced in ways that exacerbate or reveal challenges associated with an individuals' neurodiversity.
- The organisational culture of Police Scotland has been identified by participants as undergoing a process of positive change to enhance neurodiversity awareness and inclusion.
- Enduring challenges remain, which include awareness and understanding of reasonable adjustments and concerns with progression and promotion for neurodivergent officers and staff.
- Enhanced awareness of neurodiversity within Police Scotland, catalysed through the efforts of DEFINE Ambassadors, has contributed to enhanced and improved police services for neurodivergent members of the public.

1. Design, intentions and implementation

SUMMARY:

- The DEFINE Pilot is comprised of highly motivated and well-informed officers and staff who are dedicated to the promotion of neurodiversity in Police Scotland.
- The input for the DEFINE Pilot reflected an appropriate degree of caution regarding the Ambassador role, but future developments for the Pilot may need to transform the input to a more formalised training that recognises and harnesses the skills and lived experiences of Ambassadors.
- Co-creation of the role of Ambassadors, with input from Ambassadors and neurodivergent officers and staff, may enhance the future delivery of the Pilot.
- Executive support symbolises and motivates commitment to enhancing neurodiversity inclusion across the organisation.

The DEFINE Pilot was designed at a grass-roots level by motivated officers who were personally and professionally concerned with providing workplace neurodiversity support within Police Scotland. Whilst the initial concept of the Pilot was undertaken and driven by one individual, a small but powerful team of senior officers supported its' development and implementation, and it received official executive support in 2024. The intention of the Pilot was to enable individuals who felt in need of neurodiversity support (either for themselves, or regarding their role as a line manager), to have a single point of contact known as an 'Ambassador' who could provide consolidated information regarding the support available within Police Scotland. Existing formal and informal support was already in place, such as through external consulting agencies and occupational health, the peer-led Neurodiversity Support Network, and the Neurodiversity Strategic Working Group which supports actions towards implementing Police Scotland's Neurodiversity Delivery Plan, including the DEFINE Pilot:

The aim of the group [Neurodiversity Strategic Working Group] is to bring all parts of the organisation...or the parts of the organisation who have a role to play within that neurodiverse space together to bring together all the work that's taken place, to then have a centralised overview, to then support the roll out of initiatives across the force. (Participant #1)

However, participants identified that internal support was previously not always easily accessible to officers and staff in a streamlined way. It was the intention of the DEFINE Pilot that Ambassadors could make navigating access to support easier by providing signposting to the services available. To achieve this, Ambassadors were recruited either through professional connections with the original team or via responding to an advert on the Police Scotland intranet page. Ambassadors had multiple motivations for joining the Pilot, which ranged from personal experience of neurodiversity (either they are neurodivergent, or a family member is), to workplace experience of neurodiversity (for instance, as a line manager supporting a neurodivergent officer). Not all Ambassadors were neurodivergent, but all had invested in their own professional development through engaging in independent learning about neurodiversity. As a result, all Ambassadors spoken to in this research were well-informed and personally motivated to enhance neurodiversity support in Police Scotland:

I did a lot of background checks on my own. I did a lot of self-teaching about neurodiversity, different conditions, how it manifests itself in adult females, adult males, how that is factored into how we train our officers, and why our officers are failing exams due to particular neurodiverse conditions. (Participant #5)

Following the initial design and efforts by the original officers involved in the DEFINE Pilot, the Pilot received executive support for implementation. This support for the Pilot was particularly valued by those involved in the implementation of the Pilot. This both legitimised the Pilot and the efforts of Ambassadors, as well as symbolising organisational commitment to ensuring neurodivergent officers and staff can flourish within Police Scotland.

I think it's even more important that there is this executive sponsored function within the organisation to combat [incorrect] narrative[s] and to try and bring out the realities, the evidence, the data, in relation to [neurodiversity in Police Scotland]. (Participant #1)

To support Ambassadors, an 'Ambassador Code' was created which formalised their role and remit as 'role models' for diversity and inclusion. The Ambassador Code defined the role as providing a supportive point of contact for officers and staff to enable signposting to the appropriate support available internally and externally for those working in Police Scotland. It also outlined the values of an ambassador as concerned with upholding and demonstrating inclusivity and diversity within Police Scotland and to treat all with fairness and respect. Additionally, Ambassadors received an 'input' delivered by a disability co-ordinator in a classroom setting to provide guidance and information on neurodiverse conditions, support available within Police Scotland, and outline expectations for the role. This was conducted in an environment which deliberately removed the influence of organisational hierarchy so that open communication between Ambassadors could be facilitated, which is a strategy supported by academic evidence that indicates that rank structures in policing can contribute to silencing and reluctance to share experiences and concerns (Adlam, 2010; Davis, 2020). However, some Ambassadors have identified that this input felt too generalised, and did not provide Ambassadors with a sense of how neurodiversity may present in policing specifically.

