



## **Safety Net Report**

### **Executive Summary**

Digital media can be a challenging landscape for anyone to navigate, but especially so for people with neurological conditions (e.g. stroke, brain injury, etc.) or who are neurodivergent (e.g. ADHD, autism). At a time where there are many different online platforms on which misinformation, extremist beliefs and scams can proliferate, it can be very difficult for our clients to stay safe. It is widely recognised that in the past decade, conspiracy theories and fake news sources have spread hugely, particularly online.

Our Safety Net project has delivered workshops, primarily to neurodivergent teenagers and to adults who are carers or who work in social care, educating participants about these potential dangers, and discussing how they can keep themselves—and others—safe.

Workshop material has included content on a wide variety of material, including: scams, grooming, catfishing, fake news and the manosphere.

Ultimately, we have delivered workshops to 449 clients in total, and data from post-session questionnaires and focus group interviews shows that we have had an impact on participants' awareness. It is difficult to know whether this will become long-term behavioural change, since our interventions have been limited to single workshops. If we were to continue this project, we would focus on a smaller number of participants, working with them over a longer period of time in order to properly track long-term impact.

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### **About The Brain Charity**

Based in Liverpool, The Brain Charity provides practical help, emotional support and social activities to anyone living with a neurological condition, as well as their family, friends and carers. We are unique in that we support people no matter which neurological condition they live with.

There are over 600 neurological conditions in total. Many are well-known and all too common, such as dementia, stroke, epilepsy, traumatic brain injury and multiple sclerosis. There are also very many conditions that only affect an unlucky few. For someone diagnosed with a rare condition such as trigeminal neuralgia or Alice in Wonderland Syndrome, life can become very lonely and frightening.

The impact of a diagnosis can be devastating and wide-ranging. Clients can lose control of their health and their lives. Many face unemployment, poverty and social isolation as a result.

We were set up 30 years ago out of a recognition that not enough support was being provided once neurological patients left the hospital setting. The genesis of The Brain Charity came from doctors at The Walton Centre NHS Neurological Hospital, who saw a need for patient to receive information, advice and support in the community.

Our mission is to provide activities, advice and support that improves people's wellbeing and quality of life. We champion neurodiversity, providing training to organisations across the sectors. We have a big ambition to fight loneliness, we guide people through the hard times and help them reach their potential.

Our core values are:

- Kindness – we welcome everyone to our charity.
- Commitment – we will travel side-by-side with everyone throughout their journey, no matter how complex, how long or how difficult.
- Authenticity – we are a community-led organisation.
- Courage – we are enthusiastic about taking on new challenges.
- Optimism – we believe that equality for people with neurological conditions is now within reach and will strive every day until prejudice and lack of opportunities are removed from society.

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## Background

The Brain Charity is at the forefront of the current neurodiversity movement, working to support people with neurological conditions and who are neurodivergent to help them reach their potential. We also work to improve acceptance and understanding in society of neurodiversity, including the additional challenges that neurodivergent individuals face.

The Brain Charity's initial project commissioned by Ofcom as part of their Making Sense of Media initiative stemmed from our recognition that many of our clients generally had lower levels of digital literacy compared to the general public, and this therefore led them to be more susceptible to online scams or fraud and more likely to be targeted. This is something that had been identified in previous community consultations, and although we offer I.T. classes as one of the activities we run from our centre, clients had requested more specific sessions on certain aspects of digital life.

We had identified that with regards to media literacy, our clients often find it difficult to:

- **Identify unreliable information themselves:** 32% of disabled individuals lack basic digital and media literacy skills, and many people with a neurological condition have not been taught critical thinking skills through education.
- **Make rational decisions around online interactions:** Loneliness and social isolation is one of the most common issues affecting our clients: in our last community consultation in 2022 we found that 65% of respondents were regularly affected by loneliness. This desire for human contact can leave them particularly vulnerable regarding online interactions; for example, several of our clients have been the victims of romance scams.

- **Identify risks without support**, such as a carer who is digitally literate or skills, and who can spot, double-check and advise against risks.

In addition, although The Brain Charity is a national charity, we have strong Liverpool roots (approximately 80% of our clients come from either Liverpool and Knowsley), and this project has been aimed at people from the wider Liverpool area. This is because these are areas of high deprivation (Liverpool and Knowsley are the 4th and 3rd most deprived local authority areas in England), which tend to experience additional disadvantages that compound digital illiteracy. Many are less likely to use technology due to either negative perceptions or inexperience due to the costs of digital technology. Not only do they find themselves socially isolated, but they also miss out on the benefits of online activity.

