

## Dyslexia Scotland – experiences of dyslexic people in education, criminal justice and the workforce

A submission for the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee on Neurodivergence in Scotland

### Introduction

This paper draws on quantitative findings from two recent Scottish surveys:

- the 2024 national research report ‘Towards a Dyslexia-Friendly Scotland?’, based on a survey of 1,420 dyslexic adults carried out in collaboration with the University of Glasgow;
- a national survey of 1,740 members of the general population of Scotland.

It also draws on Dyslexia Scotland’s Helpline data.

Further input draws on anecdotal evidence from Dyslexia Scotland’s services, including feedback from our members, local branches and Dyslexic Adult Networks.

The evidence consistently shows that dyslexic people face systemic barriers in both education and the workforce, not because of a lack of ability, but because systems are frequently inaccessible, practices and cultures lack awareness and understanding, and support is inconsistent. These also have consequences for the criminal justice system.



Research highlights the significant benefits of early identification, appropriate support and inclusive environments.

#### Context to our submission

Dyslexia is a language-based learning difference. Someone with dyslexia can have difficulties with learning to read and spell, working memory and processing speed. Dyslexia is life-long and genetic.

(Extract from Scottish working definition of dyslexia)

An estimated 10% of the general population is dyslexic – around 500,000 in Scotland - with around half having at least one other neurodivergent difference, including ADHD, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and autism (Dyslexia Scotland, 2024).

However, in Scottish prison populations, studies indicate a rate of 50% with dyslexia, a significantly disproportionate figure (Kirk & Reid, 2001).

#### About Dyslexia Scotland

Dyslexia Scotland is a national charity (SC000951). We campaign for a dyslexia-friendly Scotland, seeking to ensure that people with dyslexia of all ages have their rights met and can reach their full potential.

#### Experiences of dyslexic people in Education

##### Identification and assessment

Delayed identification is a critical issue within education. Earlier identification can mitigate against a number of negative life-long consequences.

Dyslexic learners can expect to attain less well than their peers, not through inability, but because of inaccessible education systems. In Scotland, school pupils with dyslexia have lower attainment levels than

pupils with no identified additional support need (Equality and Human Rights Monitor, 2023).

Our national survey of adults with dyslexia found that many adults were not identified as dyslexic until adulthood, with the average age of identification being 21 (Dyslexia Scotland, 2024). As a result, young people with dyslexia often leave school without comprehensive documentation of their learning needs, successful strategies, and reasonable adjustments. This information gap creates barriers in further education, employment, and accessing adult support services. Many must restart assessment processes, losing critical time and momentum during a critical transition period. For many, the cost of the dyslexia assessment is a barrier to the young person.

80% of our research respondents stating that the cost of independent assessment prevents or discourages identification, resulting in continued difficulties with literacy, participation in education and career development throughout adulthood.

In 2025, 57% of people contacting our Helpline sought access to assessment of dyslexia, indicating that identification is a priority need for our community (Dyslexia Scotland, 2025).

Late or missed identification has long-term mental health consequences. Rates of depression and anxiety in the Scotland's dyslexic population are three to four times higher than in the general population. Academic studies indicate that this is a consequence of a lifetime of education and work-based struggle, stigma and the daily effort of managing tasks that lead to cognitive overload (Dyslexia Scotland, 2024). Respondents

frequently described years of unexplained struggle, damaged confidence and self-esteem, and being perceived as ‘lazy’ or ‘not trying’, rather than being recognised as learners with different needs. Research by Dyslexia Scotland in 2025 confirmed that there is widespread misunderstanding among the general population of Scotland about what dyslexia is and what difficulties people with dyslexia experience (Dyslexia Scotland, 2025).

Women and girls are identified on average at least two years later than boys, meaning that the female demographic is further disadvantaged.

Access to support in schools, colleges and universities

Just over half of respondents (55%) reported having received support or assessment arrangements at some point during their education.

However, access to support was inconsistent, and many members of our community experienced gaps at key transition points, particularly from school to further or higher education.

