



**Richard Johnson**  
**From Anxiety to Clarity:**  
How my Asperger's diagnosis  
helped me to find myself



**One Small Change**





**No one is too disabled,  
or too affected by  
mental health difficulties,  
to lead an ordinary life**

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# Foreword

From the moment Richard spoke, I was transported into his life journey. I felt and sensed the words he used to express what life was like for him growing up with autism, something that brought him anguish and uncertainty in his place amongst his peers not just within his family but in life itself.

Richard has a rawness of embracing what life deals him and using it to open the world around him, parking up past memories but revisiting as and when he needs too, so he can move forward and not become stuck. Richard is proud to work and live in Sandwell; we are proud to have him.

Richard's book will inspire everyone who takes the time not just to read it but feel the emotion that flows throughout. Enjoy the journey.

I wish Richard the very best life gives him, and I thank you for being part of my life and giving me the opportunity to be part of your life, Richard.

**Councillor Suzanne Hartwell**

**Cabinet Member for Adult, Social Care & Health**



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## What does having Asperger's mean to me?

As you will see from my story, it took me a long time to get to the point in my life that I currently find myself at. It was not a particularly easy journey. I have had to overcome many obstacles along the way. However, I don't want to be pitied or patronised. I want to be respected as a person first and I want people to see the potential that my autism brings. Autism has always been a gift to me. A lot of the skills and abilities I have I thank my autism for.

There is no one size fits all with autism, you need to remember that we're all different. And the approach you take to us needs to be individual and person centred.

Autistic people are human beings just like anyone else. Like everyone we go on a journey and certain things we struggle with at different stages in our life. This is no different for anyone.

I want more people to have the opportunities that I have had. Other autistic people need to have good support to access mainstream services.

I feel privileged to work for the council and I love my job. However employment shouldn't be a privilege, it's a right. People like myself bring innovation to the workplace.





## The school years

For as long as I was in education, I attended a mainstream school. However, from an early age, I did not fit in and I did not understand why. This made me anxious, and my anxiety only increased throughout my years at school. I was often too anxious to go to school which meant I missed a lot of lessons and my academic performance suffered as a consequence.



## Primary school

I experienced difficulties to some extent at primary school. This was first brought to my parents' attention by my teacher in Year 2. They were concerned that I had a tendency to easily lose concentration in class, and that they needed to establish whether this was because I lacked interest in what was being taught, or if it was an issue with my understanding. They advised my parents to make an appointment for me to attend a Further Developmental Test. The result of this assessment was that I had responded well to everything the assessor had asked me to do. The assessors were therefore left confused as to why I had been sent there. I was discharged after just one appointment. However, these were never raised as a major cause for concern.

The school had felt it necessary to place me on what was known as the special needs register. This was because some issues around my reading and comprehension had been identified.

Although my reading ability was regarded as average for my age, members of the teaching staff were a bit concerned that I seemed to struggle to remember the key facts about what I had read. Being on the special needs register meant that I was occasionally taken out of class to attend a session with the school's special needs teacher. Sometimes this would be on a one to one basis, but other times it would be with a few other children who had also been placed in that category.

The special needs teacher would set me exercises aimed at testing my comprehension. This would usually involve me having to read some text and subsequently answer questions based on it. The special needs teacher also introduced me to an exercise known as skimming and scanning, which seemed to aid my progress. The appointments were rather short and fairly few and far between, so I was by no means segregated from others in my year group. As my performance improved, these appointments were gradually phased out.

Only a few months before this, another student on the special needs register had been transferred to a special school that would provide him with more help than a mainstream school was able to. I remember coming home from school one evening and telling my mother this news.

With what I'd said still fresh in her mind, she assumed the worst. She feared that I would also be sent to a school for children needing extra support. However, it came as a great relief to her when my special needs teacher reassured her that such a move would never even be considered for a child of my ability.



In the final years of primary school, children were organised into ability groups for their maths and English. Despite being on the special needs register, I was moved into the middle set for English during my final year.

I remember the teacher from the adjacent classroom coming into my lesson and after exchanging a few words with my teacher, she instructed me to get my things and follow her to the other classroom. I must have appeared nervous, because I remember her looking at me and telling me not to look so worried. It wasn't until later that I learnt that the reason I had been asked to change classrooms was because I had been moved up.

## The transition to high school

There were three high schools in the vicinity of my primary school, two of which took a large number of students from my school. Contrary to the recommendations of my parents and teachers, who stressed the importance of me going to a school where I would know people, I decided to go to the school where only a very small minority of children in my year group would also be going to. I had based this decision on nothing other than the fact that my mother had attended this particular high school as a child.

Throughout the entirety of primary school, I had not had a particularly large circle of friends. Nevertheless, I had one very close friend. We'd known each other since nursery. He would often come to my house after school and stay for dinner. Unlike me, he never seemed to have any problems mixing with others and therefore had a wider circle of friends. I would always feel left out whenever I saw him mixing with other people. I did not know how to join in.

It was following my transition to high school in September 1999 that my difficulties started to escalate. I found that most of my peers appeared to be finding the transition to high school relatively easy by comparison. Many had the advantage of already-formed friendships, which had developed in their respective primary schools. They just seemed to take the transition in their stride, unlike me.

That October, I was transferred to a lower teaching group because it was felt that I was struggling to cope with the class size and that I would work better in the lower group. I definitely felt far more at ease in this lower teaching group, as it contained far fewer students and it seemed like a more supportive environment in which to learn.

However, my anxiety still became that bad that I could not focus on my academic studies. My attendance became erratic, as I often could not face going to school. It came to be that I was out of school more often than I was in. Visits from the Education Welfare Officer became a frequent occurrence, and on one occasion, they even offered to buy me an Easter egg if I managed to complete the term without having any more time off.