I think that guidance was a wee bit lost because it wasn't connecting necessarily to an operational setting, ... They were giving guidance in their, kind of, field [disability], which is fine but how that actually connects to an operational setting didn't...wasn't really landing. And it left people feeling a wee bit unsure of what their role really was and what they should be doing. (Participant #2)

Furthermore, some Ambassadors felt that this input instructed them that their role was one of formal signposting, not informal support and guidance that supported individual wellbeing. In this way, the input was experienced as restricting as opposed to enabling them to fulfil the expectations of the 'role model' laid out in the Ambassador's Code, which for them also encompassed sharing knowledge and providing informal wellbeing support.

Although the designers of this input were not consulted for this research, it appears likely that the original formalisation of the role communicated via the input reflects an appropriate degree of caution to prevent the harm that may arise with non-trained, but nevertheless well-meaning and well-informed, Ambassadors giving advice they are not equipped to provide. Research supports this caution, as providing non-reviewed or sanctioned advice can result in harm if that advice is incorrect, incomplete, or misleading (McDowall et al., 2024). This is further complicated by the multiplicity of ways neurodiversity can be experienced, so that even if an Ambassador is particularly well-informed about one type of neurodiversity, they may not be able to provide accurate advice in a way that reflects how that neurodiversity uniquely presents in the individual requesting support.

Nonetheless, as the Pilot has moved from its infancy to a more well-established system of support, there is now an opportunity to return to, and reconsider, the type of input provided to Ambassadors. Co-production may be an ethos Police Scotland considers for future inputs and training to address the challenges experienced by Ambassadors. Co-production refers to the meaningful involvement of those with lived experience in the design, delivery, and implementation of services so that those services accurately reflect and respond to the needs of those supported by the service. This is now the 'gold standard' approach within academic research, and is a recognised approach in public sector training and teaching (Norris et al., 2024). The Ambassadors spoken to in this project form a powerful resource, whose skills and experiences can be drawn upon to enhance the support provided by the DEFINE Pilot by co-designing a training which harnesses the strengths of the Ambassadors as collaborators in shaping the future of the role. In the next section, the Ambassador role in practice is discussed in depth.

2. Ambassador Role: Formal and Informal Mechanisms of Support

SUMMARY:

- The formal support offered by Ambassadors enables the consolidation of, and access to, information regarding neurodiversity support pathways in Police Scotland.
- This formal support may mitigate the adverse impacts of long-wait times for referrals, ensuring continuity of care during a period which may be challenging for officers and staff.
- Informal support takes the shape of open and authentic conversations with Ambassadors to break down stigma, enhance individual awareness, reduce the harms associated with not disclosing, and improve confidence in accessing support.
- Whilst informal support is a vital aspect of the Ambassador role, Ambassadors may require their own support network to ensure they are not at risk of emotional harm from providing informal support in this way.

Ambassadors described their role in two parts: formal signposting and informal support, both of which were described as vital to supporting officers and staff who seek their help. The section discusses both of these mechanisms of support in turn.

FORMAL SUPPORT

Many Ambassadors described a large part of their role as providing formal signposting support for officers who had contacted them because they thought, or knew, they were neurodivergent. The formal signposting involved explaining the different official supports available through Police Scotland. The support pathways described by Ambassadors included:

- Awareness raising of the possibility of referral to an external consultancy company that provides assessment of traits for neurodivergence. Whilst this company does not provide a diagnosis, they can identify traits that can inform a workplace action-plan to assist the individual, which may involve one-to-one coaching.
- Advice detailing how to add a diagnosis on SCOPE, an in-house system that is used to identify officers and support access and inclusion alongside other workplace needs.
- Signposting occupational health and wellbeing support services, what they do and how they operate.
- Awareness raising about the Disability Passport Scheme which can enable swift disclosure without the need for verbal disclosure.
- Providing information sharing around Access to Work, how to start the process, and what is available through the process.

