

# **‘You’re alone, but you’re not technically alone’: exploring the benefits and barriers to an inclusive library service for autistic users on the Scottish isles.**

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## **Abstract**

Services for autistic users are often limited in geographically remote areas. While libraries have the potential to provide an inclusive space for autistic users, this is currently under-realised. This research explores how libraries on the Scottish isles can support autistic users, identifying the benefits and barriers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four librarians, three autistic adults and the parents of two autistic children all living in the Scottish isles. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes relating to staff practices and user experiences. The autistic users identified their local library was a quiet, comforting space but it did not meet their needs as a user. Library staff reported adapting services based on the needs of their users, but a lack of formal training limited their ability to do this. This research highlights the potential for small island libraries to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment for autistic users. The provision of staff training is identified as a foundational requirement for building awareness and ensuring the diverse needs of autistic users are recognised.

## **Keywords**

Autism, Scottish Isles, remote, library service, inclusion

## **1. Introduction**

Libraries are very well equipped to support autistic patrons as they can provide a safe, calming environment (Anderson, 2020). The provision of such spaces for autistic users is particularly important in more rural areas, where services for autistic individuals are already limited (Preece and Listiakova, 2021). There is a wealth of literature which covers the inclusion of autistic users in libraries and the benefits for doing so, which is covered in a literature review. However, this research largely considers more populated areas. Typically, more remote areas tend to be overlooked in research.

This research will investigate the current practice in public libraries on the Scottish Isles. It will ascertain if there are any changes the libraries can make to benefit autistic users and help in providing a more inclusive service. Librarians, autistic users and their parents are interviewed to establish current provisions and lived experiences from their perspectives. While this research focuses on the autism spectrum, many experiences may correlate to the experiences of other neuro-diverse individuals and recommendations may also benefit them.

The researcher has a personal connection to the Scottish Islands, with regular lengthy visits to family in the Hebrides. This background highlights the challenges and strengths experienced by island communities. Prior to beginning training in librarianship, the researcher completed a master’s degree in autism studies and worked with autistic children for fifteen years. This combination of personal, academic and professional experience inspired the focus of this research.

### **1.1 Identity first language**

Hosking’s (2008) research notes the importance of avoiding using language with negative connotations. The importance of giving credence to the voices of disabled people is also emphasised.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the proper terminology to use when discussing autism spectrum disorder. There are two theories: the use of person first language (person with autism) or identity first language (autistic person). Some argue that a disability does not define a person, while others feel that autism cannot and should not be separated from an individual (Dwyer, 2022). While there is not a universally agreed upon standard, Taboas, Doepke and Zimmerman (2022) conducted a study of preferred language which established that autistic adults preferred identity first language. Anderson (2024) notes that typically this preference is not honoured in literature. However, this research has been undertaken to encourage the inclusion of autistic people and as such, their preferences will be respected in this paper.

For the purpose of this research, 'autistic' is serving as a catch all term to include any library users who also exhibit similar symptoms. Recommendations provided are aimed to benefit autistic users but other neuro-divergencies may also benefit. The presence of autistic-like symptoms will guide any service provisions, rather than the need for an official diagnosis.

## **1.2 Autism spectrum disorder**

Autism spectrum disorder (henceforth referred to as autism) was first described by Leo Kanner (1943). In this seminal work Kanner describes eleven children who displayed idiosyncratic communication, obsessive desires for routine and a lack of social interest. Individuals on the spectrum typically experience difficulties in three areas: language and communication, flexibility of thought and forming relationships with others. These features of autism are commonly referred to as the 'triad of impairments' (Wing and Gould, 1979). It is a lifelong developmental disorder, the impact of which can vary from individual to individual.

Today, the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) is the most common diagnostic criteria used to establish an autism diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to the DSM-5, an individual meets the diagnostic criteria for autism if they exhibit persistent deficits in social skills and communication, alongside repetitive behaviours (stimming) and restrictive interests. In recent years there has been an increase in prevalence, though this is suspected to be due to awareness and changes to diagnostic criteria (Russell et al., 2021). Layden, Anderson and Hayden (2021) state that autism is the most common disability seen by librarians, so it is important libraries and their staff are well equipped to support them.

## **1.3 Life on the Scottish isles**

The services available on the Scottish isles vary. Islands which the Scottish Government considers to have high levels of services, including Arran and Islay, have access to education, health services and grocery stores. However, these high levels are only measured in comparison to other islands, some of which have very limited services available to them. Even the islands with the highest levels of services still face limitations in comparison to the mainland (Scottish Government, 2024). The provision of a public library is overlooked by the government when considering important amenities for islanders. However, this may be an oversight. The National Islands Plan (Scottish Government, 2019) consists of thirteen strategic objectives which aim to improve life for island communities. Some of the areas of concern; digital connectivity, arts, culture and language, and education. The most recent annual report of the National Islands Plan indicates slow progress in reaching some of these objectives (Scottish Government, 2023a). One could argue that public libraries could be valuable tools in achieving some of the strategic objectives, such as those related to empowering communities and supporting culture. Table one shows the islands which do have public libraries, indicating the size of the population the libraries serve and the total opening hours each week. Considering the budgeting cuts and closures affecting public libraries in Scotland, particularly in rural areas, the ongoing provision of these services is not guaranteed (Hay, 2024; Racekova, 2024).

Table 1. Public libraries on Scottish isles

<b>Council area</b>	<b>Island</b>	<b>Population (Scottish Government, 2024)</b>	<b>Library</b>	<b>Total opening hours in a week</b>
Argyll and Bute (Live Argyll, 2025)	Islay and Jura	3200 and 196	Islay Mobile Library	18 hours and 20 minutes over 3 days
	Bute	6498	Rothsay Library	30 hours over 5 days
	Tiree	653	Tiree Library	Temporarily closed – ongoing attempts to reopen by local community.
	Mull	2800	Tobermory Library	11 hours over 3 days
Western Isles (Western Isles Libraries, 2025)	Lewis and Harris	21,574	Stornoway Library	34 hours over 5 days
			Tarbet Library	18 hours over 4 days
			Lexy the mobile library	35 hours over 5 days
	Barra	1264	Castlebay Library	18 hours over 4 days
	Benbecula	1283	Lionacleit Library	27 hours and 30 minutes over 6 days
	Uist Islands	4864	Lachaidh the mobile library (also serves Benbecula)	35 hours over 5 days
Highland (High Life Highland, 2025)	Skye	10,008	Skye and Lochalsh mobile Library	28 hours over 4 days
North Ayrshire (North Ayrshire Council, 2025)	Arran	4629	Arran Library	25 hours over 4 days
Orkney (Orkney Islands Council, 2025)	Mainland Orkney and connected isles	18,480	Orkney Library and Archive	46 hours over 6 days
			Stromness Library	44 hours 15 minutes over 6 days
Shetland (Shetland Islands Council, 2025)	Mainland Shetland and connected isles	19,882	Shetland Library	48 hours over 6 days
			Mobile library (Big Van)	Both vans operate 5 days a week
			Mobile library (Peerie Van)	

Preece and Listiakova (2021) conducted a study which looked at families' experiences of autism services in rural coastal England. There were some benefits to living in rural areas, such as a more relaxed environment and the participants feeling that there was a greater community spirit. However, the families who were interviewed all reported limited services which suited their family's needs. The difficulties experienced by these families in accessing services is likely to be exacerbated further for those living on an island as they cannot drive to other areas with ease. A literature review by Ault et al. (2021) also concludes that those living in rural areas are disadvantaged, calling for greater supportive services for autistic people and their families in such areas.

