

PLACE FOR ALL

EQUALITY

DIVERSITY

INCLUSION

“ My journey in transport planning. ”

Victoria Vernon, Transport Planner



EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Sharing personal stories and perspectives to foster inclusivity in the workplace

I'm Victoria Vernon and I'm a transport planner for Leicestershire County Council (LCC). My role is to review planning applications against their impact on the highways network.

I'm quite unique, having four different types of neurodivergence - dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD-C and autism spectrum disorder. The sporadic nature of the first three and the very linear nature of autism means I already deal with some internal conflict before I even start thinking about the outside world!

School was awful and I faced a lot of bullying and discrimination. I stayed on for AS levels but decided I would sit my exams and not go back. I applied successfully for a university nursing course, but when they wanted me to defer for a year because of my age, I started temping with Wimpey Homes. Their design team wanted me for a trainee post, so I stayed and worked my way up to become an architectural technologist. I had a real flair for structural calculations and Computer Aided Design.

Later, I decided that I wanted to become someone who shapes the world they live in, so I took a pay cut and started as a planning technician at Sport England. Because I'd shown so much interest, they found some budget to put me through university on a day release where I was awarded the Royal Town Planning Institute Award for Outstanding Achievement, came top in my class and finished with a very good first. When I wanted to carry on, they helped me with my Masters, which I got with distinction.

Becoming a transport planner for LCC in 2019 was a leap, but I love to learn. I can look at a location plan, our mapping system, google, elevations, floor plans and the way my mind works, it will layer everything together and make a 3D walk-through in my mind. So instead of seeing just all the different drawings, my brain puts them all together to build a virtual walk through. I can even see the vehicles moving around.

Hyperfocus, which is symptom of my neurodivergence, is a wonderful thing. If I've got a lot going on, I can drill down into one subject. I have that focus and ways of thinking that a lot of other people don't have. The downside comes when it's time to stop. I have to be careful as it can take over and I forget to eat and take breaks. Team members often step in here and make sure I'm eating. Sometimes I just can't put things down and I can't relax or sleep.

Sudden changes can be difficult - changes in lighting can be really painful, loud noises and fire alarm tests go straight through me. Smells, tastes, foods - I can really like something one day and the next, no chance. Even I can't work it out. I can find textures impossible too. I'm also hyposensitive when it comes to pain which can be a problem with the clumsiness that comes with dyspraxia. I had a broken wrist once and didn't realise it until my mum persuaded me to go to hospital. I might know something feels wrong, but if it doesn't look wrong and I don't feel the pain, I can shrug it off.

Building trusting relationships that allow me to open up is really important. When I was

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masking in previous jobs, I was frequently ill. I spent so much time hiding everything I would get home with sensory overload. That could mean a shut down or migraines and losing all my down time trying to repair. I could get severe migraines four times a week. In Leicestershire, I've had the confidence to open up. As a result, I've been granted the flexibility to do my job the best way for me, and they would much rather I did that because the alternative can mean lost time. It's to everyone's benefit as I'm really good at my job!

One of the hardest things to go through is the reasonable adjustment process. A lot of it is done through the Government's Access to Work, which means undertaking various assessments after which they give you a big list of equipment. There can be an expectation that this process puts everything in place, but of course, it doesn't. There can be compatibility issues with tech and the limited training you get can mean you don't get the best out of it. I have a lot of good things in place that fall outside reasonable adjustments and often work better. There's the flexibility, and I have a traffic light system which helps the team understand how I am each day and enables them to know how to approach me.

I still worry about what people might think of me - that I can't do my job - but not having to mask has taken a huge weight off my shoulders. Opening up has been one of my hardest decisions, but also one of the best I've ever made. As people gain understanding, they see when I'm genuinely struggling and I get a lot more respect. That's why opening up and sharing insight into how my brain works differently is so important. I've found it's not a liability, it can be a real asset if people work with me.

I've done training sessions, awareness days and Big Conversations and took part in a team managers' away day. I became a Diversity Champion and part of a group of like-minded people who all have a passion for equality, getting rid of discrimination and who want everybody to feel safe at work. We're there if people need support. We want to highlight that by having conversations, raising awareness and gaining understanding, people can actually change their views.

LCC have been brilliant. They've still got a way to go - I think that's true anywhere - but they listen and take action where needed. They've also given me more confidence than anywhere else. They've given me a voice and a platform which has come from me putting myself out there, standing up, and saying I struggle with these things and see real changes be made as a result. We now have a neurodiversity champion and an ICT champion to help with reasonable adjustments.

Neurodiversity is one of those subjects that's still quite taboo and hard for people to talk about as it can leave you feeling quite vulnerable. I'd like everyone to understand there are no wrong questions. It's ok to ask, just don't expect us to always have the answer. I can talk about different aspects of my neurodivergence, why they are issues and how things get set off, but I can't explain why. My brain works differently, it's just how I am.

Victoria Vernon
Transport Planner, Leicestershire County Council