Not all of these options were discussed with everyone who contacted an Ambassador, rather Ambassadors would provide signposting advice that was specific and tailored to the individual and their needs:

After [they] did get diagnosed [they] then messaged me again to ask, do they have to put it on SCOPE? and, if they do, how do they put that on SCOPE and then who sees it, things about that? Like, disclosing it. And then obviously I was just...I had just asked, like, and how are you getting on, like, does your line manager know, do you feel comfortable talking to them? Because obviously once you put it on there [SCOPE], if they don't know...like, do you know what I mean, I would just ask them that question in case they hadn't thought about it. But they did. Their line managers were all aware and were really supportive and stuff. They'd said they were just wondering, like, how do you get it put on SCOPE and...aye. So I had, like, helped with that kind of thing, the formal side of it, because we want to disclose it. And about the disability passport, like, I had brought that up as well. Like, 'if you need reasonable adjustments...because that'll change'. So, like, I just explained that kind of thing. So it's more questions about assessment and just generally, aye, they think they might be neurodiverse and how they...the challenges they're maybe facing in the role they work in. (Participant #6)

The ability of Ambassadors to tailor their guidance enabled empowered discussions about the options available. Furthermore, having a single point of contact to relay this information is an important feature of this Pilot. Not all, but some neurodivergent individuals will experience challenges with information processing and communication. This may particularly be the case for dyslexic, autistic, and ADHD individuals, and these neurodiversities may co-occur in the same individual ([British Dyslexia Association](#)). Several participants spoke of the challenges of locating information on internal intranet pages, although some also highlighted work where this was being improved. Improving access to information is aligned with the Equality Act's requirements that individuals are not disadvantaged due to access needs, which includes access to information, and aligns with the responsibility of organisations to remove barriers to support where possible. Thus, having streamlined information communicated via DEFINE Ambassadors, alongside work being undertaken to streamline this information is a necessary benefit of the DEFINE Pilot.

Related to this, however, is the reality that the services and support pathways that individuals may be signposted to may themselves have, or raise, challenges for the individual seeking support. In particular, long wait times for assessment and coaching from the external consultancy agency was commented on by several Ambassadors as a key area of concern:

I don't think it helps when you've got processes that take such a long time as well. So, like, we were talking about...for a year to get coaching put in place, so a lot...like, again, if you break it down to probationers that we've got, they'll start the process really early on, or say maybe once they fail an exam, they'll maybe go for a screening and realise they're neurodiverse. So in Police Scotland their exams will pause at that point until they can complete their coaching and make...so that they're giving...you're level in the playing field and giving them the same chance as everybody else to pass the exams. But because of that, you are then...a lot of the time causing them to have their probation extended, because they've not...we can't get the funding for the coaching put through quick enough. And then they're ending up on an extension for their probation, which seems to be this massive thing. And I remember it as a probationer, you don't want your probation extended. And that seems to be...that's, like, a big barrier, so you've got people that you'll say, "would you like to go on this?", "no 'cause my probation will get extended". And you can't turn round to them and say, "no it won't", because I know it will, because that's just the way the process is because the process isn't fit for purpose. The external processes aren't fit for purpose and they're overrun. So I think that's the...that's a big barrier as well. That doesn't help. (Participant #2)

Long wait times for assessment are associated with poor mental wellbeing, and was described by one researcher ([Cameron, 2023, pp.335](#)) as 'like holding your breath'. The repercussions of long wait times for support services also go beyond the individual, affecting the organisation and delivery of policing. Many participants highlighted that probationary periods could be extended (as described above), or that officers' roles may be 'modified' and removed from frontline roles, for officers awaiting assessment. To be clear, disclosure of neurodivergence does not always result in modification of role or extension of probationary periods in Police Scotland, and participants highlighted that this would only occur if there were challenges identified in the provision of frontline duties or regarding passing the probationary period. Nonetheless, that this can be an outcome of accessing support, and therefore also a barrier to

disclosure, it is important DEFINE Ambassadors can provide continuity of care through what can be, for some, a challenging period in their work. This continuity of care is a core part of the informal support mechanisms provided by Ambassadors, discussed in the next section.

INFORMAL SUPPORT

Alongside the signposting to formal support, participants identified the informal peer-support provided by Ambassadors as a key added value of this role. Several participants have discussed the value of an informal peer-support space in which officers and staff can feel heard and supported by those with lived experience or considerable understanding of neurodiversity in a non-judgemental and non-stigmatising atmosphere. Within this environment, the opportunity to have these conversations can bring quasi-therapeutic benefits such as breaking down stigma, empowering the individual to understand their own experiences and enabling them to feel heard, acknowledged, and supported.

