Episode 2: Ask, Listen, Do: Rethinking Neurodiversity with the Autism Wellbeing Project

In this episode of *Let's Go Further*, we continue our exploration of equity, diversity and inclusion across the skills and education sector—focusing on how better support for neurodivergent learners and colleagues can create more inclusive environments for everyone.

With diagnoses of neurodiversity rising across the UK, and recent government plans to reform the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system in England, this conversation looks at what meaningful support really looks like in further education and skills.

Host Joe McLoughlin is joined by Emma Eager and Emily Abbott, directors and founders of the Autism Wellbeing Project. Through their work providing therapy, social care, training, and accreditation, they aim to raise awareness of autism and challenge misconceptions—helping individuals and communities to thrive.

Together, they explore the realities of turning inclusive policies into everyday practice, the challenges facing educators and employers, and the opportunities to create lasting, positive change for learners, colleagues, and wider communities.

Episode Guests

Emily Abbott

Emily Abbott is the co-founder and director of The Autism Wellbeing Project, bringing an extensive background in social care and a deeply personal connection to autism through her family. She is passionate about creating real opportunities for independence and ensuring autistic people can access the right support that truly adds value to their lives. Emily is also a trainer for the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training, sharing her knowledge to improve understanding and outcomes across health and social care.

Emma Eager

Emma Eager has spent 15 years working as a teacher and leader in primary education and is a qualified counsellor and experienced trainer. She delivers the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training as well as the wider training offer from The Autism Wellbeing Project. Emma is dedicated to improving outcomes for autistic adults, bringing a mix of humour, honesty, and compassion to her work. As someone who is diagnosed AuDHD, she combines professional expertise with lived experience to create meaningful and relatable learning.

Episode Transcript

Joe McLoughin: Hello and welcome to series five of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm your host, Joe McLoughin. In this series, we'll be exploring the range of ways that equity, diversity and inclusion policy and practice shapes the sector and helps change lives for the better. Across this series, we'll be joined by key voices from under pressure and in-demand sectors to explore how employers and educators can best work together to deliver life changing results for learners, their families, and their communities, from the challenges of turning good policies into good practice to broadening our understanding of what inclusive education looks like. Our conversations will provide a platform for, and a celebration of the myriad opportunities that Further Education provides. With diagnoses of neurodiversity rising across the UK and with the government recently publishing plans to reform the special educational needs and disabilities system in England. In this episode, we are exploring how those in the FE and skills sector can best support their colleagues and learners. Joining me are Emma Eager and Emily Abbott are both directors and founders of the Autism Wellbeing Project. A project offers therapy, social care, training, and accreditation services and ultimately wants to raise awareness about and challenge perceptions of autism so that everyone in that community can thrive. Welcome to you both.

Emma Eager: Thank you Joe.

Emily Abbott: Thank you.

Joe McLoughin: Just to begin at the beginning, can you tell us a little bit about where the Autism Wellbeing Project came from?

Emily Abbott: We both worked as I've worked in the sector for quite a while. We met in a previous role in a previous charity supporting autistic people, and we both come out of that thinking, what can we do in our small part of the world in Cheshire and Widnes, and realise that there's a huge gap here for support for specifically for autistic adults? Um, Emma, come along with an idea, forced me to a coffee shop, and said, what do you think about doing this? I've already got a name. And we can do this, this, and this. It was kind of half set up already, and she just wanted me to say yes.

Emma Eager: I didn't have a choice, really. It was always going to happen, but it was always in our in our interest really, wasn't it?

Emily Abbott: Um, I have a brother who's autistic. My wife is autistic. Emma, you've got lived experience, haven't you?

Emma Eager: Yeah. So I had a diagnosis of ADHD and autism a few years ago. And I've got family members as well that are autistic. So we live and breathe it really, don't we?

Emily Abbott: Absolutely. Yeah.

Emma Eager: Just thought so. Something we could really make a difference in. And off we went.