Both Vanegas et al. (2023) and Feather et al. (2024) also note the sizeable disparity between the provision of services aimed at autistic individuals between urban and rural areas. Feather et al. conducted a study into the perspectives of caregivers in rural Arizona. Their experiences echoed that of many others in rural areas. On average, diagnoses were obtained up to eighteen months later than those living in urban areas. Parents and guardians living in rural areas also reported often feeling isolated and uninformed. Vanegas et al. (2023) reported the information sources available to urban caregivers in comparison to rural caregivers. Larger populated areas have access to more specialists and support groups. Caregivers in rural areas often had to turn to social media, where Vanegas et al. reported misinformation can spread. Rural areas may not have access to specialist autism services, but public libraries are at least in a strong position to provide information and teach digital literacy. Ault et al. (2021) report a reduction of stress levels in caregivers who have access to information support. This is a service which libraries can provide.

The Scottish Islands Data Overview (Scottish Government, 2023b) reports that, on average, the island authorities have a higher employment rate than the rest of Scotland. This report does not include statistics on autistic employees but difficulties with unemployment or under employment are common in the autism community. Reports of unemployment vary, but recent reports suggest that only 20-30% of autistic adults are employed (Davies et al., 2024; Nicholls, 2025). It is probable this trend of underemployment is also an issue for autistic people living on Scottish islands.

## **1.4 Aims and objectives**

The aim of this research is to investigate if public libraries in the Scottish isles are currently supporting autistic individuals and establishing any barriers to this support. Necessary data to establish the aim will be collected through a literature review and semi-structured interviews. The interviews will be conducted with librarians, adult autistic users and the guardians of autistic children.

Research objectives:

1. To explore recent literature which examines good practices for the inclusion of autistic users in libraries.
2. To investigate the current provisions available in public libraries in the Scottish Isles.
3. To establish whether autistic individuals are currently utilising their local public library on the Scottish Isles.
4. To ascertain any current barriers which prevent autistic individuals using the services provided by their local library.
5. To propose a range of evidence-informed recommendations to public libraries in rural areas which can encourage the inclusion of autistic individuals.

Collectively, these objectives aim to explore how library services on the Scottish isles can improve the inclusion of autistic users. Research regarding the inclusion of autistic users in library services in a rural context is limited. As a result, this study aims to make a valuable contribution by highlighting barriers and opportunities for overlooked users in living in overlooked areas.

## 2. Literature review

The following review of literature explores the benefits of libraries for autistic users and the potential barriers that can hinder inclusion. Key considerations for good practice are discussed, including effective communication and acknowledgement of sensory processing difficulties autistic users may have. Current practice in Scotland is explored and the challenges posed by funding cuts are examined.

### 2.1 Benefits of libraries for autistic users

Reports of how welcoming libraries can feel to autistic users varies. Many find the calm spaces are a welcome reprieve from overwhelming sensory situations (Anderson, 2021). However, this is not guaranteed. As each autistic individual is, indeed, an individual. Some may struggle with the sensory environment (Annabi et al., 2022). Braumberger (2021) states that users with sensory processing disorders may become distressed in libraries in part due to bright lights and distracting noises, amongst other sensory inputs. As Vanegas et al. (2023) report, most research into autism occurs in urban areas, near universities or medical centres. It is likely that most of the reports of these sensory processing difficulties noted in Braumberger's literature review have come from users in more urban areas. Currently, there is no known literature which reports the sensory experiences of autistic users in smaller, quieter rural libraries. It is possible sensory processing difficulties are less distressing in these settings due to lower footfall. This is not to say that these difficulties should be ignored. White (2021), an autistic librarian, notes it is difficult to establish the sensory needs of a single individual due to the nature of the autism spectrum. However, issues like this may be easier to overcome in smaller libraries in smaller communities in which staff know users on a personal level.

Simpson et al. (2020) state the potential for libraries to support the literacy development of autistic children. They describe the Bookbug Sessions which are available across Scotland. These sessions, which are usually held in libraries, consist of songs, rhymes, and stories. These sessions aim to develop children's speech and language skills and their ability to communicate socially. While Bookbug Sessions are created with neurotypical children in mind, they focus on the development of skills which autistic children typically struggle with and therefore these sessions can provide many benefits. Information available on the Scottish Book Trust website indicates that there are currently Bookbug Sessions held on Benbecula, Lewis, Mull, Shetland and Orkney (Scottish Book Trust, 2024).

Though they are not specifically discussing Bookbug Sessions, Paynter et al. (2020) consider the benefits which similar services can have for autistic children. They state that exposing children to books, encouraging joint attention and modelling use of language will help develop the literacy skills of both autistic and neurotypical children.

The potential benefits of libraries do not end once a child ages out of early years story time sessions, though older autistic children can typically be overlooked in the sector (Gibson and Hanson-Baldauf, 2019). Layden, Anderson and Hayden (2021) believe librarians can provide ongoing support to their autistic users, assuming adequate training is provided. Libraries can help their users develop their IT skills which can enhance employment opportunities. They can also provide access to the local community in a structured environment, which may be preferable for some autistic individuals.

White (2021) also provides good insights into the benefits libraries can have for autistic users. They state that libraries have the potential to provide stability and structure, which provides comfort to many on the autism spectrum. While access to books can help develop language skills, White does not consider this to be the main benefit to autistic users. Instead, they agree with Layden, Anderson and Hayden (2021), stating that libraries can encourage inclusion within a user's local community.

## 2.2 Barriers to inclusion

Alongside sensory processing difficulties, there may be other barriers which restrict autistic users utilising the services their local library has to offer. Throughout literature on this topic, the most common barrier cited is a lack of staff awareness and knowledge, affecting the quality of the service. Layden, Anderson and Hayden (2021) note that autism is the most common disability librarians will witness and call for support and training to improve the quality of service. Their paper analyses the prospectuses of different Master of Information and Library Studies. They found that only 2.2% of the courses covered topics related to ASD and call for an increase in training, citing this as the main barrier to inclusion.

However, the onus of training librarians should not solely be placed on academic institutions. As early as 2016, Prendergast called for more professional development training for librarians to improve the service provided for autistic users. In the years following, it seems this problem is still prevalent in many libraries and staff are still not given the necessary knowledge to facilitate good practice (Braumberger, 2021; Paynter et al., 2020; Anderson and Robinson, 2024).

