

“The way my brain is wired helps me do better”: neurodiversity at Dstl

If I've had a 'peopley' day I need to sit in a dark room in silence or hide under a blanket when I get home.

This is how Andrew, or AJ as he is known, manages being a principal software engineer in a world-class organisation with the challenges of having Asperger's Syndrome and dyslexia.

He started working for Dstl 18 years ago and it was through his job that he was first diagnosed – although he already suspected that he had Autism Spectrum Disorder.

He talks about his experience as the organisation marks Neurodiversity Celebration Week.

AJ said:

My story is an unusual one, perhaps since my diagnosis came later in life.

I've always known that I wasn't quite the same as other people, and at school I didn't really have many friends and I was bullied quite a lot.

I was that boy at school that spent every lunchtime in the library, reading or playing with the computers.

However, it was at school that he developed a passion for science and engineering, and he remembers a favourite book at aged five was on the history of iron and steel manufacturing.

He believes attitudes have changed since he was a child and that Neurodiversity Celebration Week is important as it helps explode prevailing myths and signposts available support.

I think there are lots of stereotypes around all kinds of neurodiversity. Some people think of dyslexic people as being unable to read, or those with autism and Asperger's as people that have no social skills at all who can't cope in the real world.

I don't think any of those are true. There's an adage that says, 'If you've met one neurodiverse person... you've met one neurodiverse person'. We are all different – in the same way everyone is different.

AJ's Asperger's also manifests itself in a hypersensitivity to sound, where an almost inaudible hum of electrical equipment can be painful, while travelling on the London Underground is unbearable.

In a work environment the general noise of an office can be very distracting and networking or making small talk is extremely stressful.

People are often surprised to learn AJ is neurodiverse as he has learnt to "mask the symptoms and fake being 'normal'." However, he says this coping technique is emotionally and mentally draining.

He went on to say Dstl provided a package of help which included a flexibility around his work station, a screen reader and coaching to help with specific things that he finds difficult.

I think Dstl is a good, supportive employer, I think there's lots of scope for making appropriate adjustments for people that have needs.

It's not about curing it, it's not about taking it away it is about giving people the tools they need to be the best they can. I was surprised at the level of support that was available.

Everyone's journey is going to be different but the important thing for everyone to realise is that, as an organisation, Dstl really wants you to be yourself and be the individual you are and embrace that diversity.

He feels, with the support of the organisation, his condition makes him better at his job.

He said:

It gives me an ability to concentrate deeply on something technical for long periods, a skill at spotting patterns and following logical sequences.

I've always had 'the knack' when it comes to electronics and computers – and I have no doubt that my Asperger's plays a significant part in that.

The way my brain is structured, the way my brain is wired, helps me do better. I still want to know exactly how everything works – but now it's an asset and Dstl pays me to do it.

If the little boy sat in the corner of the library was to meet me now? I would have loved to have known as a child that I would end up working in an environment like this on things that really matter and things that have really interesting problems to solve.

Joint statement on Afghanistan, 25 March 2022

News story

Joint statement condemning the Taliban's decision not to re-open secondary schools to Afghan girls.



Joint statement from the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Italy, Norway, the United States of America, and the High Representative of the European Union. We are united in our condemnation of the Taliban's decision not to re-open secondary schools to Afghan girls:

We are united in our condemnation of the Taliban's decision on March 23 to deny so many Afghan girls the opportunity to finally go back to school. The Taliban's action contradicted its public assurances to the Afghan people and to the international community.

The decision came after months of work by the international community to support teacher stipends based on an expectation that schools would be open for all, with the higher interest of Afghan students and teachers in mind. And sadly, it came as eager Afghan girls were walking to their schools for the first time in seven months.

We call on the Taliban urgently to reverse this decision, which will have consequences far beyond its harm to Afghan girls. Unreversed, it will profoundly harm Afghanistan's prospects for social cohesion and economic growth, its ambition to become a respected member in the community of nations, and the willingness of Afghans to return from overseas.

It will have an inevitable impact on the Taliban's prospects of gaining political support and legitimacy either at home or abroad. Every Afghan citizen, boy or girl, man or woman, has an equal right to an education at all levels, in all provinces of the country.

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Project launched to support EV chargepoint infrastructure rollout

The Geospatial Commission has today launched a discovery project to explore how location data can be better utilised to support planning and delivery of electric vehicle charge points by local authorities.

The UK is committed to transitioning to electric vehicles (EV) in support of ambitious net zero targets. Local authorities will play a crucial role enabling this transition.

This project will support the approach set out in the government's Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy, published today by the Department for Transport, which focuses on enabling the rollout of a robust EV charging infrastructure network by 2030. Setting out a vision and approach for EV infrastructure roll-out and expectations of key stakeholders, the Strategy identifies that addressing barriers to data sharing will be important to enable decision making.