The first chats, normally I'll have with the officer they're at the edge of their seat, absolutely horrified. Then I'll start a conversation with, yes, "how are you feeling about it? Has this ever been mentioned before?" And I'll start saying things that I know they're going to be feeling, but it gives them that comfort that they've got understanding, you know. I'll say to them, "how's muster for you? How do you find the pace of that?" And then you suddenly see them starting to relax, once they're allowed to have a conversation about...someone that understands, that I'm giving them the time of day and offering them...don't worry, we'll help you. There's loads out there that we can do. This isn't an issue. So, it's that type of thing they would get. (Participant #5)

Within this, there was a recognition that the impact of rank and seniority also ought to be limited where possible to enable open discussion and reduce fear associated with disclosing concerns to a senior officer.

I try and keep it informal. I think people, kind of, respond better. I think it's a rank thing. Because obviously nobody wants to have a one-on-one meeting with a supervisor, even if it's the, kind of, best meeting in the world, it's still a one-on-one meeting with a supervisor. So I try and keep it a little bit informal, so it isn't a one time meeting. I like to, kind of, keep it open and if they want to come back to me, they can. Obviously if there were issues that were really, really significant or I felt as though I had to take dynamic steps, I would change the dynamic in that. However, the issues that were, kind of, discussed, I felt it was appropriate to deal with it at an informal level and it's more of a, 'come to me when you want' scenario, if that makes sense. (Participant #4).

Moreover, many Ambassadors described these conversations as open-ended and ongoing, meaning that those who made contact with an Ambassador could subsequently continue to benefit from these conversations. As with the above noted concern with long wait times for formal recognition of needs, this aspect of the informal role of the DEFINE Ambassador enables continuity of care and support during the waiting periods. For some, the ability to disclose concerns in a safe environment provides benefits in and of itself in terms of providing an outlet for working through emotions and concerns that they may not have previously felt able to discuss:

I do get approached by people. And I do spend quite a lot of my time...obviously it's like being a counsellor. I'll give you an example of one individual who has quite lengthy service, has struggled a lot recently and someone suggested I speak to them. And I met them for a coffee, and by the end of it, they were...you know, had been tears but they had unloaded probably 20 years of frustration, anger and a lot of...in that two-hour coffee. (Participant #1)

The informal supports provided by DEFINE Ambassadors may be vital to reducing hidden harms by encouraging disclosure without repercussion through informal

conversations. Research evidence indicates that neurodivergent police officers may feel fearful of disclosure in the workplace due to concerns regarding misunderstanding from colleagues, discrimination and stigmatisation, and barriers to promotion ([Tromans et al., 2023](#)). Lack of disclosure can furthermore increase the risk of lack of accommodations and adjustments for neurodivergent individuals in the workplace ([Burton et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, lack of opportunities to disclose can encourage and exacerbate 'masking', which is where neurodivergent individuals use behavioural strategies to suppress their neurodivergent behaviours and traits. Masking is associated with emotional dysregulation, exhaustion, and burnout ([Kidwell et al., 2023](#)), and so constitutes a hidden harm that neurodivergent individuals working in the police may experience if appropriate support pathways are not in place. As described by participants, the DEFINE Pilot enables the promotion and empowerment of neurodiversity in policing through both the informal and formal support pathways it can provide. Relatedly, however, it is important to be aware that this informal support role of Ambassadors could pose a challenge to Ambassadors themselves in terms of emotional labour, and could increase their own risk of burnout in the role. Research by [Richards et al., 2019](#), supports the need for organisations to be aware of the risks of emotional harm, and put support in place, to mitigate this. Ambassadors are not trained therapists, and therefore they do not have the tools therapists would draw on to support their own mental and emotional resilience, but the Ambassador role may become quasi-therapeutic in some circumstances. Therefore, it may be prudent for future initiatives for the DEFINE Pilot that there is institutional recognition of this potential outcome, and steps taken to put support in place to protect the wellbeing of Ambassadors.

3. Who has benefitted from the DEFINE Pilot?

SUMMARY:

- Line managers and senior managers are invested in supporting neurodivergent officers and have sought out support from DEFINE Ambassadors to enable this. This has enabled proactive workplace adjustments to empower neurodivergent officers.
- The DEFINE Pilot is well placed to support constables undergoing their probation, though enhanced capacity to provide this support may be needed in future.
- The probationary period may be an operational area that further requires additional consideration as it may be uniquely experienced in ways that exacerbate or reveal challenges associated with an individuals' neurodiversity.