Emily Abbott: Yeah, a great idea. I think we were quite naive to how quickly we thought it would, um, you know, get off the ground running. But it's been brilliant. Yeah.

Joe McLoughin: That's great. Now you mentioned there about the importance of making a difference in your part of the world and to how autism is one of your interests. So how do you do that? What, what, what does an average week look like for you both?

Emma Eager: Oh gosh. Very busy. Um, an average week for us, I would say is delivering therapy, delivering lots of free activities to autistic adults that can be ranged from cafe socials, um,

Emily Abbott: sports and gravity yoga, hula hooping.

Emma Eager: Yeah.

Emily Abbott: Sex ed sessions. All sorts.

Emma Eager: Yeah. Um, and then we deliver a lot of mentoring and then lots and lots of training delivery at the minute, specifically delivering the, the Oliver McGowan training across um, the Northwest really Manchester, Cheshire, uh, Liverpool, things like that. So it's busy.

Emily Abbott: It is. I think we've got about eight training sessions on this week alone. So yeah, it's very hectic. But I think the thing we're most proud of is the free wellbeing activities we put on. Because yeah, that a lot of people charge for activities and things like that. We've never wanted to do that. We know the area we live in is classed as a deprived area, so we always wanted it to be free. And regardless of diagnosis if people think they're autistic. They can come along.

Emma Eager: Yeah.

Joe McLoughin: Great. Recognising that range of work, recognising how it's available to everyone. What would a win look like for you in, say, five years, ten years, twenty years' time?

Emily Abbott: Oh, we've been thinking about that a lot, haven't we? We had our advisory board last week and it's always really difficult, I think, thinking about strategy and things like that, because the nature of being a CIC, we kind of have

to sort of go with the flow a little bit and see where needs are, see what's coming through Parliament, see what's coming through the council, and kind of go with it a little bit. And we don't want world domination or anything, do we, Emily Abbott?

Emily Abbott: No, I think. A win for us is our community, isn't it? A win is what we've built. We support over two hundred adults at the minute. Um, we're not really a numbers game. It's more about are we always providing something that's completely inclusive and safe and welcoming? And if we can continue to do that in the next three, five, ten years, then that that's the win. I think just still being about and still providing that support that that's so needed.

Emma Eager: And we don't want to be massive. We love that we can go into activities, and we know faces and we know names. And, you know, we're not leaders that are leading from afar. We want to be in there and meeting everybody and meeting the people we serve. So, it's really important to us to keep that small sort of family community feel that we've got great.

Joe McLoughin: Great, and so kind of responding to that, then that idea of wanting to be present, recognizing that there's more need, there's more stuff happening. Um, as we mentioned at the outset of the episode, the diagnoses of neurodivergence are on the rise in the UK. Uh, and as an organisation that's in the front line in this area, can you explain a little bit about why that is and what the consequence or what some of the consequences are?

Emma Eager: Yeah, of course, it's something we hear a lot, isn't it? Oh, everyone's a little bit autistic these days. Everybody's getting diagnosed. And I think we were talking before about how we'd explained this. And I think there's a bit of a common analogy going around now about the stars in the sky. You know, we've always been aware there's stars in the sky. But as technology has improved and we've discovered telescopes and we've got better, we've found even more stars in the sky. And I think this is what's happened with diagnosis is autistic people. They've always been there. We're just better now at diagnosing them, better at finding them. Our public awareness is a lot higher, and I think we will still see rates continue to rise for quite some time, and then they'll level off.

Joe McLoughin: And so with the levelling off, I'm curious kind of what do you have a do you have a number in your head, like a percentage or a proportion or where if you were to if you were to take a guess at it, where would you where do you think the number might be?

Emma Eager: Yeah. I've had conversations with psychiatrists and people like that, and I think the thinking is probably around fifty percent of the population is neurodivergent in some way. So not just being autistic, that might be ADHD, dyslexia, you know, all sorts of different brain types. So, I think we've got to really change how we think about it and kind of anticipate that in our day to day lives,

we're going to come across people that have brains that work a little bit differently, and we just need to do better at designing the world.

