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‘You need to feel safe’: Co-designing inclusive police interview spaces, considering the spatial and the sensory aspects

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Abstract

People with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic/neurodivergent are more likely to experience sexual violence. When they report, they are less likely to be believed or to receive appropriate support. There is limited research that considers the impact of the environment where victims of crime give evidence on victim testimony. Specific issues include the location and layout of interview rooms, background noise, harsh lighting, and other sensory stressors. This study focuses on the views, experiences and recommendations of victim-survivors of sexual violence. The research team worked with 10 co-researchers with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic/neurodivergent to understand how police interview spaces affect how people feel and communicate. We held three online workshops, and a participatory walk through of a police space. The study found that sensory overload from the physical environment can make it harder for people to understand the information provided and the questions asked during the interview and to formulate a response. It shows the importance of flexibility in interview room design and presents practical recommendations. Working with co-researchers with lived experience , it calls for inclusive, trauma-informed, and person-centred responses in the criminal justice system.

Introduction

Research with disabled victim-survivors of sexual violence demonstrates that the gap between the number of actual assaults and reported ones is more substantial for disabled victim-survivors. These are compounded due to barriers like limited support, disbelief, and assumptions about credibility (Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023). While drawing on wider disability research to highlight systemic patterns, the literature below identifies how findings relate specifically to people with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic/neurodivergent.

Research in the UK shows that people with learning disabilities are disproportionately affected by sexual violence compared to those without learning disabilities (Willott, Badger and Evans, 2020; Dike et al., 2023; Majeed-Ariss et al., 2023). The Stern Review highlights that police acknowledge their increased risk of repeat victimisation (Stern, 2010). However, reporting remains low. There is also limited evidence on how the spatial design of police environments affects victim-survivors’ engagement with the justice system.

People with learning disabilities are often excluded from research participation due to gatekeepers - individuals with formal or informal roles such as care home managers, support workers or family members who can enable or restrict access to potential participants (Williams, 2020) or inaccessible research design (Cook et al, 2015). Few studies have engaged ‘experts by experience’ (examples include: (McCulloch *et al.*, 2021; Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023; Jobe and Williams, 2025) in representing their lived experiences and co-create recommendations for inclusive police responses. Experts by experience refer to those whose knowledge is lived rather than learned. In the context of this research, this refers to lived experiences of sexual violence and navigating the criminal justice system, including reporting to the police.

This article presents findings from a participatory study with experts by experience as co-researchers who contributed to shared decision-making in the research process. This included identifying priority topics, methods design and analysis. The article explores recommendations from experts by experience for enhancing police interview settings to promote a more inclusive environment. By centring lived experience, we advocate for inclusive, trauma-informed, and person-centred reform.

Throughout this article, identity first language will be used in relation to disabled people. Co-researchers had different preferences in terms of how they preferred to be described. Some co-researchers preferred identity first language such as Autistic person or Autistic victim survivor, while others described themselves using person first language such as women with learning disabilities and/or autism, or women with learning disabilities, neurodiversity and autism. We have used these descriptions faithfully. To reflect person first and identity first language preferences, we have used 'victim survivors with learning disabilities and/ or Autistic victim-survivors' throughout this paper.

Barriers to justice for victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/ or autistic/ neurodivergent victim-survivors

Despite decades of advocacy and research, victim-survivors of sexual violence with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic/neurodivergent face barriers in reporting sexual violence and accessing justice (Willott et al., 2020; Majeed-Ariss, Rodriguez and White, 2020; Hollomotz et al, 2023; Williams and Jobe, 2024; Jobe and Williams, 2025). In the UK, Jobe and Williams (2025) identified systemic barriers such as learning disabilities not being recognised, poor communication and inadequate support. Hollomotz et al. (2023) highlighted limited accommodation of accessibility and communication needs. Barriers also include inaccessible spatial environments, such as police stations and court rooms, that make it difficult for people with learning disabilities to give evidence or report crimes (Edwards, 2013). These studies underscore how factors that increase vulnerability to sexual violence also hinder access to justice, magnifying victim-survivors' exclusion and risk of further harm. Justice includes formal procedures and the justice interests of victim-survivors such as recognition, validation, and support (McCulloch *et al.*, 2021)

Victim-survivors of sexual violence with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent victim-survivors often report not being believed or taken seriously (Jobe and Williams, 2025). A systematic scoping review found discriminatory responses were based on inaccurate beliefs about people with disabilities (Bach et al., 2021). These beliefs include assumptions that people with learning disabilities are prone to lying, are sexually promiscuous, or incapable of providing reliable testimony, contributing to lower quality investigations and poor case outcomes (Keilty and Connelly, 2001; McGilloway, Smith and Galvin, 2020; Williams and Jobe, forthcoming). Taken together, barriers to justice include societal attitudes, inaccessible environments, and systemic communication gaps.