The DEFINE Pilot has provided support for a range of officers within Police Scotland, including neurodivergent officers, line managers who are supporting neurodivergent officers, and probationary constables also (note: whilst probationary constables are officers, they are discussed separately in this report as findings indicate that the probationary period may be a unique challenge for neurodivergent officers). These are discussed separately below to showcase the specific benefits and learning outcomes for each of these groups, though it should be noted that their experiences may also be inter-related (for instance, line managers may reach out to the DEFINE Pilot provide support to probationary constables, who may in turn be in contact with DEFINE Ambassadors themselves).

NEURODIVERGENT OFFICERS

The DEFINE Pilot has been designed to provide neurodiversity support to all officers and staff, regardless of their neurodiversity status. In large, Ambassadors have described a slow original start to the Pilot whereby few people sought Ambassador support, but that this has increased over-time as the Pilot became more embedded and more well known through the division. For the most part, Ambassadors have

described providing support to line manager and probationary constables (see sections below), but some Ambassadors have described providing support to officers who are, or who are considering they might be, neurodivergent. The support provided by Ambassadors in these circumstances is primarily concerned with providing clear guidance during a period which can be challenging for officers, alongside providing the informal support described in the section above, to enhance wellbeing:

The couple of people that have come to me is because they think they are [neurodivergent] or they're going for assessments and then maybe there are things then after they've had an assessment and the outcome of that. Like, a... one of the girls had got in touch with me just in December, they...obviously they told me what they thought they were going through and, like, they're getting an assessment for ADHD and then asking what it was...like, about the assessment, kind of thing. (Participant #6)

Clear information sharing is crucial as it empowers neurodivergent officers to seek reasonable adjustments in the workplace, such as through notifying line managers and ensuring official recognition through the 'disability passport' scheme. Such approaches can leverage access and remove barriers to effective working and personal wellbeing ([Tromans et al., 2023](#)). As described above in the sections on formal and informal support, Ambassadors described how engaging with neurodivergent officers enabled them to provide both clear guidance and informal welfare support, and this approach is in line with [Police Scotland's 2030 \(pp.8\) vision](#) to 'improve employee welfare and wellbeing, ensuring our diverse workforce is more supported in doing their best work each day'. This approach is further enhanced through line management and senior management engagement with the DEFINE Pilot, as discussed next.

LINE MANAGERS

Line managers were identified as a specific group that have sought support from Ambassadors. Participants have related this to a growing cultural and organisational awareness amongst line managers of the need to support, and have knowledge of the support pathways available to, neurodivergent officers. Officers may come to their attention either through disclosure, or because the line manager has become aware of some behaviours that may indicate neurodivergent traits. In particular, it has been highlighted that having an Ambassador to speak to has empowered line managers to feel confident in starting initial conversations with officers and staff and to enable them to provide ongoing support and signposting.

So I think a lot of line managers in Police Scotland, it's some...neurodiversity isn't something...we've always known what it is, but it hasn't...certainly in years gone by in the police, it wasn't as obvious.... There wasn't as many...there probably was as many officers joined with neurodiverse conditions. It just wasn't as recognised back then. So, nobody really had to think much about these processes and what to do and how to put that support in place, because people just muddled through and got on with it and didn't really speak out. Whereas now we live in a society where people are so much more open to discussing conditions that they have and pushing back a wee bit on organisations to say, 'you need to give me support. Like, I'm here to do this job, but I need additional support to level the playing field a wee bit, so you need to give me that support.' And I think that's basically just why line managers will come to me. It's because they're not aware of it because it's not something that we've been doing for a long time. So they'll come to me to make sure that they're getting...they're aware of the right support to put in place but also the processes that they need to follow for the organisation to make sure that we're getting it right for the organisation as well. (Participant #2)

Beyond this support, it is clear that senior management involved in the delivery of the DEFINE Pilot are motivated to encourage local supports for line managers and neurodiverse officers to promote inclusion within the immediate working environment. In particular, one participant has discussed how they have promoted 'quiet spaces' within one division:

I made a policy for each area, command area, so each area across the division, every station, you might...you don't achieve it in every one, but every subdivision should at least have a quiet waiting room for those with neurodiversity to go [to undertake their work]. And it was really difficult, because I wanted to put a sign on the door to make it very clear that that's what it was for, but we needed an area for people to...everyone, but also particularly those with neurodiversity conditions that maybe needed a bit more quieter space to concentrate or get their head around something...it was one of those easier reasonable adjustments that I could implement from a senior management perspective. Locally, they didn't feel as if they could, but maybe making that policy across the division, it was easy enough to do, to say 'no, actually, we're having that in every area, and that's because we need to support people that might need, you know, a bit of peace and quiet to do some writing.' Not just neurodivergent officers, you know, not just with those conditions, actually anyone that just need a bit of time to really go and have a closed door, time to concentrate on what they were doing. (Participant #7)