Many of the other factors affecting the quality of service for autistic users may stem from a lack of quality training but are certainly worth noting. The awareness and acceptance of other users, as well as library staff, can also make autistic users feel unwelcome. Some autistic users, particularly in environments which may overwhelm their senses, may stim (White, 2021). This behaviour may cause the individual to stand out and feel judged by other users. Both Simpson et al. (2020) and Paynter et al. (2020) report that this fear of judgement often inhibits interactions with staff.

Prendergast (2016) also notes that concerns over judgement from other users stops care givers bringing their children to story time sessions in case their child's behaviour draws scrutiny. While it may be an unconscious bias, many staff and users have normative social expectations which can cause an autistic user to feel unwelcomed. The same author notes that autistic users and caregivers of autistic users should feel able to advocate for themselves without judgement. Awareness and acceptance of behaviours exhibited by autistic users will go a long way to ensure they feel welcome. Annabi et al. (2022) are also in concordance with Prendergast (2016), noting that there is a bias towards the assumption that users are neurotypical and that their behaviours are misunderstood. Increased awareness may help challenge this biased way of thinking.

Limited opening hours in rural libraries may also be an unavoidable barrier, for both autistic and neurotypical users. With smaller libraries, such as Tobermory Library, which is only open for eleven hours in a week, users may physically be unable to visit, depending on their schedule. While some barriers may be insurmountable due to circumstances, it is hoped some can be overcome with slight considerations for the needs of the users.

## 2.3 Considerations for good practice

While libraries have the potential to be welcoming spaces for autistic users, some care should be taken to facilitate this. While there is limited research which considers rural public libraries specifically, there is a lot of research which suggests good practice which can help overcome the barriers to inclusion which may be adaptable to different settings (Paynter et al., 2020; Annabi et al., 2022; Anderson, 2021;2024).

Researchers in the University of Washington, USA (Annabi et al., 2022) produced an online training program which strives to encourage inclusion of autistic users. While this research was undertaken in a large city in America, the training is still applicable to smaller public libraries, like the ones on the Scottish isles. The training, titled 'Autism Ready Toolkit', hopes to encourage inclusion by giving students the knowledge to create an accessible environment that suits the needs and interests of each

autistic user. The online training teaches about autism, dispelling myths and stereotypes. The barriers to inclusion are noted and strategies to overcome these barriers are provided. As mentioned, lack of training is a huge barrier to autism inclusion and acceptance. This short but comprehensive training summarises much of the literature regarding inclusive practice in public libraries and is freely accessible online.

### **2.3.1 Communication**

To be able to adapt a service to suit the needs of autistic users, it is imperative that library staff know what these needs are. Annabi et al. (2022) train students to acknowledge and welcome autistic users. This small consideration, which is good practice regardless of the user, indicates an openness to all. Anderson (2021;2024) also often refers to the importance of listening to the needs of the users and putting their needs at the forefront of any practice changes. Communication difficulties, a common symptom in autism, may prevent a user feeling comfortable approaching a member of staff. However, signalling an interest in hearing from either the user or an advocate on their behalf, will remove a massive barrier to inclusion (Paynter et al., 2020). It may be likely that increased communication between staff and users can be a strength of smaller rural libraries, where staff are more likely to know the users due to smaller populations.

### **2.3.2 Sensory processing difficulties**

Autism is, by very definition, a spectrum disorder. Considerations on creating a sensory environment may not benefit every user. However, generalised advice is often cited in literature which can help put autistic users at ease. Consideration for accessibility should extend past users with physical disabilities. Autistic users often find public spaces, including libraries, can be sensorily overwhelming (Prendergast, 2016). As noted, common difficulties often reported by autistic people are adverse reactions to harsh lighting and excessive noise (Braumberger, 2021). However, awareness and consideration for these issues can help overcome these difficulties.

Autism friendly events can be planned in which lights are dimmed, and numbers of visitors are restricted to negate these two sensory considerations. Public libraries in South Dublin, Ireland, offer weekly quiet evenings in their quest to be inclusive to all users with disabilities. To further aid the sensorial comfort of autistic users, they also provide sensory kits which aid both gross motor and fine motor control. Ear defenders and weighted blankets are also available to help autistic users relax (dlr libraries, 2021). While a library will not want to limit the number of users all the time, regularly scheduled events can help with awareness and inclusion.

Anderson and Robinson (2024) note that alongside light and noise levels, overwhelming signage may also cause sensory distress in autistic users. They note the importance of clear signs to prevent confusion. This is good practice which will benefit both neurotypical and neurodiverse users. Braumberger (2021) suggests that each library should make a sensory checklist which considers light, sounds and signs but also other visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory inputs. They also recommend designated space for autistic users to minimise sensory overload. This is likely impractical in many small rural public libraries. However, awareness and consideration of the needs of autistic users and a willingness to strive to provide good service will go a long way to inclusion.

## **2.4 Current practice in Scotland**

All public libraries and museums in Glasgow have been given an Autism Friendly Award by the National Autistic Society (Glasgow Life, 2018). It is evident museums that in Glasgow have earned this award. Many of the museums hold autism friendly events in which they limit visitors and overwhelming sound and light. There are social stories available on the Glasgow Life website which users can read prior to visiting many museums in the city. These stories contain photographs of the building and explain to the readers what to expect when visiting. There are also sensory kits available in some of the museums

which users can borrow for the duration of their visit. Typically, these sensory kits contain ear defenders, emotion cards and fidget toys (Glasgow Life, 2025a).

The same consideration of autistic users does not seem to extend to the libraries in Glasgow. At the time of this research, there are no specific autism friendly events scheduled in any of the public libraries. While care had been taken to discuss the physical accessibility of each library, only ten of the thirty-three libraries in the area have provided social stories to support autistic users (Glasgow Life, 2025b). If sensory kits are provided, this information is not shared online. It is uninspiring that limited effort merits an award.

Public libraries in Inverclyde have put consideration into the needs of autistic children and adults, stating that their libraries are AU-SOME (Inverclyde council, 2025). Every branch has weekly autism specific events in which they ensure limited noise, a sensory kit and 'friendly staff'. One may question why sensory kits cannot be available at other times and presumably the demeanour of staff outside of these sessions is also friendly, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. Their website also contains links to autism charities which contain advice and support.

Research into the current practices in public libraries on the Scottish isles yields disappointing results. As seen in Table 1, the Scottish isles are covered by six different councils. None of these councils have any reference to autism accessibility on their webpages. No social stories are provided to prepare autistic users for their visit, though Shetland Islands does have a visual walkthrough, (CASE Shetland, 2025). A report on the 2011 census reveals that two percent of the Scottish population live on islands (National Records of Scotland, 2015). Autism prevalence rates are estimated to be approximately 1 in 100 people (Zeidan et al., 2022). These figures indicate that, assuming an even distribution, around 1000 inhabitants of the Scottish isles may have an autism diagnosis, while there may be more who experience similar symptoms but have not received a diagnosis. While this is a small percentage of the Scottish population, residents in these areas still deserve to be able to access to a high-quality service from their public library.