Police interviews: implications for victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/ or autistic/ neurodivergent victim-survivors

Police interviews with victim-survivors and witnesses are crucial in obtaining information of sufficient quality to convince the Crown Prosecution Service in the UK to charge a suspect (Stokoe *et al.*, 2020). Recent policy developments in England and Wales, such as Achieving Best Evidence revisions and Operation Soteria promote victim-centred and trauma-informed approach, supporting police's strengths and capacities for responsive interviewing.

Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) in Criminal Proceedings guidance outlines adjustments for interviewing witnesses with learning disabilities such as preparing them for the interview to

reduce distress, involving a registered intermediary to support different communication needs and providing alternative methods of communication (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Operation Soteria is a new national operating model to improve police responses to reports of sexual violence, introduced in England and Wales in 2023 (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024). While an early evaluation of victim experiences suggests that Operation Soteria has improved victim-survivor experiences overall, there remains more to be done to improve police responses to disabled victim-survivors, and to improve these victim-survivors' experiences of reporting sexual violence (Victims Commissioner, 2025).

Jobe and Williams (2025) argue that procedural compliance-focused approaches prioritise credibility and consistency, often overlook or misunderstand emotional, sensory, and communication needs. This contributes to perceptions of unreliability (Williams and Jobe, 2024). Inconsistencies in responses can stem from officers' limited ability to recognise learning disabilities or communication needs, often relying on an official diagnosis to signpost support (Jobe and Williams, 2025). Not recognising needs can significantly impact the quality of the evidence, including not accommodating differences in articulating and sequencing events.

These challenges reflect systematic issues such as limited training, supervision and organisation pressures to follow procedural guidance (Stokoe *et al.*, 2020; Åker and Johnson, 2020). Some UK officers also struggle to balance establishing empathetic rapport, and meeting forensic objectives, resulting in questioning styles that may seem unsympathetic or even hostile (Stokoe *et al.*, 2020). Victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent victim-survivors may struggle to understand focused direct questioning styles and can encourage compliant or inaccurate responses (Cederborg and Lamb, 2008; Åker and Johnson, 2020).

There is also limited understanding of how spatial design of criminal justice environments affect victim-survivors, particularly in spaces where victim-survivors are interviewed by the police. Overlooking communication and sensory needs can risk retraumatisation, distress, contributing to reduced coherence of accounts and contribute to perceptions of unreliability (Gudjonsson, 2010). These issues can contribute to attrition (Jobe and Williams, 2025).

Some examples of good practice exist. The Barnahus model offers a trauma-informed approach to interviewing child victims of violence, which may provide a useful template for approaches to interviewing vulnerable adult victims. The model demonstrates how supportive interview settings promote feelings of safety and facilitate disclosures (Johansson et al., 2017; Stefansen, 2017). Gibbs et al. (2023) similarly found that autistic adults and their parents felt supported when the police listened to their needs, gave enough time to process and responded with respect and politeness, reflecting trauma-informed principles. These experiences contributed to participants' willingness to seek police help in the future.

Addressing sensory processing, trauma, and intersecting needs in police environments

Sensory processing differences shape individuals' experiences of police environments and the justice process. A Canadian study by Salerno-Ferraro and Schuller (2020) explored police interactions with the autistic community, and found that autistic participants experienced sensory overload while they were in police environments due to loud noises and strong smells. These responses were often misinterpreted as resistance, guilt, or aggression, leading to negative interactions. The British Standards Institution (2022) offers guidance on designing spaces for different sensory processing needs including heightened sensitivity (hypersensitivity) or reduced sensitivity (hyposensitivity) to sensory stimuli. Hollomotz et al.