These supports align with recommendations from [Kidwell et al., 2023](#) who find that proactive supports and healthy role modelling from line management and senior management may benefit neurodivergent individuals to feel empowered and supported in the workplace. Particularly, they identify that ensuring well-informed supervisory support from line managers is a cornerstone to leveraging a healthy and inclusive workforce, through reducing stress, emotional exhaustion, and increasing a sense of organisational justice and positive identification with the organisation ([Kidwell et al., 2023, pp. 58](#)). In sum, the work of DEFINE Ambassadors to improve line manager knowledge, confidence, and ability to deploy appropriate workplace accommodations is a key, and evidence-based, benefit of the DEFINE Pilot.

PROBATIONARY OFFICERS

Ambassadors and officers involved in the delivery of this Pilot have identified that probationary constables, and the probationary experience, is a key operational area where the DEFINE Pilot can add value. There is an indication that the probationary period may be a very challenging time for individuals, where their neurodiversity may be exacerbated or indeed revealed for the first time. Some participants have described that officers they have met with in their capacity as an Ambassador had not considered they may be neurodivergent until they joined the police service, and that it was the particular working expectations of probationary constables that prompted this consideration:

[Regarding probationary officers] Some had a pre-existing diagnosis, which was good, but due to the uniqueness of our role in the police and the uniqueness of the way we test learning, i.e., through visual, through practicals and suchlike, neurodiversity was getting highlighted quite a bit because officers were really, really struggling about the way the neurotypical training programme that we had. Therefore, people were failing practical exams; people were failing written exams; people were failing oral exams and when it was looked into further, there was neurodiversity issues roundabout there. (Participant #5)

The DEFINE Pilot is well placed to support probationary constables, and there is a clear awareness of this particular organisational need amongst Ambassadors.

I tend to use my experiences to help support probationers who potentially have neurodiverse challenges try and best support them and share my lived experiences and share what I've found helps and...to try and guide them through certain processes and like I say, to get to through the probation or get through exams or to support. (Participant #4)

However, findings also suggest that probationary progression, such as the multiple modes of assessment, may have been inadvertently designed in a way that disadvantages, and so reveals or exacerbates challenges for, neurodivergent officers.

This is supported by policing scholarship, which has recognised two parallel training and learning mechanisms within probationary training in the police service: the formal, structured probationary training that instructs recruits on the practicalities of how to do the job of policing, and the informal requirement to assimilate socially into a deeply embedded police culture to gain recognition and legitimacy within the workplace, or risk exclusion. The latter is often known as the 'hidden curriculum' ([Wieslander, 2019](#)). In short, the hidden curriculum refers to the unspoken, but nonetheless deeply meaningful, social expectations on individuals to absorb and assimilate into the organisational culture within a common workplace. These social and cultural expectations are not explicitly instructed, rather there is a passive expectation that individuals 'pick up' cues regarding culturally acceptable and unacceptable conduct and act accordingly. The hidden curriculum has been identified by Byrne ([2022](#)) in educational settings as shaped by neurotypical understandings and standards for learning and teaching. As such, neurodiversity is often implicitly 'designed out' of educational training. Because the hidden curriculum is highly dependent on assumed abilities to absorb cultural expectations through social interactions, the impact of the hidden curriculum on neurodivergent individuals can be severe, and can lead to social isolation, disempowerment, and can impede neurodivergent individuals' ability to learn ([Byrne, 2020](#)).

The probationary period may therefore be an area of operational vulnerability for officers, supervisors, and for Police Scotland and could contribute to reductions in retention of probationary officers. It is important to recognise the implicit and explicit design of probationary training, and to consider how inclusive and neurodiversity-aware probationary training could be implemented. It is also important that attention is paid to the progression of probationary officers who may be neurodivergent and present with additional needs, and it is a benefit of the DEFINE Pilot that it is well placed to provide this support. However, as these support needs may increase over time as greater awareness of, and individual willingness to disclose, neurodiversity is occurring across many workforces, it is important the DEFINE Pilot, and Police Scotland more broadly, maintains capacity to be responsive to these needs.

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4. Beyond the DEFINE Pilot: Organisational Culture and Police Provision

SUMMARY:

- The organisational culture of Police Scotland has been identified by participants as undergoing a process of positive change to enhance neurodiversity awareness and inclusion.
- Enduring challenges remain, which include access to reasonable adjustments and concerns with progression and promotion for neurodivergent officers and staff.
- Enhanced awareness of neurodiversity within Police Scotland, catalysed through the efforts of DEFINE Ambassadors, has contributed to enhanced and improved policing services for neurodivergent members of the public.