We would deliver this through a combination of:

- Group media literacy sessions delivered to clients.
- One-on-one support to clients with specific needs.
- Group media literacy sessions delivered to carers and care workers.


As we began to promote this project, however, we did not receive the uptake which we had envisioned when initially designing Safety Net. Although this was disappointing, what emerged from our first delivery sessions enabled us to pivot and deliver a project that was more cutting edge.

We redesigned our project, keeping the focus on helping neurodivergent and vulnerable individuals identify unreliable information (including scams), but with a heavy focus on:

- Common online scams.
- Online grooming.
- Extremist beliefs, such as common conspiracy theories found online, and the manosphere.


These are very hot-button issues which we found neurodivergent individuals are disproportionately vulnerable to.

## Examples of Workshop Content



# STAYING SAFE ONLINE

- Common types of online scam
- Online grooming
- Extremist beliefs
- How to report issues




## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- The anonymity the internet affords disabled people can be very liberating.
- The internet is not a 'safe space' and should be handled similarly to the "real world".
- Neurodivergent people particularly vulnerable.

**A man with a brain injury was scammed out of all of his money. He and his mother are calling on social-media companies to protect disabled people from con artists.**

Ordinary Citizens Jan 2 2021 8:04 PM





## Office on the web **ISM AND GROOMING.**

### 'Staggeringly high' number of autistic people on UK Prevent scheme

**Terror laws reviewer says criminal justice outcome not always right one for people with the condition**



© Lloyd Gunton, who has autism, was jailed for life after declaring himself an Islamic.

## RADICALISATION AND AUTISM.

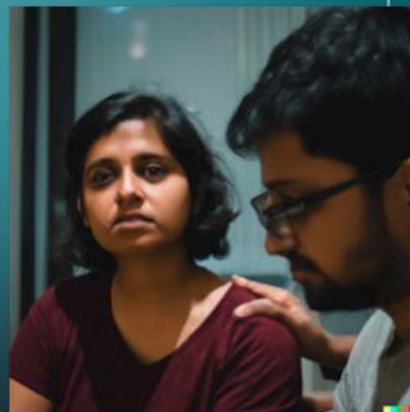
- Autistic people can be at risk of radicalisation due to a combination of factors, including social isolation, difficulty in communication and understanding social cues, a desire for structure and routine, and a tendency towards obsessive interests or fixations.
- These factors can make them more vulnerable to online propaganda and extremist ideologies, which can provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and structure.



## MATE CRIME.

Office on the web Frame

- Mate crime can happen anywhere.
- Neurodivergent kids/teens at risk.
- Trustworthy nature exploited.
- "Befriend" then exploit the person.



## CLICK TO ADD TITLE

A survey of 225 women found that "9 autistic women out of 10 are sexually victimized" — Frontiers behavior neuroscience 2022

This is 3x the average rate...

## Evaluation Aims and Scope

Our evaluation has aimed to measure the impact of our sessions on five elements:

1. Participants' ability to recognise scams online (or those received via email or text).
2. Participants' ability to protect themselves from online scams.
3. Participants' understanding of more serious matters online e.g. grooming, catfishing, etc.
4. Participants' understanding of conspiracy theories, fake news and the manosphere.
5. [To carers and social workers only]: Participants' confidence in being able to support others to stay safe online.

In total, our project has delivered 29 workshops, engaging a total of 449 people on the Safety Net project. This breaks down to:

258 people who are neurodivergent or live with a neurological condition.

191 people who are carers or work in social care.

We did not carry out monitoring on every single cohort who attended Safety Net workshops, but on a roughly indicative 236 participants (137 neurodivergent participants, and 99 carers).