## **2.5 The strain of funding cuts on Scottish rural libraries**

It would be remiss to discuss the current practice in public libraries in Scotland without consideration for the funding cuts the sector is experiencing. In a news article bleakly titled 'Public libraries in 'crisis' as councils cut services', Lynch and Tomas (2024) report that over 180 council libraries have closed, or ownership has been transferred, in the last 8 years in Britain. This number equates to 1 in 20 public libraries. These stark numbers are echoed in a report by Carrell (2025) on Scottish public libraries for the Guardian. They state that since 2014, 42 public libraries have closed and there has been a 30% decrease in budgeting.

The devastating impact of these cuts runs deep, particularly in rural areas where libraries are fulfilling the gap of many missing services (Brown, 2024). However, there seems to be little sympathy from the councillors in charge of this decision. When speaking to Galloway (2025) about the closures of libraries in Argyll and Bute, a councillor admitted there was no money for libraries in the council area, saying that "only" Tiree and Cardross are closed, with seemingly no consideration for the population of people this affects.

In some cases, pressure from the public has overturned decisions to close libraries. In Fife, the public managed to save 5 of the 12 libraries earmarked for closure (Brown, 2024). However, unfortunately the end of these cuts is not in sight for libraries. In Scotland, many local councils are still proposing cuts. Ross (2024) details a sizeable budget gap of £108.3 million for High Life Highland council, so replacing the aging fleet of mobile library service vans in the Highlands will not be a priority. Despite being an asset to remote populations, there is concern that the mobile library service provided in the Highlands will cease due to these financial constraints (Campsie, 2024). Indeed, these budget restraints

are affecting public libraries across the country (Grayston, 2024). It is hoped research into improving service provisions for autistic users will benefit many users, both neurotypical and neurodiverse. Perhaps more pertinently, it is hoped that there will still be public libraries left in rural areas which can benefit from this research.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how libraries on the Scottish isles can support the inclusion of autistic individuals. The critical disability theory underpins this research. This theory views disability as a product of social, cultural and environmental barriers. Normative assumptions regarding ability should be challenged and with the voice of disabled people given value in a discussion regarding them (Hosking, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were specifically chosen as the primary method of data collection to allow for flexibility and depth in exploring participants lived experiences and professional perspectives. Following this philosophical stance, the voices of the autistic participants are paramount to the discussion and will influence recommendations. These recommendations can help libraries challenge disabling barriers and improve their practice.

#### **3.1 Participants and recruitment**

Three participant groups were involved in this study: library staff on the Scottish isles, autistic users and parents of autistic children who live on the Scottish isles. It was deemed important to consider the experiences of both librarians and users to establish current practice and potential barriers. As seen in section 2.4, on the surface it appears that little practice is going into the inclusion of autistic users. It may be that while the libraries are not updating their websites regularly, good practice is still going on within the island libraries, so first-hand data is important.

Each library on the Scottish isles was emailed to inform them of the research and request participation from the librarians. Replies from this email were low, with a 10% response rate. However, as noted in the literature review, many of these librarians are struggling with funding and resources are spread thinly. Posts were made to source autistic library users on social media. It is appreciated that there may be some communicative barriers with autistic participants which may limit participation. However, it is common the voice of autistic people is overlooked, and thus it is important their opinions are valued and sought out (Svaler, 2023).

Different groups were joined for each island to source users. The snowball method was used to try to find additional participants through recommendations. While the research was intended to only consider public libraries on the islands, through recommendations provided from participants, it was decided to also open considerations to school librarians. This decision was made as the limited opening hours of a lot of the libraries prevented autistic school pupils from visiting their local public library, but it was reported they utilised their school library more by librarians in this study. This highlights the barriers both neurotypical and neurodiverse users face on the islands.

Purposive sampling was also used, as Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout was contacted. Their work on the Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit (Annabi et al., 2022), a free training resource available to library staff to help the inclusion of autistic users, was very pertinent to this research and their expert insight was deemed valuable. In total, ten participants were interviewed, four librarians, three autistic users, two parents and Dr Romeijn-Stout. All participants were provided with an information sheet and informed consent was received prior to their interviews.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were all conducted online via Microsoft Teams, due to the remote geographical area covered by this research. While using surveys may have been easier for the

participants to complete from a logistical consideration, semi-structured interviews were chosen to obtain data. This method was chosen due to the richness of information which can be learned through the participants' experiences, giving more understanding and depth to the data (Jain, 2021). Semi-structured interview questions were written to achieve the research objectives. This ensured key topics were covered, however if the conversation took a pivot, the researcher allowed this to allow the participants to speak freely. Consent was sought out to record and transcribe the interviews to allow the data to be analysed.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews was analysed following Clark and Braun's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Data from the librarians and the users and parents were separated into two separate groups, due to the difference in the experiences for each group. Transcripts from the interviews were read thoroughly, with common experiences highlighted. Different experiences were colour coded and collated into themes. This method of data analysis identified common themes in current practices and highlighted barriers to the inclusion of autistic users. The reoccurrence of these themes highlighted their importance, thus guiding recommendations for libraries to ensure a more inclusive practice. The narrative based qualitative approach of analysing the participants' experiences is akin to telling their story and giving them a voice. In their work on storytelling in the Cabrach, Reid, Pirie and Ironside (2024) argue there is value in storytelling in research. They feel it can capture the nuances of social situations which may be overlooked in more traditional analysis. This approach aligns with the broader aim of this research, which is to prioritise the voice of autistic people and to use those voices to guide good practice.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for this research was provided by Robert Gordon's ethics board. Participants gave their consent prior to their interviews and permission was obtained to record the interviews. Recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions were stored on a password protected device and all information was anonymised to prevent the participants from being recognisable from the research. To protect autistic children, interviews were conducted with their guardians instead. Extra care was taken with autistic participants to ensure they understood and felt comfortable with their right to anonymity. While the questions in the semi-structured interviews were not intended to be distressing, autism can present itself in different ways so it is hard to predict how some participants may feel being interviewed. Participants were informed that they were free to exit the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Care was also taken to ensure the participants felt comfortable, such as assuring them they did not need to have the video on if they preferred not to.

### **3.5 Limitations**

It is hoped this research will benefit libraries on small, remote islands. The findings may be transferrable for libraries in more populated areas and recommended practices may also be generalised to different neurodivergences. However, this research topic is limited by its geographic specificity. While the provision of a good service for autistic users on small, remote islands is important, it concerns a niche population. The relatively small number of people affected by this topic will limit sample size which may affect the quantity of data which can be collected. The researcher recognises that their background may have influenced the design of the study and interpretation of the findings. A pre-established commitment to autism inclusion and a personal familiarity of the islands may have shaped the focus on user experience and accessibility. Additionally, a strong belief in the value of public libraries may have resulted in an unintentional bias, potentially leading to an overly optimistic interpretation on the role libraries can play in supporting autistic users. To challenge this potential bias, a reflexive approach was adopted throughout the research process, guided by Olmos-Vega et al. (2023). This included ongoing reflections of the researcher's own assumptions. Care was taken with interpersonal reflexivity to plan the language used in interviews with autistic users. Olmos-Vega et al.

note that researchers must be aware of potential power imbalances while also valuing participants' unique experiences. By remaining attentive to the language users during the semi-structured interviews, it helped the researcher ensure participants were comfortable.

