

Digging Deeper: Neurodiversity

Andrew Belt: Welcome to the fifth episode of our Digging Deeper podcast series. With it being Neurodiversity Celebration Week this week, this episode is focused on neurodiversity in the built environment. So, what is neurodiversity, you might ask? Neurodiversity refers to brain differences. So, conditions like autism and ADHD are variations of the human brain.

At UCEM, our disability and wellbeing team work hard to help meet our neurodiverse students' needs, and we strive to make learning with us as inclusive as possible. With our online learning programmes catering for professionals in the built environment, I was intrigued to learn more about the experiences of people with neurodiversity within the workplace.

The Civil Service is striving to make the workplace more inclusive and, in this podcast, I hope to learn more about the work government departments are doing and how this can be replicated across the built environment.

Joining me today is Zoe Bacon, Property Apprenticeship Manager at the Office of Government Property.

Hi Zoe.

Zoe Bacon: Hi, Andrew.

AB: I'm also joined by Miranda Foster, Senior Manager Affordable Housing Products at Homes England and Founder of the Homes England Neurodiversity Network.

Hi Miranda.

Miranda Foster: Hi Andrew.

AB: My final guest is Jenny Offord, Senior Planning and Enabling Manager at Homes England and also a student on UCEM's MBA in Construction and Real Estate.

Hi Jenny.

Jenny Offord: Hi Andrew.

AB: So, firstly, I'd like to ask a few questions to Zoe. How did you find yourself in the role you are currently in?

ZB: During my Civil Service career, I have spent the most time working in property and HR. I spent eight years working in the HM Revenue & Customs estate team managing HMRC properties that were held under a PFI contract, direct leases and informal agreements with other government departments; and around five years in HR, specialising in recruitment.

My current job is a beautiful blend of both HR and property, and when my former property colleague contacted me to tell me this role was being advertised it felt like fate - almost as if it had been created with me in mind!

AB: What does your role comprise?

ZB: In my role, I am here to work with and support departments to use property apprenticeships to meet their capability needs, build a pipeline of wonderfully diverse talented people both from outside and inside the existing Civil Service, to support property apprentices and graduates throughout their development programmes via development and

CPD events, and celebrate and promote the brilliance of a career in the government property profession.

AB: What departments do you work with and what is the relationship with them?

ZB: I work across all government departments, from Homes England to DWP, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to the Valuation Office, Department of Education to the Ministry of Justice.

I like to think that my relationship with them is one of mutual respect and support. I'm here to help with building pipelines of talented diverse people ready to start their property career; to provide guidance and advice regarding the needed infrastructure to support their apprentices and help train their apprentice's managers, mentors etc., so that they and their apprentices get the most out of their apprenticeship programmes.

AB: How did you come across UCEM? And how do you work with UCEM?

ZB: I was introduced to UCEM when I first started in this role as many of our government surveying apprentices study with UCEM. I think I have a very open and effective working relationship with UCEM. We have regular meetings where we meet to discuss what is happening with our apprentices across government, working together to address any issues and concerns and I've learned a lot from our meetings, building my knowledge of the apprenticeship which makes me more effective in my role.

AB: How has the learning side of the apprenticeships been for your apprentices? And what support is there for apprentices with neurodiversity?

ZB: Each of our apprentices studying with UCEM has an apprenticeship outcomes officer who are there to support the apprentices through their programme with both their personal and career progression, as well as the completion of the apprenticeship.

The AOO also provides pastoral care as well when needed. On top of that, UCEM also has a disability and wellbeing team that provides support to those apprentices that require it, supporting apprentices with disabilities, learning difficulties, health conditions etc. A number of apprentices come to realise that they may be dyslexic when they are studying at degree level and UCEM's wellbeing team is there to support and help.

AB: Thanks, Zoe. And now some questions for Miranda and Jenny.

So, just firstly, what is your experience of neurodiversity?

MF: For me, I'm a late diagnosed autistic. I didn't get a formal diagnosis until into my 30s. I think I've spent all of my life really knowing that I felt different, but not really understanding why. I've learned to mask it, to try and fit in with varying levels of success.

