Closing the Fair Work Gap

Citation for published version:

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Download date: 07. Mar. 2024
Closing the Fair Work Gap: An Intersectional Fair Work Framework for the Autistic Workforce

FULL REPORT

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A research project in partnership with Into Work, funded by the Scottish Government Increasing Understanding of Autism programme, managed by Inspiring Scotland
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3 Acknowledgements

The project is funded by the Scottish Government through the Autism Fund. We would like to thank Emma Wood and Fiona Scott of Inspiring Scotland and Sue Hope for support transferring the project from Cornerstone to Into Work. Further thanks go out to Kat Allen, our key contact and partner at Into Work. Finally, great thanks and appreciation go out to all participants and those who helped us recruit participants to the study.
4 Executive summary

The “problem”

Employment opportunities for autistic people are characterised by an extensive and complex range of barriers, rendering work for the clear majority unfair. The unfairness can be identified in the form of a sizeable employment gap between the autistic and non-disabled workforce. Further evidence of unfairness manifests in the form of widespread under-employment, plus exclusion and marginalisation due to contemporary human resource practices, and organisational cultures and workplace architecture designed for the neurotypical workforce. In addition, it is increasingly recognised how attempts to resolve the autism employment gap excludes intersecting demographics, such as gender. Taken together, it paints a picture of employers requiring a framework to transform their workplaces and close the employment gap, or as framed in this report, the fair work gap, for the autistic workforce.

Scope

The report is aimed at addressing a lack of fair work for Scotland’s autistic workforce, i.e., critiquing, collecting primary data, and then setting out what fair work should look like for such employees. It is primarily aimed at employers as the primary stakeholder to Scotland’s Fair Work Framework. It is also aimed at further key stakeholders: trade unions, the Scottish Government, and civil society organisations (e.g., autism and employment support charities).

Aims and research questions

Given Scotland seeks to become a Fair Work Nation by the year 2025, as well as reducing the disability employment gap, the over-arching aim of the report is to consider what fair work means to the autistic workforce, as well as to those who manage autistic employees. In doing so, the report sets out recommendations and action points to close the autism fair work gap. This is achieved by capturing the lived experiences of autistic working people and managers responsible for autistic employees, through a lens based on Scotland’s Fair Work Framework, the social model of disability, and intersectionality, with the aim of producing a blueprint for fair work autism (see Figure 61, p. 73.).

The project is driven by four research questions:

1) What does work look like for autistic working people?

2) How do autism and gender intersect with dimensions of fair work?

3) What are the main barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce?

4) How can the Fair Work Framework be advanced to be more inclusive of the autistic workforce?

Methodology

Primary data based on lived experience of autism and work was attained, via a mixed methods approach, involving electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews, from autistic employees and those experienced at managing autistic employees. The data were analysed on the basis of a conceptual lens combining the Fair Work Framework, the social model of disability, and intersectionality.
Findings

Key findings arising from the research include:

- Awareness of the Fair Work Framework varied across the sample. In addition, awareness of relevant equalities policies within organisations was often limited.
- The data shows that there is no one experience of being autistic in the workplace, with a wide range of differing barriers and facilitators to inclusion emergent from the data. Importantly, the data suggests autistic men and women can experience the workplace differently and such differences should be built into refinements of the Fair Work Framework and organisational policies.
- While employers are making progress in implementing Fair Work for autistic people, many autistic respondents felt particular dissatisfaction with ‘effective voice’ at work, including in unionised workplaces.
- Accessing reasonable adjustments was an area of particular concern for many autistic respondents, and where adjustments were implemented they were often not reviewed for suitability.
- Many respondents reported considerable stigma, resulting in masking and disguising of autistic traits at work.
- Line managers are key to autistic people’s access to fair work, with a single, reliable and trustworthy point of contact for autistic people reported by respondents as beneficial.
- Autistic respondents reported autonomy at work as a facilitator of fair work, both in terms of general job satisfaction, and as a way to access adjustments.
- Despite a range of autism initiatives, for many autistic employees, the responsibility (and the burden) of securing support rested with them.

Recommendations and action points

Key action points to come, by stakeholder to fair work, are as follows.

Recommendations and actions for the UK Government:

- Strengthen the protections at work for autistic people through revising the Equality Act (2010)
- Devolve application of the Equality Act (2010), e.g., public sector duty in Scotland regarding addressing of socio-economic inequalities

Recommendations and action points for the Scottish Government:

- Revise and refine the Fair Work Framework to include the perspectives of autistic people in the workplace.
- Act as a focal point, bringing together stakeholders including employers, autism experts (including lived experience voices) and trade unions to improve the work experiences of autistic people.
- Recognise the diversity of and intersectional experiences of autistic people in the workplace.

Recommendations and action points for employers:

- Recognise autistic people have diverse experiences of fair work, and that these are often informed by gender.
• Develop, with inclusion specialists, and crucially those with lived experience, autism specific policies to support autistic people and their line managers.

• Undertake equality impact assessments of changes to working practices and the organisation of work, including changes to the built environment, to develop plans to mitigate any negative effects on autistic people.

• Better support line managers more generally in managing autism at work, but in particular support the regular review of workplace adjustments for autistic people.

Recommendations and action points to staff representative bodies, such as, trade unions, staff associations and equalities networks:

• To upskill workplace organisers’ understanding of autism, including the diversity of experiences and how these may be gendered, in order to improve ability to effectively represent the voices of autistic people at work,

Recommendations and action points to civil society organisations:

• Ensure autism or neurodiversity training provided to employers is up-to-date, strengths-focused and grounded in the social model of disability and lived experience of autism in the workplace (ideally led by autistic trainers).

• As an employer, provide as much job security possible while funding is under threat. Ensure communication about job role changes, contract endings and redundancies is timely, clear and provides sufficient contextual information, explanation of decision-making and opportunities for autistic employees to process information and to ask for clarifications.
5 Glossary of terms

*Autism*: a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference in the way a person communicates, interacts and processes the world around them

*Disability (autism) employment gap*: the statistical difference between those who are disabled (and more specifically, autistic) and working compared to the non-disabled and working population

*Fair work*: work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society

*Intersectionality*: ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects

*Lived experience*: denotes the reality of how individuals understand and interpret their worlds

*Neurodiversity*: the idea cognitive conditions, such as autism, attention deficit hyper-active condition (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia, are natural variations in the way people think and process information. The term recognises both the difficulties people who have these conditions may encounter and the unique strengths that can derive from thinking differently

*Neurodivergence*: people may be described as neurodivergent if they have a cognitive profile that is different to that of the average or typical person – for example, an autistic person may be said to be neurodivergent

*Neurotypical*: a term used to describe people who are not neurodivergent

*Social model of disability*: an approach suggesting disability is created by barriers in society, such as the environment (e.g., inaccessible buildings and services), people’s attitudes (stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice), and organisations (inflexible policies, practices and procedures)
6 Introduction and overview

6.1 The “problem”: Autism, neurodiversity, exclusion and under-employment of the autistic workforce

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference in the way a person communicates, interacts and processes the world around them (Scottish Autism, 2023). Autism is commonly associated with the notion of “neurodiversity”, the idea cognitive conditions, such as autism, attention deficit hyper-active condition (ADHC), dyslexia and dyspraxia, are natural variations in the way people think and process information. The term recognises both the difficulties people who have these conditions may encounter and the unique strengths that can derive from thinking differently (GMB, 2018). More specifically, an autistic person may be described as “neurodivergent” if they have a cognitive profile that is different to that of the average or typical person, referred to in this context as “neurotypical” (GMB, 2018).

Employment for autistic people is characterised by a range of widespread and complex barriers. Broad evidence suggests the autistic workforce face a substantial and stubborn employment gap of around 30 percentage points against the wider disabled population, and approaching 60 percentage points lower than the non-disabled population (ONS, 2021). Where employment has been attained, there is also an ‘alarming’ level of under-employment to contend with (Wen et al., 2023). More specific barriers include, for example, exclusion and marginalisation due to a range of contemporary HR practices (Richards, 2012), stigma and discrimination (Patton, 2019), and building design (Narethiran et al., 2022). Taken together, such findings suggest the clear majority of employers fail someway short of providing fair work for autistic working people. The findings also suggest employers require a common but nuanced framework to facilitate fair work for the autistic workforce.

Despite evidence of disability discrimination, there is some debate over whether autistic people should be considered “disabled”, and instead be seen as “different”. This is an especially important distinction to note, as in the context of the report, a disabled/autistic employee would be covered by anti-discriminatory legislation, such as the UK’s Equality Act (2010), whereas an employee viewed or self-identifying as different is unlikely to benefit from such legal protections. Further, many autistic employees can be viewed as disabled if their lived experiences are examined via the social model of disability. For the purpose of this report, it is recognised many autistic people do not see themselves as disabled, but given the gravity of the problem tackled in the report, that of a distinct lack of fair work available to the autistic workforce, the social model of disability is drawn upon as a means to draft notions of fair work in such situations. The social model of disability suggests disability is created by barriers in society, in this case an ingrained failure of employers to manage the outwardly displayed cognitive differences associated with autism, and includes the environment (e.g., inaccessible buildings and services), people’s attitudes (stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice), and organisations (inflexible policies, practices and procedures) (UK Government, 2015). Importantly, what this translates into, is the framing of the lack of fair work available to the autistic workforce, as a consequence of barriers in society, but especially barriers created by and associated with work organisations.

A further dimension to the problem is how methods of improving inclusion for the autistic workforce tend to focus on men, neglecting the emergent reality of autism associated with a range of marginalised identities (Doyle et al., 2022). As such, attempts to create notions of fair work should consider intersectionality, a concept initially designed to understand complex patterns of disadvantage arising at the crossroads of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991), but in this instance applied as a means to understand and move on from disadvantage arising at the crossroads of gender and autism. For the purpose of the report, intersectionality is required to reflect the growing incidence of women seeking a diagnosis for
autism (e.g., see Devlin, 2021), but also the chronic shortage of research reflecting the lived experience, or the reality of how working individuals understand and interpret their worlds (Schwandt and Burgon, 2006), in this instance autistic women understandings and interpretations of work experiences.

6.2 Fair Work Framework: A remedy for the autism employment gap in Scotland?

While the employment-related legal context to the report is the UK, Scotland is the main focus, so consideration was given to how to frame findings from a study based on the lived experience of Scottish autistic employees and managers/HR professionals responsible for autistic employees. As such, consideration was given to the emergent ideas drafted from 2015 onwards by the Fair Work Convention (see e.g., 2016, 2019, 2020), a body responsible for driving forward the Fair Work agenda, but more importantly, designed to make Scotland a “Fair Work nation” by the year 2025. As such the report, as well as subsequent findings, recommendations and action points, is based on Scotland’s Fair Work Framework. The Fair Work Framework is defined by the Fair Work Convention (2016, p. 5) as ‘… work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society.’

The Fair Work Framework is further illustrated below (see Figure 1). The Fair Work Convention (2023) provides substantial details of each dimension to the Fair Work Framework, but key details are as follows:

**Effective voice** – For individuals, the opportunity to have an effective voice is crucially important. Having a say at work is consistent with the broader suite of rights available to citizens in democratic societies.

**Opportunities** – It is a reasonable aspiration to want work that is fair – and for fair work to be available to everyone. Fair opportunities allow people to access work and employment and are a crucial dimension of fair work.

**Security** – Security of income can contribute to greater individual and family stability and promote more effective financial planning, including investment in pensions.

**Fulfilment** – As well as through interesting and meaningful work, fulfilment can also arise from positive and supportive workplace relationships that promote a sense of belonging and this overlaps strongly with respect as a dimension of fair work.

**Respect** – Respect at work enhances individual health, safety and wellbeing. Dignified treatment can protect employees from workplace-related illness and injury and create an environment free from bullying and harassment.

Importantly, the Fair Work Framework is centred on “inclusive growth”, or improving opportunities to participate in economic life and the need to benefit from this participation (Findlay, 2020). Such notions further cement the importance of the Fair Work Framework as a means to remove barriers to employment, thus closing the employment gap between the autistic and wider workforce.

However, despite its clear potential, the Fair Work approach currently insufficiently reflects key needs noted in the previous section, not least pertaining to autism, neurodivergence and intersectionality. Indeed, research indicates how in one sense fair work has broadly held up well in recent turbulent and difficult times, for disabled and women employees, and employees with caring responsibilities employees, such groups face additional challenges accessing fair work (Zemanik, 2023). More specifically, the problems associated with autism
and employment have not been researched in the context of the Fair Work Framework before. This point is particularly relevant given an important wider criticism that the Fair Work Framework has attracted limited primary research (Gall, 2021), leading to substantial gaps in evidence of its impact (Fair Work Convention, 2020). Where evidence has been gathered, the picture appears to be of how lived experiences of fair work, especially for women and disabled people, vary considerably (Fair Work Convention, 2019, 2020; Stockland et al., 2023). Indeed, key goals of the Fair Work Framework appear to have come under pressure during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting inequalities for disabled employees in accessing fair work have deepened during this time (Irvine, 2021). In more generic terms, a consultation exercise involving employers suggested smaller businesses are likely to require training and support to comply with the Fair Work Framework (Business in the Community, 2018). Crucially and as Gall (2021) concludes, the goals of the Fair Work Framework appear weak, there is no compulsion for employers to implement them, even in public sector contexts. Gall’s points indicate how any findings on fair work autism should include governmental attempts to make the Fair Work Framework a statutory compulsion. However, it seems that further research, especially designed around key wider frameworks, such as the social model of disability and intersectionality, can deliver important insights into what fair work might look like for Scotland’s autistic workforce.

Figure 1: Fair Work Framework (Fair Work Convention, 2016, p. 7)

6.3 Aims and research questions

Given Scotland’s aim to become a Fair Work Nation by the year 2025, as well as reducing the employment gap, the over-arching aim of the report is to consider what fair work means
to the autistic workforce, as well as to those who manage autistic employees. In doing so, the report aims to set out recommendations and action points to close the fair work gap for the autistic workforce. Such recommendations are to be rooted in lived experiences of autistic working people and managers responsible for autistic employees, captured in the research and analysed through the lens of Scotland’s Fair Work Framework, the social model of disability and intersectionality, producing a blueprint of what fair work could look like for the autistic workforce (see Figure 61, p. 73).