Initially, my parents just put my attendance down to nothing more than teething problems, which they hoped I would overcome as I settled in. When things didn't get better, they started to wonder whether it was the result of bereavement, as over the previous few years, I had lost 3 grandparents in close succession.

Because of this, my mother arranged for me to see a bereavement counsellor. After just one appointment, however, they arrived at the conclusion that my difficulties in school were not the result of grief or mourning, and instead they advised my parents to seek a referral to a psychiatrist for me. I went on to have a few appointments with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), but I was soon discharged from the service. They had concluded that I was simply just a very anxious child, and therefore stressed to my parents the importance of making sure that they continue to send me to school, regardless of the panic attacks that my school phobia was causing.

I feel that my teachers, especially my form tutor, had noticed that I was more anxious than my peers, but they were reluctant to raise any concerns or seek an investigation into the reason why. They presumed that the problem was that my attendance was so low, and I felt that they saw me as my own worst enemy. They became frustrated at this because they recognised that I was actually quite bright. **They failed to acknowledge that my poor attendance was an effect – not a cause – of the problems I was experiencing.**

Autism and mental health conditions are two completely different entities. Nevertheless, we on the autistic spectrum are more likely than our '*neurotypical*' peers to develop mental health conditions. This is due to the additional struggles that living with autism brings. When I was at school, back in the early 2000s, autism was not as well understood as it is now.

My teachers did not have the knowledge they needed in order for them to consider it necessary to raise the concern that my problems may have been caused by Asperger's.

The school I attended was a prestigious sports college, priding itself on its ability to constantly outperform other local schools on GCSE and A-Level results. Unfortunately, due to this lack of understanding around Asperger's and autism, and because my circumstances were new to them, they could not pin point the problem. The school did have a special education department, but because the teachers only saw me as an anxious student with low attendance, they did not want to put me in the special education category and thus I did not receive any support.



Even when a mentoring programme was introduced in year 9 my anxiety was misunderstood: my mentor would always blame the problems I had been experiencing on my low attendance. He would set me targets aimed at improving this, but I never ended up achieving them.

Walking back into my English lessons after my mentoring sessions had finished always made me feel very anxious. I used to get very self-conscious, because of it being such a large group. I made my mentor aware of this, but he just used to give me advice on how to handle the situation. I would try and persuade him to extend the sessions so that I would not have to go back in. However, he used to say that he would not be doing me any favours if he agreed to this. I don't think he appreciated quite how overwhelming the experience was for me.

My parents continued to bribe me to go to school, and tried all roads to encourage me mix with my peers and make friends, but I had become more and more withdrawn as the years went on and I did not want to. My parents wanted for me what other parents want for their children, but I did not want any part of school after school hours which included seeing anyone from school or participating

in any extracurricular activities. I would often fail to pass on any correspondence from the school onto my parents. My parents would often find letters in my school bag that I should have handed to them days, sometimes even weeks, previously. As a result I often missed out on things such as school trips or mufti days, or at least my parents felt that I was missing out. These things were not important to me.

My refusing to go to school used to result in a lot of tension within the household. My mother felt very much alone in all of this. My sister, who is two years younger than me, was a very studious child who would always get herself up and off to school without a fuss. Unlike me, she had a good attendance record. I would have spent much of the previous night lying awake and worrying excessively about having to go to school in the morning, and thinking about what illness I could fake next in order to persuade my parents not to send me in. It got to a point where my parents were running out of convincing things to write on the note that they would give me to hand to my form tutor on my return to class. They would ask me for ideas as to what they could state as the reason for my absence, as they felt they had exhausted their list of reasonable excuses. My form tutor

would usually have a quick glance of the note as I handed it to him. This would be followed by him giving me a very disapproving look, clearly not convinced by what he had read.

Things continued to escalate until finally the added stresses of my GCSEs resulted in me completely refusing to attend school anymore. I was barely a few weeks into Year 11 at the time. My decision was much to the dismay of some of my teachers, who felt that I was more than capable of completing my exams and achieving respectable grades. They tried all roads to persevere and think of ways in which to help me. Some of my teachers were keen to send me some work to do at home, while my head of year was willing to reduce my timetable in an attempt to ease the pressure for me and allow to report to school for only the compulsory subjects. Unfortunately my mental health had deteriorated to such an extent that I felt unable to co-operate and agree to what they were proposing.

At first, my parents continued to liaise with the teachers, who contacted them regularly, and were keen for me to return to school and accept the help that was now being offered, but I remained adamant that I would not be returning.

In the end, my head of year managed to persuade me to return to school for a meeting in his office. The school nurse ended up sitting in on this meeting also. The pair decided that if I was not willing to return to my classes, I would at least need to be placed on some sort of alternative education programme. The meeting concluded with me having agreed to let them contact local colleges and make enquiries as to what was available for me.

I ended up being placed at Sandwell College, on a course called Integrated Studies, which was primarily designed for young adults between the ages of 16 and 19 who, for various reasons, had experienced barriers to learning, and aimed at giving them the opportunity to gain some basic skills in the key academic areas. The school and the college made arrangements for me to attend the programme as a pre school-leaver.

Although attending college was a novelty to begin with, I soon found that I was not gaining anything from the placement. I had gone from studying work at GCSE level in school to studying very basic literacy and numeracy at college. I found that the level I was studying at was well below my academic capability. Nevertheless, I felt better for having had the pressures of school taken away from me.

Despite many of my fellow students having needs more complex than my own, I did seem to fit in far more easily than I had done at school. I ended up exiting the course prematurely, several months before my school year was due to end. I simply lost interest in it.