We asked delivered the following four/five question survey after each workshop:

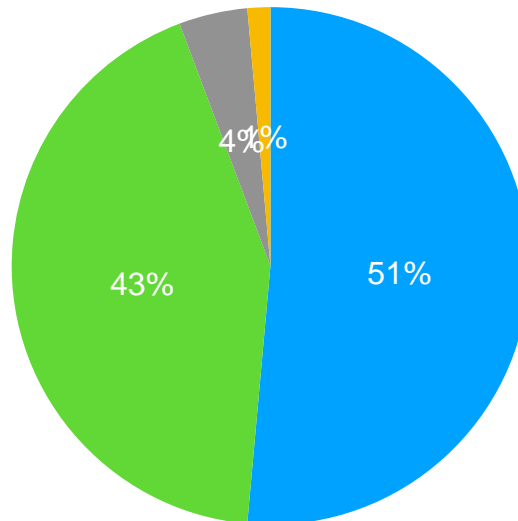
1. How much more prepared/equipped do you feel to spot scams online or through email/text?
2. How confident do you feel in protecting yourself from online scams compared to before the workshop?
3. How knowledgeable do you feel in terms of understanding more serious matters online (e.g. grooming, catfishing, etc.)?
4. How knowledgeable do you feel in terms of understanding conspiracy theories, fake news and the manosphere?
5. How much more confident do you feel in being able to protect others to stay safe online compared to before the workshop?

We also carried out several interviews with focus groups who had attended workshops. These were carried out by Brain Charity staff members or volunteers who had not been involved in delivery of the Safety Net project, in order to reduce bias and make interviewees feel at ease.

## Findings

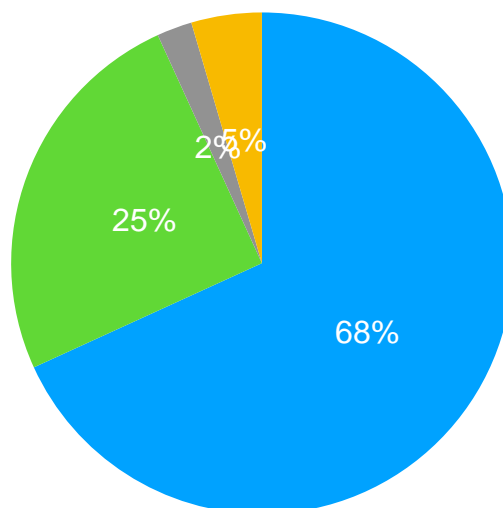
1. How much more prepared/equipped do you feel to spot scams online or through email/text?

■ Very   ■ Fairly   ■ Don't Know   ■ Not Very



2. How confident do you feel in protecting yourself from online scams compared to before the workshop?

■ Much More   ■ A Bit More   ■ Stayed the Same   ■ Don't Know

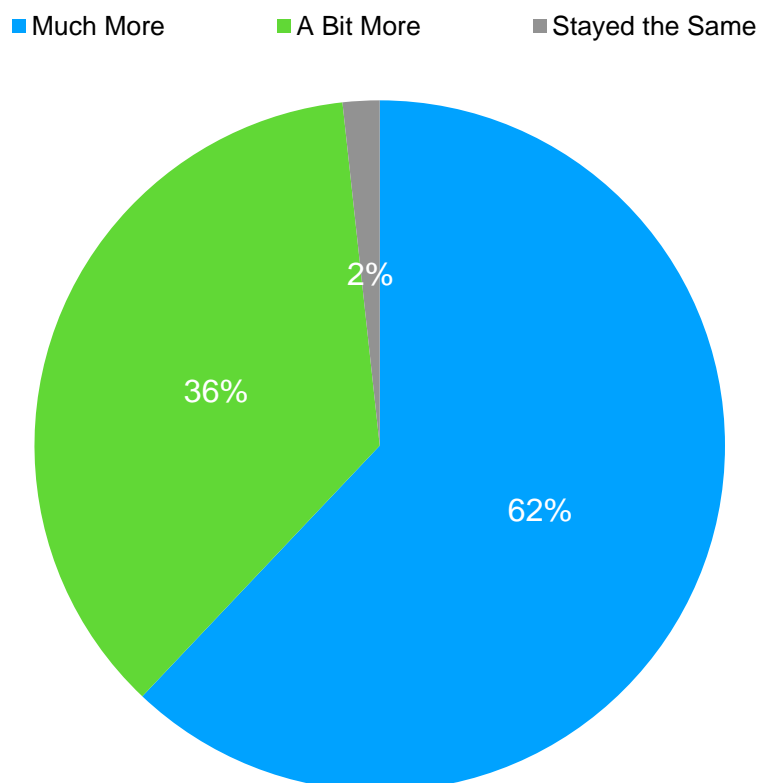


Here we can see that almost all (approx. 95%) of participants reported that, following a Safety Net workshop, they felt more equipped to notice online scams, with around half of all participants saying that they were very confident in this area.