Questions driving the report include:

1) What does work look like for autistic working people?

2) How do autism and gender intersect with dimensions of fair work?

3) What are the main barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce?

4) How can the Fair Work Framework be advanced to be more inclusive of the autistic workforce?

6.4 Methodology

To achieve the aims of the report, a two-stage mixed methods system of research design was put together and deployed.

Stage one: involved the design and distribution of two electronic surveys, one aimed at autistic employees (see Appendix 1), and a similar survey aimed at managers responsible for autistic employees (e.g., line managers, HR/equality professionals). A broad aim of the survey was to attain a convenience sample, an approach based on recruiting participants who are most ready, willing and available (Saumure and Given, 2008), reflecting experiences of autistic employees and managers regarding fair work.

The fundamental basis of design for both surveys was the Fair Work Framework. Therefore, following a front page set up to provide research information and to act as the main basis for informed consent to take part in the research, and a few questions to confirm eligibility/suitability for the respective survey, there were five themed sections based on the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework (see Appendix 1). However, notions related to intersectionality and the social model of disability also fed into survey design. Each of the main five sections reflected three to five aspects of the relevant dimension (21 in total). Respective statements correlated with key themes in the autism and employment literature, mapping broadly onto the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework. Each statement made explicit or implicit reference to autism, e.g., “My employer encourages open workplace communication regarding autism”, or “I have effective reasonable adjustments in place that enable me to do my best at work, e.g., wear headphones at work, allowed to take short breaks”. Participants were asked to signify a level of agreement/disagreement with each statement following a five-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree – given a rating of 1; somewhat agree 2; neither agree nor disagree – 3; somewhat disagree 4; strongly disagree – 5). Some statements had “not applicable” options, related to statements implying disclosure and how this may not have happened in some instances.

At the end of each section, participants were given an opportunity to provide optional details of what they believed to be good practice in relation to each respective dimension of the Fair Work Framework. A further substantial and penultimate section of the survey was designed to gather demographic information. For the employees’ survey, participants were asked optional closed questions about category of job, sector employed, size of employer, length of
time employed, nature of contract of employment, hours worked, access to diversity policy, access to neurodiversity policy, age range, gender, disability, neurodivergence. The manager survey asked for slightly different information: nature of role in relation to autistic employee, autism status, size and locations of employer, sector of employer, access to HR professional, confidence in supporting autistic employee, access to diversity policy, access to neurodiversity policy, trade union recognition, support from autism civil society organisation. The final stages of both surveys allowed participants to voluntarily signal interest in the next stage of the research, i.e., an opportunity to be kept up to date with research findings, as well as leave contact details regarding taking part in a semi-structured interview on broadly the same issues.

Given the differences between what data was to be gathered for the two cohorts of employees and managers, and to avoid confusion for the research ethics reviewing process, separate ethical approval was sought for the surveys. Ethical approval was sought for each survey from Heriot-Watt University’s Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and approvals for the surveys were granted in early May 2022.

The surveys were initially piloted among informal contacts of Cornerstone organisation, a Scottish social care charity initially partnered to the project. The piloting process led to a range of small, but important minor changes to how the surveys might appeal to target groups. Specifically, the piloting process was of most benefit to the wider project in terms of removing and minimising ambiguity in the language of the survey, as well as in clarifying key terms associated with the Fair Work Framework.

Participants were recruited to the surveys via a range of methods. The main means of raising awareness and participation was via a Twitter account set up for this part of the research (@FairWorkAutism). Prospective participant awareness-raising was further attempted by contacting and requesting distribution of the survey via a range of autism and disability civil society organisations based in Scotland. Unison, the leading public sector trade union, was also approached to distribute the survey via equality networks. Further ad hoc attempts to recruit research participants came via emailing out to personal contacts, as well as posting on personal LinkedIn pages.

The two surveys ran concurrently between mid-May and mid-September 2022, or four months in total. The employee survey led to 253 responses, of which 191 were usable, i.e., a figure including partial responses judged to have provided enough information. Importantly, for analysis involving gender comparison, a further 33 responses were excluded from this aspect of the analysis, due to very small number of responses based on wider categories of gender, including a substantial part who did not answer this question. The manager survey proved more difficult to recruit to and resulted in 32 complete or sufficiently complete responses, after 57 started the survey. As a consequence of such participation rates, analysis of the data is restricted to comparisons with employees on the 21 aspects of the five dimensions of fair work. Combined, the surveys gathered data from 223 (191 employees and 32 from employers) people with experiences of autism and fair work across Scotland, an achievement given autistic people represent 1-2 per cent of the population and are one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in society. Importantly, in terms of gender and intersectionality, almost half of the employee survey sample (48.2 per cent) were women. The wider employee survey sample was based on men (41.8 per cent), and 8.7 per cent who were non-binary or preferred not to disclose gender identity.

The surveys captured in total 10418 words of qualitative data. The majority of the qualitative data was volunteered by autistic employees, which involved a total of 9986 words. More specifically, the employee survey led to the capture of 199 comments specifically on fair work, with 36 comments on effective voice, opportunity (n=36), security (n=52), fulfilment
(n=29) and respect (n=45). In terms of the percentage of comments captured by gender, women contributed 54 per cent, men (31 per cent), non-binary (10 per cent), prefer not to disclose (5 per cent). For the manager survey, two comments were captured related to effective voice, opportunity (2), security (5), fulfilment (3) and respect (5). In total, 69 employees showed interest in stage two of the research, demonstrating high rates engagement with the issues at stake. A total of four managers also showed a willingness to take part in stage two of the research. Qualitative survey comments were analysed as per data from the interviews, as discussed below.

The resulting dataset from the survey was cleaned and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, a statistical analysis software package). Given the exploratory nature of the research and the sampling characteristics, most of the analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics with some inferential techniques also being applied. A first inspection of the data distributions using frequency counts, percentages and bar charts showed no major issues in terms of polarised answers and therefore the mean was deemed as an appropriate summary measure for variable comparisons. Furthermore, comparisons were made in terms of response distribution between men and women using clustered bar charts for the employee data.

For each of the five dimensions, the means for each element were calculated to assess the level of disagreement with the statements, with results compared between employees and employers. For the employee data, means were also compared between men and women. In order to assess the statistical significance of the difference on means between men and woman, t-tests were deployed producing some significant results. Once exploration of individual dimensions and their elements was concluded an aggregated view was produced by calculating the overall mean for each dimension, allowing for the overall strength of disagreement to be compared between dimensions. This was also done separately for both men and women to allow for the gender comparison.

Data gathered via the surveys was limited in a range of ways. For example, the convenience sample led to over-representation in terms of women (52 per cent), professional occupations (38 per cent), public sector employment (47 per cent) and larger employers (75 per cent). Both surveys were quite lengthy. This is a likely reason for the volume of partially completed responses, especially regarding the survey aimed at those who manage or oversee the employment of autistic employees.

**Stage two**: involved the design and recruitment to a programme of semi-structured interviews with the two main parties to fair work, i.e., autistic employees and managers responsible for autistic employees (see tables 1 and 2). Such interviews, as per the open comment options on the two surveys, were conducted to add depth to the range of findings expected to come from and be led by the surveys. Interviews were also considered as an effective means to produce examples of practice related to fair work and autism.

As per the surveys, interviews were designed around key themes related to the Fair Work Framework, with the interviews more widely set up to reflect the social model of disability and intersectionality. Consideration was also given to emergent sub-themes from the open comments in the survey, as well a focus on identifying lived experience of good practice. This part of the research was conducted in partnership with Into Work, a not-for-profit and civil society organisation set up to give autistic and disabled adults equal opportunity and access to meaningful employment, and to receive fair treatment in work. The partnership extended to discussing the format of interviews, and the recruitment to this stage of the research. Further, as per the surveys, interviews were organised with autistic employees (see Table 1), and managers with experience of managing or overseeing the management
of autistic employees (see Table 2). As characterised by the surveys, intersectionality in the form of gender was a feature of recruiting interviewees, particularly in the case of employees.

More specifically, the interviews centred on exploring action points made by the Fair Work Framework, and what autistic employees (see Appendix 2), and managers have experienced in practice (see Appendix 3). The questions were then opened up to explore the wider lived-experience of autistic employees, and to ask for examples of good practice from the managers’ perspective. The findings were intended to steer recommendations and action points for employers and wider stakeholders on achieving the goals of the Fair Work Framework, in a manner fully inclusive of autistic employees.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to better understand the lived-experience of the participants, including the ability to draw out key barriers and facilitators of fair work. For the autistic employees, we wanted to understand what the Fair Work Framework meant to them and how they have experienced it in their working life (see Appendix 2). For the managers – one of whom identified as autistic (see Table 2) – we wanted to find out how the Fair Work Framework was used and/or encouraged in the workplace in a managerial capacity (see Appendix 3). Both employees and managers were asked about the five components of the Fair Work Framework, what these components meant to the participants (in both theoretical and practical terms), and how they could be used to help focus fair practice in the workplace. The questions were then opened out to ask about wider workplace experience. Often participants wanted to speak about specific experiences, and at other times, prepared questions were asked. Importantly, an autistic member of the research team led the qualitative aspect of the research, i.e., the research benefitted from such an arrangement, especially as interviewees and interviewer had the potential to share similar perspectives.

Ethical approval was sought, and attained (in mid-November 2022) for the interviews from Heriot-Watt University’s School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, with approval granted before potential participants were approached. Before the interviews took place, a participant information sheet describing the project, and a consent form were sent out to potential interviewees. The signed consent form was then returned to the research team and stored with the interview recordings. The interview data were securely stored on Heriot-Watt’s OneDrive, a process GDPR compliant.

Prepared interview questions (see appendices 2 and 3) – suggestions for the semi-structured interview – were emailed to the participants ahead of the interview so interviewees knew what to expect, and could make notes for their potential responses before the interview. The approach matched good practice in giving autistic participants clear information about the interview process and content before the interview (Gowen et al., 2019).

By design, the lead on this aspect of the research is autistic. The team considered it good practice to have an autistic researcher inputting to the design and conducting such interviews (Pellicano et al., 2014). There is good reason to believe the choice of a lived experience interviewer facilitated the effective recruitment of participants and positively influenced the quality and depth of the data collected.
Table 1: Details of autistic employee interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/pseudonym</th>
<th>Position/job</th>
<th>Autism status</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sam</td>
<td>Building Assessor</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Andy</td>
<td>Statistician</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. James</td>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>No formal diagnosis</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Phil</td>
<td>Gardener</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Oliver</td>
<td>Retail Assistant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Alistair</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Douglas</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Duncan</td>
<td>Support Employee</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lachian</td>
<td>Sous Chef</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Adam</td>
<td>Police Inspector</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Peter</td>
<td>Communications Officer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Callum</td>
<td>Health and Safety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Iona</td>
<td>Legal Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jean</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>No formal diagnosis</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Isla</td>
<td>Library Assistant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Evie</td>
<td>Library Assistant</td>
<td>No formal diagnosis</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Eilidh</td>
<td>Trainee Actuary Consultant</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Ishbel</td>
<td>Police Administration</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Annabel</td>
<td>Charity Worker</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Steven</td>
<td>Hire-car Maintenance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>Cisgender man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Christopher</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Preferred not to say</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Details of manager interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Autism status</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. Jamie</td>
<td>HR Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Jack</td>
<td>NHS Administration Manager</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Shona</td>
<td>Regional Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>PNS</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Charlie</td>
<td>Chief Delivery Officer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Alice</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Third</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewees were largely volunteers from stage one of the research, but many were also recruited via the autism networks of both Into Work and Heriot-Watt University. The interviews were conducted 1-16 December 2022. Given more women than men completed the survey, attempts were made to recruit more men when it came to recruiting to the interviews. The recruitment led to 26 interviews, a total including five managers, and 21 autistic employees (more than half of interviewees were men) (see tables 1 and 2). The final number of participants reflected the interviewer’s sense of being empirically confident that gathering additional data would shed limited if no further light on, in this case, fair work and autism (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The 26 interviews resulted in approximately 19 hours of...
recordings, about approximately 45 minutes each. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription organisation, resulting in an anonymised and pseudonymised dataset (i.e., with all directly and indirectly identifying information removed, in compliance with current data protection regulations) of just over 150,000 words.

Interviews (as per survey open comments) were analysed using template analysis (King, 2004), allowing for a priori coded themes. The data gathered about autistic employee lived experience of work and employment was analysed on the basis of identifying the widest range of barriers (related to the social model of disability) and facilitators to fair work, a range informed in large part by the five, at times, overlapping dimensions of the Fair Work Framework (see Figure 1), plus the 21 aspects of fair work explored via the survey (see Appendix 1 and Table 3).

Further key themes applied in the analysis related to gender, identification with notions of disability, autism and neurodivergence, plus key stakeholders in fair work for the autistic workforce (e.g., trade unions, civil society organisations and consultants, staff support networks, health professionals), and a range of HR practices associated with putting up barriers to and facilitating fair work, such as hybrid working, flexible working, conflicting demands of work, organisational structure, shift patterns and working, teamworking. The qualitative data drawn from manager sources was analysed in a more straightforward manner, acting as a means to further identifying barriers and facilitators to fair work, plus drawing out instances where employers partner with a range of third parties and wider stakeholders to fair work, e.g., trade unions, civil society organisations, occupational health professionals.

As per the surveys, part two of the research was also based on a convenience sample. While such an approach is suited to exploratory research, it is recognised how the research findings will be limited by the fact they are based on experiences of those most willing and accessible to the research team and partners.
7 Main findings and analysis

7.1 Introduction

Data analysis and emergent key findings are set out below, addressing three of the four research questions, initially set out in Section 7.3:

1) What does work look like for autistic working people?
2) How do autism and gender intersect with dimensions of fair work?
3) What are the main barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce?