## 4. Results

For clarity, the outcomes of this research will be broken into separate sections. Each section will cover the results and the discussion for each group of participants interviewed. The first two sections will cover the interviews with librarians working on Scottish Isles, autistic users and autistic parents sharing their children's experiences. Following this, the interview with Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout will be discussed. Subsequently, the findings will be collated into recommendations for libraries on the Scottish Isles to consider. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed several themes regarding the inclusion of autistic users in remote Scottish libraries. While some experiences differed with each participant, common themes were evident throughout the interviews with each group which will be discussed.

### 4.1 Librarians' experiences

In total, four librarians were interviewed. To preserve anonymity, the location of the librarian is omitted. However, to include some insight into their perspectives, the position of each participant is included in table 2. Inclusion of the general size of the island each participant lives on was considered, but differences appeared insignificant between smaller and larger islands. Separation from the mainland ensures each participant provided an insight of quintessential island life, regardless of population size.

Table 2. Librarian positions

Participant number	Position
Librarian 1	Public librarian
Librarian 2	School librarian
Librarian 3	School librarian
Librarian 4	Public Librarian

#### 4.1.1 Library use and users

While the librarians didn't know the exact diagnosis of their customers, they all suspected that they had autistic users who visited the library. It was noted that it was very difficult to achieve a diagnosis on the islands, so some users may be experiencing long waiting times during the diagnostic process. Confirmation of a diagnosis does not change the needs of the user and the service they deserve. The librarians all felt that autistic users felt comfortable in their library. One must be cognisant of confirmation bias as there are likely autistic users who do not visit the library, prohibiting their experiences from being shared. However, the libraries on the islands do appear to serve as a place of solace for at least some of the autistic population. This appears to be particularly pertinent for school aged children:

"Some of the young people, the library is their place. They just go and sit there and that's their place to be." Librarian 2.

"The library was always somewhere the students could go if the classroom got overwhelming." Librarian 3.

"They came to the library when lessons are too much. It's where they feel in control." Librarian 4.

When asked if there were any autism specific events, the librarians each stated that there were not. Librarian 4's response mirrors the experience of the other participants, saying "we don't have any autism-friendly specific events or anything like that, or specific areas that they can go to". However, while the setup in each the libraries were not considered purely with autistic patrons in mind, each

librarian had made meaningful adaptations when they were able to react in response to the needs of their users. This ensured they felt comfortable and welcome in the environment.

#### **4.1.2 Environmental comforts**

Each librarian reported that they did not have the space to cater for a separate room specific for autistic users who needed a separate space, but when it was possible they adapted the environment as much as possible to meet the needs of the user. Each adaptation was made with their user's needs in mind, either short or long term. Librarian 4 summarised the individualised response to the needs of users which is possible in smaller, tight communities:

You get to know your community and they get to know you. You get to know your users quite well and who needs a bit of extra help or extra support. You recognise that and you tailor things towards them.

When asked about tailoring their library to the needs of their users, librarian 2 had a similar outlook of adapting to suit their users. In response to tragic events in the school, they had pivoted the focus of the school library to a place of love and nurturing. Part of this involved them creating little reading areas with comfortable chairs and beanbags which proved so popular more areas were needed. Fidget toys, sensory books, pencil grips and mindful colouring books were also brought into the library. Librarian 2 also witnessed one neurodivergent student who did not feel comfortable using blue chairs, so they made the decision to buy different coloured chairs going forward. These choices were all made after listening to the users and observing their interactions within the library space to establish their needs. The participant spoke of great pride in the changes in the school library and the source of comfort it has for many students.

Librarian 4 also spoke with satisfaction when describing a time when they were able to provide comfort to a user in distress: "She was having a panic attack and came to the library as a safe space ... we got her a quiet room, and we turned the lights down. She just needed something at that time to calm her down".

#### **4.1.3 Staff comfort in successful interactions with autistic users**

Each of the librarians noted it was unusual for the autistic users to verbalise their needs and wants, so observations were necessary to adapt the service to suit them.

"You just have to look at everybody individually and think right, what do they need from us today?" Librarian 4.

"We've evolved to meet needs. It's about getting to know your young person, playing to their strengths and being flexible... It's just evolved. If it works, we keep it. If not, we change. It's through observation and listening" Librarian 2.

Librarians connected to schools often had autistic users visit with a support worker. When questioned if there were collaborative discussions with these support workers to drive necessary adaptations, results varied. Some librarians seemed to have a positive working relationship with the support workers and were able to discuss the needs of the users. However, this was not consistently utilised, as librarian 1 reported "I think they (support workers) would speak up if they knew it was possible, but I don't think they assume that they can".

#### **4.1.4 Lack of formal training**

A common theme through each librarian interview was that of a deep desire to serve the autistic community in the best possible way. Each librarian demonstrated adaptability and good organisational skills, but their efforts often occurred without formal training or institutional support. While desire to partake in this research likely indicates a positive bias, it is encouraging to see such passionate staff members striving to include all users. However, in every interview it was apparent that the impetus

behind this passion begins and ends with the library staff. When asked if any adaptations in service were a result from policy or self-driven, each librarian stated that it was their own choice to adapt based on the needs of their users. There was no push from upper management to make special considerations to aid the inclusion of autistic users and no policies in place. Librarian 4 echoes the experiences of all the librarians when they stated, “there hasn’t been any specific training, but everyone seems to have a heightened awareness, it’s more personally driven than from higher up”.

Willingness to participate in this research suggests the librarians each had prior predilection in autism. It is promising that the library staff are making observations and striving to meet the needs of their autistic users. However, assumptions cannot be made that all librarians are as observant and aware of autistic users as the ones involved in this study. Furthermore, without formal training and understanding of autism, mistakes could inadvertently be made. Good intentions are honourable but should be supported with training to maximise impact. Librarian 1 stated: “We’re not specialists ... I wouldn’t know what to do to make it easier for an autistic child to enjoy the library”. After learning of the Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit, two of the participants were very interested in completing this online training to gain more insight as they were looking for more information to guide their practice.

#### 4.1.5 The impact of funding cuts

The impact of funding cuts varied between the libraries involved in this study, but no librarian was left unscathed. Librarian 1 felt particularly afflicted by funding cuts:

The council cut the budget every year ... at some point there’s nothing left to cut anymore. And we are at that point. So now we can only close libraries or cut people’s jobs or cut the budget for books, which is already very limited here.