## The diagnosis

My aunt grew concerned that the issues I was experiencing might be the result of some undiagnosed underlying condition. She suspected that I might be on the autistic spectrum. At the age of two, her daughter had been diagnosed as being on the lower functioning end of the spectrum, following concerns of severe developmental delays. She explained to my parents that because autism was such a broad spectrum, it could manifest itself differently. She felt that I may have been on the higher functioning end of the spectrum and advised my parents to get this looked into.

My parents took this advice and managed to get my GP to refer me back to CAMHS. By this point my doctor had picked up on the fact that I had visited the surgery far too frequently over the previous over the past few years.

On each visit they had been unable to find anything wrong with me. They were now convinced that my problem must be one of psychological rather than physical nature.

During the first appointment, the psychologist identified that I was struggling with depression and anxiety. Unlike the specialist I had been under a few years previously this particular doctor seemed keen to look into my situation more thoroughly. She agreed that I was not well enough to return to school, and she prescribed me some medication to help manage my symptoms of anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). She explained to my mother and I that she felt it would be necessary for me to attend further appointments with her over the coming months. She acknowledged my mother's concerns and agreed that it was possible that I might be on the autistic spectrum. They arranged for me to attend further appointments, and these usually took place every two or three months. My mother was now able to contact my head of year and to authorise my absence, informing them that CAMHS were treating me for severe depression whilst also seriously considering the possibility of me being on the autistic spectrum.

At the time, I was just so relieved that the pressure of school had finally been taken away from me. I remember feeling that I had been defeated and let down by the education system. Yet at the same time I was glad that I was finally beginning to get somewhere with CAMHS. I felt that I was finally being listened to and that my issues were being taken seriously. Although this was an extremely difficult and worrying time for my parents, at least now they could rest assured that they would not be prosecuted or fined for not sending me to school. They could focus on helping me to get the help and support that I was so much in need of.

Following my school refusal, I became very isolated from the outside world, having no contact whatsoever with people of my own age. The thought of leaving the house only exacerbated my anxiety. I would fear coming face to face with people in my year group, for I knew it was inevitable that they would ask me awkward questions about why I had ceased to attend school. At the time, I was struggling to understand myself, so the last thing I wanted was for people to start putting me on the spot and asking difficult questions about my circumstances. I did not know who I was or why I was facing such an ordeal. The segregation I was experiencing did not do my mental health any justice.



I went on to develop severe depression and my OCD worsened. I could not sleep at night until I felt satisfied that all gas and electrical appliances were safely switched off, and all doors and windows were securely locked. Despite my parents' efforts to try and reassure me that they had been successfully locking up at night for many years before I was even born, I was unable to convince myself that performing these checking rituals several times over after my parents had retired to bed each night was completely unnecessary.

As well as having OCD I went on to develop symptoms of social phobia. Due to the high levels of anxiety caused by the thought of having to mix with others, I chose to avoid all social situations. Even visiting members of my extended family was too much for me to deal with. My parents would always try hard to get me to accompany them on such visits, but I always refused.

My bi-monthly visits to CAMHS continued and as the psychologist started to uncover more about my past, her suspicion that I was on the spectrum deepened. At the time, part of the formal procedure for diagnosing autism involved a multi-agency assessment (MAA). However, the CAMHS professional decided that she would be bypassing this and carrying out the assessment by herself, explaining that she felt she had obtained sufficient background knowledge to justify this decision.

Although she felt fairly confident that I was on the autistic spectrum, she referred me for an IQ test. The purpose of this was to determine where on the spectrum I was, that is to say, whether it was autism or Asperger's. It was only in hindsight that I realised this. My knowledge of autism was very vague back then. All I knew was that my cousin had been diagnosed. I began to worry that if I received a high IQ score that the psychologist would change her mind and decide that I did not meet the criteria for having the condition after all. The last thing I wanted after coming so far was for CAMHS to discharge me a second time. However, following the IQ test, I was formally diagnosed with Asperger's, which had been her assumption all along.

My appointments with CAMHS did not end immediately after my assessment. In order to help manage my anxiety and social phobia, she arranged for an occupational therapist to pay me a home visit once a week, who would teach me relaxation techniques. This included her introducing me to a deep breathing exercise, which she instructed me to do last thing each night before going to bed. She gave me a printout of the exercise sequence for me to follow. Each night my mother would devote fifteen minutes of her time

to talking me through the sequence. This always began with her making me a hot bedtime drink to help get me relaxed.

Around this time, I was contacted by Black Country Connexions. They arranged for me to attend an appointment at their local office, so that they could talk about some of the options that were available to me as a school leaver. Due to my circumstances, I was far from work-ready. My mother came to the appointment with me in order to make sure that my situation was understood. The advisor agreed that I was not ready to move into employment. They felt that I needed to access programmes that would support me to build my confidence instead. Learning that I had previously been on the Integrated Studies course, my advisor felt that it would be a good idea to get me back on some sort of education programme. At the time, my self-esteem was at an all-time low. I began to seriously underestimate my own abilities. Despite encouragement from my Connexions advisor and staff at the college, I decided to enrol on a course that was academically below the one being recommended. I had convinced myself that anything more advanced would prove way too stressful for me and that I would struggle to cope with the social aspect of it.

September soon came around and the college year began. On the first day, my advisor escorted me to the college and waited with me in the main reception area, which was occupied by a large number of students all waiting to be organised into their groups by staff. It was apparent that the crowd of students consisted of mixed abilities, many of them clearly had needs far greater than my own. Having clearly picked up on my unease, which arose from my realisation that I may have enrolled on the wrong course, my advisor did her best to reassure me, although I was unconvinced.