This section reflects the mixed methods approach, drawing on quantitative data gathered using two electronic surveys, and qualitative data from open comments aspects of the surveys, plus semi-structured interviews with autistic employees and managers of autistic employees. The quantitative survey findings are initially presented and are largely employee-focused, as the autistic workforce is the main focus of the study. The emphasis is also focused less on managers and employers because they do not by and large have direct lived experiences of autism and employment. Low survey response rates also made such findings less viable. This is followed by an interpretation of qualitative findings from the interviews and survey open questions, principally aimed at teasing out key issues surrounding the lived experience of autism and fair work, especially related to barriers and facilitators to fair work. The analysis of qualitative findings builds on earlier quantitative findings, but also includes broader issues raised. The qualitative section (7.8) further includes a range of case studies, drawn from the interviews, and selected as examples of how practice can be steered towards providing greater access to fair work for the autistic workforce.

First, the quantitative data is analysed according to demographic information from the two surveys, then more generally across the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework (see Figure 1, p. 15). Gender differences (women and men compared) across the five dimensions were then analysed. Second, the quantitative data is analysed similarly to above, but by dimension and the aspects to each dimension as set out in the surveys (see Table 3, p. 27). Included in this part of the analysis is a comparison between employees and employers/manager. The third section (7.8) represents a presentation of qualitative data based on key issues raised by the survey, specifically focusing on barriers and facilitators to fair work as per the five dimensions of the Fair Work Framework. The section ends (7.9) by setting-out of key conclusions to be drawn from an analysis of all the findings, paving-the-way for a wide-range of specific recommendations and action points aimed at key stakeholders to fair work and autism.

7.2 General landscape for autism-inclusive fair work

Key findings on the experiences of the autistic workforce drawn from the employee survey are as follows. Approximately four-fifths (80.3 per cent) reported awareness/access to an equal opportunities policy, although only a minority reported awareness/access to an HR policy specifically on autism or neurodiversity (6.2 per cent), with a substantial proportion (60.5 per cent) not sure if such a policy exists where they work. Importantly, less than half of autistic employees considered themselves disabled (48.2 per cent), although there were clear gender differences, in that women (64.4%) were more likely to identify as disabled than men (40.9%). In terms of identification with the notion of neurodivergence, the vast majority (86.4%) considered themselves neurodivergent, although again, proportionately, more women (88.9%) than men (71.2%) see themselves in this way.
In the survey of managers, all participants (100 per cent) reported access to an HR professional, or were such a professional themselves. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the sample discussed in the previous section, a majority of participants (61.5 per cent) reported the recognition of at least one trade union for the purposes of collective bargaining where they are employed. Importantly, a sizeable minority (30.8 per cent) reported using autism organisations for training staff, although the vast majority said they had not or were unsure if autism-specific training had been previously explored (69.2 per cent). Broadly similar to the employee survey, 100 per cent reported access and awareness of an equal opportunities or diversity policy, but in contrast, almost a half (46.2 per cent) believed their organisation had a specific autism and/or neurodiversity policy. Overall, the vast majority of participants (84.6 per cent) stated they were confident in supporting their autistic employees.

As can be seen in Figure 2 (below), the findings suggest “work” for autistic employees is a rich and complex mixture of fairness and unfairness, thus likely to be based on a complex interaction of multiple barriers and facilitators to fair work. Specifically, the autistic employee experience of work appears very mixed. An overall mean of 3, or thereabouts, indicates no clear common experience of agreeable or disagreeable experiences of work, while a mean of 2.9 or below, is indicative of more agreeable experiences of fair work. The figure, depicting the mean of all respondents, reflecting all dimensions and sub-aspects of the Fair Work Framework, reveals “fulfilment” to be rated the highest by autistic employees, followed by “security”, while “effective voice” was rated the lowest. It can also be seen that “respect” and “opportunity” rate very similarly overall to effective voice. As such, at the onset of deeper and more specific analysis, the broader findings point towards a need for more work on closing the fair work gap for the autistic workforce.

![Figure 2: Average mean rating of dimensions of Fair Work Framework (employee)](image)

From a similarly broad analysis aggregating data based on gender (see Figure 3 – below), there appear to be some similarities and differences in work experiences between autistic women and men. For instance, both autistic women and men have similar experiences related to fulfilment (2.23 women versus 2.45 men). However, respect appears the dimension in which experiences are ranked lowest for women (2.95), but for men it is opportunity (3.09). That said, effective voice, taken by gender, represents the second most disagreeable experience of fair work for both women and men (2.91 women versus 3.05 men).
men). As such, and as indicated above, the fuller and deeper picture is likely to produce further important and gendered differences and similarities in the experiences of fair work, as well as revealing a nuanced understanding of barriers and facilitators to fair work.

Figure 3: Average mean rating of dimensions of Fair Work Framework, by gender (employee)

When the dimensions are broken down to consider all 21 individual aspects of fair work explored via the survey (see Table 3), a more complex and nuanced picture of fair work emerges, by gender, as well an indication of where barriers and facilitators to fair work for autistic employees are likely to be more commonly and specifically experienced. Table 3 indicates where there appears to be a majority of broadly agreeable experiences of fair work (colour coded in green, representing a mean score of 1.0-2.9, and more likely to indicate facilitators to fair work), but also highlights where there appear to be aspects of fair work drawing proportionately more disagreeable experiences (colour coded in yellow/amber, denoting a mean score of 3.0-3.9, and more likely to be indicative of barriers to fair work). The green and yellow/amber colour codes are also used, respectively, to show where there is no statistical/statistical difference between women and men. A red coding system was further considered, but participants did not indicate a widespread strong disagreement with any of the 21 survey statements, i.e., culminating in a mean of 4.0 or above.

Importantly, as can be seen from Table 3, the quantitative findings can be divided in five ways, determined in part by information presented in the final column to the right, how the 21 aspects of fair work are rated by participants, shown in this instance as ratios based on aggregating their agree-and disagree-ability rating for each aspect. First, there are five aspects of fair work rated as more agreeable than disagreeable (see final column for specific ratios of such two measures) when aggregating all participant experiences (2, 9, 10, 15 and 18). Second, there are three aspects of fair work rated more agreeable than disagreeable, but there are statistically significant differences in experiences between women and men (6, 14 and 19). Third and importantly, there are six aspects rated as more disagreeable than agreeable (1, 5, 7, 12, 17 and 20), but there is statistically no significant difference between gender in these aspects of fair work. This leaves just one aspect of fair work (21) where a
majority are disagreeable, and there is a statistically significant difference between women and men. Finally, there remains a more mixed and ambiguous range of aspects of fair work (3, 4, 8, 11, 13 and 16) where there is some combination of agreeable and disagreeable experience of practice, which vary in terms of being statistically and not statistically significant between women and men.

Emphasis on the broad dimensions of fair work further points towards an uneven picture of access to fair work. However, this approach also highlights a need to further consider a range of aspects of fair work experienced differently by autistic women and men as employees, and in some cases, experiences varying by a statistically significant margin. Such insights are likely to be key to mapping gendered areas of good practice and to recommending improvements where required. The next sub-sections (7.3, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.7) builds on this analysis by, in turn, exploring each dimension and aspect of each dimension of the Fair Work Framework. A key aim here is to draw out in detail specific areas to commend, but also to identify elements requiring more detailed attention and action. A further aim is to draw out key areas for consideration in analysis of the qualitative findings.

7.3 Effective voice and autism

According to Figure 2, “effective voice” represents (marginally) the area of fair work most likely to be associated with disabling barriers, although “respect” and “opportunity” sit closely behind. This raises broad concern given many participants are employed in settings where trade unions are recognised. However, when considering gender, effective voice represents the second least positively experienced dimension of fair work for both women and men (see Figure 3). That said, there appears to be no standout aspect of effective voice, which is attracting the strongest agreeable or disagreeable sentiments. However, it is reasonable to suggest that effective voice is the most variously experienced part of fair work, as will become apparent in the rest of the findings.

Effective voice for the purposes of this study encapsulates four areas of further investigation (see Figure 4). According to Table 3, participants are most in agreement that they are able, if required, to meaningfully express their views at work (2.78). Indeed, 54.9 per cent of the sample agree this is the case where they are employed, compared to 32.5 per cent who disagree (see Figure 8). However, when considering effective voice (see Figure 9), there are important gender differences, for example, men appear more than twice as likely to have strong disagreeing views on being able to safely express views at work compared to women, indicating that autistic men face greater barriers to this key aspect of fair work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Fair Work</th>
<th>Aspect of dimension</th>
<th>Mean (woman)</th>
<th>Mean by gender (man)</th>
<th>Mean by gender (man)</th>
<th>Statistical significance by gender (Yes/No)</th>
<th>Combined agreeable: disagreeable (%)&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective voice</td>
<td>1. Employers encourage open communication regarding autism</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>30.9:37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Safely express views in a range of ways</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>54.9:32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Access to a staff representative of independent advocate</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>36.5:38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Employer responds positively when raising autism-related matters</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>43.9:31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>5. Offered reasonable adjustment during recruitment and selection</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>28.3:46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Access to training and development opportunities</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59.2:26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Access to point of contact, mentor or job coach</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>38.4:45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Available promotion and progression opportunities</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>45.3:38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>9. Paid a wage reflecting experiences, skills and qualifications</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>60.1:28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Employment is secure and low risk of losing job</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>69.6:23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Effective reasonable adjustments enable to do best at work</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>51.0:35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Reasonable adjustment reviewed on regular basis</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>28.0:52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Employment rights understood and respected by employer</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>38.7:31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>14. Job allows use of skills, knowledge and experience</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>74.4:18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Allowed opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>79.0:12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. Reasonable adjustments to allow to train, develop and learn skills for career development</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>39.5:36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>17. Feel understood as an autistic person</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>37.3:48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18. Confidence of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>52.2:33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19. Employer supports well-being, health, and safety</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>63.6:25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20. Meaningful training on inclusion and diversity translating in policy and practice</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>35.3:43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21. Colleagues good understanding of needs of autistic worker</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>31.1:51.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Fair Work dimensions and aspects of dimensions by mean, gender, statistical significance and ratio of agreeability/disagreeability (employee)

<sup>2</sup> Excludes “neither agree or disagree” and “not applicable” options
Participants responded least positively in relation to their employer encouraging open communication regarding autism (3.18) (see Figure 4). Considering this in more detail (see Figure 6), the most selected answer is actually “neither agree nor disagree”, indicating little may be communicated about autism in many organisations. However, it is clear sentiments on this key issue vary, with more indicating disagreement (37.7) over agreement (30.9). A gender breakdown suggests autistic women are on average more likely to have neutral or agreeability sentiments compared to men (see Figure 7), although such differences are not statistically significant (see Table 3).
Women appear most in agreement that employers respond positively when they raise an autism-related matter (2.65) (see Figure 5), suggesting raising such matters is in the majority of cases a facilitator of fair work. Such views can be seen in more details when consulting Figure 13. When compared to men, 53.9% of women (compared to 34.0% of men) indicate agreeable experiences of raising autism-related matters. This finding suggests women find it easier than men to be autistic at work. Men on the other hand indicate most agreement in relation to being able to meaningfully express views at work (2.89) (see Table 3). Interestingly, men report the most extreme experiences of such matters (see Figure 9), with men reporting both stronger agreement and disagreement compared to women.
In terms of disagreeability, women are least in agreement when it comes to experiences of access to a staff representative or independent advocate (3.12). Indeed, as per Figure 11, women express far less strongly agreeing sentiments, and are more likely to indicate somewhat disagreeing on such matters. Men appear most in disagreement in relation to open workplace communication regarding autism (3.27). Indeed, as can be seen by viewing Figure 7, men are less likely to agree or have neutral views compared to women, but similarly, variously in disagreement compared to women on such matters.
Figure 10: Employee rating of access to a staff representative or independent advocate should have concerns at work

Figure 11: Employee rating of access to a staff representative or independent advocate should have concerns at work, by gender
When the views of managers of autistic employees are compared, a further and quite different perspective of effective voice and fair work emerges. Managers indicate a greater confidence in the effectiveness of voice-related facilitators concerning autism compared to employees. As depicted in Figure 14, managers are in considerably more agreement regarding all four aspects of effective voice. Such a divergence of views between the two main parties to the employment relationship is expected, but perhaps the gap is wider than in more general circumstances. The broader findings indicate the majority of manager participants believe they are, or their organisation is, confident in supporting autistic employees. Further, the surveys measure two different things: what a manager believes to be on offer to the employee, and how the employee experiences what is on offer. In such situations managers appear most agreeable about responding to autism-related matters.
themselves, and marginally less so should an employee seek access to a representative or advocate, or open communication about autism. At the least, findings suggest there is a significant gap between the lived experiences of being autistic at work and managing or overseeing such experiences. Manager apparent agreeability may stem from a level of pride in meeting the relatively low legal thresholds regarding the facilitation of fair work for the autistic workforce, while employee views more readily encapsulate experienced disabling barriers.