The financial strains felt in their library are a massive barrier to autistic users as the remaining staff feel stretched and disheartened. A disconnect between local politicians and councillors was reported, with many not attending events in the library they were invited to. This leaves Librarian 1 feeling like there is a disconnect between decision makers and the realities of providing a public library service. These funding cuts have not only led to reduced staffing and curtailed services; they also severely limit the librarian’s ability to purchase inclusive resources: “There’s no relaxing corner or fidget toys ... anything like that would need to come out of a grant. It’s just not possible in the normal budget”. The lack of financial support leaves the librarian feeling like there has been missed opportunities for inclusion. Librarian 2, who is financed through the school rather than the local government, is in a better funding situation than Librarian 1. However, they still feel they need to minimise spending when possible. They feel obliged to find resources for the library users as cheaply as possible:

“The things I’ve brought in – fidget toys, jigsaws, joke books – most of it’s from friends or donations”

Librarian 3, also based in a school library, also felt restricted by the financial situation:

“There’s only so much you can do without time and people. We make do, but it’s not ideal”.

## 4.2 Autistic users’ experiences

Table 3. Participant experiences of ASD

Participant number	Experience
Participant 5	Parent
Participant 6	ASD diagnosis
Participant 7	ASD diagnosis
Participant 8	ASD diagnosis
Participant 9	ASD diagnosis and parent

In total, three autistic adults and the parent of two autistic parents, one of whom is also autistic, were interviewed. Due to the vast diversity seen on the autism spectrum, the reflections of these participants' experiences are far from representative of the entire community. However, it is hoped this research begins to consider at least some of the experiences faced by autistic users when using their local library on the Scottish Isles. As stated, the voice of autistic users is central to this research and their input is an invaluable insight into how some autistic users feel about their local library.

#### **4.2.1 Library experiences**

Of the participants who utilised their local library, comments were largely complimentary of their experiences with both the library and its staff. A recurring theme was that the participants appreciated the library was a quiet, calm space for them.

“Those places are alright because you're alone, but you're not technically alone. So, it's like parallel existing. And that's got that kind of like grounding effect. Like other people just existing around you without bothering you. Kinda helps calm me down.” Participant 7.

“When I would go to the library, all I would really want was like an Internet connection, power supply and for it to be quiet. Oh, and for there to be enough interesting books.” Participant 8.

#### **4.2.2 Barriers to inclusion**

When questioned about potential sensory discomforts, participants did not feel as afflicted by this due to the smaller nature of their local library, in comparison to larger libraries they had visited on the mainland. Participant 6 responded “No. I mean, for all the sensory stuff, the library is pretty small. So, that makes a lot less aggravating.”

However, the smaller libraries, while more comfortable, did not seem to be meeting the needs of the participants. Participants, most of whom were in their early twenties, mentioned their library did not hold events suitable for many age groups, including their own. Each mentioned their library holding Bookbug sessions, a song and story time session held across Scotland for young children. It is important to consider that this was the case for all events, not just autism specific ones. As a result, limited events are unlikely to be a consequence of exclusionary practices and will affect all library users regardless of their neuro disposition. The limited selection of books available was mentioned by several participants which again, is likely a universal complaint for users. While certain complaints may be common through all library users on the Scottish Isles, the impact of these may be felt differently in different groups.

“There wasn't really anything in relation to the library. It was more for younger kids and stuff. I think that would be good if there was a bit more communal space for my age group.” Participant 8.

“There wasn't, like a lot of books there, there wasn't many that I like, like comics and stuff like that. There was barely any of that in it.” Participant 6.

When questioned, the autistic users did not express any insurmountable barriers which limited their use of their local library. It is probable that the type of autistic person who feels comfortable participating in an online interview with a stranger is less likely to experience overwhelming anxiety in social situations and therefore feels more comfortable using the library. In contrast, the parent participants who were talking on behalf of their child, reported barriers which they felt prevent them using their local library. As reported by Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout, the fear of judgement prevents one mother, participant 5, from bringing her autistic daughter to her local library, despite harbouring a great love of libraries herself.

“I'll probably have a fear because she's going to be noisy.”

“I'm always worried, you know, will she do something which might cause damage?”

Participant 5 described bringing her daughter to horse riding on the island. She felt the staff were very accepting, but her daughter became overstimulated and hit one of the members of staff. The staff

were very understanding in this scenario, but she stated that her shame prevented her returning. Fear of a similar situation occurring in the library prevented her visiting initially. Once her daughter settled in the environment, she then faced a bigger barrier:

“I had just got brave enough, and thought she was settled enough, to branch out to taking her into the local library. And then they go and shut it...”

### **4.2.3 Interaction with staff**

When the participants were asked if they felt comfortable approaching staff for help in the library, responses varied. Participant 9, an autistic mother with two autistic children, responded that she preferred the more anonymised experience of using a larger library on the mainland:

“Me and my kids all can’t hack the library because of the human contact element in taking books out. When we lived in the city, we used the self-checkout machines. This is the main barrier for us.”

Another user, Participant 7, also agreed that they would prefer to avoid staff, when possible, though admitted this is a reflection on himself and not the library staff being unapproachable:

Oh, I won't even communicate my needs to someone I'm like pretty close with just because of the shame. So, I know I don't feel like I'd be comfortable talking to staff about an issue. I'd probably just try to sort out myself.

In contrast, participants 6 and 8 both felt comfortable approaching library staff if required:

“Yeah, I would say the two librarians I had were, you know, very open people, very nice, very easy to talk to. They were very understanding and very empathetic.”

Participant 5 felt that knowing she had support from library staff would encourage her to visit with her daughter more willingly.

OK, you can do it without somebody to help. But actually, I'm not relaxing. I'm not getting time to stop and look at anything... It's really hard going into cafes and things when I'm on my own because I can't keep up and keep an eye on her, you know, I have to be on the ball all the time. So yeah, if I had more support then I would take her with me to the library.

## **4.3 Professional insight**

Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout, part of the team of researchers involved in the Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit, shared interesting insights during an interview. She was approached due to the relevance of her research as it was felt her observations could offer valuable parallels. The Autism-Ready Libraries Tool Kit is a free online resource designed to equip library staff with the skills and knowledge needed to improve inclusion of autistic users and their families in the United States of America. Though geographic context differs, Dr Romeijn-Stout noted that the current political climate in the United States has also resulted in funding cuts. However, the toolkit helps strengthen the aims of this research relating to barriers to inclusion and recommendations for future practice.

When questioned on the main barrier to inclusion for autistic users, she noted social barriers are the main hurdle to overcome. This includes the disconnect between library staff and both neurotypical and neurodiverse users. Despite regular outreach attempts for different populations of people, the same consideration is not extended to autistic users, leaving their needs unrealised and unmet. In addition, Romeijn-Stout noted that many of the families in her research had negative experiences with their local library due to the normative expectations held by both staff and other users leading to them feeling ostracised. Awareness is necessary for acceptance, if autistic users are to feel comfortable utilising the facilities available. Romeijn-Stout states:

Social barriers are the largest barriers for folks using the library. It's not even necessarily a lack of sensory kits or a lack of a suitable environment, it's more so the fear of judgement ... the fear of being told the need to leave.