(2023) found that disabled victim-survivors wanted inclusive support services that reflect their lived experiences. They describe welcoming spaces as having warm interiors with soft furnishings, tea and coffee in the waiting area and adjustable light settings, aligning with British Standards Institution's (2022) recommendations. Edwards (2013) critiques the inflexibility of criminal justice systems in Ireland that often construct the identities of disabled people based on their vulnerability and incapacity.

Ridout (2020, 2022), from the UK, in a first-hand account describes how practitioners overlooked her sensory overload, affecting her ability to process information and communicate. Dike et al. (2023), in a systematic review of studies of sexual violence among autistic individuals, similarly note how research across 22 studies suggests autistic victims are more vulnerable to emotion regulation difficulties and sensory processing differences following trauma, potentially affecting the interview quality. Inconsistent verbal and emotional cues may result from sensory overload and may be used to question credibility. Collectively, these studies span justice systems in multiple countries and contexts and highlight the impact of the physical environment of police spaces that influences victim-survivors' decisions to engage in the criminal justice system or to withdraw.

Strengths-based approach through participatory co-design

This study adopts a strengths-based approach that recognises individuals with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent individuals as experts by experience. It builds on Hollomotz's (2009) call of seeing beyond individuals' vulnerability. Design frameworks such as spatial justice (Piedade et al., 2025), trauma-informed design (Gregory & Zborowsky, 2025; Rosato, 2025), and user-led service development (British Standards Institution, 2022) advocate for environments that support agency, flexibility, and inclusion. These principles align with participatory research with survivors of violence (Fiolet et al., 2024; Jumarali et al., 2021), which promotes autonomy, control, and voice. This study draws on these frameworks to co-design inclusive police interview spaces that respond to the diverse needs of victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/or autistic/ neurodivergent victim-survivors.

McGoldrick et al. (2025) underscore the need for an individualised and flexible approach. The British Standards Institution (2022) recommends engaging neurodivergent stakeholders in co-design of spaces to reduce environmental stressors. These principles align calls for criminal justice environments and responses designed by and for disabled survivors (Hollomotz et al., 2023; McCulloch et al., 2021; Ridout, 2022; Jobe and Williams, 2025). Research with lived experienced women in Australia finds that survivors' view of justice as linked to being listened to, believed, and supported (McCulloch et al., 2021). Centring victim-survivors' voices contrasts with the exclusion and silencing that they often experience, especially in navigating the criminal justice system.

Methods

The study was a small-scale qualitative study, following a participatory action research (PAR) design. The PAR approach enables people with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic/neurodivergent to contribute a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives, which are often overlooked in traditional research (MacLeod, Lewis and Robertson, 2014). This study adopted a participatory, trauma-informed, and inclusive approach. A trauma-informed approach involves creating a safe environment that promotes victim-survivors' strengths and autonomy while sharing power through collaborative decision-making (Jumarali *et al.*, 2021). The study was co-designed with ten (10) lived experience co-researchers, alongside third-sector professionals. Data were generated through three online participatory workshops and a participatory walk-through of a police interview environment.

Participatory workshops

Three online workshops were conducted with ten co-researchers in England. Co-researchers were supported by a support worker or ISVA known to them, and the research team. The workshops were designed to adapt to diverse communication and emotional needs (Jumarali et al., 2021). Each session began with a check-in and ended with a wellbeing debrief.

Workshop 1: Rapport building and co-designing the research

Through visual cues and verbal prompts, the team built rapport through 'getting to know you' activities. We identified the co-researchers' hopes and expectations, and co-created a working agreement. The working agreement included values and ways of working together including using accessible language, allowing processing time, and taking regular breaks. The co-researchers co-designed the research by articulating how they wanted to contribute, such as speaking, typing in the chat, or through a support worker. They also identified the priority topics they wanted to discuss in the following workshops.

Figure 1: Workshop 1 discussion prompts

Workshop 2: Identifying 'good' and 'bad' spaces

Through breakout group discussions, the second workshop explored what made a space feel "good" or "bad," focusing on spatial design elements that co-researchers identified as impacting them most significantly, such as light, sound, and room size. Some examples of visual prompts include the figure below.