Figure 14: Aspects of effective voice and mean rating (employee versus manager)

7.4 Opportunity and autism

As noted in Section 7.3, “opportunity” (2.95 mean) represents one of three dimensions where the autistic workforce is most likely to face disabling barriers to fair work (see Figure 2). Opportunity in this instance is broken down into four aspects (see Figure 15), where two aspects appear to be broadly seen as agreeable by participants and two less so. Indeed, there appear to be two stand-out concerns (see figures 15, 17 and 21) related to this particular dimension of fair work: access to a consistent point of contact, mentor or job coach (3.23 mean); and the offering of reasonable opportunities during the recruitment and selection process (3.27 mean). Both these aspects are necessary for facilitating fair work. In contrast, participants report comparatively better experiences of promotion and progression opportunities (2.98) (also see Figure 23), and even better experiences of being able to access meaningful training and development opportunities (2.59) (also see Figure 19). These positive findings provide some evidence of what is currently facilitating fair work.
In terms of gendered experiences of opportunity at work there are varying degrees of difference reported by autistic women and men as employees. For instance, women are more in agreement on all aspects of opportunity compared to men, with the exception of the offering of reasonable adjustments during the recruitment and selection process (see Figure 16 and 18), adjustments critical to signalling an inclusive working environment for autistic employees from the outset. Such a difference was earlier captured in Figure 3, where it can be seen that women rate opportunity as the third most agreeable dimension of fair work, but for men it is ranked fifth, indicating men experience marginally greater barriers to this aspect of fair work compared to women. Specifically, both women and men report most agreeable experiences of access to meaningful training and development opportunities (2.4/2.8) (also see Figure 20), yet women are less in agreement on the offering of reasonable adjustments during recruitment and selection processes (3.4) (also see Figure 18), while men are least in agreement on access to a consistent point of contact, mentor or job coach (3.4) (also see Figure 22). Overall, there is a mean rating of three or more for men, as opposed to two for women, suggesting in broad terms, opportunity at work for autistic women is better facilitated than it is for autistic men (see Figure 16).
Figure 16: Aspects of opportunity by gender and mean rating (employee)

Figure 17: Employee rating of offering of reasonable adjustment during recruitment and selection
Figure 18: Employee rating of offering of reasonable adjustment during recruitment and selection, by gender

However, across four of the aspects of opportunity there appears to be no statistically significant differences between women and men (see Table 3). Where there is statistically significant difference between women and men it falls under the aspect of access to meaningful training and development opportunities. Importantly, as was the case with effective voice, it is men who report being more in disagreement on access to training and development (see Table 3), although this could be related to men having higher expectations than women over such dimensions to work. Indeed, as noted in Figure 20, men are least likely to agree and most likely to disagree on access to meaningful training and development opportunities. Further consideration of gender differences regarding opportunity (see figures 18, 22 and 24) can be more clearly and precisely observed. For example, women are also most likely to agree and least likely to disagree on consistent point of contact, mentor or job coach (see Figure 22), as well as access to promotion and progression opportunities (see Figure 24). In contrast, men have the strongest disagreeing sentiments on the offering of reasonable adjustments during recruitment and selection (see Figure 18), although it is important to note this aspect of opportunity drew the highest percentage of neutral responses (see Figure 17). This suggests a sizeable minority of participants did not disclose autism, or raise reasonable adjustments, at this key stage of opportunity at work. Such oversights could also relate to barriers engrained in HR practice, e.g., a failure to de-stigmatise disclosure and/or inform of adjustment requirements.
Figure 19: Employee rating of access to training and development opportunities

Figure 20: Employee rating of access to training and development opportunities, by gender
Figure 21: Employee rating of access to point of contact, mentor or job coach

Figure 22: Employee rating of access to point of contact, mentor or job coach, by gender
Broadening the analysis to include manager views of four aspects of opportunity (see Figure 25), there appears to be a clear and significant gap between views of managers and employees. The gap appears largest in relation to the offering of reasonable adjustments during the recruitment and selection process, and least in relation to access to meaningful training and development opportunities. Overall, the findings suggest managers have a substantially more positive view of how they facilitate opportunity for autistic employees compared to what autistic employees report they experience. Put differently, the rhetoric of employer or manager sense of opportunity is likely to be a broad, but key barrier to fair work for autistic employees.
As noted already, autistic employees report more agreeable experiences of “security” than effective voice, opportunity and respect, although “fulfilment” ranks highest (see Figure 2). Indeed, such levels of agreeableness is likely to be related to a high representation of participants from public services. Indeed, both women and men rated opportunity as the second most agreeably experienced dimension of fair work (see Figure 3). More specifically, as noted by Figure 2, security is divided into five aspects, all of which command varying agreeing and disagreeing responses. For example, all participants indicate broad agreement in terms of their employment being secure and with it a minimal risk of job loss (2.29) (also see figures 30 and 31), although a sample disproportionately drawn from professional occupations and/or the public sector is likely to underpin a comparatively good sense of job security. In contrast, the potential for reasonable adjustments to be reviewed on a regular basis by a line manager and/or HR professional, a practice key to facilitating ongoing access to fair work, drew the clearest sense of disagreement (3.48) (also see figures 34 and 35), a level of sentiment rated most disagreeable across all 21 aspects of fair work (see Table 3). Such sentiments indicate how being autistic at work represents an ongoing battle for recognition and adjustments to sustain inclusion/access to fair work.
Three further aspects of security, all of which are crucial facilitators of fair work, drew broadly positive responses, attracting a mean of 2.9 or less (see Figure 26). That said, in terms of gender, the mean for agreeability/disagreeability reached or exceeded 3.0 for women regarding reasonable adjustments to enable best work outcomes (also see figures 32 and 33), and the employment rights of autistic employees are understood and respected by the employer (see figures 27, 36 and 37). As such, these two aspects indicate an important gender difference on key facets of fair work.
Further analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between women and men regarding opportunities surrounding fair work. However, that does not mean differences between working autistic women and men are inconsequential. For example, on aspects related to being paid a wage to reflect experiences, skills and qualifications (see Figure 29), as well as whether reasonable adjustments are in place to allow best work outcomes (see Figure 33), women reported more varying experiences (most strongly agreeing and disagreeing), with men more likely to slightly agree or disagree. The same to an extent could be said of a feeling of security and a minimal risk of losing their job (see Figure 31), in that woman, overall, felt most secure and at comparatively low risk of losing their job, as well as, for a proportion of women, feeling most insecure and at higher risk of job loss. This of course could be linked to the nature of the organisation employing a large majority of the participants. Further, women reported the highest level of agreement in relation to employment rights of autistic employees (see Figure 37), while men clearly reported the highest level of disagreement, indicating in a further sense how it may be tougher in certain instances to be an autistic man than an autistic woman at work, although this could be due to the nature of the work conducted by men and women, i.e., women working in secure jobs such as teaching or policing, with many men working in less secure work such as construction or are self-employed. That said, it is important to note on employment rights of autistic employees, the most common response was neutral (see Figure 36), indicating a level of ambivalence or ignorance of what employment rights relate to autism (i.e., possibly whether autism or neurodivergence can equal disability under the Equality Act (2010)), a situation likely to manifest as a hidden barrier to fair work. In contrast, in relation to reasonable adjustments reviewed on a regular basis with a manager and/or HR professional, men reported both the strongest level of agreement and disagreement with such practice (or lack of practice) (see Figure 35).
Figure 29: Employee rating of being paid a wage reflecting experiences, skills and qualifications, by gender

Figure 30: Employee rating of employment as secure and low risk of losing job
Figure 31: Employee rating of employment as secure and low risk of losing job, by gender

Figure 32: Employee rating of effective reasonable adjustments enabling to do best at work
Figure 33: Employee rating of effective reasonable adjustments enabling to do best at work, by gender

Figure 34: Employee rating of reasonable adjustment being reviewed on a regular basis
Figure 35: Employee rating of reasonable adjustment being reviewed on a regular basis, by gender

Figure 36: Employee rating of employment rights understood by employer
Intriguingly, analysis in this sub-section and in others so far, reveals autistic women broadly tend to express a higher level of agreement (four out of five instances for security, plus four others regarding effective voice and opportunity), and, to a lesser extent, more polarised experiences of fair work. This could relate to how being autistic at work is perceived as challenging for women and men, but marginally worse for men on some dimensions. However, it could be a factor related to gender per se (for example greater proportion of women working in public sector jobs with greater union representation and security), intersecting with the limitations of the research methodology, with only further research likely to bring clarification regarding such matters.

In terms of manager perspectives on security (see Figure 38), there appears to be, compared to effective voice and opportunity, marginally higher levels of agreement on the five aspects captured by the second survey. More broadly, the picture emerging in one sense is of an important gap between what autistic employees perceive to be fair work and that of those responsible for more broadly overseeing such experience of work. Specifically, the gap appears widest in terms of the reviewing of reasonable adjustments, and narrowest when it comes to a sense of job security/minimal risk of losing one’s job. It seems only the qualitative findings are likely to unlock what the above means in terms of facilitating or putting up barriers to fair work.
7.6 **Fulfilment and autism**

In the survey, “fulfilment” ranks the greatest means to facilitate fair work by autistic employees (see Figure 2). Such sentiments are shared by autistic women and men employees (see Figure 3). Indeed, one aspect of fulfilment: allowed opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and have influence; ranked the highest (1.91) across all 21 aspects of fair work (see Table 3). Again, this could be related to key characteristics of the sample, in that it draws disproportionately from professional occupations, public sector employment, as well as larger employers, but it should also be seen as a sign of one particular and important aspect of fair work accessible to the autistic workforce.

Aside from work autonomy, fulfilment is divided into two further aspects (see Figure 39). Closely behind in rating of agreement is that of the job allowing use of existing skills, knowledge and experience (also see figures 41 and 42). However, in contrast to the two aspects discussed so far, is reasonable adjustments in relation to training, learning and developing skills for career advancement, which attracted an overall mean of 3.03 (also see figures 44 and 45), suggesting this particular aspect is a barrier to fair work, and an area where employers need to invest more resources. This indicates a widening picture of pressures stopping autistic people being their autistic selves at work, i.e., adjustments are hard to come by and/or maintain, and are restricted to certain aspects of work. Significantly, this fourth reference to reasonable adjustments (recruitment and selection/opportunity, enable best work/security, reviewed on regular basis/security, and in this sub-section in relation to career development/fulfilment), also represents the fourth occasion reasonable adjustments emerge from the analysis of the data as barriers to fair work (see Table 3).
Figure 39: Aspects of fulfilment by mean rating (employee)

Figure 40: Aspects of fulfilment by gender and mean rating (employee)
In terms of gender, women and men show similar agreement/disagreement levels towards all three aspects of fulfilment (see Figure 40). Further, while there is no statistically significant difference between the experiences of autonomous work and reasonable adjustments related to career advancement (see Table 3), there is a statistically significant difference between how autistic women and men rate their opportunity to make use of their skills, knowledge and experience (see Table 3). Importantly, as appears in earlier instances of statistically significant gender differences (under effective voice and opportunity), as well as one further time below under “respect”, women appear to have better on average outcomes (2.02 women/2.44 men). (There is one instance under respect where the difference suggests better outcomes for men – see Table 3). More specifically, patterns emergent over dimensions of fair work so far appear to fit with patterns apparent with fulfilment. For example, women (compared to men) report stronger agreement related to the job allowing them to make use of skills, knowledge and experience (see Figure 42), as well as opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and have influence (see Figure 44). However, it is important to note the opposite is true of reasonable adjustments to enable to train, learn and develop skills useful for career advancement (see Figure 45). It is also vital to recognise, as per two previous examples (opportunity and security), that a substantial minority provided neutral responses, suggesting a degree of ambivalence and/or ignorance on such matters (see figures 44 and 45), or the potential for further hidden barriers to fair work to emerge and undermine wider good practice. Following the social model of disability, however, such situations could represent employer knowledge or resource gaps, leading to a range of problems for autistic employees accessing fair work.
Figure 42: Employee rating of job allowing use of skills, knowledge and experience, by gender

Figure 43: Employee rating of being allowed to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference
Figure 44: Employee rating of being allowed to work autonomously, solve problems and make a difference, by gender

Figure 45: Employee rating of reasonable adjustment to allow to train, develop and learn skills for career development
Interestingly, under the fulfilment dimension, employee and manager attitudes come the closest to converging across the full spectrum of fair work (see Figure 47). Indeed, both employees and managers indicate high levels of broadly similar agreement regarding opportunities to work autonomously, as well as ability to use skills, knowledge and experience. This represents an important finding in terms of identifying the most commonly reported facilitators to fair work. At the same time, such aspects represent a small part of the wider notion of fair work, and in all probability are likely to be undermined by wider and more numerous barriers. That said, there appears to be a sizeable and important gap on the key matter of reasonable adjustments in relation to training, learning and developing new career-related skills. Such a gap seems to suggest a lack of communication of available adjustments, failure to recognise barriers to access, or failure to provide appropriate adjustments (e.g., inflexibility with format or wider options of training offered).

Figure 46: Employee rating of reasonable adjustment to allow to train, develop and learn skills for career development, by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percent
The fifth dimension of fair work, that of “respect”, represents, overall, one of three dimensions most strongly associated with barriers to fair work for the autistic workforce (see Figure 2). When broken down by gender (see Figure 3), it can be seen how respect represents the third ranking dimension when it comes to barriers to fair work for men (3.03), and despite attracting a slightly higher degree of agreement (2.95), ranks the second highest probability of barriers experienced by women.

When broken down further, more telling variance can be drawn out of the five aspects of respect, generally (see Figure 48) and by gender (see Figure 49). For instance, ranking highest on agreement levels is employer support for well-being, health and safety (2.46), which is expected to a degree given the broader employment-related demographics of the sample. Similarly, feeling confident that support will be received if facing bullying and harassment attracted a relatively good overall mean of 2.74. In contrast and of particular concern, is colleague understanding of needs as an autistic person at work (3.45) – something receiving the most negative response for women across all 21 aspects (3.59) (see Table 3), and in all probability, marks the greatest barrier to fair work for this group of employees. This relates to a range of earlier points based on how difficult it can be to be autistic at work; in this instance it appears at least marginally more difficult to access fair work as an autistic woman than an autistic man. Two further aspects of respect attract means of 3.0 or over (see Figure 48), including provision of employer training on inclusion and diversity that translates into day-to-day policy and practice (3.20), and feeling understood as an autistic person at work (3.31).
In terms of gender, analysis of individual aspects of respect suggests both women and men are most in agreement on well-being, health and safety (2.3 versus 2.7) (see Figure 49). However, there are crucial differences to note when it comes to most disagreement. For instance, women are in most disagreement when it comes to colleague understanding of autism (3.6), with men in most disagreement when it comes to being understood as an autistic person where employed (3.5). Out of the five aspects of respect, there are two where there is a significant statistical difference (see Table 3), one attracting a wider sense of agreement, that of well-being, health and safety (2.29 women/2.73 men), and one attracting a wider sense of disagreement, that of colleague understanding of needs of autistic employee (3.59 women/3.29 men). As such, it is unclear from the analysis why autistic men believe their well-being, health and safety is less of a concern for their employers, but it may be the case that the wider workforce are not only slow to understand the needs of their
autistic colleagues (possibly related to the wider aspect of equality and diversity training translating into policy and practice), they are also slower when it comes to recognising women as autistic, i.e., the wider workforce is less tolerant of, or accustomed to, the behaviour of neurodivergent women.