I powered through doing all the things that I thought I should to get along in my career. I've learned how to network. I've made myself go along to social events. I've read every book under the sun on how to be a better colleague and manager. So, ultimately, I did manage to get to a place in my career doing something I loved but paying for it in my personal life with really poor mental health.

My younger brother is also autistic, but he was diagnosed at a young age. The similarities between us was so obvious to me, but to the outside world I learned to hide it so I could pretend to be neurotypical, whereas he's amazing at just embracing who he is.

I think that I've known for a long time that I am autistic, but because of the stigma around self-diagnosis and people going on the internet and finding things out, I felt like I had to go through the process of a formal diagnosis to make the changes that I needed for me. And it's quite a long and intense process, but getting that diagnosis was a massive relief to me.

It's helped me understand why I struggled in social environments and, with certain other things, it's been mind-blowing to learn about sensory processing disorder. Before, I never realised that not everyone feels nauseous when they're looking at overly bright colours, for example.

I realised that not everyone hides in the bathroom for at least one session per conference, but I didn't know it was because my brain was overwhelmed by taking in too much information. Having that diagnosis, it really clicked for me and has helped me learn more and understand who I am and why my brain works the way that it does.

It's helped me. What I need isn't wrong, it's just different to what the world is kind of set up for at the moment.

The other thing with learning about my own neurodiversity has made me really passionate about increasing others' understanding and acceptance because what I want is for the next generation coming through to not have to feel that they have to conform to an exact way of being in order to get ahead.

AB: That's really great that you're looking to do that. Everyone talks about inclusivity and this is a big part of it. Jenny, what's your experience of neurodiversity?

JO: I think I now notice neurodiversity in all the teams that I work in. Being part of the Neurodiversity Network at Homes England, and seeing different communication styles has really made me reflect on a personal level on strategies and approaches that work and don't work for me.

AB: In terms of the challenges you face, what specifically are they?

JO: I guess it's just challenges that have been exacerbated for all of us in lockdown particularly around communication and finding a style that works for the group that you're talking to. So, my preference one day might be to be on camera and another day, I might find that just having an audio conversation is more meaningful and I think it's this constant reflection of what's the right type of communication for that situation.

I think that that expands into how we learn as well, so, sometimes just listening to a podcast can be the best way to take in information. Other times you need diagrams to explain things.

I think at the moment, information is often shared in one way. I hope that we can start to use technology to offer more choice so that the styles of communication relate better to the way that I and others work in teams.

AB: And Miranda, we spoke beforehand and I explained my lack of knowledge about neurodiversity prior to the disability and wellbeing team at UCEM sharing what they were doing on it which we've shared on our website.

It was clear from our conversation that language used with neurodiversity is something to grapple with. So Miranda, what language should be used with neurodiversity?

MF: And thank you for asking. I think it's really important that we have these conversations as with anyone in any marginalized group.

The most important thing to do is to check with the person you're talking to how they want to be referred to, how they identify, because it can be a very personal thing. Understanding that neurodiversity is an umbrella term with lots of different conditions within it, with the alternative being neurotypical for people who don't fall into those categories, is good to know.

An interesting thing that's happened over the last years with both the neurodiversity movement and disability rights movement is that people have moved away from what was historically seen as the best way to talk about us being person-first language; for example, a person with autism. That comes from a very good place and some people still prefer that, but generally, we see overwhelmingly from the community that we want to just be referred to as we are.

For example, most of us would refer to ourselves as an autistic person, rather than a person with autism. This comes from a place where 'person with autism' is removing us from something that's an integral part of who we are.

It also suggests that it's a negative thing to be autistic, that there's this autism that sort of follows me around, whereas it's not a negative thing, it's not a positive thing, it's just a descriptor of who I am and overwhelmingly, we're seeing in these communities that people just want to be referred to as they are.

Another point to note on that is that some neurodivergent people are disabled and consider their divergence to be a disability and some do not, so it's really important not to conflate the two things and also not to assume that because someone is neurodivergent, that they also have a learning disability, because the current data says we're actually at a similar level to the neuro-typical population. It's really just understanding and accepting how we wish to be addressed.