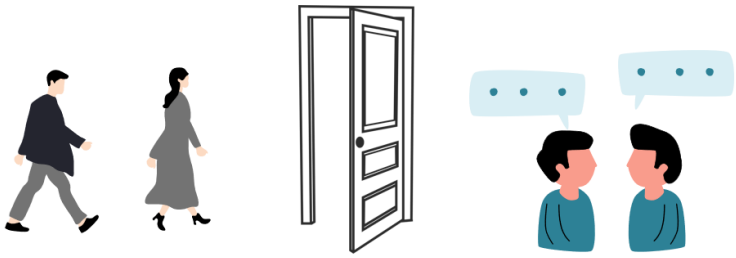

Figure 2: Workshop discussion prompt

Workshop 3: Co-designing inclusive police spaces

The third workshop involved reviewing photos of police spaces and co-designing inclusive interview environments through drawing and discussion.

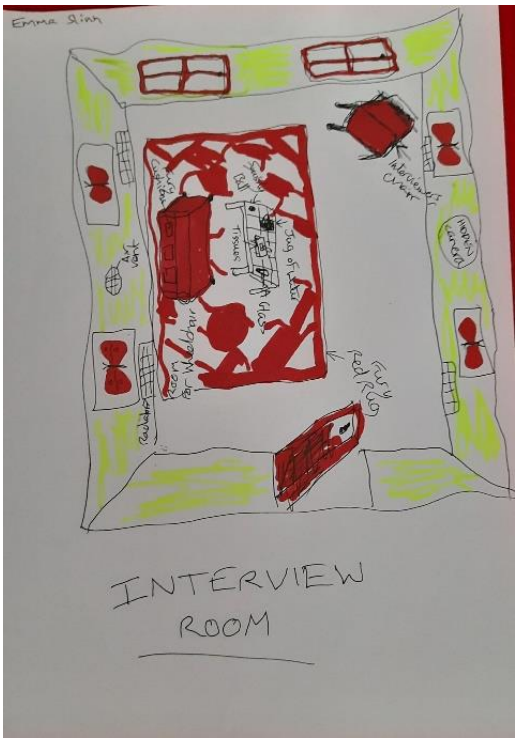

Figure 3: Workshop 3 creative output

Participatory walk-through

In addition to the participatory workshops, a participatory walk through of a police interview environment took place at local police interview suite. Police partners were interested to learn how they might adapt current interview spaces to enhance inclusivity. The participatory walking method enabled the participants to experience and reflect on the physical environment of a police interview spaces and other related areas. A similar approach was used by Holloway et al. (2020) with autistic individuals to research the police custody process. Participants included a lived experience co-researcher, and three third sector practitioners (an Autistic advisor, a former registered intermediary who assisted complainants and witnesses in the

criminal justice system and a learning disability Independent Sexual Violence Advisor). They were divided into two groups, each accompanied by a researcher and a staff member, following a participant's recommendation for a more manageable approach and to manage potential sensory overload for participants if they were in a larger group.

Participants visited key areas including waiting rooms, corridors, interview suites, and the live testimony room where witnesses can provide their court testimony remotely (Crown Prosecution Service, n.d). They made verbal observations, asked questions, and took notes. This open-ended, experiential method allowed autonomy to focus on aspects that mattered to co-researchers. Reflections were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Sociology, Durham University. Most co-researchers were engaged through two disability organisations via gatekeepers and support workers, with one engaged through a learning disability ISVA. The two groups had prior experience of working together and one group had worked with the research team on prior projects which is essential in promoting trust and rapport in the sessions given the sensitive topic of the research. The team ensured that the co-researcher recruited through the ISVA was supported in how she wanted to participate through regular check-ins, mindful of the group dynamics of other members who knew each other. Professionals were recruited through the research team's professional networks.

Verbal and written consent were obtained using accessible information sheets and consent forms. Verbal consent was offered as an option for those with difficulties in written communication. Consent was considered an ongoing process, and participants could take breaks or withdraw at any time. All participants were financially compensated for their time with a standard equitable rate in agreement with the organisations. To ensure anonymity, no identifiable information is included in this article. Support workers known to the co-researchers through the disability organisations engaged in the research facilitated post-session debriefs and provided emotional and communication support in all activities.