Extending gender analysis further, some major differences and similarities emerge between aspects of respect. As indicated in the previous section, the pattern of women reporting greater agreement related to experiences of fair work is evident. For example, women more than men report strong and somewhat agreement over confidence of receiving support related to bullying and harassment (see Figure 53) and support regarding well-being, health and safety (see Figure 55), with men more likely to report disagreement than women on both aspects of respect. However, this is not the pattern for the three other aspects of respect. In contrast, when it comes to receiving understanding as an autistic person in the workplace, men occupy the extremes of agreement and disagreement, while women are more likely to be found in the centre ground, reporting moderate experiences (see Figure 51). In the case of colleagues having a good understanding of the needs of an autistic employee, men are more likely than women to variously agree, while women variously disagree (see Figure 59). Finally, with inclusion and diversity policy and practice reflecting employer training, there appears to be substantial and mostly equal disagreement for both women and men (see Figure 57). Overall, these findings specifically illustrate the complexity and nuances of how gender and autism intersect in relation to fair work.

Figure 50: Employee rating of being understood as an autistic person
Figure 51: Employee rating of being understood as an autistic person, by gender

Figure 52: Employee rating of confidence of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment
Figure 53: Employee rating of confidence of receiving support regarding bullying and harassment, by gender

Figure 54: Employee rating of employer supporting well-being, health, and safety
Figure 55: Employee rating of employer supporting well-being and health and safety, by gender

Figure 56: Employee rating of meaningful training on inclusion and diversity translating into policy and practice
Figure 57: Employee rating of meaningful training on inclusion and diversity translating into policy and practice, by gender

Figure 58: Employee rating of colleagues understanding of needs of autistic employee
Respect unsurprisingly represents broad continuity across all dimensions of fair work when it comes to comparing employee and manager views (see Figure 60). Contrasts in such views appear highest when it comes to being understood as an autistic person in the work setting, and converge the most in relation to support for well-being, health and safety. Of note is how the lowest level of agreement across 21 aspects of fair work for managers relates to the respect dimension. Such a difference indicates managers have some degree of awareness that more needs to be done to ensure autistic employees are understood beyond the relatively narrow confines of employee-manager interactions. Indeed, for the most part, employees are likely to spend far more time collaborating with colleagues than with a manager. If such relations are put under strain from a lack of understanding, then it may contribute in equal measures to direct failure to access fair work, as well as undermine wider fair work facilitators, such as opportunities to work autonomously, and benefit from relatively secure employment.
7.8 Barriers and facilitators to fair work for the autistic workforce

An analysis of the qualitative findings led to further emergent and significant insights into the lived experience of fair work for the autistic workforce, specifically in terms of deepening and extending the breadth of key barriers and facilitators. Analysis is largely provided through tables 4 and 5 (below), summaries of key themes to emerge from open comments from the surveys (see Appendix 1), but mostly from the 26 interviews with autistic employees and those who manage or oversee the employment of autistic employees (see tables 1 and 2). The analysis also involves the drafting of a range of case studies, variously exemplifying key aspects of fair work, drawn in this instance from the interviews, and woven into the discussion where applicable below.

Case 1: Jean, Secondary School Teacher (employee)

Jean is an autistic secondary school teacher who is now on a permanent contract. During her training period Jean was often moved from school to school with little notice, which she found unsettling. It was also during her training period that Jean realised she was autistic but because she did not know her colleagues well, she felt she couldn’t be open about her neurodivergence. This caused Jean extra challenges as it meant she did not feel she could ask for adjustments at work. Now that Jean does have a permanent job, where she is open with her colleagues about being autistic, Jean feels a sense of security at work. This sense of security was also a double-edged sword as Jean is also afraid of moving onto a new job for either career progression or to reduce her considerable daily commute. Jean has found line managers to be supportive but not initiative-taking in terms of putting adjustments in place. Jean has now given up on securing adjustments believing that the job’s not going to change.

As a secondary teacher, Jean finds herself in a challenging situation. Firstly, Jean notes how the schools she has worked in have put in place a range of adjustments for autistic and disabled students, but no such adjustments exist for staff. For Jean, being autistic at work is silenced, to the extent she doesn’t know if there are other neurodivergent or disabled staff at the school. There is an equalities group, but this is focused on supporting LGBTQI colleagues, and Jean doesn’t find her needs are discussed here.
Despite the silencing and lack of effective voice, Jean does find the strict structure of the day at school immensely helpful as an autistic teacher. However, the teaching spaces themselves are not autism friendly for example, the spaces are often noisy which triggers Jean’s hypersensitivity to sound. Jean would like to wear noise cancelling headphones, but this is not possible while teaching.

When asked to reflect on the Fair Work Framework and how this could be expanded to include autistic people’s needs at work, Jean would like the framework to include the ability to be her full autistic self at work: ‘being able to be fully present as a professional in my own authentic self and not having to pretend to be someone else so that I can do my job.’

Case 2: Phil, Gardener (employee)

Phil is an autistic self-employed gardener working to help private households to manage their gardens on a home-by-home basis. Although Phil does not have a line manager, he is supported by a workplace counsellor provided by an autism-led civil society organisation. Phil is also unsure of his work status, i.e., whether he is truly self-employed or has separate contracts with each householder he works for. Although Phil is not a trained horticulturalist, he has learned about caring for plants and maintaining gardens through his own research and learning on the job. Formal courses and training are overwhelming for Phil as he struggles to learn facts about plants, and he had similar challenges at school being in formalised learning environments. Phil prefers to learn as he works through exploring how things work, for example, different kinds of lawn mowers. This self-paced and directed learning helps Phil to manage his anxiety around change at work and learning new skills.

The introduction of technology into the workplace has helped Phil. He is able to learn about plants by using his phone and also appreciates being sent instructions via email where there is less ambiguity about what the other person wants. Phil also appreciates being able to organise his own working day so he can manage his workload in ways that work best for him, for example, if a customer gives him a key to the garden shed so he can mow lawns and weed gardens when he is able to. Phil found the formalised employment arranged via the Job Centre to be particularly challenging due to set working hours and social dynamics in the workplace that he didn’t understand. Consequently, Phil prefers to work alone and without a strict 9-5 workday.

For Phil, a fair work job would have predictable working conditions, where caring for others is central to workplace relations and a workplace which does not tolerate banter or jokes at others’ expense. Importantly for Phil, dress codes are a significant barrier at work, and Fair Work would include being able to dress in comfortable clothes without restrictions such as a uniform.

Case 3: Evie, Library Assistant (employee)

Evie is a library assistant who is currently managing a return to working in the library after remote and then hybrid working during the pandemic. The lockdowns affected Evie’s mental health negatively as she felt poorly understood and disliked by her colleagues and wider networks. Seeking out mental health support led to Evie undertaking counselling, which ultimately resulted in an informal diagnosis of autism. Evie did eventually share her autism diagnosis with a trusted colleague who said they had suspected for some time that Evie is autistic. Despite this, Evie is reluctant to share her diagnosis more widely as she is relatively new to her job and is unsure of how her new colleagues will react. Consequently, Evie is also reluctant to ask for workplace adjustments as she feels picked on at work and doesn’t want to make everything about her. Evie has some awareness of the Fair Work Framework, but also feels that there are many policies which frequently change, and she struggles to keep up with these developments.

Despite Evie being on a permanent contract, she does not feel she has job security due to considerable staff shortages which require staff to be moved around to different sites where she doesn’t know people. This uncertainty causes Evie considerable distress, although managers do make some effort not to place Evie in libraries where she expresses discomfort. This makes Evie feel guilty as she does know her managers are trying to accommodate her and is worried that she does not appreciate these efforts enough. Evie knows library managers are over-worked and are trying to balance multiple priorities during a time of cuts to funding and staff numbers.
Even though Evie does face challenges at work, she also finds meaning in her work, particularly when working with children and supporting their literacy development. Sadly, these literacy groups move around libraries in Scotland and this disruption and uncertainty prevented Evie from continuing this enjoyable work. Evie requested that she be allowed to stay on one site, but a senior manager centrally refused this request with no explanation.

The return to working in libraries has caused Evie and her other colleagues to reflect on the inaccessibility of their workspaces, for example, poor kitchen facilities, noise and lack of quiet spaces. However, Evie notes that when a disabled colleague did ask for an adjustment to their work, they were immediately pushed into capability procedures and declared unfit for work, rather than an adjustment being put in place [in this case requesting a repair to a broken lift].

Evie would like the Fair Work Framework to reflect the specific needs of autistic people: ‘I would like to say something like, where we’re listened to and it’s a two-way process...If I ask for something to be done, and they say no, I would like an explanation as to why’.

The findings from the interviews are consistent in a range of ways with the findings from the surveys. For instance, the qualitative findings indicate work for the autistic workforce to be a rich and complex mixture of fairness and unfairness. Indeed, unlike the quantitative findings, tables 4 and 5 provide rich and summarised details of the multiple barriers and facilitators autistic employees face at work. A second broad characteristic of both sets of data is that there is clearly not a common experience of work, whether good or bad. This further adds to the case for a common approach to employment, that is, a Fair Work Framework inclusive of autism, acting as a means to raise and provide consistency in practice. The findings in this instance provide little evidence of broad, concerted attempts by employers to invest in specialised HR policy and practice relating to autism. Importantly, while and as noted in earlier sections, less than half of the autistic participants see themselves as disabled, the evidence presented in Table 4 strongly suggests autistic employees are disabled to some degree by their experiences of work. That said, while disabling barriers must be removed or heavily mitigated against, subsequent developments to the Fair Work Framework should aim to be about building organisational views of autism as difference, rather than disability. What the qualitative findings seem to be telling us differently is what such disabling forces look like, both in terms of character, but also in terms of how they appear to permeate every aspect of everyday HR and general management practice. Such findings also tell us how barriers inhibit attempts to see autism as difference as opposed to disability. In practice, this means prevailing disabling barriers are more likely to widely stifle almost every attempts to build a culture of inclusion and acceptance of difference.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension to Fair Work Framework</th>
<th>Organisational barrier</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Effective voice**             | • Lack of trust in employment relationships, i.e., employee-manager, employee-senior management, employee-HR professional  
• One-way, inflexible and short-notice communications  
• Absence of or ineffective independent staff representation  
• Poor communication on disclosure and reasonable adjustments  
• Bureaucratic decision-making, e.g., delayed or outsourced procurement processes, delays or over-ruling of line manager decisions and recommendations |
| **Opportunity**                 | • Inflexible flexibility requirements, e.g., short notice shift patterns, high-levels of short notice labour mobility  
• Lack of structure to job, details of job, accurate and up-to-date job description, hidden dimensions to jobs  
• Exclusionary delivery of training, e.g., short lead times, group-based, self-directed  
• Rigid organisational structures and hierarchies, i.e., slows or stops changes required for inclusion  
• Discriminatory recruitment and selection policy and procedures, e.g., leads to literal interpretation of candidate requirements, selection practices disabling  
• Inflexible working environments, e.g., busy open plan offices, inflexible lighting and heating systems, food preparation and dining facilities back on to working spaces  
• Equality and inclusion practices reactionary, legal minimum, compliancy-orientated, partial or not embedded into wider organisational strategy, e.g., performance management, fail to meaningfully recognise intersectionality  
• Conflicting attitudes and priorities of layers of management, e.g., line manager agrees adjustment and senior manager questions or ignores recommendation, unclear obligations/responsibilities of line managers and HR professionals, inconsistent practices across units in large organisations |
| **Security**                    | • Manifold problems with reasonable adjustments, e.g., recruitment and selection, access to training, lack of alternative forms of communication, limited or no explanation for refusing adjustments  
• Discriminatory assessment of performance, e.g., victimised for requesting adjustments, over-weighting of peripheral or optional aspects of jobs, impaired performance due to inflexible working environments  
• Lack of expertise on autism, expertise on autism dated and medical model orientated  
• Unplanned or poorly planned transition to new line manager |
| **Fulfilment**                  | • Micro-management and/or low or no levels of job autonomy  
• One-size-fits-all teamworking practices, e.g., teamwork exclusionary in terms of large numbers, lack of cohesion, unclear role allocation  
• Poorly planned and organised meetings, e.g., no or minimal advance agenda, lack of meeting etiquette, no follow-up summary and clear action points  
• Minimal or no role models, especially if autistic women in key roles |
| **Respect**                     | • Misunderstanding or intolerance of autistic behaviour/lack of awareness training  
• “Lip service” treatment of equalities and inclusion, e.g., line manager, senior manager, HR professional  
• Stigma related to current or past employment  
• Exclusionary sub-cultures, e.g., “banter”, “office politics”, “everyday ableism”, varying corporate or professional nomenclature, inconsistencies across areas of organisation  
• Lack of formal policy and practice on autism in smaller organisations, i.e., leads to inconsistencies, failure to at least meet minimum legal requirements, puts onus on employee to act and know what is best for them  
• Establishing clear and consistent parameters around difference and individualism, conflicting policies on difference and individualism, e.g., dress code versus equalities  
• Lack or poor systems designed to capture and share appropriately information regarding autistic employees  
• Policy and practice lack recognition of intersectionality, e.g., women spend longer not knowing they are autistic, do not conform to (male) stereotypes |

Table 4: Organisational barriers to fair work for the autistic workforce

When considering effective voice (e.g., see cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10 and 12) the barriers identified provide a range of evidence to suggest the employment-related interests of the
Autistic workforce are subordinated to a range of direct and indirect organisational forces and priorities. As such, autistic employee interests appear commonly and widely degraded by a range of wider management practice and attitudes. In the case of opportunity (see cases 4, 5, 7 and 8), the barriers reflecting this particular dimension to fair work seem certain to lead to a range of difficulties for autistic employees both accessing and progressing at work. It is reasonable to suggest experiences of a fraction of what is noted under opportunity in Table 4 is in high probability likely to lead to substantial problems getting into and staying in work, as well as raising the prospects for autistic employees being disengaged, experiencing poor well-being, or held back in the development of skills and career progression. Similar issues arise in terms of stability, where the findings point strongly towards a lack of stability in employment (see cases 1, 3 and 5). Notably, autistic employees appear extensively disadvantaged by manager attitudes towards autism. In wider terms of what is meant by fair work under the Fair Work Framework, autistic employees are in all probability likely to face sizeable problems with job satisfaction (see cases 1, 3 and 5). The findings suggest autistic employees should either find a way to fit in, or pay the consequences through lack of career development or progression, or become demoralised by practices and work environments typically informed by neurotypical norms and values. As such, it is no surprise to see autistic employees subject to an entire range of exclusionary practices (see cases 2 and 3), including undignified treatment, lack of social support and mistrusting relationships. The barriers in this instance also relate in particular to security, as common, widespread and ongoing disrespect is likely to undermine the relatively good levels of job protection reported by wider study participants. Further, while Table 4 makes only marginal reference to how gender intersects with autism, there are some important considerations in terms of barriers related to gender. For example, women autistic employees are likely to face further and unique barriers based on stigma, manager and colleague ignorance, and a sense of isolation. Indeed, such findings link in with survey findings where women reported high levels of disagreeability when it came to colleagues understanding the needs of autistic employees (see Table 3).