It turned out that I had indeed been placed in a group that was well below my academic ability. As the first lesson unfolded, I began to feel patronised, as the focus of the lesson was on very basic spellings. Suddenly I found myself being taught how to spell three-letter words, despite me having studied Shakespeare in preparation for my GCSEs only a few years previously at high school. I picked up the courage to tell the tutor that I felt I had made a huge mistake and enrolled on the wrong course. They agreed with this and excused me from the group. I contacted my Connexions advisor, who agreed to come and collect me.

Upon her arrival, she told me to me that she would shortly be heading to a church hall in Langley for an appointment concerning another one of her clients. She explained that this Christian centre was home to a local charity, which offered a mentoring programme for young people with emotional difficulties. She invited me to go along with her, suggesting that I could sit and get a feel for the place and observe what goes on there while she attended her scheduled meeting. After witnessing some other youngsters coming and going from the site and their interactions with staff, I decided that I liked it. It seemed like a very welcoming and supportive place, in an informal setting. A young female staff member had a friendly chat with me over a game of pool. She managed to persuade me to join the programme. I really liked the sound of the weekly mentoring sessions, so I decided to leave my contact details with her. They agreed to send me a letter detailing when my first session would take place, and who my personal mentor would be.



Due to my social anxiety, I had not used public transport independently since I was on the Integrated Studies course, about a year and a half previously. But in order to do my weekly commute to the Christian Centre, it was something I would need to be able to do. Keen to promote my independence and eager for me to get the best out of this new opportunity, my mother and sister agreed to support me to carry out a few trial runs to the venue where my mentoring would be taking place. As a young person who had become so withdrawn and isolated from the outside world that I hardly ever left the house, I was not used to dealing with everyday social situations.

The thought of having to catch a bus and come into contact with other members of the public was overwhelming for me. The travel training offered by my family proved successful in somewhat alleviating my anxiety. I was able to perform the journey to my first mentoring appointment independently.

I took an instant liking to my new mentor. She seemed like a very friendly and approachable person with a nice personality and great sense of humour. I found that I could easily confide in her and talk to her about almost anything. We struck up a really good friendship. I began to cherish the couple of hours that I spent with her each Tuesday afternoon. The sessions became the highlight of my week. She became my soulmate, and the only person I trusted outside of my family.

Because the sessions took place early in the afternoon, I usually ended up having lunch with her. She introduced me to a local family-run bakery called The Oliver Twist, which became a regular haunt of ours. I used to enjoy our 10-minute walk to the bakery. We would either take our lunch back to her office at the Christian centre, or go al-fresco and consume it over a friendly chat in the nearby park.

## Beginning to understand myself

It was a very gradual process, but a lot had begun to change since my diagnosis. Mentoring was definitely playing a big part in this, but I was also now accessing the Autism West Midlands Resource Centre. This was something that had been brought to my attention via CAMHS. For the first time, I had started to understand myself, and this gave me confidence that I had never had before.

Because I had not understood myself in the past, I had not felt confident that anyone else would understand me either. However, now I was able to explain to people why I might find things difficult, and why I might need things explained to me in a certain way. I was confident to state what I needed, and this changed my outlook on life. For the first time, I began to have a somewhat more positive attitude towards my future.

The first thing I wanted to do with this new found confidence was to achieve some academic qualifications. As I had left school before taking my GCSE exams, I had no formal qualifications to my name. I knew I was bright, and now that I could request the support I needed, I knew I could achieve academically.

In August 2007, I enrolled on a course called 'Skills for Working Life' at Dudley College, and thus began a life-changing chapter for me. My tutor at college had previously worked for Changing Our Lives and had received an invitation to attend their Annual General Meeting (AGM). She told me they were a rights based organisation who worked alongside different kinds of people including those on the autistic spectrum, including Asperger's, and she asked me if I would like to join her.

I went along to the meeting and found it really interesting. The two people doing most of the compering had learning disabilities, yet had gone on to have key roles in the company. These inspirational speakers were clearly very highly regarded by their immediate colleagues and amongst stakeholders within the local self-advocacy movement. I felt that if they were able to achieve something so positive, then so was I.



## Entering the world of work

The following year, all the students on my course were required to participate in a two-week work experience placement of their choice. I decided to do my work placement with Changing Our Lives, as I was already acquainted with them. I was involved in a project which involved me going into a local school and talking to pre school-leavers with special educational needs and learning disabilities about opportunities that would be available for them when they left school. During those two weeks I was mainly shadowing my supervisor and observing what she did. This enabled me to find out more about the kind of work carried out by the rights-based charity. My colleague encouraged me to participate as much as possible in the talks she was giving to the students. To my surprise, this work came naturally to me and I felt confident speaking to the children. Changing Our Lives were pleased with my performance and told me I had a natural ability in public speaking.

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Shortly after the completion of my Skills for Working Life course, the rights-based charity went on to offer me a paid position, working 21 hours per month. The hourly wage was very respectable, especially considering my age and compared to the standard minimum wage of the time. In my role, I spoke up for people with learning disabilities and autism. I was involved in local and national campaigns, and even delivered training on learning disabilities and autism. I had gone from being diagnosed as being on the Autistic Spectrum only three years prior, to now being an expert in the field and making a living from delivering training on the subject to professionals and stakeholders.

The work I did through the self-advocacy movement, which I did both on a local and national basis, enabled me to meet a very diverse range of people. The many conferences and networking events I was responsible for attending drastically improved my social life. As well as being respected by my colleagues, I was also highly regarded by the fellow self-advocates that I met and the many stakeholders and professionals that I became acquainted with. I had gone from living a very isolated existence to now being a confident public speaker, addressing large audiences as an expert by experience.