Data analysis

Data analysis integrates researcher-led analysis and collaborative analysis with the co-researchers. It involved iterative and concurrent data collection and analysis, wherein the co-researchers had an active role in shaping the discussions and refining the analysis. Multi-modal data such as field note reflections, discussion transcripts, and other visual data from the workshops and participatory walk-through were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach. This approach centres the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity, acknowledging the research team's role in knowledge production along with the co-researchers (Joy, Braun and Clarke, 2023). Transcripts were inductively coded, and preliminary themes were developed collaboratively. Collaborative dialogue with co-researchers helped validate findings and refine the analysis (Simpson & Quigley, 2016; Caretta & Pérez, 2019). Differences in experiences and opinions were discussed and reflected in the analysis (Caretta & Pérez, 2019).

Findings

Theme 1: Addressing the intersection of trauma, sensory needs, and disability in inclusive police response

This theme outlines how co-researchers described the interaction of trauma, sensory experiences and disability in police environments.

Sensory overload, trauma and distress

Co-researchers shared accounts of sensory overload and emotional distress during their police encounter:

> “I was in the police station, but I fell off the chair 3 times, I have a learning disability. No one was there to help me. My anxiety went straight through the roof.” (Co-researcher 2)

Another described leaving without reporting:

> ”I was made to sit and wait in the main entrance to the police station... and it took them so long to get anybody organized…I actually walked out and just went and cried in the car… and that held me up from reporting for several years… you're getting more and more agitated because people are coming and going, and you're just getting more upset.” (Co-researcher 3)

Several co-researchers remarked on the long waiting time in an unfamiliar room with other people and lack of privacy when reporting that contributed to their reluctance to engage with the system or made it an even more difficult ordeal.

Environmental barriers and the risks of re-traumatisation

Some co-researchers recalled how claustrophobic and uncomfortable rooms affect them more severely due to the traumatic experience:

> “Probably impact me more severely if I've had a traumatic thing, and then that yes, it might make me close up a bit more.” (Co-researcher 2)

Others described health implications of environmental barriers like strip lights: “It can also trigger my epileptic seizures.” (Co-researcher 4)

Another co-researcher added that she finds it difficult to talk to people in general but even more in unfamiliar and uncomfortable spaces like police stations.

Others raised concerns about privacy:

> “It's all not private as well. It's not something you want to be reporting to the desk sergeant… my dad did all the speaking for me. It didn't help me on my case, but it is what it is. I couldn't speak for myself.” (Co-researcher 5)

> “People maybe moving around in the street don't bother me, but if it's directly in the building, and it sounds like people are waiting behind the door, or you don't feel comfortable speaking about things that you don't know who's listening.” (Co-researcher 1)

Environmental factors could affect comfort in speaking which affected the quality of evidence they were able to provide. A co-researcher shared how layouts that require intense eye contact can make the experience distressing for her. Others felt that layouts that showed the camera in a visible place made them feel uneasy, ‘it's a bit intimidating, when you see a camera pointed right at you’ (Co-researcher 4). However, a former registered intermediary who joined the walk-through, noted that police officers often move furniture into ‘a standard default position’.

Supporting sensory needs in police interviews

Co-researchers described variability in their sensory sensitivity and needs throughout the day:

> “It depends on how you how well you are feeling that day as well for me sometimes, if I'm feeling really well, some of the things don't affect me as much, but if I'm not very well, all the sensory things are heightened.” (Co-researcher 4)

This could also affect victim presentation and mannerisms, which could influence how a victim is perceived:

> “I'll start getting a headache, but it'll be like weird. I'll start yawning and looking like I'm like, not interested, but it's I don't know why I have that reaction, but it's the lights that set it off.” (Co-researcher 1)

Co-researchers recommended allowing them to adjust things throughout the interview and having regular check-ins and breaks to see how they feel. Some felt that having cards to signal if they wanted to pause or stop was useful if they found it difficult to articulate it verbally. Meanwhile, others had a different opinion of their value based on practice and personal experiences.

A co-researcher shared her positive experience in a police interview of feeling supported.

> “I was told I could take a break anytime I wanted, and knowing that you have that option to go and reset your eyes... if I'm feeling I'm getting a headache, if I spend a few minutes just readjusting and go back in again.” (Co-researcher 2)

Theme 2: Person-centred and flexible adjustments to diverse needs

This theme describes how inflexible physical environments and inconsistent communication practices magnify structural inequalities for victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent victim-survivors.

Physical environment and sensory barriers

During the participatory walkthrough, co-researchers’ described how crowded layouts and fixed furniture created barriers for those with mobility challenges. They also noted the physical sensations resulting from a waiting room with auditory and visual sensory overload.