Case 4: Jamie, HR Director (manager)

Jamie is a Director of Human Resources for a large multinational organisation with its HQ in Scotland. Jamie manages a team of around 50 people. Jamie is aware of the Fair Work Framework and builds this into policies within his organisation, although reflects that this can be challenging in a multinational context where there are different national legislative frameworks. Through his work, Jamie has noticed that existing autistic employees are more likely to be able to access adjustments at work because they have an established relationship, and they are a known asset to the employer. In contrast a new applicant does not have that leverage to be able to request adjustments.

In his capacity as HR director, Jamie recognises that recruitment and selection processes can be unintentionally discriminatory against neurodivergent people, including autistic applicants. Jamie has spent time talking to autistic applicants to understand their experiences and challenges when applying for jobs in his organisation. One aspect which Jamie has found can be helpful for autistic candidates is for the interview questions to be sent in advance to all candidates, but also has reservations regarding whether this could advantage some candidates. Jamie also reflects on interviewing for senior positions in organisations where the interview panels may consist of 6 or 7 people and how this may be intimidating or off-putting for autistic people.

Jamie believes that a fair workplace allows everyone to be themselves at work (as much as they want to be), have fun, fulfill their potential while building a sense of community and shared purpose. Importantly, Jamie feels that a fair workplace also includes accountability for when managers do not enact fair work practices. Key, says Jamie, is to listen to the individual and to create a working culture where the individual can speak up about what they need. Jamie outlines the many ways staff can be heard at his place of work, including individual and collective forms of representation. For Jamie, diversity in all its forms, should be celebrated, moving away from medicalising language of disorder or diagnosis.
Case 5: Callum, Health and Safety Manager (employee)

Callum is a senior manager in a higher education institute managing a team of technical staff, which has experienced considerable insecurity due to successive rounds of voluntary severance, which he has found upsetting. Callum was diagnosed as autistic later on in life and is also a father to three autistic sons. Callum wasn’t aware of the Fair Work Framework, but he reflects that although there is support in school for autistic children, this drops off when an autistic person enters the workplace. As a senior member of staff, Callum feels he can be open about his workplace needs, for example, control of lighting and sound and is trying to ensure he weaves neurodiversity into his work managing and supporting other colleagues. However, Callum also describes himself as ‘high disguising’ as he is able to hide his autistic traits at work when he feels it is required. Callum has felt limited in his career, despite his success, due to the expectations placed on him and others to engage in formalised tasks which are not inclusive for autistic people. One example Callum identifies is giving presentations at work where Callum struggles to maintain eye contact with audience members, while speaking at a pace which the audience may not be able to keep up with. Callum reflects that promotion and progression criteria should be analysed to ensure they do not perpetuate neurotypical working patterns and expectations.

As a manager, Callum is also aware of the limitation of traditional recruitment and selection methods for new staff, specifically interviews. For Callum, his interview experiences have focused on his technical skills where he feels confident talking at length about his understanding. However, Callum reflects that the other aspects of interviews, e.g., soft skills, can be particularly challenging for autistic people.

When asked to reflect on how the Fair Work Framework could be adapted to ensure it reflects the needs of autistic people, Callum draws a comparison to the use of male bodied crash test dummies in car safety testing, arguing that this meant the impact of crashes on female bodied people has been ignored. Similarly, Callum argues that what constitutes fair work is based around the needs of neurotypical people, with neurodivergent people’s needs excluded.

Case 6: Alistair, Software Developer (employee)

Alistair is a software developer who works in one of four small teams employed by an IT company. He believes he and all colleagues benefit from a culture of respect where he is employed. Where Alistair works all colleagues, including himself and other employees he believes are autistic, are encouraged to speak in an open, honest and blunt manner. He believes, as a result of such a culture, autistic employees are totally accepted in how they come across. Having been employed by the IT company for some time, he is yet to see any ‘negative talk’ about autistic employees, and in personal terms, it has been a ‘positive’ experience for him.

Case 7: Shona, Regional Director (manager)

Shona is a regional director of an organisation that specialises in supporting IT organisations recruit autistic employees. Shona’s organisation not only advises IT organisations, but also as an employer itself, adheres to what they believe to be good practice in making sure autistic employees are given maximum opportunity to succeed in new jobs. This best practice begins with putting in place adjustments through the entire recruitment and selection stages of employment. Best practice starts at the recruitment stage where recruiters are encouraged to reduce the job description down to about three to four key points, as it is often the case autistic candidates deselect themselves if they see a list of 20 bullet points and they cannot do all 20. At the selection stage, such good practice includes sending prospective candidates photographs of the reception area, details of who will be on the interview panel, including their job titles and why they are on the panel. Further adjustments include making sure all areas are not likely to cause sensory problems, such as avoiding having the interview near a cafeteria or staff kitchen, making sure the light can be adjusted, requesting interviewers do not wear bold or brightly coloured clothes, such as psychedelic designs. In more specific terms in relation to selection, interview questions are sent out in advance and care is taken to ask one at a time, allowing candidates to process and make sense of the questions.
As can be seen in Table 5, the lived experience of autism and work has a positive side. Indeed, an analysis of the qualitative findings revealed a wide-range of facilitators, and indicating in this instance many employers are getting autism inclusion increasingly right, almost certainly based on strengthened investment and developing expertise on autism at work. Cases 11 and 13, based on hybrid and flexible working, reveal how employers can arrange work that allow autistic employees to demonstrate their value at work. However, the downside to such a trend is that the findings taken as a whole suggest employers are also undermining and effectively cancelling out to a point such important and increasingly emergent efforts. Specifically, the qualitative findings provide evidence to suggest the autistic workforce benefits from managers partnering with a range of wider stakeholders, such as trade unions, civil society organisations and autism consultants, as well as a range of health professionals, to improve the chances of fair work availability to the autistic workforce (see cases 2 and 4). There is also evidence, albeit in an implicit form, of autism or neurodiversity policies, and such policies leading to practice benefiting autistic employees. Further, there is evidence presented in Table 5 pointing towards increasing confidence of managers in managing autism in the workplace. However, it appears that in reality such practice is either not particularly widespread, over-estimated (as noted by survey findings) or that it is often undermined by a range of more pressing and conventional management and HR imperatives.

A range of key facilitators can be associated with effective voice. Indeed, the examples highlighted by Table 5 provide a rich account of how the interests of the autistic workforce can be facilitated through a range of common and widely available established voice mechanisms (see cases 2 and 4), as well as how effective voice can also emerge from more recent voice-related innovations, such as via email systems or social media platforms. When it comes to getting into and succeeding at work (see also Case 6 based on a culture of speaking openly), a particular example of opportunity stands out when consulting Table 5, that of reforming the entire talent management and employee resourcing process in organisations (see Case 7). Importantly, such processes need not be reformed for the benefit of one, albeit historically and greatly disadvantaged, group of employees. That is to say, all prospective and current employees are likely to attain better access to, and achieve more progress at work, because of more carefully and thought through resourcing practices. As per the quantitative findings, the qualitative findings also hinge very much on manager attitudes, policy and practice related to reasonable adjustments, as well as more implicitly in terms of the potency, or perhaps lack of potency, regarding legislation surrounding equalities. However, as per Case 8, a part of being secure in a job can be obtained via an “employee passport”, a means to catalogue key adjustments for autistic employees, particularly useful when an employee changes line manager. Furthermore, as for opportunity above, all employees are likely to benefit from consideration of what leads to a greater sense of engagement with the organisation and a lowering of premature employee turnover, demonstrated in particular by Case 9, an example of how an autistic employee benefitted from flexible training opportunities. There are bound to be further good examples beyond this research of how fair work can be achieved for the autistic workforce, plus demonstrating how practices from wider dimensions to fair work may also indirectly lead to more satisfied and fulfilled employees. However, as is increasingly obvious from considering the full range of facilitators for autism and employment, the wider workforce would almost certainly appreciate most fulfilment-related facilitators, not least in terms of more consideration of crafting jobs to suit individual strengths, whether based on soft or technical skills, behavioural traits, or simply personal preferences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension to Fair Work Framework</th>
<th>Organisational facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Effective voice**              | • Regular, open, honest and unambiguous discussions with line manager and wider team  
• Small teams to allow focus on individuals, clearer roles, accessible, structured and manageable meetings  
• Access and support from a trade union representative or autism ally, e.g., help negotiate adjustments, safe working environments, flexible and predictable working patterns, find common ground between neurotypical and neurodivergent workforce, autism part of collective bargaining  
• Autism or wider neurodiversity staff forum/network (not disability), e.g., for mutual support, for organisational consultation, feed into organisational newsletters  
• Access to progressive autism civil society organisation or consultants, e.g., help negotiate adjustments, flexible and predictable working patterns, job coaching, advise and train line managers and HR professionals  
• Access to health professional, e.g., provide guidance on workplace adjustments  
• Access and support from a trade union representative or autism ally, e.g., help negotiate adjustments, safe working environments, flexible and predictable working patterns, find common ground between neurotypical and neurodivergent workforce, autism part of collective bargaining  
• Access to health professional, e.g., provide guidance on workplace adjustments  
• Asynchronous communications, e.g., email, social media platforms, or multiple methods as default |
| **Opportunity**                  | • Reform full talent management employee resourcing process, e.g., build in adjustments and clarity in job design, job description, recruitment and selection methods, induction, succession planning  
• Regular access to a good, trained and supportive line manager – keeps record of meetings, follow-up summary emails, periodic check-ins, ongoing feedback to employee, builds trust |
| **Security**                     | • Develop policy and practice on reasonable adjustments, e.g., hybrid working, control over own working space, providing advance notification of work patterns and structure of working day, noise cancellation and light regulation, flexible working, quick consideration of adjustments, minimise occupancy of open plan offices, adjustment checklists  
• Have a dedicated individual or team for adjustments  
• Make autism part of sustainable and responsible HRM strategy |
| **Fulfilment**                   | • Promote a range of autistic role models, accounting for roles and intersecting identities  
• Prioritisation for own and adjustable workspaces  
• Use job design to allow to play to strengths and minimise requirements for adjustments  
• Unquestioned time off for medical and health-related appointments, support from a staff representative or external consultant |
| **Respect**                      | • Develop autism or neurodiversity strategy (not disability) with associated policy and practice, e.g., emphasise difference over disability, focus on the positives, provide role model examples, encourage awareness and acceptance and recognition of difference, training for managers, colleagues and teams, provide access to advanced training on autism inclusion, centralise and keep data on autism, go above legal minimum requirements, such as anticipate autistic and neurodivergent workforce  
• Strategy co-designed with autistic or neurodivergent workforce, allowing for marginal and intersecting identities |

Table 5: Organisational facilitators of fair work for the autistic workforce
**Case 8: Douglas, Administrative Assistant (employee)**

Douglas works for NHS Scotland in a general administrative capacity. Recently his employer has taken to using “employee passports”, sometimes more generally referred to as “disability passports”, or a document completed by an employee based on detailing their health and what adjustments should be put in place to assist them. He believes such an initiative represents a layer of job security, as it is the basis of monthly conversations with his line manager and is meant to be formally reviewed on an annual basis. The passport contains details of what reasonable adjustments he requires, explaining in his case autism and what that means for Douglas in his job role. Importantly, having a simple and accessible document based on autism and his job role, as Douglas points out, means ‘… you don’t have to keep explaining yourself’. The document, as such, lowers the prospect of stigma, as well as smooths the transition to being managed by a different line manager should this be required, both critical aspects of employee retention and engagement.

**Case 9: Oliver, Retail Assistant (employee)**

Oliver is a retail assistant and employed by a large high street chain retailer. Oliver’s work is perhaps a little more specialised than some forms of retail work, so it requires regular training sessions. In previous jobs training was quite stressful as it was usually announced at short notice, with training expected to be done outside regular shift patterns. Where Oliver currently works the approach is quite different, but different in way for all staff, and not as a reasonable adjustment. For example, when training is required, all staff are given a monthly allowance to train and time off to do the training, all training details are announced often a month or more in advance with options when to train often available. The key issue is that Oliver believes the training is more fulfilling, and therefore more likely to be incorporated into daily activities, when there is time to prepare in a range of ways to do something different to his regular day-to-day duties.