AB: That's a really great explanation. And, Miranda, could you tell me about your role?

MF: Yeah, sure. So, I work for Homes England - the government's housing accelerator. We work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that homes are built, where they're needed. My small part of that mission is about getting affordable homes to people who couldn't afford to buy or rent in the areas that they're most needed.

So, I work in affordable housing on the policy and product side of things with a particular interest in shared ownership. My work's a great blend of strategic thinking, but also policy and implementation detail, which works perfectly for me and my strengths. We work closely with the Ministry, understanding their priorities and what they're doing, which has been an amazing learning curve for me.

AB: Great stuff. And Jenny, if you could also tell me about your role with Homes, England.

JO: I'm in Homes England's Development Team - South as a town planning and enabling manager, so I take sites through from acquisitions to disposals, advising on the town planning sides

I'm also the vice-chair of Homes England's Neurodiversity Network. My role in that network has an external industry focus. I'm really interested in looking at how the property sector generally can embrace neurodiversity and also the role of town planning within that.

AB: What opportunities are there in the property industry?

MF: There's a huge range of careers within property. There's a massive breadth of jobs that you could do.

I think particularly with the neurodiversity focus, it's about finding a role that plays to your strengths. Neurodivergent people have what's called a spiky profile so we have extreme strengths, but also disproportionately hard challenges in areas, and that can be a real asset to the industry.

As an example, someone who is dyslexic might have really strong 3D visual-thinking skills which could be a real asset for planning or design work. Some neurodivergent people have amazing verbal communication skills so it might be that they want to work in work with external providers to talk about what we're doing and get more people to build homes.

My strengths are in systems thinking, strategy and detail so I do well in a policy environment. I'm very fortunate to have found a role which plays to my strengths and is also what I care about. For me, it's really important to be doing something that you're passionate about.

Plays to your strengths as a person and for people who are graduating, there's a whole world to explore and it's really worth taking time to find what works for you. So, as an example, the Homes England graduate scheme enables our graduates to rotate to different areas and try out different roles and I think that's fantastic for them in understanding which bits they really enjoy and which bits don't really play to their strengths.

At the end of the programme, they can then find a role that works for them.

AB: That sounds like a very good scheme. Do you agree with what Miranda said there, Jenny?

JO: I agree. The property sector is so broad and, as Miranda mentioned, taking time at the start of your career to discover and understand what you're interested in and what your strengths are is really important. It's also helpful to find the kind of organisation that you feel most supported in. I've worked across local authorities, international property consultancies, UK planning specialist firms, for developers on building sites and now Homes England on projects ranging from small planning appeals for residential development right up to large regeneration schemes of, say, 10,000 homes and every project has required a different skill set.

What I can reflect on that now is that if something doesn't feel like it's catering to your strengths, it probably is time to talk to others and network widely to maybe find a different role within property that suits you because there are so many different kinds of opportunities.

AB: It sounds like a lot of exciting projects which you've worked on there which ties into the next question which is: what of the triumphs and challenges you've experienced in the industry?

MF: It's an interesting question for me because, for most of my career, I haven't had that formal diagnosis.

I've just known that I haven't fit in. I'd known that I've always been a bit of an outsider, awkward socially, saying the wrong thing, but not really understanding why. Getting a diagnosis has changed how I approach things I find challenging.

I'm now more able to push back on things and I'm very aware that not everyone is fortunate enough to be in a safe enough position to do that. I'm very lucky. My manager is awesome. He lets me play to my strengths and accommodates me where needed, because he knows that's how he'll get the best work from me.

I think the challenge that a lot of people have is when they're expected to fit into a certain way of doing things. For example, Jenny mentioned that sometimes you go to meetings and the assumption is that you should have your video on and some people really struggle if people have the video off.

So, it's all about finding a balance between different needs but, for example, if I have my video on, I'm very conscious that my facial expressions don't always match what a neurotypical person would be expecting. I naturally move a lot, gesticulate a lot, fidget and so on because that's my body's way of trying to get proprioceptive inputs.