An Autistic advisor who joined the walk through explained:

> “The more sensory input I have, the less able I am to understand what's what. I become more and more dysregulated and less and less connected to what's happening.”

Choice of interview location and emotional impact

Co-researchers_in the workshop shared contrasting experiences related to choice and the impact of limited options for interview location. One described a positive experience where police respected her choice of interview location and allowed her parents to remain nearby. In contrast, another explained:

> “It was in an office behind the police station. It was like all the tables were pushed in the middle, with about 20 chairs around the side… ... it's more intimidating than the little poky prison rooms, because at least then you kind of fit the space, even if it's horrible.” (Co-researcher 1)

This account contrasts with how she wanted a space to feel comfortable and like a? ‘home’ when giving a statement about her traumatic experience.

Accessing adjustments and special measures

The co-researchers recalled difficulties in accessing special measures and accommodations. During the walk through, the ISVA highlighted the systemic barriers to requesting accommodations. They reflected that: “The problem you have sometimes [is if] what we ask for something, we [have to] go tooth and nail for it.”

They noted that this process often requires formal documentation like medical reports and highlighted the importance of pre-trial visits so the person can ask for adjustments. Without an intermediary or ISVA, many victim-survivors are left to navigate these barriers without specialised support.

Co-researcher (1) shared that some people like her might not know what they are allowed to ask for or how to say it. She describes how having a late diagnosis means that she is uncertain about what is reasonable adjustment so she would not ask at all.

Some co-researchers from the workshop stressed the importance of being asked about accessibility needs in advance such as hearing loops, interpreters, Braille and intermediaries.

Adjustments to diverse needs

Co-researchers in the workshops consistently emphasised that their sensory and emotional needs and preferences varied widely. Notably, what feels safe or helpful for one person might feel stressful or inappropriate for someone else. A co-researcher shared that dim lighting helps manage her migraines, while another requires brighter lights due to vision impairment. Several mentioned the importance of soundproofing to ensure privacy and not hearing distracting noises from outside. Meanwhile, regarding ventilation and airflow, having the option to open the window is useful to make the room feel less stuffy and warm. These differing needs underscore the importance of adjustable settings for light, sound, and temperature, as well as ensuring accessibility for different disabilities. These examples illustrate the range of preferences among individuals with varying sensory needs.

Theme 3: Participation and co-design as advocacy for justice

This theme describes how co-researchers viewed participatory and co-design methods as opportunities to share experiences and contribute recommendations for more inclusive police practice and achieving justice.

Challenging disbelief and exclusion

Several co-researchers recalled their experiences in police spaces and the criminal justice system, where they felt disbelieved, unsupported and dismissed:

> The police don't believe you when you tell them that something's happened to you (Co-researcher 5).

They also described the implications of the manner of the people engaging them within police spaces:

> The environment is also created by the people who are in that space with you... if the people in there don't take their time and aren't kind and patient or trained…That will still mean that that person is going to have a really negative experience. (Co-researcher 6).

For many co-researchers, this study represents an opportunity to contribute to change and is motivated by a shared desire to improve the system for others:

> Taking us seriously...because we have either learning disabilities or neurodivergent, we are classed as unreliable witnesses and I think that needs seriously addressing. (Co-researcher 3)

Co-designing safe and inclusive spaces

In the workshop and the walk-through, the co-researchers described what a safe and comfortable space could look like, frequently using the phrase “feels like a living room”.

A co-researcher explained:

> “You need to feel safe rather than in a clinician's like sort of place... I'd rather be somewhere I felt safe to talk about horrible things.” (Co-researcher 1)

Whilst there are varied preferences and sensory needs, recurrent recommendations surfaced in the workshop and walk through discussions. Soft chairs, soundproofed rooms, warm lighting, and things like blankets, plants, or pictures can help people feel more relaxed. Co-researchers also emphasised the importance of choice including different types of chairs, changing the texture using blankets, ways to adjust the light or temperature settings, and the option to bring familiar items from home. Some suggested sensory items that can be made available such as stress balls, bubbles, and fidget toys. These are aimed at supporting emotional regulation during interviews.