**Case 10: Iona, Legal Support (employee)**

Iona works for the Scottish Government, providing legal support in one of her employer’s many departments. After a recent diagnosis of autism she actively sought information and advice on how to get adjustments put in place. In doing so she believes the process to attain adjustments where she works is based on respect for individuals. In more detail, Iona viewed the process as a ‘helpful’ and ‘positive’ experience. For instance, she could self-refer to the Workplace Adjustments Team, and even speak to someone in that team who has experience of neurodiversity. A key outcome of this referral was recommendation of mind-mapping software. Added to this, Iona believed the respect is extended by the fact her line manager is open to discussing autism and what that means at work. Further, Iona’s line manager is keen to encourage the wider team to be more ‘neurodiverse aware’ and how ‘small things’ can make a big difference in such situations. Indeed, Iona believes, in a career spanning around thirty years, her current employer is the most ‘autism-friendly’ she has experienced. She sums such a culture up as, ‘… no one bats an eyelid if you do something a little bit out of the ordinary’.
Case 11: Eilidh, Trainee Actuary Consultant (employee)

Eilidh is a trainee actuary consultant who collaborates with a different manager depending on which client she is working for. Eilidh finds work stressful, particularly when it comes to attending big meetings and how wearing headphones in the office for long periods gives rise to colleagues and managers viewing such staff as unapproachable. The dress code in the office is also quite strict and staff often engage in “chit-chat”, but Eilidh finds both to be unwelcome distractions and undermine a job she enjoys. What makes an important difference to Eilidh’s working life is, meetings permitting, hybrid working, including an opportunity to “work from home” on a regular basis. Key to why Eilidh appreciates hybrid working is how such an approach allows greater autonomy in how she does her work. For instance, Eilidh can start earlier and finish earlier than if she was in the office. More importantly, such an approach allows Eilidh to have some control over her work and working day. Hybrid working in this sense is less to do with working from home from time to time, and more about balancing out the stresses associated with working in the office and a form of self-directed adjustments to working practices.

Case 12: Steven, Hire-car Maintenance (employee)

Steven works for a busy car hire company. He is employed behind the scenes in making sure the fleet of cars is properly maintained and matches customer demand. Even though Steven is largely “hands off” in terms of the immediate demands and customer-facing parts of the business, he is expected to attend a range of team meetings, meetings he struggles to get the most out of. Unsure of how his manager would respond, Steven approached his line manager to see if he would be willing to provide some extra support in the one area of his job he struggles with. Steven’s manager agreed to his request to follow-up after meetings and provide summary points, as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions on anything arising from such meetings. Steven believes his manager has good people skills, but also lets his staff make small but important adjustments to their day-to-day jobs. For example, pick shifts that help keep a steady and predictable routine, and wear ear and eye protection at times when it is unnecessary.

Case 13: Annabel, Charity Worker (employee)

Annabel works part-time for a small charity. The charity is largely government funded and provides mental health services for children. Annabel is autistic but also has a further health condition that constitutes disability under the Equality Act (2010). When combined, Annabel believes they constitute a ‘double whammy’, as she has to contend with physical health issues, requiring a certain diet, at the same time as wrestling with how her ‘mind works’. What helps Annabel remained engaged and focused on her jobs is flexible working, part of which involves part-time employment. Further key dimensions to flexible working, or a form of adjustment, is being allowed to do certain tasks before lunch (largely administration and phone calls), and other tasks, such as working directly and having contact with children in the afternoon. Importantly, the working day is divided up by a three-hour break, effectively a form of split shifts, a break allowing Annabel to eat at a pace she feels comfortable with, and rest and recoup energy, so as allow her to work effectively in the afternoon. By breaking up working days, Annabel feels work is both manageable and successful.

The means to facilitate dignified treatment is also outlined in Table 5. Of significance, especially as such examples were drawn from education work-related settings, is going beyond legal minimum requirements regarding autism, and levelling up law-based obligations between staff and students. Indeed, cases 6 and 10 demonstrate how respect at work can be achieved via, in one instance via a culture of being able to speak briefly and be oneself, to another based on a team dedicated to managing reasonable adjustments in the workplace. With this dimension of fair work there are links to effective voice, in that to facilitate such treatment, how better than to do so via consulting the workforce on the policies and practices are aimed at supporting them. Similar to the case of barriers, specific gender-related examples of facilitators were not in abundance, but what was captured represents an important consideration for a Fair Work Framework for autism. In this instance, it makes sense to develop autism strategy, policy and practice with meaningful
input of the autistic workforce, plus their advocates, and to make it truly inclusive, the voices of other marginal groups such as women also need to be captured.

7.9 Conclusions

The purpose of this section of the report is to address the first three of four research questions set out at the beginning of this section (7.1). What can be broadly drawn from the findings on the basis of these key questions is as follows:

- Autism is widely considered by employers, but the outcome from their initiatives is far from consistent, with widely and consistently applied “good” practice regarding fair work and autism rare.
- Autistic working people identify strongly with the notion of neurodivergence, although disability discrimination is a distinct reality of their experiences and attempts to access fair work.
- What it means to be autistic/neurodivergent at work is not universally understood by key and immediate stakeholders to fair work.
- Managers rate their ability to manage autism consistently and significantly higher than autistic working people experience such situations. For example, manager rating of HR policy and practice regarding autism appears heavily informed by compliance with equality legislation (e.g., Equality Act (2010)), which may explain why managers have far more positive views of autistic employees accessing fair work, i.e., minimal legal compliance is equated with “good” practice. More generally, the difference appears based on one party largely crafting and overseeing such experience on a unilateral basis, while the other party directly experiences it. It seems reasonable to suggest the views of those experiencing attempts to provide fair work should be considered over those who are neurotypical and do not have to experience the conditions they craft.
- Employer and HR practice appears to have come a long way in recent times, but it has not come far enough. Just as importantly, employers and HR professionals do not appear to have considered how such advances appear commonly undermined, in conflict with, and in some cases, brought into disrepute, by wider business imperatives and HR policy and practice. For example, equalities, and in this case autism, appears of secondary concern when set in a wider context of HR policy, practice and strategy, e.g., the need to recruit trumps the need to recruit in a fair, equitable and transparent manner; the need to train and develop the workforce rarely or barely factors in differences in how employees learn or experience the learning and development process.
- Employers may well have begun to develop and introduce autism/neurodiversity policy, practice and strategy, but it equally seems the case that autistic employees are broadly unaware of such commitments, or yet to see such initiatives having any meaningful impact on their lived experience of fair work.
- The lived experience of being autistic at work is best and broadly described as “mixed”, suggesting at least for a sizeable majority of the autistic workforce, working conditions when averaged out across all dimensions of the Fair Work Framework are just about tolerable.
- Autistic employees do not have a common experience of work, suggesting there is a clear need to generate a broad framework applicable to all working contexts and environments.
- Autistic men and women experience work broadly the same, but there are important and, in some cases, significant differences, suggesting more should be done to reflect intersectionality in closing the fair work and autism employment gap.
- Employers fare well in a range of dimensions to fair work (e.g., fulfilment and aspects of security), but it appears less of a commitment to other aspects of the Fair Work Framework are undermining the quality of work and job security employers have made efforts to provide.
• Access to reasonable adjustments at all stages of fair work appears to be particularly problematic and a central issue. This especially includes periodical reviews of whether existing adjustments remain in place, relevant or effective.

• Access to effective voice ranks highly in terms of being a broad barrier to fair work, especially given the sample draws disproportionately from situations where trade unions are recognised. This suggests an opportunity for collective bargaining to be widened to include autism and neurodiversity.

• Autism, increasingly and more widely seen as difference, is treated in the workplace as disability, leading to autistic employees facing high levels of a distinct form of stigma, associated with non-disclosure, but more importantly, such employees find it generally impossible to be their autistic selves at work. In such situations this also leads to “disguising” or “masking”, with behaviour of this kind resulting in excessive exhaustion by breaktime or at the end of the working day, or a need to find “hiding places” when at work, which all contribute to reinforcing negative and harmful and inaccurate stereotypes of autism. The data also suggests both men and women experience important differences in the extent to which colleagues understand autistic traits in the workplace.

• Autistic employees appear to broadly benefit from a single, reliable and trustworthy point of contact, typically a line manager, but in some instances supplemented or superseded by a staff representative, or external counsellor or consultant. The findings suggest more could be done to make such initiatives a universal reality and embed such practice in an autism/neurodiversity policy or strategy.

• Employers could make a wide-range of changes to their general management and more specific HR policies and strategies to reflect autism, but in many cases, broader reform of such policies and practices are likely to deliver important, sustainable and positive outcomes for all employees. If this is the case, it seems only minor reforms will be needed to specifically facilitate access to fair work for the autistic workforce.

• The high levels of job autonomy and use of employee skills afforded by employers, experiences rated highly by autistic employees, are on reflection too narrowly defined, reflecting far more on employer interests over that of employees. This suggests more can be done to extend autonomy and use of skills so that employees themselves can enact adjustments, especially related to preference for a particular method of communication and minor changes to the working environment to reflect sensory differences. Such an approach appears to work well in broader terms as many employee participants agree employers are considerate when it comes to promoting well-being, health and safety, as well as fighting against bullying and harassment.

• The burden of accessing fair work, and closing the fair work gap, falls disproportionately on individual autistic employees and a range of allies that employers acknowledge inconsistently or fail to recognise (e.g., trade unions, civil society organisations and consultants, health professionals). As such, without progressive reform of HR policy, practice and strategy towards fair work and autism, certainly requiring the tightening of equalities legislation, the burden will continue to be placed on a range of non-employer stakeholders to fair work, stakeholders who currently struggle to influence the fair work agenda.

In the next and last section, a range of recommendations and action points are set out in advancing the Fair Work Framework to reflect the interests and historically poor working experiences of the autistic workforce, including more specific recommendations and action points aimed at key stakeholders to fair work in Scotland.
8 Recommendations and action points

8.1 Introduction

This final section addresses the fourth and main research question, that of: How can the Fair Work Framework be advanced to be more inclusive of the autistic workforce? Recommendations and action points are set out in accordance with the key stakeholders to the Fair Work Framework as it stands, as well as stakeholders more specific to building fair work for the autistic workforce – i.e., governments, employers (including HR and occupational health professionals), trade unions, civil society organisations. Recommendations and action points from this research are also captured by figures 61 (below) and 62 (overleaf), which represent how the Fair Work Framework could be advanced to reflect inclusion, including in this instance autism and gender, but also how such transformations can be put into place in the work organisation. First, Figure 61 indicates how key findings help steer the Fair Work Framework towards transforming the work setting to reflect the autistic workforce, but specifically in terms of recognising a need to orientate fair work in this instance includes regular and meaningful consultation of the autistic workforce, representatives and specialists, adopting the social model of disability, taking a multi-stakeholder approach, and recognising gender and other marginalised and intersecting identities as a critical facet of autism and employment.

![Figure 61: An intersectional Fair Work Framework for inclusion (adapted from Fair Work Convention, 2016, p. 7)](image-url)

In the second figure of the section (Figure 62), the specifics on what processes of fair work for the autistic workforce should look like, reflecting the typical structures and hierarchy of contemporary organisations, as well as the stakeholder characteristics of the Fair Work Framework. Importantly, Figure 62 highlights how such key stakeholders interact in working towards, implementing and monitoring the fair work for the autistic workforce outlined in Figure 61.
As noted by Figure 62, it is critical to note how key stakeholders come together, in pluralistic formation, to create and maintain fair work around co-creation practice grounded in lived experience of autism and employment.

Figure 62: Interactions and key stakeholders to fair work inclusion

8.2 Recommendations and action points for governments

There are wide-ranging implications to arise from the findings related to the UK government – e.g., strengthen the Equality Act (2010) (including to reflect multiple protected characteristics and intersectionality, plus employers have to anticipate protected characteristics), have more definitive plan/strategy for fair or good work across the UK, recognise devolved governments are limited because employment law is not a devolved matter, repeal and reform union laws, grant more power of recognition by employers and better fund civil society organisations, promote social model of disability, reform Autism strategy and legislation, reinstate Union Modernisation Fund.

For the Scottish government: commission more research on fair work, recognising the uniquely gendered experiences of both employment and neurodiversity. The findings suggest that lack of awareness and understanding of the Fair Work Framework could be wider spread. We therefore recommend the Scottish Government consider wider dissemination of the Fair Work Framework, including how autistic people may experience employment. Although the current research retains a focus on autism, there are other “conditions” which fall under the banner of neurodiversity which would warrant further investigation. While employment law remains reserved, the Scottish Government should explore possibilities for working with the UK Government to strengthen equalities legislation which would set out specific protections for autistic employees. In addition, the Scottish Government should consider ways it can enforce fair work, for example through procurement routes, and monitoring and reporting.

The data presented here has suggested the Fair Work Framework should be revised to explicitly incorporate fair work for autistic people. We suggest advancing the fair work framework to include the ability to be authentically oneself at work (see Figure 61) which emerges as an area of importance for both autistic women and men. We also urge the Scottish Government to recognise intersectionality across the Fair Work Dimensions, making explicit the gendered and neurotypical assumptions which underpin how work is often organised. For example, the data shows how distressing short notice moves to different work sites can be for autistic employees (see Case 1 and Case 3) and that autistic women may feel more comfortable seeking workplace adjustments than men.
We recognise that much of our sample works in large public and private sector organisations. Smaller employers may lack the resources to implement recommendations. Accordingly, we suggest the Scottish Government provide tailored support for small to medium sized enterprises and micro-organisations to enable them to enact the Fair Work Framework.

The Scottish Government is also uniquely placed to coordinate efforts by civil society organisations, education, trade unions and employers to leverage the expertise across these organisations. Enabling this cross-organisation working would support employers to implement policies which meet the needs of autistic employees. We also suggest that the Scottish Government is in a position to support the upskilling of wider health services who would support autistic people, especially related to the social model of disability, for example occupational health professionals and general practitioners.

8.3 Recommendations and action points for employers, HR and occupational health professionals

We recognise the vast majority of employers are unlikely to be experts in autism, therefore suggesting employers and HR professionals work closely with organisations who do have relevant expertise, including lived experience. Drawing on wider expert resources may be of particular benefit to small organisations who do not have the internal resources such as a HR department, or occupational health. The data clearly shows there is no one “experience of autism and employment”, and we strongly recommend that employers recognise the diversity of experiences of autistic people and support managers to move away from stereotypes of how autism may present in the workplace and the nature of adjustments which may be beneficial.

Employers would benefit from developing autism-specific policies regarding recruitment and selection, development opportunities, reasonable adjustments and management training. Collaborating with experts, such policies should recognise how gender and autism may intersect in complex and subtle ways. The data shows sharp contrasts between the perspectives of employees and employers in the provision and uptake of equalities policies, including those relating to supporting autistic employees. Accordingly, we suggest employers undertake regular reviews of how existing policies are perceived and adopted by different staff groups.