Dr Steve Unger, Commissioner at the Geospatial Commission, said:

Location data will play a key role in planning the UK's transition to electric vehicles and help make net zero a reality. Through this project, the Geospatial Commission will understand the challenges faced by local authorities who wish to exploit location data. By working together, we will be able to unlock the potential for data-driven innovation in transport.

The Geospatial Commission discovery project includes workshops with 10 local authorities to identify challenges and opportunities for better use of location data in the rollout of EV chargepoint infrastructure. This project will be undertaken by technical specialists Frazer-Nash Consultancy.

Matthew Perrin, Digital Services Innovation Lead, Frazer-Nash Consultancy, said:

Geospatial data is vital to planning, installing and running an effective charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. We are really looking forward to working with the Geospatial Commission and local authorities on this important study, providing our expertise in geospatial data and discovery to enable this important step on the UK's journey to net zero.

Councillor Helen Hayden, Executive Member for Infrastructure and Climate from Leeds City Council, said:

Over the last five years, Leeds has taken a range of actions, offering free electric van trials, discounted parking and requiring charge points in new developments, to accelerate our city's transition to less polluting vehicles.

With figures showing that the number of plug-in vehicles in Leeds has doubled over the last year, it is vitally important that we understand how best to expand and improve access to charging infrastructure for drivers on the go or without private parking. We are therefore excited to be part of this timely project.

The following local authorities are involved in the project:

1. Oxfordshire County Council
2. City of York Council
3. Norfolk County Council
4. Greater Manchester Combined Authority
5. West Sussex County Council
6. Cornwall Council
7. Kent County Council
8. Leeds City Council
9. Wiltshire Council
10. Cheshire East Council

Editor's Notes:

1. The Geospatial Commission published [Positioning the UK in the Fast Lane](#) in August 2021 which identified that supporting the effective use of location data and systems is vital for the UK to have the best charging infrastructure in the world and meet net zero targets whilst driving economic growth. This new project builds on the findings of this report.
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Tenfold expansion in chargepoints by 2030 as government drives EV revolution

- convenient, affordable and reliable charging for all as government commits £1.6 billion to expand UK charging network – with around 300,000 public chargers expected to be available by 2030
- key barriers to EV driving removed with chargepoint operators legally required to meet rigorous standards, enabling drivers to pay easily and find nearby chargers
- comes as private sector embraces transition to clean and low emission road transport, with bp pulse announcing £1 billion investment in ultra-fast charging

The UK's charging network has been given a huge boost today (25 March 2022), as government unveils plans to support the UK market to reach 300,000 public electric vehicle (EV) chargepoints by 2030 – equivalent to almost 5 times the number of fuel pumps on our roads today.

Backed by £1.6 billion, under the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy, charging will become easier and cheaper than refuelling a petrol or diesel car, while new legal requirements on operators will see drivers of EVs able to pay by contactless, compare charging prices and find nearby chargepoints via apps.

The new strategy sets out the government's aim to expand the UK's charging network, so that it is robust, fair and covers the entire country – as well as improving the consumer experience at all chargepoints, with significant support focused on those without access to off-street parking, and on fast charging for longer journeys.

£500 million will be invested to bring high quality, competitively priced public chargepoints to communities across the UK. This includes a £450 million Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) fund, which will boost projects such as EV hubs and innovative on-street charging, so those without driveways don't miss out on cleaner transport.

A pilot scheme for the LEVI fund launching today will see local authorities bid for a share of £10 million in funding, allowing selected areas to work with industry and boost public charging opportunities.

Meanwhile, the LEVI funding includes up to £50 million to fund staff to work on local challenges and public chargepoint planning – ensuring that any development complements all other zero emission forms of travel, such as walking and cycling.

The existing £950 million [Rapid Charging Fund](#) will support the rollout of at least 6,000 high powered super-fast chargepoints across England's motorways

by 2035, ensuring the UK continues to lead the Western world in the provision of rapid and ultra-rapid public chargers.

This comes on top of ministers' pledges to continue addressing any barriers to private sector rollout of chargepoints, such as local councils delaying planning permission and high connection costs.

Ambitious and innovative chargepoint operators are already committed to installing an additional 15,000 rapid chargepoints across England's entire road network – a quadrupling of the current offer – and over 100,000 on-street chargepoints by 2025.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

We're powering ahead with plans to help British people go electric, with our expanding charging network making journeys easier right across the country.

Clean transport isn't just better for the environment, but is another way we can drive down our dependence on external energy supplies. It will also create new high-skilled jobs for our automotive and energy sectors and ultimately secure more sustainable and affordable motoring for all.

Drivers are at the heart of the revolutionary plan, with rigorous new standards and legislation being introduced to improve people's experience of using public chargepoints.

The government is mandating that operators provide real-time data about chargepoints. It is ensuring that consumers can compare prices and seamlessly pay for their charging using contactless cards. They will also be able to use apps to find their nearest available chargepoint.