While breaking down social barriers is important, Romeijn-Stout also provides recommendations on adapting the physical environment in libraries to suit autistic users with potential sensorial discomfort. The Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit already discusses this topic at length, but Romeijn-Stout provided additional recommendations for libraries under financial strain.

The provision and advertising of sensory kits can significantly contribute to building acceptance and ensures autistic users feel welcome. When questioned about the most important items to include, she responded:

"I think if you have, you know, a small amount of funding, if you can get those earmuff headphones and some sunglasses, those are probably the heavy hitters of the sensory kind. They help with the harsh lights"

In addition to sunglasses, Romeijn-Stout recommended changing fluorescent lights and trying to use natural light as much as possible, although she appreciated this may not always be reliable in winter months. An inexpensive solution to cover light sources with greaseproof paper will lessen the brightness but may not help with the gentle hum emitted by some lights which some users find uncomfortable. Hyperacusis could also be catered for by the provision of additional sound proofing, if space is limited. Soft furnishings like quilts and cushions can help muffle distracting or distressing sounds.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Librarians' Experiences**

Reliance on the heightened awareness and observations of staff to serve the autistic users highlights the lack of effort which is put into meeting their needs. Personal interest or experiences led each librarian in this research to participate but this may not be indicative of all librarians on the Scottish Isles. While the intuition of each participant shone through, it is a disservice to autistic users to effectively leave the quality of their service to chance.

It is essential proper, formal training should be made available for library staff. Improved knowledge and awareness of autism will benefit both library staff and users alike. Increased knowledge will help librarians recognise common blocks to inclusion such as sensory difficulties or communicative barriers. It will also help library staff work towards abolishing these barriers to provide an improved inclusive service for autistic users. Awareness in the way autistic people may present themselves in social situations can ensure unexpected behaviours are no longer unexpected. The lack of training received by the participants is not unique to the Scottish Isles, as it is regularly cited as a barrier to inclusion in literature (Braumberger, 2021; Paynter et al., 2020; Anderson and Robinson, 2024).

In an ideal world, autistic users would feel comfortable to verbalise their needs to library staff. However, this may be very uncomfortable for a lot of autistic users. Mandatory training would give more librarians the skills to observe and deduce, like the librarians in this study. It would likely also benefit autistic users if it was made obvious that the libraries are taking steps to provide a more inclusive service. In the small, remote libraries focussed on in this research, it may not be possible to host autistic specific events or provide autism friendly spaces due to space or staffing issues. However, being seen to make visible strides towards inclusion can help assure autistic users that they are welcome and valued in public libraries and may encourage them to speak to library staff if they had any concerns. Considerate signage, welcoming statements or posters are small changes which may have a big impact on autistic users and may help reduce social anxieties (Paynter et al., 2020). This is in concordance with Paynter et al. (2020) who note that signalling a willingness to cater to the needs of autistic users will create a welcoming atmosphere.

While consideration should be made for financial struggles in the sector, the value of training should not be diminished. However, it does not need to be a great expense. The Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit is a free service which can provide staff with a very good introduction to the autism spectrum. It also provides suggestions for adaptations which can be made to public spaces to help autistic users feel more comfortable. Section 5.3 of this research covers a discussion with a researcher involved with the toolkit, Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout. Romeijn-Stout provides cost effective suggestions to adapt a library space. While increasing funding cuts are a barrier to the library experiences of both neuro-divergent and neurotypical users, there are still options available. While suggestions have been made to mitigate financial constraints on libraries, this is not to be interpreted as an endorsement of continued funding cuts. Rather, these adaptive strategies can help library staff operating under increasingly limited resources. Such measures may offer temporary relief, but they are not sustainable substitutes for the adequate funding to ensure an inclusive library service.

## **5.2 Autistic Users' Experiences**

Participants' experiences in these smaller, remote libraries, reflect much of the literature based in more urban environments such as those reported in research by Anderson (2021). The sample size of this research is small, and the self-selection of the participants likely inadvertently excludes autistic people with less confidence or limited social skills. However, similarities in the findings in this research to other pieces of literature suggest that while the findings may not be representative of every autistic person, they are certainly indicative of some of the barriers to inclusion they experience when utilising their local library.

Due to the nature of autism, with different presentations of the disorder, a one sized-fits all approach will not benefit all users. While some users will feel comfortable talking to library staff, others will prefer to be left to their own devices. Knowing the customers and recognising their needs is an important skill to ensure good service for all users, but it will particularly help to make autistic users feel comfortable and welcome. While White (2021) noted that it is difficult to cater to each autistic individual, this is less of a barrier for libraries in smaller communities where staff and users are more likely to have familiarity. This positive should be utilised. Autistic users may not feel comfortable verbalising their needs, but through observation library staff may be able to personalise their service. Interviews with the librarians suggest that some are already skilled in observing the needs of their autistic users. With some additional training this would be achievable for all staff and would ensure autistic users feel welcome and understood.

Experiences of the autistic users are likely to be common through neurotypical and neurodiverse users of small, rural libraries. While further research would be required to confirm, it would not be a stretch to imagine that limited book selections and library closures are a hindrance for the general population. However, the effects of these barriers are more likely to impact users with autism. With the general population, a limited selection of books can be overcome by ordering online. What may be a mild annoyance for neurotypical users could present a more substantial barrier for autistic users, considering the higher rates of unemployment within the autistic community. Financial burdens are likely felt greater by autistic people, who statistically struggle to gain meaningful employment in comparison to neurotypical peers. This may be a difficult barrier to overcome, due to funding cuts. However, library staff could help autistic users to find other materials online of interest to them to mitigate this.

## **5.3 Professional Insight**

While the landscape between large American, urban libraries and small remote Scottish Island libraries differs greatly, there are similarities in experiences in both settings. The perspective of Dr Romeijn-Stout complements those of the participants in this study. Both countries are witnessing funding cuts to their public libraries and social barriers are limiting meaningful inclusion for autistic users. While

these cuts are a barrier in the provision of adequate services for both neurotypical and neurodiverse users, Dr Romeijn-Stout provides pragmatic low-cost considerations which can improve the environment for autistic users. Adapting the physical environment is important to ensure the comfort of autistic users. However, it can be a response to their needs and not a tokenistic gesture in these less populated areas. The libraries on the Scottish Isles may not currently serve users who experience discomfort with certain sensory inputs, so it is not necessary to spend valuable funds adapting the environment without knowledge that it will benefit anyone.

Unfortunately, the social barriers reported by Romeijn-Stout are not exclusive to the U.S. and are also reported by participants in this research. Her observation that social judgement is often a greater barrier than physical discomfort resonates with participant 5's concern about bringing her daughter to the local library for fear she may cause a disruption. Apprehension around shared social spaces and concerns about being misunderstood or being perceived to be causing a disruption are reported. Romeijn-Stout's emphasis on the emotional well-being of autistic users reinforces the idea that inclusion extends beyond material adaptations – it also requires cultivating a library culture that is genuinely welcoming and non-judgemental. Romeijn-Stout believes this begins with improving inclusion and awareness around autism and advocates for training for library staff. This aligns with comments from several island librarians who expressed a desire for more guidance on how to support autistic users but felt it was not provided. By promoting greater understanding of the needs of autistic users, staff can help them feel seen and supported. This can make steps towards reducing fear of judgement. Inclusive environments emerge not only through physical adaptations to the space but also through informed, empathetic human interactions. These findings suggest that while physical adaptations are important, they must be implemented alongside efforts to dismantle attitudinal barriers to promote a culture of empathy within library spaces.