While workplace adjustments can support autistic employees to access and remain in work, it is essential these adjustments are subject to a meaningful review process. The data presented here suggests employees may not feel comfortable in seeking adjustments, or requesting changes to existing agreed adjustments. Managers could overcome this reticence, proactively collaborating with autistic employees to develop tailored suites of adjustments which are reviewed regularly.

We also suggest employers undertake assessments of changes to working practices, the organisation and architecture of work to proactively understand how such changes may affect autistic employees, thus in a manner, avoid the need for many reasonable adjustments further down the line. Such assessments may take the form of equality impact assessments, or discussing openly with autistic employees the planned changes. The changing nature of work, for example, the expectation of increased mobility of employees to work across multiple sites and hybrid working, may disproportionately affect autistic people and we suggest employers carefully consider changes to determine if they are necessary and to identify strategies to mitigate any negative impacts.
8.4 Recommendations and action points for trade unions, staff associations and networks

Despite the majority of respondents working in unionised workplaces, the data suggests effective voice at work is an area of particular concern for autistic people. There are a number of trade unions who are already working to improve their representation of neurodivergent members, for example the TSSA and RMT. However, the perspectives in the current study suggest more work is required in this area, for trade unions to be an “effective voice” for autistic people. Many of the recommendations for employers would have relevance for trade unions, including recognition of the diverse needs of autistic people and the benefit of working in collaboration with autism experts, including those with lived experience.

The interview data also suggests that trade union members did not necessarily feel their union was well informed on autism or on how to represent autistic people. As such we suggest trade unions work to raise their organisers’ understanding of autism and how both men and women may experience work and autism differently.

It is important to recognise that not all employees can be members of a trade union, for example, police officers. Some employers may not recognise a trade union or staff association, and instead deploy a range of staff networks, typically focusing on equalities. Accordingly, effective voice at work must also consider the more limited legal scope of organisations such as staff associations, and especially staff networks. The data suggests there is scope for staff associations and organisations such as the Police Federation to upskill their organisers in understanding the needs of autistic members and to work in collaboration with employers to improve the working lives of autistic people. In the case of staff networks, it is the responsibility of employers and HR professionals to facilitate such networks and proactively engage in dialogue with such employee collectively organised groups.

8.5 Recommendations and action points for civil society organisations

Recommendations for action regarding civil society organisations, effectively mirror fair work as set out in this report, reflects funding difficulties and how such organisations often employ average numbers of autistic workers. For instance, ensure autism or neurodiversity provided to employers is up-to-date, strengths-focused and grounded in lived experience of autism in the workplace (ideally led by autistic trainers). Further good practice is likely to involve monitoring the impact of the training on employer policy and practice regarding autism. As an employer, as well as a service provider, model good autism-inclusive processes, language and communication within organisations should be the norm. Recommendations also include providing as much job security to employees as possible while funding is under threat. This means ensuring communication about job role changes, contract endings and redundancies is timely, clear and provides sufficient contextual information, explanation of decision-making and opportunities for autistic employees to process information and to ask for clarifications. Such action could include actively promoting diversity, disclosure and access to adjustments in the recruitment and on-boarding processes. Overall, a final recommendation is of collecting data to monitor and promote the neurodiversity of the employee base as well as equal access to development and promotion opportunities.
9 References


Fair Work Convention (2023) *Putting Fair Work at the Heart of Scotland’s Workplaces and Economy*. Available at: https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/


Stockland, K., Rostron, J. and Runge, J. (2023) *A Qualitative Investigation into the Experiences of Workers in the Hospitality Sector in Scotland*, Edinburgh: OGL.


Appendices

Appendix 1: Autistic employee survey of fair work

Building a Fair Work Framework for employers of Scotland’s autistic workforce

Introduction
Thanks for clicking on the link bringing you to this survey, a survey aimed at collecting data to help map your experiences against Scotland’s Fair Work Framework, producing a blueprint for better employment and management of Scotland’s autistic workforce. This survey is part of a research project funded by the Scottish Government and managed by Inspiring Scotland. The project is developed and designed in partnership between Cornerstone and the Centre for Employment, Work and the Professions (CREWS) at Heriot-Watt University. Key findings from the project will be disseminated through a range of presentations and publications. If you wish to remain informed about these presentations and publications, you can register contact details at the end of the survey.

Do I have to take part?
Participation is open to any adult currently employed in Scotland who is diagnosed, seeking a diagnosis, or self-identifies as autistic. Given the importance of making Scottish workplaces more autism-appropriate, participation is strongly encouraged, but it is entirely up to you whether to take part. If you do decide to take part, please select “Agree” at the bottom of the page.

What will my involvement be?
We estimate the core aspects of the survey should take 8-10 minutes of your time. There are six sections to the survey, with five related to the Fair Work Framework, plus one designed to understand more about your employment and you as an individual. The wider research will involve interviews and focus groups. If you would like to be invited to this stage of the research, you can register your contact details at the end of the survey.

What will the information I provide be used for?
By completing the survey, we will be able to gather important information from the people most likely to benefit from such an initiative, i.e., autistic workers. The information gathered from this survey and the wider research will be used to provide action points to Scotland-based employers based on good practice for employing autistic people.

Will my taking part and data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?
The broad aim of the survey is to build an aggregated quantitative dataset which by nature does not purposefully identify individuals. However, if we do collect more personalised data (e.g., through optional open comments), we will anonymise such data before it is analysed or presented in any public-facing format. The raw data will be stored in Heriot-Watt University’s IT storage systems. The dataset will only be shared with research partners when all data has been fully anonymised.

What protections are in place regarding research ethics and data protection?
The research project has been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, a process involving a risk assessment related to the gathering of personal data. If you would like to know more about such processes at Heriot-Watt University, you can click...
on the research ethics policy here and data protection policy here. The legal basis used to process your personal data will be Legitimate interests.

**What if I have a question or concern about the research?**

If you have any questions or concerns at any time about taking part in this survey, or the research more generally, please contact [X].

**Consent to take part in study**

Q1 I have read the statement above and consent to taking part in the survey

**Eligibility for study**

Eligibility to take part in the survey

This is a web-based survey and may be shared or distributed beyond the boundaries the study is targeted. This part is simply about making sure only those qualified to take part do so. There is also a question on your disclosure of autism to employers.

Q2 I am currently employed in Scotland/by an employer based in Scotland:

Q3 I have been diagnosed as autistic, currently undergoing or considering seeking a diagnosis of autism, or self-identify as autistic:

Q4 I have disclosed my diagnosis, plans to be diagnosed, or self-identification as autistic, to my employer:

Q5 At what point did you disclose to your employer that you are autistic?

**Part I: Security at work**

In this section you will be asked to rate how much you agree or disagree with a range of statements related to a first dimension of the Fair Work Framework, that of security at work. If you are not sure how to answer, or have no strong opinion, you can select “neither agree nor disagree”. To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the participant. Security should be taken to mean, for example, having a job that pays more than the minimum wage, and comes with a low risk of redundancy or arbitrary dismissal.

Q6 I am paid a wage that reflects my experiences, skills and qualifications:

Q7 I feel my employment is secure and there is a low risk of losing my job:

Q8 I have effective reasonable adjustments in place that enable me to do my best at work, e.g., wear headphones at work, allowed to take short breaks:

Q9 My reasonable adjustments are reviewed on a regular basis, or as often as appropriate, with my line manager and/or HR professional:

Q10 The employment rights of autistic workers are understood and respected by my employer:

Q11 Please use the space below to comment further on the above, especially if you had a good experience of security at work in any employment situation. Comments are very welcome but optional.

**Part II: Respect at work**

In this section you will be asked to rate how much you agree or disagree with a range of statements related to a second dimension of the Fair Work Framework, that of respect at work. If you are not sure how to answer, or have no strong opinion, you can select “neither agree nor disagree”. To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the participant. Respect at work should be taken to mean, for example, when at work you...
are respected and treated respectfully regardless of your role, status, or any legally
recognised characteristic.
Q12 I feel understood as an autistic person where I am employed:
Q13 I feel confident I will receive support if I experience bullying and/or harassment:
Q14 My employer is supportive of my well-being, health and safety:
Q15 My employer provides meaningful training on inclusion and diversity that is translated
into policy and day-to-day practice:
Q16 My colleagues have a good understanding of my needs as an autistic person at work:
Q17 Please use the space below to comment further on the above, especially if you had a
good experience of respect at work in any employment situation. Comments are
very welcome but optional.

Part III: Opportunity at work
In this section you will be asked to rate how much you agree or disagree with a range of
statements related to a third dimension of the Fair Work Framework, that of opportunity at
work. If you are not sure how to answer, or have no strong opinion, you can select "neither
agree nor disagree". To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the
participant. Opportunity should be taken to mean, for example, a fair chance to
progress in work and employment, such as through training, promotion, and
mentoring.
Q18 I was offered reasonable adjustments during the recruitment and selection
processes:
Q19 I have access to meaningful training and development opportunities:
Q20 I have been given or can access a consistent point of contact, mentor or job coach:
Q21 There are promotion and progression opportunities available to me:
Q22 Please use the space below to comment further on the above, especially if you had a
good experience of opportunity at work in any employment situation. Comments are
very welcome but optional.

Part III: Fulfilment at work
In this section you will be asked to rate how much you agree or disagree with a range of
statements related to a fourth dimension of the Fair Work Framework, that of fulfilment at
work. If you are not sure how to answer, or have no strong opinion, you can
select "neither agree nor disagree". To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the
participant. Fulfilment should be seen as an important part of well-being at work, in
that you have some form of job satisfaction and control over what you do each day.
Q23 My job allows me to make use of my skills, knowledge and experience:
Q24 I am allowed opportunities to work autonomously, solve problems and make a
difference:
Q25 Reasonable adjustments are offered that allow me to train, learn and develop skills
useful for career advancement:
Q26 Please use the space below to comment further on the above, especially if you had a
good experience of fulfilment at work in any employment situation. Comments are
very welcome but optional.

Part V: Effective voice at work
In this section you will be asked to rate how much you agree or disagree with a range of
statements related to a fifth dimension of the Fair Work Framework, that of effective voice
at work. If you are not sure how to answer, or have no strong opinion, you can select
“neither agree nor disagree”. To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the participant. Effective voice should be taken to mean, for example, various opportunities to voice your opinions on work-related and/or autism-related matters, and that your opinions will be recognised and, at least to some extent acted upon, by your employers.

Q27 My employer encourages open workplace communication regarding autism:
Q28 I feel I can meaningfully and safely express my views at work in a range of formal and informal ways:
Q29 I have access to a staff representative or independent advocate should I have any concerns at work:
Q30 My employer responds positively when I raise autism-related matters, e.g., in response to my disclosure, requests for reasonable adjustments and/or during performance reviews and discussions:
Q31 Please use the space below to comment further on the above, especially if you had a good experience of effective voice at work in any employment situation. Comments are very welcome but optional.

Part IV: About your employment and you

The final section is simply about further aspects of your current job and you as an individual. The questions and statements will allow us to analyse the data according to a range of key employment and non-employment related characteristics and variables. To progress in the survey, all activities need to be completed by the participant, but if you feel uncomfortable responding to any of them, please just select the “prefer not to say” option.

Q32 What best describes the job you do?
Q33 I am employed in the following sector:
Q34 The company or organisation I work for is a:
Q35 I have been employed in my current job for the following amount of time:
Q36 I am employed on the following basis/work on average the following amount of hours per week:
Q37 Does your employer have an equal opportunities or diversity policy that covers employment?
Q38 Does your employer have a policy on autism or neurodiversity that covers employment?
Q39 I belong to the following age category:
Q40 I self-identify with the following gender categorisation:
Q41 Do you consider yourself disabled?
Q42 Do you self-identify as neurodivergent?

Thank you and beyond the survey

We truly appreciate the time given to sharing with us your experiences of autism and employment.

If you would like to keep up to date with the project, please provide a contact email address below.

If you would like to be considered for further stages of the research project (e.g., taking part in an interview and/or focus group), please provide a contact email address below.
Appendix 2: Interview guide (employee)

- Can you tell me a little bit about your role?
- Are you answerable to a single manager or to several for different aspects of your work?
- Are you aware of the Fair Work Framework? In what capacity? (Opportunity for explanation)
- What does/would a fair workplace look like to you?
- What does ‘opportunity’, ‘security’, ‘effective voice’, ‘respect’, and ‘fulfilment’ mean to you in a work context? (We will go through these points individually.)
- Can you tell me about any good examples of helpful adjustments or an autism-friendly environment you’ve experienced?
- Are there reasonable adjustments in place to support your autistic employee(s) If so, what? Was this a straight-forward or difficult process? Why?
- How many autistic people do you work with? (How did you find out?) What, if any, processes are in place to invite disclosure? (At what stage, if any, did you disclose?)
- How are management decisions, procedural changes communicated within your organisation? Do you feel the standard means of communication is autism inclusive - could it be improved?
- What other changes would you make to your workplace to make it more inclusive, particularly for autistic people? Have you encountered any barriers to making your work environment more inclusive?
- What do you like about your work?
- Is there anything you would change about your work?
- If you have not already said, is there anything you would like your manager to know about working with autistic people?
- Is there anything else you would like to mention?
Appendix 3: Interview guide (manager)

- Can you tell me a little bit about your role?
- How many staff do you manage?
- Are you aware of the Fair Work Framework? In what capacity? (Opportunity for explanation)
- What does/would a fair workplace look like to you?
- What does ‘opportunity’, ‘security’, ‘effective voice’, ‘respect’, and ‘fulfilment’ mean to you in a work context? (We will go through these points individually.)
- Can you tell me about any good examples of helpful adjustments or an autism-friendly environment you’ve experienced?
- Are there reasonable adjustments in place to support your autistic employee(s) If so, what? Was this a straight-forward or difficult process? Why?
- How many autistic people do you work with? (How did you find out?) What, if any, processes are in place to invite disclosure? (At what stage, if any, did you disclose?)
- How are management decisions, procedural changes communicated within your organisation? Do you feel the standard means of communication is autism inclusive - could it be improved?
- What other changes would you make to your workplace to make it more inclusive, particularly for autistic people? Have you encountered any barriers to making your work environment more inclusive?
- Are there any types of training or support that would help you to make your work environment more inclusive?
- Is there anything else you would like to mention?