Figure 4: A co-researcher's illustration from the workshop on co-designing an inclusive space

Recommendations for waiting rooms and preparations for the visit

Several co-researchers recalled how their experience in the waiting room and the prolonged waiting time affected their decision to continue or delay reporting. One explained:

> “I had to wait in the waiting room for several hours with other people and I did not feel like being around other people at all, and that was very difficult. So it's looking at those environments as well’” (Co-researcher 3)

Some co-researchers recommended access to tea and coffee, water coolers, charging stations, and quiet areas. They felt that reading materials should be varied but avoid triggering content. Activities like colouring and the presence of a supportive person were seen as helpful in reducing anxiety before interviews.

Other recommendations entail providing information to help people prepare before their visit including photos and videos of the spaces, maps, information pack on the process, and signposting to help. This information is crucial in planning the visit, anticipating potential triggers and seeking additional support.

Discussion

This study illuminates how police interview environments shape the communication and engagement of victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent victim-survivors with criminal justice processes. It extends findings from previous research on barriers to justice, such as communication and systems affecting perceptions of credibility (Willott, Badger and Evans, 2020; Bach et al., 2021; Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023), by highlighting how physical and sensory aspects of police settings influence victim-survivors’ comfort and participation. The discussion below synthesises this paper’s findings with existing research and practice guidance, including Achieving Best Evidence (ABE).

Physical environments and sensory impact

Insights from the workshops and participatory walkthrough highlight how physical environments can exacerbate distress due to room layout or sensory overload, aligning with findings of heightened vulnerability of neurodivergent people in unfamiliar settings (Edwards, 2013; Ridout, 2022). The findings illustrate the effects of cramped environments on victim-survivors such as reduced coherence of their interview accounts, affecting the quality of their testimony, resonating with prior literature (Gudjonsson, 2010). Some co-researchers described how the police were not aware of their sensory and emotional needs. These reflections reinforce the need for individualised and flexible responses (Jobe and Williams, 2025).

Co-researcher accounts also indicate that sensory experiences in waiting rooms can seriously impact on victim-survivors. For instance, the prolonged waiting time in a distressing environment led to delayed reporting, aligning with prior research on barriers to justice for disabled victim-survivors (Bach *et al.*, 2021; Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023).

Implications of procedures and policies

The findings show that existing police processes tend to be rigid and inflexible, for example, requiring specific seating layouts and lighting settings to meet video interview requirements. Several co-researchers recalled how spatial and sensory environment factors impacted their ability to communicate during the interview, which may affect how their evidence is viewed by police, potentially impacting on police perceptions of victim credibility , especially if they showed visible signs of agitation (Ridout, 2022).

Whilst police are required to meet technical standards for video interviews, these efforts can have unintended emotional consequences for victim-survivors. This underscores potential tensions between police and court systems and victim-centred approaches like Operation Soteria and the ABE guidance (Hollomotz et. al, 2023; Jobe and Williams, 2025). These

findings align with research that shows how police officers face a tension between following procedural guidance and practicing empathy for the victim-survivors' needs (Stokoe et al., 2020).

Person-centred adjustments and inclusive proactive communication

Co-researchers underscored the need for adjustable settings and flexible room layouts in improving the experiences of the criminal justice system for victim-survivors with learning disabilities and/or autistic/neurodivergent victim-survivors. They emphasised the significance of choice in seating, lighting, sound, and sensory items and for the space to evoke feelings of comfort and safety. These recommendations align with inclusive design principles, which suggest that physical environments should be adjustable to different needs (The British Standards Institution, 2022). These reinforce the need for person-centred and inclusive services and design, informed by lived experiences (Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023; Jobe and Williams, 2025)

Inclusive communication was identified as a recurring theme across the findings. Access to additional support was often reliant on disclosure of a diagnosis, yet proactively providing options and accessible information was considered best practice. The findings align with previous research showing that disabled victim-survivors wanted to be asked about their access needs (Hollomotz, Burch and Bashall, 2023). The co-researchers also suggest providing sufficient pre-visit information like photos, maps, and videos of the physical space to help individuals prepare for their visit, mitigating potential anxiety and distress.

Consistent with earlier studies, the experiences of co-researchers in this study were inconsistent and often depended on individual officers (Gibbs et al., 2023). Some had good experiences which included being offered a choice of venue where the interview was held and the presence of supporters near the space, while others were not. These options affected their interview experience, the emotional impact of the space and ultimately the quality of the evidence they were able to provide.

