

An autistic Open Research Librarian describes the moment she realised the large size of the NLISN community and learned that her difficulties were not that unique after all.



My name is Jo, and I am one of the founding co-chairs of NLISN. I work at Lancaster University Library on the Open Research Team and I have an MSc in Information Science. I have an NHS diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, received at the age of 36.

My career, and life outcomes, have been significantly affected by my neurodivergency, and it's only in my 40s that I've come to have the success I have now. It took me a long time and a lot of hard work to understand and

mitigate some of the issues I was having. As I considered developing my career even further, my initial reaction was that someone like me has gone as far as I could already. I could not find many role models that spoke openly about being a senior leader and autistic, and none that I knew of in my sector.

In the pilot year of NLISN, I wasn't sure if a network like this would be viable, as I presumed there were not that many people like myself – neurodivergent and working in libraries. As we completed our first scoping report as part of this pilot, I expected to get single figure respondents. But we didn't – we got 91. Later, in 2025 we have completed our first representation survey as NLISN. We will publish our findings as we process them – but for now we can make the statement that the number of respondents we had was around 1100.

The major thing I learned was that I definitely wasn't alone, and more than that, there was actually significant representation of neurodivergency in our sector. This was not what I was expecting at all! Far from being someone who has very low prospects for future progression, I was actually already in a sector that was suitable for someone like me. Seeing this level of representation challenged many of the assumptions I had internalised about what leadership and success were meant to look like. It also made clear that the barriers I had experienced were not something uniquely shameful, but were systemic issues that could be addressed.

This changes everything. I have changed my own beliefs about myself and the uniqueness of my struggle, and no longer think of myself as very different and much worse than my peers. But also, I have definitely changed my mind about whether career

progression is for me or not – in fact, for my work leading NLISN, I was named on the CILIP125 list of emerging leaders. What felt like a ceiling has become a platform for growth.

Ultimately, my experience at NLISN has reframed my understanding of my own potential and has shown me that supporting and celebrating neurodiversity is not just personally transformative, but also strengthens the sector as a whole. Seeing the scale of engagement has made it clear that neurodiversity is not a marginal issue within our profession. It is central to how we recruit, retain, and develop future leaders.