These insights, alongside those from library staff and users, will be summarised in the recommendations section.

## **6. Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Research limitations**

The information learned from the literature review is considered in the recommendations. Insights from Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout are also very valuable in considering cost-effective recommendations. However, the shared experiences of the autistic users, parents and librarians are given more weighting. While research from more populated areas may offer larger sample sizes, it cannot capture the idiosyncratic differences experienced by those living life in the remote Scottish Isles.

The limitations of this research are recognised. It covers a small sample size. More pertinently, it is likely there is a positivity bias with the participants. Librarians can only report upon the autistic users who do visit the library and are likely unaware of potential users that feel unable to visit with the current set up. Also, the autistic participants each displayed comfort in social situations as they were able to attend online video interviews. This is unlikely to be indicative of the experience of all autistic users, due to communication barriers commonly seen in autism. Future research may include more inclusive methods to reach potential library users. However, the insights gained from this research are still very valuable in creating an introduction to library usage on the Scottish Isles. The lived experience of each participant has contributed to providing these recommendations to support inclusive practices.

## **6.2 Practical recommendations**

The following recommendations focus on staff training, advertising, getting to know the users and creating an environment which meets the needs of autistic users. The importance of staff training underpins every recommendation and is the most important step. It is hoped local councils will take these recommendations on board, recognising the need to consider a more inclusive approach.

### **6.2.1 Staff training**

The most common theme through every librarian's interview was the lack of training provided for them. The Autism-Ready Libraries Toolkit is a fantastic resource which can be utilised, overcoming both financial and geographical restrictions that in-person training may pose. Alternatively, partnerships with local autism charities may provide training with more emphasis on current Scottish practices.

While the librarians in this research were seen to be putting in time and effort to support their users, the lack of formal training left them questioning if they were doing the right thing. The provision of an inclusive service should be embedded in policy and practice, not reliant on individual initiative. Library staff should be provided with the necessary knowledge to provide quality service. The training should cover the nature of autism to give staff insight into how autistic users may present themselves so they may be recognised. Suggestions can be provided to create an inclusive space but due to the diversity of ways in which autism can manifest, giving staff the knowledge to recognise the individual needs of their autistic users would be beneficial. Teaching staff to communicate with autistic users or recognise their needs through observations would be an excellent way to provide a welcoming, inclusive space.

### **6.2.2 Advertise the new inclusive environment**

By providing training, staff will be given the necessary skills to provide a welcome social environment in which non-verbal communication is recognised. It is also important to advertise to the autistic users that steps are being taken to ensure they feel welcomed in the libraries. This is not widely practiced in libraries throughout Scotland, with very little mention online about inclusive practices. Libraries on the Scottish Isles can reverse this trend. Signage in the libraries alone will not reach the users who are not currently visiting the libraries. Advertisements in shops or local community centres, alongside posts on social media sites should be considered. This will ensure autistic users are made aware of changes to the inclusive practices.

### **6.2.3 Meet individual needs of the users**

Arguably one of the main benefits to the libraries on the Scottish isles is the ability to provide individualised service due to the lower footfall, particularly on the smaller islands. Each recommendation stems from the importance of providing training for staff. Once they have received training, staff will have developed the necessary skills to assess the needs of each user. This would be difficult in a large urban library, but possible in the small libraries in the Scottish Isles. Improved communication and understanding can help ascertain the needs of the users on an individual basis. As noted by Librarian 2, small changes made to their library such as choosing chair colours or placement of beanbags were based on observation of users and how they interacted with the space. By focusing on the needs of individuals rather than applying generalised strategies, libraries can demonstrate they are a truly inclusive environment.

Generalised recommendations for libraries are often made in consideration for large populations of autistic people. These recommendations may not be necessary in small, remote libraries. For example, while in a larger population it is probable there will be an autistic user who prefers the lights to be dimmed or noises to be limited, this is not necessary for every user. Understanding users' specific needs can prevent unnecessary or ineffective adaptations and ensure resources are used meaningfully.

### 6.2.4 Low-cost adaptations

Dr Milly Romeijn-Stout outlined several cost-effective strategies to adapt the library spaces, if necessary. A sensory kit should be provided in each library which can help autistic users overcome any sensory discomforts they may experience in the library. In concordance with section 5.2, it is essential that these sensory kits are advertised and readily available if required.

In quieter library environments, such as those on smaller islands, sensory aids such as ear defenders or additional soft furnishing to reduce echoes may be unnecessary. However, users in larger libraries may find comfort in the provision of ear defenders to limit auditory overstimulation. The provision of sunglasses or offering to cover lights with greaseproof paper can also help any users who feel uncomfortable with harsh, bright lights. Small fidget items can also help autistic users regulate themselves. While these small considerations will require a small expense, they are necessary to ensure autistic users can use the library spaces and feel welcomed in doing so.

### 6.3 Conclusion

This study successfully met the research objectives. The literature review established current good practices for inclusion, while the semi-structured interviews with librarians, autistic adults and parents of autistic children provided multiple perspectives. These interviews taught us how libraries on the Scottish Isles provide inclusive support and how this can be improved. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of key benefits, barriers and opportunities for improved practice, directly addressing the objectives exploring user experiences, staff practices and possible adaptations. While the sample size was small, the methodology captured rich personal experiences. The research illustrates how effective qualitative methods can be in exploring sensitive issues in small communities.

This research demonstrates that the small size of libraries on Scottish Isles does not need to be a negative to the inclusion of autistic users. In fact, the smaller space and smaller communities of many of these libraries can be an asset to inclusion. Library staff in the smaller communities are in a unique situation where they can provide a more personalised service which meets the needs of their autistic users.

Currently, inclusive practices are limited throughout Scotland, both on the mainland and the surrounding islands. While barriers to inclusion exist across Scotland, they are likely to be felt more intensely in remote areas where alternative services and support are less accessible. Participants in this research indicate that while they may use their local library occasionally, the library is currently not meeting their needs as users.

The most important recommendation to come from this research is that of the provision of staff training. This underpins every other recommendation provided in this research. It is imperative that library staff are given the necessary skills to help autistic users. Knowledge and awareness are vital to the provision of an inclusive practice. Library staff should be given the tools to recognise the specific needs and issues their autistic users are likely to experience. While this research does not concern a large part of the population, it does concern a group who are often underserved and whose needs requires greater attention. Quality services on the Scottish Isles are limited for autistic users. Care should be taken to ensure the services that are available provide an inclusive, welcoming space. With some small changes, libraries can provide that space.

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