The DEFINE Pilot does not exist in a silo within Police Scotland, rather it is better considered as part of Police Scotland's broader approach to be, or becoming, an inclusive organisation that supports employees and delivers a high-quality police service for the public and communities of Scotland. As such, discussions with participants extended beyond their experience of the Pilot, and revealed findings regarding organisational experiences and the delivery of police services beyond the DEFINE Pilot. These findings can be thought of as two related aspects: a changing and improving police culture that is more aware of neurodiversity, and an enhanced provision of the police service for neurodiverse populations.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Whilst many participants highlighted enduring cultural barriers, such as stigma and fear of discrimination, as well as challenges in accessing reasonable adjustments, in Police Scotland, all highlighted increasing awareness and support within Police Scotland, contributing towards a broader culture shift within the organisation that both recognises and embraces neurodiversity.

But I'm aware that what we're trying to do from the DEFINE pilot and how we're supporting people, just the elements of support we're trying to achieve, we're just trying...the organisation is, from my point of view, trying to get confidence for officers that can seek support and seek diagnosis and seek help. I think generally they just want people to have a more supportive environment to work in, I think to everybody's benefit to be honest. So just the, kind of...and I think the DEFINE Pilot in itself, kind of, speaks to how the organisation is wanting to try and help.
(Participant #4)

This is particularly evident in executive support for neurodiverse officers written into the 2030 vision for Police Scotland. Having occupational support from the top of the organisation was highlighted as a very positive turning point by participants that symbolises that the organisation is committed to ensuring that neurodiverse officers and staff can flourish within Police Scotland. However, Ambassadors did also identify

structural barriers that remained. Specifically, two Ambassadors discussed challenges with promotional and progression opportunities. As with the previous discussion regarding the 'hidden curriculum' (above) which may act as a barrier to neurodivergent probationary constables, some participants noted that promotion opportunities in Police Scotland do not necessarily include reasonable adjustments within the selection process, which can disadvantage neurodivergent individuals:

[An officer] first noticed she may have a neurodiverse condition or dyslexia when she went to try and get an interview [for promotion] in the police and bombed it because of the structure of the interview. (Participant #5)

This aligns with research conducted by [Zurich UK](#) in 2024, that found that progression and promotion are hindered for neurodivergent people across workforces in the UK. It is also identified by the [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill consultation](#) that neurodivergent individuals may be less likely to gain and retain employment in Scotland. Thus, although the culture of Police Scotland appears to be becoming more inclusive, there are remaining structural barriers, such as promotion and progression, that persist. Removing these barriers, through considering inclusive design of training and promotional opportunities, may help to bring working practices in line with the Equality Act and the anticipated recommendations of the Learning Disabilities, Autism, and Neurodivergence Bill. Nevertheless, the impact of increased awareness of neurodiversity in Police Scotland, particularly catalysed by the efforts of those involved in the DEFINE Pilot, cannot be understated as it appears to have the potential to leverage enhanced and higher quality policing provision for neurodivergent members of the public.

POLICE PROVISION

Several participants, particularly the Ambassadors, have highlighted how their work within the DEFINE Pilot, alongside enhanced neurodiversity awareness within the culture of Police Scotland, has contributed to neurodiversity-informed policing provision, leading to better outcomes and experiences of policing for individuals who come into contact with the police. As noted below, DEFINE Ambassadors have been sought out by colleagues to provide advice on how best to approach and understand neurodivergent individuals:

I've used those experiences to help guide officers who are dealing with neurodiverse persons operationally out in the real world, how best to support them, how best to deal with certain challenges they might face. I think there's ... still a worry about how to deal with neurodivergent people. So I try and, kind of, use my experience to help officers in an operational environment to best get through that, if that makes sense. I've got an example of that actually... There was a male who had been diagnosed with autism. [The officers] contacted me, presumably because they knew my background, because I really, kind of, shared my experience. They contacted me because of a wee bit of knowledge to assist... The male was just overwhelmed and was in meltdown stage. So based on my information, based on my experience, I was able to, kind of, guide [the officers] in terms of my experience. So I asked [the officer] to go in. Obviously the... police uniform just now is a sensory thing, so wearing high viz [high visibility] vests, having a hat on, potentially radio blaring, I asked them to take off the high viz vest, I asked them to mute the radio or put an earpiece in. I used, kind of, previous information we had from previous calls to that address. I think this boy had particular... kind of, one of his particular key points was he didn't like mobile phones. So obviously we use mobile phones as a notebook, so I asked if we were using notebook entries to do it outwith his presence. So these were all points that I gave to these officers. And it really, really worked out well. But not even the, kind of, points that I gave them to how to deal with it, just the knowledge of speaking to somebody who had confidence to say, 'well try this, try that'. So that's the, kind of, real world of experience that I had. That's a real world example that happened not that long ago, that because of my shared... because of my lived experience, I felt was a genuine impact on how it was dealt with. It was dealt with really, really well. I think we were able to identify the points... they were able to deal with the situation. The family were able to, kind of, take control, we were able to go without anybody potentially being arrested, which may not have happened without my knowledge. (Participant #4)