Where support is provided, its effectiveness varies. While around four in ten of our research participants rated support as very or extremely helpful, a similar proportion found it only slightly helpful or not helpful at all. This reflects variability in learning establishments’ understanding of dyslexia, inconsistent implementation of adjustments, and support that does not always align with individual needs, further compounding the likelihood of reduced attainment and personal struggles due to inaccessible systems.

Anecdotal feedback highlights challenges in higher education, including long waiting times for disability or student support services, inflexible

teaching practices and a reliance on written content and materials, not conducive to dyslexic processing.

#### Emotional and educational impact

69% of respondents reported that dyslexia had negatively impacted their education or career opportunities. Educational experiences were closely linked to emotional wellbeing: many participants described anxiety, shame and loss of confidence stemming from unsupported learning difficulties. Those identified earlier in life were less likely to report severe mental health impacts, underlining the protective role of timely identification and support.

## Experiences in the Workforce

#### Employment outcomes and job performance

76% of research participants reported that dyslexia negatively affected how well they do their job.

Community members frequently describe difficulties from heavy administrative demands, time-pressured written communication, and inflexible systems that rely on speed, accuracy and volume of text.

#### Reasonable adjustments and workplace support

Only 41% of respondents reported receiving reasonable adjustments at work. Even where adjustments were in place, their effectiveness was mixed: three-quarters of those receiving adjustments rated them as not helpful, slightly helpful or only moderately helpful. This suggests that adjustments are often generic, poorly implemented or developed without meaningful input from the dyslexic employee.

Disclosure remains a significant issue. Some respondents reported managing without adjustments because they did not feel safe or confident disclosing their dyslexia, citing stigma, fear of being judged as incompetent, or previous negative experiences.

This has been further evidenced by a volume of enquirers requesting to anonymously sign an open letter of support for our manifesto; the fear of stigma being far greater than the potential positive outcome.

Access to formal support schemes designed to mitigate against challenges, such as Access to Work, often creates barriers. Community members highlight complex paperwork and prohibitive cognitively demanding processes.

#### Mental health and workplace culture

The research found rates of anxiety and depression among dyslexic adults to be three to four times higher than in the general population. Workplace experiences played a significant role in this, particularly where dyslexia was misunderstood or minimised. Nearly one-third of respondents reported experiencing bullying or discrimination at work due to their dyslexia.

#### Implications for the justice system

There is strong evidence that persistent failure at school can negatively affect the self-esteem of people with dyslexia and that this experience is associated with an increased risk of disengagement and deviant behaviour (Kirk & Reid, 2001).

Once individuals enter the justice system, systemic barriers frequently persist. These create obstacles at multiple stages, including police

interviewing, court proceedings, and the ability to cope with the stress of legal processes. Such barriers are compounded by common dyslexic processing differences, particularly difficulties with working memory, sequencing information, and managing reading-and-writing-intensive procedures within justice settings (Jamieson, 2022).

This cumulative pattern underscores the importance of early identification and support of dyslexia. They also highlight the need for justice, education and workplace systems to recognise and adapt to the ways dyslexic people process information.

## Conclusion

The evidence from ‘Towards a Dyslexia-Friendly Scotland?’ (2024) presents a clear picture, supported by anecdotal evidence: dyslexic people continue to face significant barriers in education and the workforce, rooted in systemic inaccessibility rather than individual capability. These have life-long, negative consequences, particularly for those entering the justice system.

Addressing these issues requires co-ordinated action across education, employment, justice and public services. Improving identification at a younger age, enhancing professional learning for educators, employers and criminal justice representatives, embedding inclusive design, eradicating stigma and fostering cultures that support disclosure and adjustment are all essential factors for inclusion. Doing so will not only reduce disadvantage but will also unlock the talents and potential of a

substantial proportion of the population of Scotland. Currently, Scottish education is not meeting the needs of, and enabling these individuals to reach their full potential. Addressing these issues will lead to economic benefit through improved educational outcomes, workforce participation and societal participation.

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