Joe McLoughin: So, kind of jumping off, of that phrase, then better at designing the world. Um, currently, the government are taking a renewed interest in FND support and provision. What do you make of their new plans? What do you think they do well, what might they do better? And is there anything important that they're missing?

Emma Eager: Yeah, I spent fifteen years in primary education. I worked up to sort of acting headship level. Absolutely loved my time in school. But increasingly, as my career in education went along, it was becoming less about understanding the children and what they needed and more into um, Ofsted and grades and results. And I think in that we've lost what made kids and young people tick. And I think we're seeing that with the number of children and young people who don't want to attend school, the amount of home educated increasing and the amount of young people that are switched off education from really quite young. And I think that's a big reason why I stepped out of education was it just wasn't what I wanted it to be anymore. You know, I was always a teacher that wanted to do art and wanted to go out in nature. And we just don't have the time to necessarily develop the whole child anymore. And I think that's really sad. And I think until systems change that, it's not just all about English and maths. We are going to see the children that don't necessarily shine in that area really struggling.

Joe McLoughin: Mhm. So are you. With that all being said, then, are you are you impressed with the new plans or are you a bit more sceptical? Kind of. What's your read of them?

Emma Eager: Yeah, I mean, it’s concerning, I think to think that we can have children that are really struggling and kind of put them in this sort of pit stop of this intensive support that will then get them back on track. I don't think knowing the children that I've worked with and children in my family, that that's necessarily going to work. So, I always go back to my son. My son's got an EHCP plan and it has been absolutely life changing for him, but it wouldn't have worked short term. What he's needed is that really bespoke education, and he's been lucky enough to find an amazing school that's really found what makes him tick, which is cars and that, you know, they're doing things like designing cars, they're building race cars, racing them. They're really, really finding out what it is. But that's a lot more than just putting in specialist teachers and trying to get him to fit into. Sort of neurotypical educational standards. He's a very different child, but. Given the right environment, you know, he's fifteen of the last two years he's spent every holiday servicing Mercedes car at a garage. He's got a job. He falls asleep listening to. Advanced engineering, you know, revision materials. And you've just got to find ways of meeting the child as an individual. And I think there's a concern that we're

trying to treat them as, you know, a group of people and that there's one size fits all. And I don't think that's the case.

Emily Abbott: No.

Joe McLoughin: So just riffing on that a little bit, because you've both said in past kind of interviews and conversations, words to the effect of it's not about having tens of thousands of pounds, it's about caring and being willing to make adjustments either for the child in this case, or for or for your staff, say, um, zooming in from the government and thinking more about colleges or thinking more about schools or skills providers generally. What might leaders of those organisations do? Like how can they drive positive changes without breaking the bank?

Emma Eager: Yeah. Do you want to do ask our phrase that we always say in training, Emily Abbott.

Emily Abbott: Go on.

Emma Eager: Ask listen, do. And I think that that's what it all comes down to, is getting to know the people that you serve, the people in your community or in your place of work, really getting to know them and what they want. And I think that's been something that's really driven us, hasn't it? Having an autistic perspective panel.

Emily Abbott: Yes, massively.

Emma Eager: So. I think sometimes Emily and I will be thinking, we know what's right for our community, and then we'll go and have a meeting with them and they'll be like, nope, that's we don't want that at all.

Emily Abbott: We're way off.

Emma Eager: Yeah. And I think unless we're actually engaging with the people that we serve and seeing what they want and asking and really listening and then responding to what they want, you know, we don't always know best. You've got to really get to know people and understand what they need. And often it's quite different to what you think.