But if I have my camera on, I'm constantly having to monitor myself and think: 'am I showing the right facial expression? Am I being distracting by moving around too much?' and so on. With any of this, being able to fit into a way of working which doesn't work for you is where the challenge lies.

Everything you have to do as a neurodivergent person to fit in takes up a lot of energy and if you're using your energy on things which really shouldn't matter, you don't have the energy and the headspace to focus on your work. I think some traits have benefited me. I'm quite passionate and single-minded, and I recognise that a lot of that comes from being autistic. Having a good, detailed my memory for legislation and guidance and so on is useful.

Through my work in the industry, I've created this amazing network of people who are equally passionate about it, and they're not all neurodivergent. I have found some brilliant mentors who have become friends along the way, united by the fact that we care about it and we want to do something about it.

Success for me has been the fact I've been able to access these amazing people that I've worked alongside, who have just accepted that I am who I am. I'm maybe a little bit odd sometimes, but it doesn't stop them being natural in the way that they interact with me.

AB: It's so important to feel comfortable at work. So Jenny, would you agree with some of the challenges and triumphs which Miranda has raised? How have you experienced the industry in that sense?

JO: I think it's been about finding projects where I feel like I'm using my skills as Miranda has said. Looking back, I think the most rewarding role that I had was where I got to lead the planning strategy on a large regeneration site in north London. It was the first role where I was based on-site and I think the neurodiversity aspect really came out because we were working with sales teams, construction teams and commercial quantity surveyors so we had different perspectives and things that we've learned.

That meant that we really had to be ourselves because we had different roles to play in this bigger project team. I think I'm most comfortable when I'm using my skills, but collaborating with others that bring something different. I think where I've less enjoyed roles is when I've just worked in teams of wholly town planners, most people went to similar universities and generally had a sort of fairly similar career path. I find that kind of stifling because it felt that we had just one mindset and I wasn't really being challenged as much as when I got on-site and was working with all these different kinds of people. I found that every day I was learning something new.

AB: So it's the larger projects which you enjoy more than the ones with people with a similar skill set, perhaps.

JO: I don't think it's the size. I think it's the teams and the atmosphere in the teams. When you aren't a bunch of people that all agree and instead you're thinking: 'oh, wow, I'm the only

one in this team with this perspective!', but everyone else here has something else important to say as well. I think, for me, that's what I enjoy because then you can be your full self and bring your skills to the table.

AB: Miranda, you've recently set up the Homes England Neurodiversity Network, which Jenny, as you mentioned a few minutes ago, you are vice-chair of as well. So, could you tell me about the network?

MF: So, the Homes England Neurodiversity Network came about by chance really. I was a relatively newly diagnosed person and I felt a bit lost. I wasn't 'out' to my workplace and I was struggling with trying to get people to understand what I needed and why I needed it.

I still felt very raw from the whole process and, by chance, I came across a couple of other neurodivergent people and we started talking about how one particular development opportunity that was coming up just didn't really fit with us. And we felt like we could benefit if it were tailored to neurodivergent people.

So, the Network came together with us looking at one particular situation and we had to work with Homes England's HR team to get it [the opportunity] adapted to meet our needs. From that experience, we felt that we could actually do quite a bit more. We managed to get the adaptations we needed and that was great, but it felt like there was a bigger cultural piece that we wanted to be part of.

Homes England encouraged us to get together and think about how we can change things. So that's how the network formed. We're only just over a year old and we're still really early on our journey.

AB: And what are your aims with the network?

MF: So we have a big overall aim, which is about creating an environment where we can be ourselves and we don't have to spend time and energy fitting into ways of working or feeling like we need to hide parts of ourselves to be accepted. There's a lot of stigma around neurodiversity. People could assume you're less intelligent or you're less capable, or they've seen films about say autistic people that gives them a particular view of what they are like. So, it's not always safe to say to your manager or it doesn't always feel safe to say to a manager that I am this and I need this.

The biggest aim that we want across all of our networks is just to build a really inclusive culture. We are aiming for more tangible actions such as working with our recruitment team, working with our HR team on policies and processes, working with our digital team, rolling out training to help people understand and accept it more.