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I worked on a project called Safe Places, which identified shops and businesses that would provide a safe place to people with Learning Difficulties should they need it whilst they are out in the community. I was also part of a campaign in the Sandwell area that challenged the definition of domestic violence to include people living in care and residential settings, who were being abused by another resident.

I was employed by Changing Our Lives for just short of three years. This experience gave me the opportunity to re-discover myself. Looking back, I saw years of being misunderstood at school and being deprived of opportunities that my peers had. However, I did not want to dwell on the negatives. I had been given a fresh start and I intended to make the most of it and adopt a more optimistic outlook on life.

My role mainly saw me working in the community. However, I would occasionally find myself in the office. I would be allocated some general admin duties. Sometimes, I would be required to write an audit report based on a recent home visit. This usually involved me working with whichever staff member had been responsible for supporting me during

the audit. They would read through my report and cross reference it with their own findings, so that we would finish off with a co-written report detailing our findings and recommendations.

I found that I enjoyed the admin aspect of my role more than the actual self-advocacy work. Changing Our Lives had helped me to discover myself and realise my true potential. Leaving Changing Our Lives was a difficult decision to make, but I knew it was time to move on. I wanted to explore new opportunities. I knew that I was keen to obtain some sort of administrative role.

Although my position with Changing Our Lives had enabled me to gain lots of transferable skills, I decided that it would be beneficial for me to up my qualifications first. Many of the jobs and apprenticeship programmes that were available were asking for Level 2 qualifications in Maths and English. This was also a requirement for many of the further education college courses.

My employment with Changing Our Lives ended in the July of 2010, so I enrolled on the Level 2 Adult Literacy and Numeracy course at Dudley College to commence the

following September. I ended up really excelling on this course and made a really good impression on my peers, who nominated me to represent them in the Students' Union. In recognition of my efforts throughout the course, the tutor put me forward for the 'Reach Student' award.

The following August I decided to call on Dudley College yet again, this time in order to take advantage of one of their enrolment events, which I had seen advertised. On the day, I came face to face with two staff members that happened to remember me from the Skills for Working Life Course 3 years previously. They were very welcoming towards me and were keen to find out what course I had come to enquire about. I told them I had the intention of enrolling on a level 2 Business Administration course.

As part of the enrolment procedure, I was required to sit at a computer and complete a literacy and numeracy skills assessment. Following this, I was invited to take a seat at the desk behind the two staff members in charge of the Business Administration course. After taking some details from me they encouraged me to enrol on a Level 3 Diploma course, as based on the results of my assessment they felt it would be necessary for me to bypass Level 2.

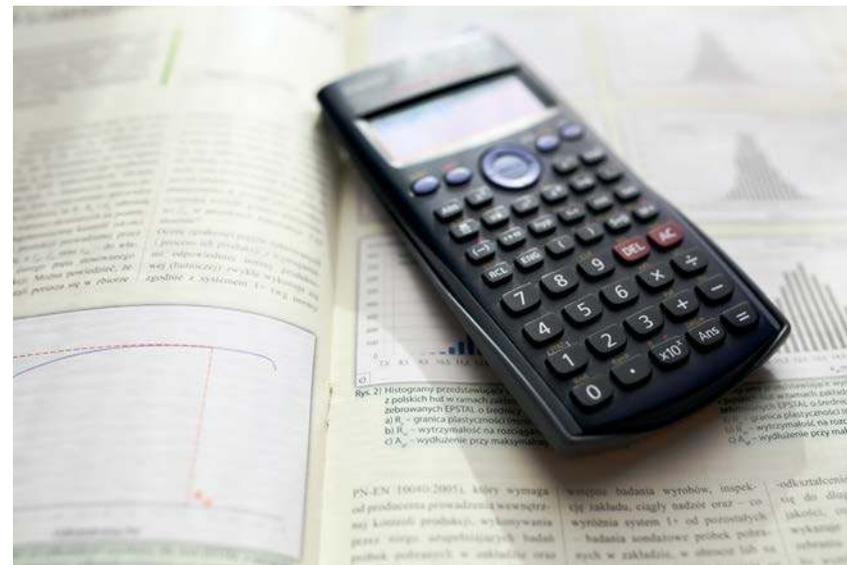
Unlike the Skills for Working Life Course the Business Administration course did not have any additional support in place. I was well respected by the other members of my group, despite the fact that the majority of them were recent school leavers and therefore quite a bit younger than me. Completion of the qualification involved a great deal of coursework across different modules. This began to get very stressful for me. My attendance suffered as a result. The course tutor referred me to the college's mentoring programme as a result of this. However, I decided to opt out after only a few sessions, as I did not find it to be beneficial to my needs. I was subsequently referred to the Learning Hub. This was because my tutor felt I was falling behind with my studies and that the sessions would enable me to catch up on coursework.

The first stage of the referral required me to report to the Hub and complete a skills assessment, the results of which would determine the level of support I needed. On seeing my results on the computer screen, following completion of the tests, The Hub staff member was confused as to why my tutor had considered the referral necessary. They explained that the programme was aimed at students requiring

additional support with their maths and English, and that my results showed that I did not meet this criteria assessment I clearly did not require this kind of support. Nevertheless, they agreed to make an exception and enable me to use the sessions to catch up on my Business Administration coursework. As was the case with the mentoring programme, I decided that I was not benefitting from the learning support sessions. Moreover, I was of the impression that they did not really know how to help me. I made the decision to stop attending the appointments.