Of all the areas covered by our project, scams was the one in which we found that clients had the most prior knowledge and understanding. It was the links between neurodivergent conditions and increased risk that people in our focus group interviews commented on as being particularly enlightening: “Finding out about ‘how’ scams/exploitation work on a practical level and then ‘why’ neurodivergent people are more susceptible was so useful from a professional and personal perspective” - from a carer.

Several of the focus group participants who worked in social care or were a carer themselves remarked that they had had their eyes opened to just how wide the range of potential scams that their children or the people they care for might be at risk from.

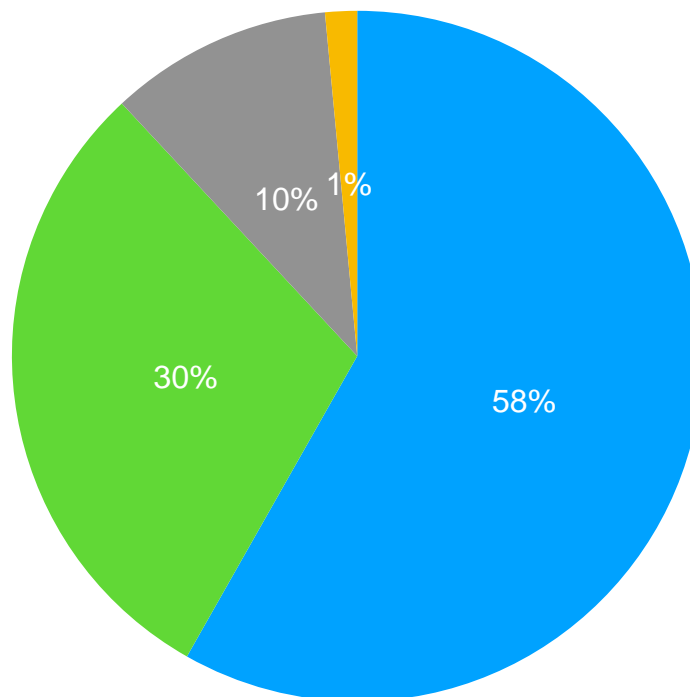
### 3. How knowledgeable do you feel in terms of understanding more serious matters online (e.g. grooming, catfishing, etc.)?





4. How knowledgeable do you feel in terms of understanding conspiracy theories, fake news and the manosphere?

■ Much More    ■ A Bit More    ■ Stayed the Same    ■ A Bit Less



The sections of the workshops that focused on more serious matters online, conspiracy theories and the manosphere proved to be most divisive. Although the data from post-session questionnaires demonstrates that most (89%) left with increased understanding, many workshops did feature healthy and robust debate from many participants (particularly in sessions delivered to teenagers in school), often presenting challenging views themselves.

In one of our focus groups comprised of neurodivergent school children aged 15-18, one participant mentioned that, in the workshop they had attended, one attendee had held similar views to Andrew Tate and other leading figures in the manosphere. This should perhaps not be surprising: almost half the young men aged 16-24 (45%) polled by HOPE Not Hate reported that they held a positive view of Andrew Tate, and significantly more had heard of him (79%) than Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (58%).

Some of the respondents in our focus group worried that this could therefore have the opposite of the workshop's intended effect, that more participants could be influenced to take his views seriously, views that have been widely condemned as misogynistic.

All of the young attendees were regular users of social media, and one of the ways in which they engage with media is by sharing the content they see on social media with their friends: "I say to my friends, if you see a funny video, send it to me. You're living through a kind of social media world, as opposed to, you know, maybe an older generation would go off [the app] after looking at it. I'll share this with you via WhatsApp. That's what we do." Another respondent, however, said that they did not only share content that aligned with their own personal beliefs, for example stating that they might share an Andrew Tate video, not because they agree with the content, but simply to share it more widely with their friends. In fact, they appeared particularly eager to share this type of content, rather than others that might perhaps be considered purely entertainment (e.g. the example cited was cat videos, which they said 'always get shared everywhere'), perhaps because they considered this

