
Learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)

Version 4

1. Policy statement

Individuals with learning disabilities or people on the autistic spectrum have contact with criminal justice services including the police service at every point of the criminal justice system whether as a victim, witness or offender. They may experience problems making sense of and coping with the criminal justice system. This frequently results in higher levels of personal vulnerability and a greater potential for miscarriages of justice when contrasted with the experiences of the general population. It is estimated that 2% of people in the UK have a learning disability; only 25% of those people are known and supported by local health and social services.

People with a learning disability or who are on the autistic spectrum are significantly more likely to be victims of crime than non-disabled people especially amongst 16-34 year olds.

People with a learning disability or who are on the autistic spectrum are also at an increased risk of developing mental health problems compared to the general population.

Early police recognition of the possible learning disabilities of people they come into contact with is crucial to ensuring an appropriate and effective response and to ensure that everyone is treated fairly.

Police officers should not be expected to be able to identify a specific learning disability or whether a person is on the autistic spectrum but they must be provided with training, delivered jointly with health and social care partners including the third sector and service users, that enables officers to recognise when a person may have a learning disability or be on the autistic spectrum so that they can respond appropriately and effectively to their needs.

2. Responsibility

The National Board is responsible for all policy formation.

3. Summary

PFEW believes those individuals with learning disabilities or who are on the autistic spectrum whether they are victims, witnesses, suspects or part of the wider community need to have trust and confidence that the police service will respond appropriately and effectively to their needs. Building trust and confidence requires a long term commitment to engage with communities. A key component of this is Neighbourhood Policing.

PFEW believes that mandatory awareness training for all police officers on learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders should be developed and delivered jointly with health and social care partners including the third sector and service users. This will contribute to the delivery of a consistent and reliable service that means victims of crime are treated with respect and allegations of crime are taken seriously.

PFEW welcomes the actions for the College of Policing set out in *Think Autism*¹ to make improvements to the police curriculum and to develop Authorised Professional Practice (APP) to ensure that all officers have access to information regarding the legal and appropriate response to all incidents involving people with mental health and learning disabilities including autism. PFEW believes that the development of national awareness training should be undertaken in partnership with health and social care partners including the third sector and service users. Currently police training is disjointed and the use of online training is wholly ineffective; training should be classroom based. Policing training needs to include condition-specific awareness.

The development and delivery of national training in partnership with other agencies will minimise duplication of effort, maximise the use of training resources, facilitate partnership working and ensure information is up to date. The inclusion of practitioners and people who have a learning disability or are on the autistic spectrum in the development and delivery of training to officers will help dispel misconceptions and to increase officers' confidence in responding effectively to situations they find themselves faced with.

Specific training should be provided to police officers and custody detention officers in custody suites on identifying and dealing with detainees with learning disabilities or who are on the autistic spectrum so that appropriate reasonable adjustments and additional support can be provided.

There should be a statutory requirement for local health commissioning boards to provide custody suites with access to specialist learning disability staff to support assessments and the signposting of offenders with learning disability needs into appropriate services.

Force Medical Examiners should be fully trained to assess and treat detainees with learning disabilities to recognise when an Appropriate Adult for adults is required.

There should be a statutory obligation on any agency that provides Appropriate Adults for adults to ensure that they are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The statutory provision to provide Appropriate Adults for children or young people should be amended to provide the same accountability and consequences for failure for not providing Appropriate Adults for adults. In the meantime Forces must ensure that the rights and interests of people with learning disabilities or who are on the autistic spectrum in police custody are safeguarded through the provision of good quality Appropriate Adult schemes that are available both during and outside normal working hours.

All agencies have a vital role to play in working together with the police to protect victims and bring offenders to justice. The police should not be left to pick up the pieces as a consequence of cuts to other public services.

¹ Think Autism, Department of Health, 2014

PFEW supports initiatives for liaison and diversion services based at police stations so that people with learning disabilities, mental health illnesses and substance misuse problems, who are suspected of committing an offence and come into contact with the police, will have an assessment of their health needs. This will help ensure decisions about charging and sentencing take into consideration an individual’s health needs. It may also mean that appropriate support and treatment is given sooner which will help stop any re-offending.

4. Procedures/implementation

We will continue to press the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council, in partnership with health and social care partners including the third sector and service users, to develop and deliver national awareness training and APP for police officers and will review its implementation.

PFEW will press the National Police Chiefs Council to ensure that any new version of the Police National Computer can identify people with learning disabilities and accommodate information on what reasonable adjustments or additional support they might need.

Responsibility is delegated to the National Secretary and/or appropriate sub-committee.

	Author	Date	Review date	Change
Version 1	KP	June 2015	June 2016	
Version2	KP	June 2016	June 2017	Minor amendments
Version 3	KP-EP	June 2017	June 2018	Changes to include reference to actions for CoP & NPCC set out in Think Autism CoP issued APP August 2016
Version 4	KP	January 2019	June 2020	Minor changes

Signed by:



National Chair



National Secretary