Many victim-survivors, like most co-researchers in this study, do not have access to an intermediary or Independent Sexual Violence Advisor to communicate their needs or request special measures due to cost, availability, or non-disclosure of their disability (Jobe and Williams, 2025). Thus, providing options that can support diverse needs should not be reliant on the victim-survivor disclosing their disability or a diagnosis. The findings support the guidance in Achieving Best Evidence to supporting victims with learning disability to access a registered intermediary and provide alternative methods of communication aside from verbal speech (Ministry of Justice, 2023). This study highlights that a person-centred response involves a combination of flexibility in the spatial environment and police staff's responsiveness and sensitivity to communication, emotional, and relational needs.

Valuing lived experience as expertise

The participatory and co-design approach enabled co-researchers to articulate practical recommendations grounded in lived experiences. These challenge testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007, Williams and Jobe, 2024) by positioning them as experts by experience. Their participation in this study transformed the narrative, wherein their insights have the potential to shape reform in police practice. The involvement of a local police force signals their willingness to listen and act on the co-researchers' recommendations. At the time of writing, some recommendations have been implemented such as adjustable lighting has been introduced to waiting room areas; cluttered posters have been moved to ease transitions between spaces; furniture has been moved to facilitate more space, and the force is exploring how to implement other recommendations, like developing accessible pre-arrival information

and clear signage. Whilst this study is limited to one police force, its practice-facing outputs aim to inform broader systemic change across police services.

Limitations and reflections on this research

The findings are contextual and time-bound, reflecting the views and experiences of the co-researchers within a specific geographical and policy period. Recent developments like Achieving Best Evidence revisions and Operation Soteria in 2023 may have led to improvements in police practice beyond those reflected in co-researchers' accounts, whose experience with the police occurred before 2021.

Conducting participatory research with a diverse group of victim-survivors from different organisations, required substantial flexibility and responsiveness in design and facilitation. The online workshops demanded significant agility and creative adaptation to diverse sensory and communication needs and to providing sufficient time and methods for contribution. Engagement varied with some contributing verbally while others preferred smaller breakout group discussions, written input, or support from support workers. The research team mitigated these differences by offering alternative modes of participations, regular check-ins, and managing the pacing of discussions carefully. Replicating these methods might be difficult in contexts with limited capacity or experience in participatory research or without established relationships with trusted organisations supporting disabled communities. Future research can explore the resonance of this approach across a wider range of disabled populations.

Conclusion

This article contributes to scholarship that critiques criminal justice systems which remain inflexible, non-inclusive, and discriminatory to disabled victim-survivors. Individuals who have experienced trauma must not be put at risk of repeated victimisation in systems that replicate dynamics of loss of autonomy and control.

Drawing on co-researchers' insights, we present practical recommendations for making police practices and physical environments more inclusive and accessible:

- Proactive communication that does not rely on a disclosed diagnosis and provides clear communication about the process and available options for varying needs
- Flexible spatial design for interview spaces and waiting rooms with adjustable settings for lighting, sound, temperature, and seating arrangements
- Offering choices to adapt to varied sensory and communication needs, including breaks, having an intermediary present, and bringing familiar sensory items
- Flexibility in applying Achieving Best Evidence and other guidance, ensuring compliance with technical standards but responding to sensory and emotional needs, following a trauma-informed approach
- Collaborating with individuals with lived experience to co-design recommendations for inclusive police practice

These recommendations align with existing frameworks for making interviewing spaces more inclusive such as the guidance from The British Standards Institution (2022), reflecting a person-centred and trauma-informed approach. Further research could explore how these recommendations and principles can be applied to other police forces and adopted into national guidance. Future research is needed to test how suggested changes in interview environments and application of recent guidance on victim-centred approaches like ABE and Operation Soteria shape outcomes, such as avoiding re-traumatisation and promoting comfort and safety. This paper calls for a transformative lens that centres the co-researchers' agency

and aspirations to develop more sensitive and inclusive responses for victim-survivors. It enabled co-researchers to articulate what emotional safety and comfort mean in practice, disrupting rigid procedural policies that dominate police environments. By embedding the perspectives of lived experience co-researchers into the design of police environments, this project advocates for a criminal justice system that is responsive to varied needs and engages experts by experience as partners in achieving justice.

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