Emily Abbott: Yeah, absolutely. And I think for us, you know, we by far have a lot of money. Um, and, you know, alongside that asking and listening is that holding the boundaries of what you can do and what you can't do within, you know, the restraints that you've got. And sometimes we'll be asked to, what's some of the things we've asked to go on a hot air balloon air balloon. And we're like, right, well, we can't do that. We haven't got the funds, but, but we can do this and we can offer an alternative that that could equally suit the needs of people. So it isn't just, you know, cutting that off because what they've asked

might be too much. It's taking that back and going, actually, I can't do that, but I can do this. And, and I think that that's a big switch in education and a big switch in learning as well. I think we talk a lot about being, just having this approach of human to human and, and ultimately that's all that it is. Um, and we're very aware in the educational sector and, you know, that there isn't a lot of time. There's not a lot of money. There's a lot of pressures. Um, but as Emma Eager: said, it's, it's getting to know those people that you're serving and that comes hand in hand with lots of support and lots of listening. Um, and people felt like they're being heard. I think that's a huge thing. Um, for, for students or individuals that are being supported.

Emma Eager: And when I'm training people on this, I do always say that, you know, like the, the average inpatient cost of an inpatient autistic person would be like about two hundred and nine thousand a year. And our turnover last year was one hundred and eighteen thousand.

Emily Abbott: The first year that we delivered support. Um, and this year it was two hundred and ninety thousand.

Emma Eager: So for that amount of money that would support one person in inpatient mental healthcare, we're supporting hundreds and doing a really, really good job. And I'm from, um, a pit town in Yorkshire and down the pits used to take canaries down the pits because they'd be the first to let you know if there was a problem with gas. And I always say in our systems, this is what our neurodivergent people do for us, that there are canaries in the coal mines. They're the ones that will show us if there's a problem in the systems we have. And but they're not going to be the only people that are going to struggle. You know, there's lots of people that need the adjustments for many, many different reasons. But if we get it right for them, we get it right for everybody. So I think it can be really good to just think of it in that way that you're not just trying to whack a mole, as I sometimes say in training, you know, you'll have somebody who's autistic and you're just trying to fix it. It's not about whacking them all. It's about systems and making sure if you get it inclusive, it helps everybody.

Joe McLoughin: Sounds like what you're talking about there is that that challenge of keeping things human to human, keeping things relatable in like a bigger system that isn't necessarily designed for, you know, the helping the individual.

With that in mind, then what advice would you give to someone in a classroom? Say like a, like a, like a frontline teacher or a support member of the pastoral support team, say, who might be working with learners who are who have got a certain neurodiversity's or might even have colleagues who have neurodiversity's. Like how would you advise them to approach their day-to-day kind of. What can they do best to support their, their colleagues and of course, mates?

Emma Eager: Yeah. So there's Doctor Bearden's famous golden equation, isn't there? That autism plus environment equals outcome. And that's something that we've absolutely hammered home to our staff and on training. Because if you get autistic people that are struggling, that aren't attending or are struggling to access, there's something wrong with the environment. And what we found here is you get the environment, right? And then your autistic people or your neurodivergent people will really, really thrive. And it's not about making people less autistic or trying to make them become neurotypical. It's about them still being autistic but being the best that they can be. And, you know, meeting the goals that they want. But I think environment is everything and remembering that you're part of the environment as well. You know, down to how you talk, how you talk to them about, you know, who they are and how you're talking about autism or what they've got, you know, whether you're talking about it as a disability or a negative or a disorder and, you know, really, really thinking about getting that environment right for everybody.

Joe McLoughin: Yeah. And so you've, you've spoken there. It's about the language you use. If you're the teacher in a room or also the leader in a room in an educational setting, the way you approach your individuals, um, kind of practically, are there certain things that staff members could do in terms of like physically changing the space or altering the space to support their learners or colleagues?

Emma Eager: Well, again, it goes back to ask, listen, do, doesn't it? And I always used to do that in my classroom. Like the first week I'd have a new class. We'd, we'd look at the space and we'd design the space together, you know, where do you want the tables? Where, how do you want it to be set up? And I'd let them have a say in it, you know, rather than me being the boss at the front of the classroom, it was about, you know, this is our space for the year. What do we want to do with it? And, you know, giving them a budget or giving them limitations, but then really thinking about what would make a difference. Because sometimes it's just things like, these lights in this room are terrible. I can't concentrate when these lights are on. You know, can we just go on Facebook Marketplace and get some second-hand lamps to have around the room? That will make it better for lots of people? I mean, even people who aren't autistic hate those fluorescent lights, don't they?