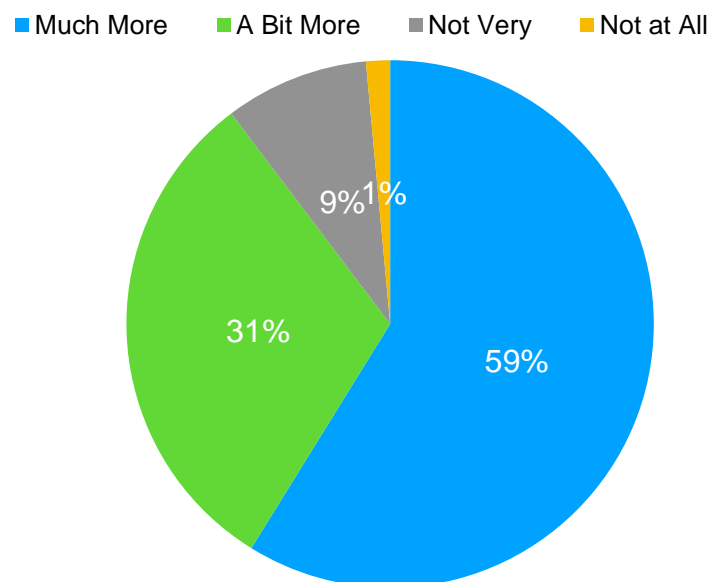
type of content to be deserving of a larger audience. They believed that they were sharing the videos from a detached, non-partisan position.

This was interesting since it demonstrated how people are able to access this type of content from a wide range of sources, including their friends who might not necessarily agree with it. This may be particularly challenging for neurodivergent people, particularly those who might not fully understand the political ramifications of doing so.

The material on conspiracy theories was particularly engaging for many participants: it is the kind of topic that many neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with hyperfixations, can take huge interest in—something recognised as both a positive and a potential danger. Some participants left the workshops claiming that the material on conspiracy theories was not relevant to them (“I don’t think this made any difference to me”—note that 10% of questionnaire respondents said that their understanding of conspiracy theories stayed the same). However, these views were a minority, and the data from the questionnaires demonstrates that most attendees found the material enlightening and useful.

The importance of questioning the provenance of online information was emphasised, something that can perhaps be difficult for some neurodivergent people, who may at times be disposed to take things at face value. For example, many popular conspiracy theories on the internet were mentioned during workshops—but it was emphasised that none had been verified by any reputable sources.

**5. How much more confident do you feel in being able to protect others to stay safe online compared to before the workshop?**



From our focus groups, we have found carers and people working in social care have benefitted the most from confidence boosts in being able to protect the people they support. Some certainly found it scary at first, since they were having their eyes opened to just how many potential dangers and pitfalls there are online for neurodivergent individuals. However, the data above reflects how 90% of participants left with increased confidence to help others

stay safe, even if this just meant challenging them on something that they might have read online.

The underlying problem continues to be a low level of general understanding around neurodivergence. For example, it was discussed that in schools, it can be very difficult for teachers to pick up instances where students are facing online dangers, not only because they can be very secretive about those things, but also because students' neurodivergence may not always be visible. They may be masking, they may not be diagnosed, or the staff may not be trained in neurodivergence.

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## **Legacy, Learning and the Future**

In addition to delivering the workshops, we have created two resources for future use, which will be submitted along with this report:

1. An extensive glossary of terms related to online safety, including websites, notable figures spreading fake news or who are members of the manosphere, common terms used in extremist online communities that target neurodivergent individuals, and a list of links to reputable sources on this topic. This is meant to be a helpful guide so that people, especially carers, know what to watch out for.
2. A podcast series, hosted by our Safety Net Media Literacy Trainer Alistair Barfield, interviewing experts in the fields of extremism and online safety.

Overall, we believe that the Safety Net project has managed to make some impact on local neurodivergent young adults, particularly through helping to educate people working in healthcare and social care. Our largest delivery partner has been the NHS, and we have delivered sessions to all the autism teams for Merseyside, as well as the autism champions and school nurses for Knowsley, Liverpool and Sefton.

The project's major strength has been the fact that it was delivered by someone who is autistic themselves. Each session included time to ask questions, and we found that not only did participants ask questions about workshop content, but also just wanted to speak to someone with lived experience of neurodivergence. It is incredibly important to have someone from the community elucidating the problem and working to find solutions.

If we were to run this project again or continue to deliver, we would take a longer-term approach, focusing on how engagement with the material impacts behaviour and online media literacy habits over a period of time.

The fact that we have been able to engage 449 individuals from a range of different groups and organisations in only a short fixed-term project demonstrates the huge demand for this kind of training: neurodiversity is one of the current buzzwords, and we should not pass up this opportunity to shape their experience of online media to be safer and more fruitful.