There's loads of work going on. People have really embraced the idea of learning more about it and seeing what they can do differently.

AB: That sounds great. I wish you the best of luck with the Network and hope it grows and achieves those aims. Aside from the Network, what support is available for people with neurodiversity at Homes England?

MF: So we're still early on our journey with neurodiversity and I think most organizations are. It's only really come to light over the past sort of couple of years.

For me, it's more about culture than anything else. And my favorite thing that we have at Homes England is a published plan to increase team inclusion for everyone. There are tangible actions and the objective is an inclusive culture and fostering staff networks.

The document is owned by our chief of staff and I think that sends a really clear message across the organisation that people don't have to go away and fix it themselves. I think that's the level of commitment that you want when trying to build environments where people can be themselves.

In terms of things, to help people, we have been rolling out training and we're working with our digital teams on helping improve the access to software, which might help people working with our recruitment team to look at how we change recruitment from being a tick box for the type of person who does well at interviews, but rather: what skills do we need and who can bring those best to us?

AB: Do you have anything to add on that, Jenny, or has Miranda covered it?

JO: I guess it's important to say as well that we're starting to look at procurement and our supply chain so going beyond what we can do as one organisation to support individuals within Homes England. It's also looking across the board at how we can work together for more systematic support for everybody.

MF: And I think that's a really key point that Jenny has raised. It's not just about us. We serve communities and across government, we're here to serve people and we need to make sure that what we do, the homes we build, work for the population and that includes one-in-seven people being neurodivergent.

AB: In terms of companies within the built environment, are these all the things they should be doing? And what more should they be doing to be as inclusive as possible, would you say?

MF: It isn't about a quick fix of rolling out some spelling and grammar software to help some narrow diversion. It's not about patching up holes. It's about changing your culture. Companies should be reviewing their processes, their policies, and their ways of working.

But neurodiversity doesn't happen in isolation. A big thing we need to consider is intersectionality of identities and people can be in several marginalised groups.

The other thing to consider is that diagnosis is a privilege so having a formal or self-diagnosis shouldn't be a barrier to people accessing what they need. A really important point on that is that the vast majority of diagnostic criteria was set on white male children so if you don't fall into that category, you're much less likely to be able to access the diagnosis.

It's also heavily reliant on what services are available; where you live, for example. So all of that is to say that we really need to strip it back and think about why do you want things a certain way? Could it be more inclusive without having to disclose the diagnosis, which may or may not be safe to disclose?

Inclusive design is about building your organisation so that everyone can bring their full selves to work and so that they can opt in to using video or not using video or reading very detailed texts.

Creating a cognitively safe space is the most important thing we can do for every marginalised group is so that people know that it's safe not to fit into the way that your team communicate or talk to each other that makes you uncomfortable, that you're not going to be ostracized or labeled as difficult.

You need to make sure that it's safe for your people to speak up and then when they do that, you really listen to them with the intent to understand.

AB: And, taking that forward, if there are employers who want to give more support but don't know how to go about this with neurodivergent people or other marginalised communities, what advice would you have?

JO: I think it's just starting conversations and looking to build understanding and reaching out, seeing what other people are doing across the industry, because there are some fantastic pockets of support. I think bringing companies together to have these conversations could make property a far more inclusive industry. I think it's already a sector that attracts people who are neurodivergent but I think it could do more to support them in the way that they work best and retain them in the industry.

AB: And is that also what you would say Miranda?

MF: Yeah, I agree with all of that. Start listening and finding out what people need. I think encouraging networks helps because it creates a safe space for people to talk and bounce ideas around.

As Jenny said, there's practical advice out there and there are people willing to help all of us that are in networks and that we found from other networks within the Civil Service and out in the industry. There's an opportunity for us to change things.

Let's share what we've learned and talk about it and see what might work as well. The most important thing for me is just getting your culture right and really questioning why you do things a certain way and asking: could they be any different? Ask around and you will find lots of people really, really passionate about this, wanting to help.