All the students on my course were invited to undergo a dyslexia assessment carried out by an existing college staff member who specialised in this field. I found the dyslexia assessor to be very supportive and approachable. On completion of the assessment she explained that her findings showed that I was not dyslexic. The appointment ended with a friendly chat, which saw us digress from the subject that had brought us together. I began to tell our about my Asperger's diagnosis and opened up to her about some of the issues I faced as a result of this and the anxiety which often accompanied it. She seemed to be very understanding towards me and the issues I was facing, and

seemed to possess a good understanding of my condition. After that she seemed to take me under her wing. Whenever our paths happened to cross, she would always make a point of stopping and asking how I was getting on with my studies.



I went on to complete the course and obtain my Level 3 Diploma in Business and Administration. In addition to this, I achieved achieved Level 2 Functional Skills English, which was taught as part of the course.

Unfortunately, I did not manage to move into employment straight away. I spent the next few years looking for work. I decided to refer myself to West Bromwich Job Centre, which made an appointment for an advisor specialising in helping customers with disabilities and into employment. With a bit of guidance from them I managed to pick up the confidence to apply for some apprenticeships. Attending a workshop at Future Skills in Smethwick also helped me with this. I got my CV out there and ended up receiving quite a few positive telephone responses from prospective placement providers, but I could not seem to get any further than this stage, as most seemed to be put off once I told them I was over 24. In the end, the Job Centre referred me to Work Choice, something else which didn't really benefit me in the end.

I ended up in the November of 2013 signing up to a two-week Level 1 Customer Service course with Nova Training, which had been brought to my attention at a careers fair. I ended up thoroughly enjoying the fortnight I spent with this training provider. The training was rather intensive and entailed a great deal of written work, interactive team discussions and roleplay activities. Most of this was focussed

around what working in retail would involve, but we also did a lot of interview preparation too. I got on really well with the other students, a very diverse group of individuals, each with a different story to tell. I became very well respected amongst my peers, and would usually be the one who my team liked to nominate as the spokesperson responsible for presenting our work to the rest of the class. Apparently I was really good at it. I had a great laugh during that crash course, and gained another useful qualification to add to my portfolio into the bargain.

The first quarter of 2014 saw me continuing to attend Work Choice appointments, but these did not bring me much joy. An ex-colleague of mine, from Changing Our Lives, brought to my attention a supported employment vacancy that was being offered by a neighbouring local authority. The job called for applications from people with learning disabilities to apply for this admin opportunity. I went on to be the successful candidate.

I commenced my role in the May. In my position I worked as part of a team responsible for delivering daily administrative support in a council-run day centre for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. I was mainly responsible

for working on a busy reception desk, where I would carry out all manner of front of house tasks concerned with the meeting and greeting of visitors. I ended up staying in this job for only five months, after deciding that I did not really like the environment in which I worked. My job was quite a distance from where I lived in Sandwell. The daily commute saw me having to travel to the extreme south west of the conurbation and involved me having to catch three buses. When factoring in the waiting times between buses this would typically take me up to an hour and half to complete in each direction. As a part time employee I found that my total travelling time each week was almost equal to the time I actually spent at work. I nevertheless gained a good deal of experience from the role, and I seemed to really excel at the mandatory online training modules. I achieved a score greater than 90% on most of them. This used to really impress my colleagues.

In September 2015, I received a routine phone call from West Bromwich Job Centre, asking me to attend a mandatory Work-Focussed Interview. The result of the meeting was that I ended up signing up to a six-week work experience opportunity, which required me to report to the Job Centre

every weekday. It was either this, or steaming clothes in a charity shop: those had been the only options on the table. I chose therefore what I considered to be the lesser of two evils. As a person with high aspirations I was certainly not prepared to waste my talents and end up working in the back of a charity shop where my wealth of skills would go unnoticed. The idea alone made me feel degraded. It made me very determined to show this man that I was much more capable than he had clearly assumed!

Despite the negative views of many friends and family members, who were of the belief that I had been coerced into what to them seemed like a punitive government box ticking exercise aimed at punishing the unemployed, I gave 100% commitment to the programme, attending 9 'til 5, five days per week. The job involved me co-conducting job seeker sign on sessions; carrying out customer satisfaction surveys front of house, and subsequently recording these findings onto a computer database; and printing job vacancies for the notice board. I went on to form an excellent working relationship with both the man in charge of facilitating the programme and my fellow participants.

I voluntarily assumed responsibility for the completion of an assignment that had originally been allocated to another work experience student, who had rang in sick. The task involved compiling slips advising claimants on changes to the sign on schedule over the upcoming festive period. The day of the week in which a claimant was usually required to sign on had something to do with the letters at the start of their national insurance number. This meant that were different pay cycles, each given a different letter (e.g. the P cycle), and slips had to be completed for each one of these. It was a rather complex operation which involved obtaining information from an Excel spreadsheet, and applying a formula to determine when members of a particular pay cycle would next be required to report to the Job Centre. Once slips had been printed off they had to be distributed to job coaches around the building and filed accordingly. I supported the other volunteers to get involved in the completion of this operation, something I achieved through delegating tasks accordingly.

The supervisor was amazed that I had managed to take on responsibility for this task without any former knowledge of what it involved. He never seemed to forget this. He would constantly remind me of what I had achieved. In fact the

way he used to talk about it amongst his colleagues made it seem as though I had accomplished mission impossible. I ended up agreeing to go along with the facilitator to a conference in Birmingham, made up of Job Centre managers from across the region. Aided by some speaker notes I had prepared in advance, I spoke to the audience about my experience of completing the work programme and what I felt the opportunity had enabled me to achieve. I received a standing ovation for my performance. This is something else that he never allowed me to forget. He even commented on this in the reference he presented me with on my completion of the work placement.