Emily Abbott: Yeah. And I think it's even about, you know, like you say, designing that space. But also, it I think a lot of teachers go in and already give like seating plans and things like that. And it's around looking at where does everyone prefer to sit? What, what does it, how does it suit you best? And it's having them conversations that are really ask, listen, and do conversations, aren't they? They're really taking in what the students require and what they need. And, you know, obviously there are going to be limitations around that. There are going to be some students that you might find that just want to sit next to them or whatever that is. But it's really looking at the, the need. And if someone is asking for that, um, can it be done and can it be done within reason? And like Emma said, you know, there's them boundaries that that you can hold, whether it's through budgets or places in the room or whatever that is. But I think it's just listening and just taking that on board. We adopt that massively here, don't we? You know, we might get a funding pot and we and we go to our panel and we say, right, we've got this pot of money. How do you want to spend it? How do you want it to look? Um, because we can't claim to know everything. We can't claim to know every autistic individual and the needs of every single autistic individual. Um, and by asking that question, we get all of the opinions and all of the needs and we try and figure that out between them all. Um, but we're really realistic about that. And I think that's a big, a big thing is being really, really realistic.

Emma Eager: Um, and I think it's remembering as well that it's as long as you get the same outcome, it doesn't necessarily matter how you get there. So I remember when I started teaching you, you get really good sort of Ofsted inspections. If your children were all sat really, still, really quiet, absolutely engrossed in you. But you realize as you learn more about autism, that those children were masking, and actually they would stop listening to you because they were putting all of their energy into sitting still and looking engaged. And actually, to do that, the cost it had on their brain and their neurology was so huge, they weren't learning. So actually, thinking about what makes a difference. So I run some groups and run them on this afternoon we'll be sat around a table, but some of the people that come will sit on the sofa further away. They might have their hoods up if they're a little bit overstimulated, you know, but they are still listening and they are still learning in exactly the same way as the others. But if I insisted on them coming and sitting as a group or at the table, they might not be able to access that group. So I think we've got to really change what we think listening and engagement looks like and meet people where they're at. And as long as we get to the outcome, it doesn't really matter, does it?

Joe McLoughin: That's great. That's really, really good to know. Um, so you've said in other interviews and other discussions that you're, you describe yourselves as we're not gatekeepers, we're sharers. Um, which I think is fair to say, given kind of all the insights and kind of bits and pieces we've heard today. Um, just

with that in mind, do you, and I'm sure there's lots, but do you each have one or two things to offer that you wish everyone knew about neurodiversity, whether it was good news, bad news, misconceptions, kind of. What's something that you'd like to get out there and show the world more?

Emily Abbott: Oh gosh.

Emma Eager: I think I think my favourite, which always happens here when, when people come to us and they're like, they're autistic and they say, I don't need people, I don't like people. And I'm like, well, just wait and see. Just wait and see what happens. And then they'll come to me a few months later and they'll be like, right. I do like people. I just needed to meet people like me. And I think sometimes people have gone through life trying to fit in with groups that aren't like them. But, you know, once they find people that are similar, they, they make connections and they really want those.

Emily Abbott: Yeah, absolutely. I think mine would be just changing that narrative. I think we see it. Um, autism and we see that as a, as a negative sometimes. And I think that's unfortunately the overarching umbrella really of autism is that it's a deficiency of some sort. And I can't tell you how many autistic people we've met that have so many talents, so many, so much capability. Um, you know, that can range from living independently, that can range from having really, you know, high stake jobs, you know, it's, there's so, so much diversity in it that it isn't a one size fits all at all. Um, and I know we say that off the cuff quite often, but it, it really is the truth is that these people are. And I always, always go back to that human-to-human level. Is that just have that conversation? Don't, you know, go in with these preconceived ideas of what this person might be like or what they can and can't do, because you will be so surprised. Yeah. And that that's a big takeaway for me.