The support of the DEFINE Pilot, alongside the enhanced awareness within Police Scotland regarding neurodiversity, to improve police provision is a vital outcome of these related developments when understood in the broader context of neurodivergent populations' experiences of policing. As with all members of the public, neurodivergent people come into contact with the police for a wide variety of reasons:

as victims, as suspected offenders, as witnesses, and through making requests for assistance. There is a burgeoning scholarship that explores the conflict and harm that can arise as a result of differences in communication between neurodivergent individuals and police officers, such as miscommunication, police misinterpretation of intent, and stressful emotional states ([Slavny-Cross et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, research has shown that where the police do not understand or respond appropriately to neurodivergent individuals, this can result in poorer treatment and worse justice outcomes for the individuals and thereafter can decrease police legitimacy and trust in the police ([Gibbs et al., 2023](#)). Several Ambassadors discussed, and were aware of, the importance of the relationship between improving organisational awareness of neurodiversity and enhancing police services for neurodivergent individuals who come into contact with the police:

So I think honestly the more awareness that we spread in the police about [neurodiversity] and the way that we make it more common knowledge that we do have officers in the police that are neurodiverse, it makes other people more aware to that when they go out and deal with people in the street. They can pick up the signs and the symptoms, but also that they're more understanding of them.
(Participant #2)

Within this context, it is imperative that Police Scotland continues efforts to enhance organisational understanding of neurodiversity both for officers and staff, and also to improve their service to the public. The members of the DEFINE Pilot interviewed for this project have shown considerable commitment to these principles.

Conclusion and Future Directions

To summarise, the activities of those involved with the design and implementation of the DEFINE Pilot embody the principles of enhancing inclusion through improving access to support across multiple sectors of the workforce within Police Scotland. The attitudes and actions described by Ambassadors align with the social model of disability, and recognise that inclusion and accessibility are organisational, and not individual, responsibilities. The DEFINE Pilot sits within an organisational context in which cultural change to enhance neurodiversity inclusion is apparent, yet challenges remain, such as: access to reasonable adjustments, promotion and progression, and enduring concerns regarding stigmatisation. However, it was not within the remit, nor the capacity, of the DEFINE Pilot to remedy these organisational challenges alone. Nevertheless, the DEFINE Pilot can be viewed as a positive step in the direction of achieving the goals set out in the 2030 vision to 'continue to support continue to support our neurodivergent colleagues and communities', in particular through the additional outcome of improving police provision for neurodivergent communities that has been catalysed by the activities and awareness raising of Ambassadors and senior officers involved with the Pilot. At present, the DEFINE Pilot remains in place and is continuing to support neurodivergent officers and staff, their line managers, and communities. The evidence presented in this report provides information regarding learning opportunities and best practices to inform the future directions for the DEFINE Pilot. The review concludes that many of the activities undertaken within the DEFINE Pilot are aligned with robust research evidence and have positive outcomes for those who interact with the Pilot. Future implementation of the DEFINE Pilot will likely be of benefit to all officers and staff within Police Scotland and to the communities that Police Scotland serves. Recommendations from the findings of this project are as follows:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to provide executive support for practices and initiatives designed to enhance neurodiversity awareness and inclusion in Police Scotland.
- Continue to provide formal and informal support via DEFINE Ambassadors and continue to support Ambassadors to undertake this role.

- Consider formalised training for DEFINE Ambassadors that is co-created with current Ambassadors and those with lived experience of neurodiversity.
- Consider the emotional needs of Ambassadors undertaking this role and establish a support network.
- Consider providing additional support for officers and staff awaiting consultations regarding neurodiversity.
- Consider additional support for constables undergoing their probation who may be neurodivergent.
- Evaluate and address institutional barriers to progression and promotion for neurodivergent officers and staff.
- Continue to pursue and embed an inclusive and neurodiversity-aware culture within Police Scotland.

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