It was towards the end of this Job Centre placement that I came across a position for a Travel Trainer, advertised online. I decided to submit an application and I was invited to attend an interview. I already knew that the person who would be co-conducting the interview had met me before, as she was a member of an external meeting that I had regularly attended with Changing Our Lives. During the meeting I spoke in depth about the transferable skills I had gained within the self-advocacy movement. The interviewer rang me later that day to inform me that I had made a good impression and that I should consider myself hired.

I commenced the role in January 2016. As a Travel Trainer, I was responsible for working as part of a small team responsible for delivering bespoke, one-to-one support to individuals wanting to gain the skills and confidence necessary to enable them to commute independently using public transport. Working with the student, it was my job to facilitate their phased journey towards travel independence and to support them to overcome any barriers along the way. The job required me to regularly liaise with the family members and/or support workers of the individual. This enabled me to monitor the progress of my students and to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds. It was also my responsibility to complete all accompanying paperwork and to regularly provide written reports detailing my observations of the student's performance and progress throughout each aspect of their commute.

The main disadvantage of this job was that the work was only offered on an as-and-when-required basis. This meant that I was not earning enough to become completely independent of Job Seeker's Allowance, so I continued to attend my fortnightly sign-on sessions. I ended up staying in this job for only six months. Nevertheless, I left this

employment having taken advantage of the opportunity to achieve a recognised Level 2 qualification in Teaching Independent Travel.



During the final quarter of 2016, the Job Centre managed to persuade me to sign up to yet another one of their internal placements. This time, however, I was working in a DWP benefits processing centre, located in Walsall. It had been agreed by Job Centre staff that the amount of time I had to spend looking for work each week would be reduced if I committed to daily attendance at this DWP premises. I was on this placement with about 8 other unemployed people, many of whom did not seem to want to take it seriously and clearly held a negative attitude towards the placement. Although I shared the frustration of my colleagues, I managed to adopt a more optimistic approach and make sure that I got the best out of the experience. As with the previous placement, there was no promise of a job at the end of it. However, on the last day of my placement, just before Christmas, I was presented with a very good reference from the manager.

I continued on the Job Centre's books for the first third of 2017 and continued to submit applications for positions that I thought would be suited to both my needs and my abilities. I now added advantage of an up to date CV.

In the February I signed myself up to some volunteering with a local charity called 'Friends and Neighbours', which

was located in the Cape Hill area of Smethwick. This role saw me getting involved in community engagement work. This involved reaching out to isolated members of the community via regular neighbourhood drop-in sessions and telephone calls.

The spring that followed saw me being referred to a one-off workshop at Sandwell College. This had been set up in partnership with the Job Centre, and was a session aimed at giving a group of unemployed people the opportunity to receive some expert training on how to tailor an application for a Civil Service role to the competencies sought by them.

I had applied for a few jobs within the Civil Service while participating in the placement at the Glebe Centre in Walsall the previous year, but my attempts proved unsuccessful.

Now keen to put into practice what I had learnt at the workshop, I continued to keep my eye out, via the government website, for roles within the Civil Service. Before long a suitable opening caught my eye. This particular vacancy was calling for Case Workers to work five evenings per week in the Universal Credit Department of Molineux House Job Centre in Wolverhampton.

I was delighted when just after the closing date for applications, an email from the recruitment department landed in my inbox. The Department for Work and Pensions wanted to interview me.

Receiving an interview for a role within the Civil Service was a massive achievement in itself and certainly an opportunity that I was not prepared to let pass me by. Not really knowing what to expect, I did all the preparation I could prior to the interview. I approached the whole thing with a very open mind. I came away from that interview knowing that I had given it my best shot. The ball was now in their court.

Nothing could have possibly prepared me for what happened next. I received a telephone call from one of the two women that had interviewed me. I had only gone on and got the job!

All of a sudden I found myself facing somewhat of a dilemma, for I also received job offers from two other employees. I had recently attended an interview with a local Council for a position as a Casual Admin Worker, and one with Sandwell Libraries for a role as a Customer Service Assistant. A hat trick of job offers... things were definitely starting to look up for me.

I ended up rejecting the offer for the post as Casual Admin Worker, so that I now only had only two options to choose from. Since the library position was only a weekend position, I decided to accept both offers. Out of the two jobs the library position is the one that my heart was telling me to go with, but I at least wanted to do the month's initial training for the Universal Credit role.



It had not been the first time I had applied for one of the Saturday Assistant positions with Sandwell Libraries. During my unemployment they had come up on a regular basis. However, I had not heard anything back from my previous applications. I never allowed myself to be put off too much by the fact that they were only offering six hours per week, because at the end of the day at least it was a job. 'Once you've got your foot in the door...', I told myself.

I remember feeling very anxious on the day of the interview, and this only intensified as I walked into the interview room and saw before me three seemingly formidable ladies sat behind a table, in a very formal setting. I had put a great deal of effort into preparing for this interview, because I really wanted this job. This made the experience feel all the more intimidating. I knew that this would perhaps be my only chance to make a good impression for this particular vacancy. Once the handshakes and introductions were out of the way and I had sat myself down, I began to feel more at ease with the panel. I had observed them mark their first score next to my name after seeing me produce my research notes from my bag, and they looked impressed with me as they did so. This was the first of many positive vibes that I picked up on.

Included amongst my paperwork was a review of Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*, a book I had read only a few months previously. Funnily enough this book had come to my attention following a random visit I paid to Wednesbury Library, which saw me looking through some withdrawn stock for sale. I had dropped in on impulse one afternoon on my way back from town. After sitting down and reading the first few chapters of this book, I was gripped, so I decided to purchase it and take it home for further reading.