These plans will also require a 99% reliability rate at rapid chargepoints to ensure they are world-class and give consumers confidence in finding chargepoints that work wherever they travel – helping eradicate so-called 'range anxiety'.

Even with recent trends in electricity prices, EVs still benefit from lower fuel, running and maintenance costs than their petrol and diesel equivalents and the strategy hopes to encourage drivers across the nation to make the switch.

Production costs also continue to fall and some analysts expect purchase price parity with petrol and diesel cars to be reached well within the 2020s.

This forms part of wider government plans to reduce the UK's reliance on imports of foreign oil, improving the security of our energy supply and reducing the country's vulnerability to volatility in global energy prices.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said:

No matter where you live – be that a city centre or rural village, the north, south, east or west of the country – we’re powering up the switch to electric and ensuring no one gets left behind in the process.

The scale of the climate challenge ahead of us all is well known and decarbonising transport is at the very heart of our agenda.

That’s why we’re ensuring the country is EV-fit for future generations by the end of this decade, revolutionising our charging network and putting the consumer first.

The private sector plays a key role in helping the country make the switch to electric and the UK’s most-used charging network company, bp pulse, is today announcing its own plans to spend £1 billion on developing charging infrastructure in the UK, supporting hundreds of new jobs.

Richard Bartlett, Senior Vice President, bp pulse, said:

This £1 billion investment is vital to provide the charging infrastructure the UK needs. We’re investing to build a world-class network.

This investment allows us to deliver more. More high-speed charging in dedicated hubs and on existing fuel and convenience sites. More home charging services. And crucial enhancements to our digital technology that will make charging fast, easy and reliable.

Alongside the pioneering strategy, the government is additionally launching an automotive roadmap outlining joint government and industry commitments to achieve the decarbonisation of road transport.

This is the first in a series of roadmaps that will be published over the course of the year for each sector of the [Prime Minister’s Ten Point Plan](#), showcasing how the UK is delivering on its green commitments.

The roadmap brings together the government’s policies designed to help and support the automotive sector in the shift towards greener transport and will help businesses plan more effectively in the transition to a zero-emission future.

[Transport Secretary declares zero](#)

tolerance for phone use behind the wheel as law changes today

- it is now illegal to use a handheld mobile phone while driving under virtually any circumstance
- government announces £800,000 communications campaign that will soon hit radios and social media
- follows public consultation that found 81% of people supported such a move

From today (25 March 2022), [motorists are breaking the law if they use a handheld mobile phone behind the wheel for any use](#), including to take photos or videos, scroll through playlists or play games – as the government closes a loophole previously exploited by dangerous drivers to escape conviction.

Anyone caught using their handheld device while driving could face a fine of up to £1,000 as well as 6 points on their licence or a full driving ban.

The government's award-winning THINK! team is also today launching an £800,000 awareness campaign to remind drivers not to use a handheld phone at the wheel and of the penalties if choosing to ignore this new law.

Millions of young people will start seeing the adverts in the coming weeks, showing friends appearing in the back seat to intervene when the driver becomes tempted to use their phone behind the wheel.

The campaign will run across video on demand, online video, social media channels and radio in England and Wales until the end of April.

[Hands on the wheel? Hands off your phone](#)

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said:

I will do everything in my power to keep road-users safe, which is why I am taking a zero-tolerance approach to those who decide to risk lives by using their phone behind the wheel.

I'm ensuring anyone who chooses to break this vital law can face punishment for doing so and we'll continue our efforts to ensure our roads remain among the safest in the world.

Edmund King AA president said:

The AA has long campaigned to make handheld mobile phone use while driving as socially unacceptable as drink driving and we warmly welcome the new law. This is a much-needed toughening of the rules to help make our roads safer.

Those who believe they can still play with their phone because it's in a cradle must think again – they leave themselves open to prosecution for either careless or dangerous driving.

The best thing to do is to convert your glovebox into a phone box. We all need to keep our hands on the wheel and our eyes on the road.

Drivers are able to make contactless payments, for example, at drive-throughs, so long as their vehicle is stationary. They can also still use a device 'hands-free' while driving if it's secured in a cradle, allowing motorists to use their phone as a sat-nav.

They must, however, always take responsibility for their driving and can be charged with an offence if the police find them not to be in proper control of their vehicle.

Updates to the law follow a [public consultation](#) that found 81% of respondents supported proposals to make it easier for culprits to be prosecuted.

The law previously only applied to so-called 'interactive communication' such as making a call, as it was written before mobile phones could be used for more complicated tasks, such as taking videos. Previously those caught using their mobiles at the wheel have in some cases been able to escape conviction by claiming that they weren't using them for interactive communication.

The update to the law ensures nobody will be able to use the loophole to escape conviction.

This is the latest move in the government's drive to bolster road safety, with the Department for Transport's £100 million [Safer Roads Fund](#) recently winning the prestigious Prince Michael of Kent International Road Safety Award.