Emma Eager: John always says, always assume competence. And I think that's something that sticks with us. You know, I think often we assume that people can't do things. We'll read a diagnosis and assume they're going to find things difficult. We do it differently. We assume that they can. So like our training, we take experts out with us. A lot of companies will only sort of employ experts that have perhaps had roles where they've been speaking and had roles where they've learned to, you know, act professionally in inverted commas. We will take anybody and believe that they can do it and work with them and develop them. And I think just the fact that we put that trust in people, they want to really do well for us, don't they? And you just see them really shine. You know, people that have never been in work or haven't been in work for decades and decades come to us and all of a sudden they're working and making a difference and their whole life changes.

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Joe McLoughin: Perfect. That's great. Um, I just wanted to just to swing back to something you mentioned there about the people seeing autism as a as a deficit model type of a, there's a, there's a problem you're dealing with or an issue that you have to overcome. I suppose my question is, is as diagnoses rise and as we sort of see more and more cases and as people, it becomes more and more visible for people day to day. Do you hope or do you expect that deficit model to change? Do you think common kind of perceptions of autism are going to shift in a good way?

Emma Eager: I'd hope so. We're doing a lot of training. We've done training for skills and education group, and we've just got lottery funding, haven't we, for Cheshire and our local area to do some training around this. And we're really trying to make a difference, even down to what do we say if somebody tells us they've been diagnosed with autism, you know, do we minimise it? Or are we saying, oh, you don't look autistic? Or are we actually saying, oh, that's really cool, you know, tell me a bit more about it or, oh, that sounds really interesting. Tell me how it affects you. What can I do?

Joe McLoughin: So last couple of questions today. And I wanted to end on a two parter that starts positively and then risks veering towards the negative. What do we get if we get our support of neurodiversity and neurodivergent staff and learners? Right? And then on the more negative side or the critical side, what's at stake if we do nothing or if we get it wrong?

Emma Eager: Um, so I think if we get it right, we will see people actually attending college, attending school, you know, they'll want to be there and it will engage them and make them want to be part of a community. And our autistic people will do well. And then from that, you will see them going into employment and being some of the best employees you've got. We employ how many now, Emily Abbott?

Emily Abbott: Um, we employ twenty-two experts by experience, and then we've got about sixty percent of our staff, um, that are diagnosed as autistic. So I think, yeah, you will see a flourish of, of fantastic talent and fantastic.

Emma Eager: Creative.

Emily Abbott: Creativity. Yeah. You know, I think it, it can really do huge, huge things for our community as well as such an asset. Um, so I think, yeah, there's a huge positive in getting it right. Um, unfortunately, there is a huge negative in getting it wrong.

Emma Eager: And I think you only have to look at the statistics around autism and suicide to see what the consequences are. And, you know, it's absolutely shocking the numbers. It's something like one in three autistic people have thought about suicide and made a plan, and one in four have actually attempted. And one of the biggest reasons for that is that lack of community, not being in employment, not feeling like they've got a place in the world and we can do better, and it will literally save lives. And I think, you know, the impact we have on people that we perhaps see for a few hours a week where we have made that difference, where perhaps they have planned that they don't want to be here anymore. And then after a few months with us, they come to us like, do you know what? I'm all right now. I've got purpose. I've got a job. I'm doing okay. And I think there's no better reason for us to make these changes than to think about it can make that much of a difference to people.

Joe McLoughin: Absolutely. That's a great, really strong point to end on. Thank you to my guests, Emma Eager and Emily Abbott and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about how you can put ideas of equity, diversity, and inclusivity into practice with your colleagues and your learners. If you have a question for us or a comment on what you've heard, please join in the conversation on social media and remember to subscribe wherever you receive podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes of Let's Go Further.