I had convinced myself that an interview for a library position would likely involve some sort of exercise requiring the candidate to talk about a book they had read, so I took the proactive approach of summarising the plot of this novel and what I liked about the story.

After completing the training for the Civil Service role I decided that the position was not for me. The job, working in a very fast-paced call handling environment would have proved too stressful for me. I had decided that my job in the library was the one I was more suited to. It was quite a gamble to take, but I held on to the hope that the library would eventually give me more hours.

On my appointment to Smethwick Library I had been placed within the Community History and Archives Service, rather than the main library. This was because during my interview I had spoken in depth about my interest in family history, something which has been a big interest of mine since my teenage years. I was contracted to 9 hours a week, which meant I worked Saturdays only.

Aware of my circumstances and noticing that I was good at my job, my managers tried to get me as much overtime as possible, but I found that I was not being offered as much as I wanted, or indeed needed. I became so used to

working in the archives that I was reluctant to try my hand at working in the main library. My very supportive colleagues were quick to point out that if I worked in the library I would get more opportunities for overtime. They would also often remind me that working in the archives was more complex than working in the library and that if anything I had been thrown in at the deep end. If I had mastered this then they had no doubt that I could work in the library. Many of the library staff had not had the experience of doing any shifts in the archives. It was regarded as an area requiring more expertise. They eventually persuaded me to cover on the library counter during staff lunches. This eventually led to me picking up the courage to put my name forward for some overtime at another library within the local authority.

I seemed to adapt well to the quieter setting of Brandhall Library, where staff had more time in which to train me. There was one particular staff member who I found to be extremely supportive. She had worked for the service for a good many years and I ended up spending a lot of time working with her during the summer of 2018. The supervisors over there would always call on me whenever they needed staffing support. It was recognised that I was doing really well there. I was receiving lots of positive feedback from my colleagues, and this spurred me on even more.



I subsequently went on to put my name down for some additional hours which had now become available at Smethwick. This opening required me to work one every three Sundays.

In December 2019, I applied for a 15 hour per week job at Wednesbury Library that had been advertised internally. After a successful interview, I was transferred in early 2020 from my Saturday archives post to my current role as a Customer Service Officer (CSO), which was a step up from my previous role as a Customer Service Assistant (CSA).

Unfortunately, barely a month into my new job, the Coronavirus pandemic took hold and lockdown was imposed on the nation. Libraries were amongst the public services forced to close their doors. Luckily for me I was able to work from home, and I continued to receive my salary.

With all the restrictions on the movement of people now in place I found that I was limited to what I could do to occupy the time outside of my working hours, something I found difficult to deal with. I wanted to utilise the extra time on my hands wisely and produce something positive.

During this time, my passion for gardening increased dramatically, to such an extent that it is now an all-consuming hobby of mine. Alongside working on this retrospective of my experiences, I also joined a creative writing group.

## The “*New Normal*”

Looking back over the past year, Covid-19 has changed so many aspects of our day to day lives, and the library service proved no exception. The way in which the library service operates has changed considerably for both staff and customers. The changes, however, are not necessarily a bad thing. In some ways the pandemic has brought with it the perfect opportunity for the service to get innovative and reinvent itself.

Throughout the lockdown colleagues kept in touch with each other via weekly online meetings set up by the management. This was vitally important for me. If I hadn't been for this, I believe that I would have found it much more difficult to go back after getting so used to the lockdown routine. My biggest concern at the height of the pandemic was that the library service would struggle to fully recover

from the pandemic and that this would mean job losses. I did not want to end up jobless and stuck in the same old rut that I have found myself in so many times before, especially after achieving CSO status in my job – an accomplishment that I am immensely proud of.

Since reopening at reduced capacity, the number of customers returning to our service has been increasing only steadily. A less busy library has meant that I have had more time to become more familiar with the additional required as a Customer Service Officer. As a key holder I can be expected to be asked to perform the opening and closing procedures. This involves the activation/deactivation of alarms, setting up counter and the RFID machines. I performed this for the first time in July, and this is a major milestone in my personal development within the service.

I am also responsible for keeping track of monitoring statistics, which involves keeping tallies on the number of general enquiries, and customers returning books/collecting reservations etc. I have also been responsible for making sure that all customers adhere to the rules surrounding our track and trace system, which has been implemented as a Covid-19 safety measure. It basically involves making sure

that each customer's card number is recorded along with the times they enter and leave the building.

In addition to this I have had a lot of involvement in promoting the Summer Reading Challenge. The purpose of the challenge is to promote readership amongst young children. The popularity of the Reading Challenge has helped us increase library membership, something which is very important in these post-pandemic times. I feel very proud to be a part of this.

However, while we have been promoting this challenge, we have been facing one of our own. Reduced staffing numbers has resulted in each library having to reduce the number of days it opens to the public each week, thus, delaying the next stage in the Covid recovery plan. Another result of the pandemic has been fewer staff on duty at any one time.

If these challenging times of endless lockdowns and draconian restrictions have taught me anything it's that one should embrace every opportunity that life throws their way. Change – as challenging as it can often be for people like me, or indeed any human being really – can definitely be a good thing. What's more I have started to appreciate the importance of living in the moment.

## Thoughts for the future

At present, I haven't got any specific dreams or aspirations for the future. This may sound strange to some people, but it's actually a positive way of thinking for me.

For so many years my mind was preoccupied with fears and anxieties about my future. I didn't have a very positive outlook on life at all. This isn't the case anymore. I no longer worry about what will happen next year, or over the next ten years because I'm too busy living in the present moment. I am happy with how my life is right now and I'm proud to be living it as my best self.

It's taken me a while to reach this level of clarity, but it is a very liberating way to be.

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or too affected by  
mental health difficulties,  
to lead an ordinary life**



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