AB: Yeah, it starts with creating an accommodating atmosphere where you feel comfortable offering your thoughts on how things could be improved and having that as a starting point, then listening to what everyone has to say about how things could be improved, which is a really good thing to take on board for any employer.

So, our final set of questions are for Jenny and relate to your studies at UCEM. So, just to kick off, how have you found your studies with UCEM?

JO: I'm really happy that I selected the MBA course. I highly recommend it for giving an overview of how organisations work and at UCEM, the construction and real estate MBA is directly applied to our industry so every module is relevant. The MBA course has enabled me to apply my experience to the different modules and I think that's made the learning richer as well.

AB: And how have you found the support at UCEM?

JO: There's a fantastic support team, who really encouraged me to apply for the Disabled Students' Allowance. It isn't something that I'd ever thought of before. Before studying with UCEM, I'd never really talked about myself being disabled and I was really reluctant to reach out but, with the team's persistence, I eventually did apply and on reflection, I would now recommend it because it provides supportive technology and access to coaching and mentoring which has really helped me to understand my strengths and weaknesses.

So, I think the individual support for students is there and it's really a great asset that more people could tap into. And from that, I've learned that there's a similar programme in the workplace as well. It's really useful to know that the support doesn't end when you finish university studies.

I think UCEM is in a rare position to lead on building support for neurodiversity for three key reasons.

The first reason is connections. UCEM is at the forefront of industry knowledge and partnerships across the built environment and construction so if we could work in partnership with others that UCEM works with all the time, I think it could really have an impact across property.

I think the digital experience at UCEM is a real advantage as well. Being mindful of digital exclusion and thinking about website accessibility regulations and how they look at content and format and bringing the knowledge from the digital sector can really help with the communication generally in education.

And then I think, finally, understanding what neurodiversity means in a practical sense has an advantage at UCEM because of its knowledge of apprenticeships. So, I think, as Zoe has touched on, there's already a lot of support in place for apprentices and spotting things like dyslexia and understanding that for someone to work their way through successfully all of the training that comes with apprenticeships, both the class-based learning and also on sites, means making sure the course is adapted to their learning style.

So, I think if you bring those three factors together, it really gives you see a chance to take a leading role. And that's where I think I would encourage having an overarching, big-picture strategy that's outward-facing and looking to listen across the industry at what's already happening and then seeing what role UCEM could play in making property generally more inclusive.

AB: I understand that the subject of your MBA project focuses on support across the industry for neurodiversity. So can you talk me through your project in a bit more detail?

JO: I arrived at the idea for my MBA research project when I started to think that there's this support in university for neurodiversity, but I hadn't heard anything about what was available in the workplace. So, after talking to a few people, I started to focus in on neurodiversity networks.

There are diversity networks across organisations within property, and some of those – JLL, Deloitte, and now Homes England - have dedicated neurodiversity networks.

So, the project is just looking at the power of how networks can change culture within organisations and also looks at the room for collaboration so that we improve inclusion for neurodiversity, but also look at other wider aspects of diversity at the same time. So if you're looking through the employee life cycle from recruitment and onboarding through to how you communicate with your line manager and appraisals, it seems that neurodiversity networks, where they exist in organisations can really bring a perspective that can help change the process that will improve it for everybody.

AB: So, to wrap up, what would be the one piece of advice you would give to organisations, whether universities or built environment firms to help bring about a more inclusive, inclusive workplace?

ZB: All employers, learning establishments, etc., want the best talented people to work and study with them, and for those talented people to be able to perform to their best ability, enjoying and taking pride in what they do.

An inclusive workplace is essential to making that happen, and having an environment where your employees can bring their whole selves to work and show their full potential can only be beneficial to your business, or organisation, therefore why wouldn't you do it?

And we have amazing people out there like Miranda and Jenny who are showing how we can improve things. We just need to listen and learn.

AB: I think that's a lovely statement there to end on. Thank you for your time. If you would like to find out more about UCEM's disability and wellbeing support, which includes plenty of advice and support, visit ucem.ac.uk/study-with-ucem/disability-wellbeing-support. For more about Neurodiversity Celebration Week, visit neurodiversity-celebration-week.com. Thanks for listening!