

PLACE FOR ALL

EQUALITY

DIVERSITY

INCLUSION

“ My journey in public sector management.”

Jade Jones, Head of Commercial & Business Improvement



EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Sharing personal stories and perspectives to foster inclusivity in the workplace

I'm Jade Jones and I'm Head of Commercial and Business Improvement for Central Bedfordshire Council. I'm dyslexic and dyspraxic and until now, this isn't something I have openly shared.

There is a lot of shame and stigma about being neurodivergent. That is why I've decided to stand up and show young people coming through you can be both different and successful.

I've been very lucky because the form my dyslexia takes doesn't affect most things at work, and while anyone who has tried to decipher my handwriting will know that it is pretty illegible, I am thankful that for work I can type, and use spellcheck!

Still, spellcheck is not always a success, it does not alert you to the fact you have perfectly spelt a completely different word. Over the years I have learned to slow down and double check documents and always get a second pair of eyes on anything that is being published. I also know that because I process information in a different way, I need to write everything down to keep on track.

When it comes to dyspraxia, it affects my coordination and balance. It doesn't impact on work because I'm not using heavy machinery or tools, but I am not going to go ice-skating any time soon and you definitely wouldn't see me on Strictly!

The most challenging thing for me is noise. I love being in the office and I'm an extrovert, so I'm happy when I'm working with people, but I'm glad we don't have office phones anymore because multiple phones ringing cuts through me like a knife. I struggle to

work in loud environments, and I can't focus if anyone is playing music.

There are positives too. Neurodivergence helps you see problems in a different way. That often means I come up with innovative solutions at work, which has helped with my career.

I've always felt different in many ways. As a scholarship kid from a working-class background, I grew up in a culture where 'A' is acceptable and 'B' is bad, so I felt I had to strive for perfection. Because I had these additional challenges I went out of my way to compensate for them: to get a first class degree, to get a master's with distinction.

But it was hard. Now I've got children myself, I am not sure it's what I would want for them. I want them to be happy, to focus on being kind and being a force for good in the world. I think the challenges I faced might have made me a bit headstrong and a bit too focussed on being the best. I internalised the stigma and needed to prove to myself I was worthy.

When I started my career on the National Graduate Development Programme in Middlesbrough I didn't tell anyone at work I was dyslexic and throughout my career I have continued to stay mostly quiet. But representation matters. It's only by being seen that other people will say: "Okay, I could do that".

At Central Bedfordshire Council I am proud of the work we do on equality, diversity and inclusion and I am happy I've been able to make sure people who come forward as dyslexic get the right support including specialist equipment to enable them to do their best work.

PLACE FOR ALL

EQUALITY

DIVERSITY

INCLUSION

“ My journey in public sector management.”

Jade Jones, Head of Commercial & Business Improvement



Although I work in a supportive environment, local government still has room to improve, and a lot depends on individual managers and their perceptions. For the first time last year I took a formal exam without extra time. I could have asked for extra time, but I didn't, because the tutor had made a number of disparaging remarks about the idea.

Afterwards, I was pleased I passed such a hard exam, but I also felt annoyed with myself for not requesting the extra time. It was because the tutor's words took me right back to school and being made fun of because I went to the lunchtime additional needs class. Despite being a top student, getting those A grades and appearing outwardly confident, I have never truly had the confidence to match.

It really matters how leaders approach these issues, it only takes one manager to make an offhand comment and it sets people back. That often happens not because people mean to be cruel or derogatory, they might just speak in an offhand way without understanding the impact of their words. It goes the other way too, if you say something nice to someone who is having a bad time it can change their entire day, and they might be thinking about it weeks later.

So I've made it a bit of a resolution this year to stand up and be counted. It's only by sharing your experiences that people go 'Oh, okay, it's not just me'. It's not just about neurodivergence, it's also about sexism or any other kind of injustice.

I've had great opportunities. I did an internship with the Department for Education when I was at university because of my dyslexia and dyspraxia and that was the kickstart to my whole career.

Because I got that, it then encouraged me to apply for the local government graduate scheme and things have snowballed from there. I've done my master's in public sector management and I went on to be first a project manager, then a team leader before becoming head of business improvement, and then head of commercial and business improvement, where I am at the moment.

You develop in confidence as you go, but we all have worries, the imposter syndrome, the nagging feeling that we aren't really any good. I was at the ADEPT LDP course, and the delegates shared their personal stories and challenges. I just thought, isn't it great when you take off the mask? Because everyone has this perception of what a leader should be. They should be calm, strong and powerful and never get flustered. But I think if you have nerves, it shows passion and that you care about something.

By having people with a different mindset, people whose brains work in a different way, you get great ideas and how can that be a bad thing? Having more differences, different backgrounds, energies and ideas can only help drive innovation and change.

I'm really nervous about talking about this, but I have got to do it.

I'll always be dyslexic. It's always going to be part of me. So we just crack on.

Jade Jones
Head of Commercial and Business Improvement, Central Bedfordshire Council

