Brightwire

Helping Neurodivergent Young Adults Transition to Self-Employment

Why career guidance built for a neurotypical majority leaves many young people without a route that fits, and why self-employment, understood through traits rather than diagnoses, may be one of the routes that does.



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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is the public release of the Brightwire foundational document. It sets out the problem the platform addresses, the evidence behind it and the rationale for its design. The technical specification sits in the Brightwire Technical Annex, available under confidentiality agreement (see Section 10).

IMPORTANT

Brightwire is an exploratory tool for self-understanding and career exploration. It is not a diagnostic instrument and gives no clinical, psychological, educational or careers advice. It must never be used for selection, streaming, grouping, exclusion, admissions or any formal determination about a young person.

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01
A Different Kind of Worker

Neurodivergent young people are entering a labour market designed around a different kind of worker. For many, the open question is whether the economy will accommodate how they think, work and create; their capacity to contribute is already clear.

Neurodivergence is common. A widely used estimate puts 15 to 20 per cent of the population as neurodivergent, a broad term covering ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and related profiles (Doyle, 2020). In any secondary school, that is a substantial share of every year group moving towards the transitions at 16 and 18.

The systems meant to support those transitions, from career guidance to enterprise education and vocational training, were built with a different type of learner in mind. The result is a persistent, well-documented gap between the potential of neurodivergent young adults (NDYA) and the support they receive.

Among neurodivergent adults in work, a pattern stands out: self-employment appears more often than in the wider population. In a 2024 survey of 573 freelancers, 18 per cent of the self-employed described themselves as neurodiverse, against a UK-wide estimate of 15 per cent (IPSE, 2024). Difficulty in conventional workplaces is a commonly cited reason for the move. Many neurodivergent people reach self-employment after conventional employment has failed to accommodate them, rather than as a first choice.

This document sets out the problem, the evidence and the rationale for a new kind of intervention: a trait-based assessment tool and resource platform that helps neurodivergent young people aged 14 to 18 understand themselves better and explore self-employment as a meaningful, supported career pathway. It explains why an approach focused on traits rather than diagnoses, on strengths as well as challenges, and on self-employment as occupational fit is a necessary response to a persistent and costly problem.

02
The Scale of the Challenge

When young people leave school without the tools to understand their own working style, and without career guidance that reflects how they work, the consequences reach well beyond individual frustration.

WHO WE ARE TALKING ABOUT

Neurodivergent young adults are a varied group. They include young people with ADHD, autistic profiles, dyslexia, and combinations of these and other profiles. What they share is a set of neurological differences in how they process information, manage attention, regulate emotion and engage with the social world. These differences are variations that can generate both distinctive capabilities and specific challenges, depending heavily on context, support and the fit between the person and their environment.

The employment picture is stark. The Buckland Review of Autism Employment (2024) reported that around three in ten working-age autistic people are in employment, against around five in ten of all disabled people and eight in ten non-disabled people. Research on young people with ADHD documents higher rates of job loss, lower occupational status and greater difficulty sustaining workplace relationships (Young Foundation et al., 2021). These are problems of fit between a person's profile and the demands, structures and social conventions of standard employment.

15 to 20%

Estimated share of the population that is neurodivergent

Doyle (2020)

3 in 10

Working-age autistic people in employment, against 5 in 10 disabled and 8 in 10 non-disabled people

Buckland Review (2024)

18%

Self-employed people who describe themselves as neurodiverse, against a UK estimate of 15%

IPSE (2024)

981,000

Young people aged 16 to 24 who were NEET in April to June 2026, 13.0% of the age group

ONS (2026)

A WIDER SIGNAL: YOUNG PEOPLE OUTSIDE EDUCATION AND WORK

The same school-to-work system is under strain at a much larger scale. The Office for National Statistics estimated 981,000 young people aged 16 to 24 as NEET in April to June 2026, 13.0 per cent of the age group (ONS, 2026). Most of them are neurotypical, and Brightwire addresses one part of this population. The figure is best read as a sign of a broader mismatch between what schools prepare young people for and the routes open to them.

Neurodivergent young people sit at the sharp end of that mismatch. The interim report of the independent review of young people and work found young people with special educational needs and disabilities around 80 per cent more likely to be NEET, and described careers guidance as "generic and lacking practical value" (Milburn, 2026). Self-employment is increasingly mentioned as a route for young people, yet schools have no structured way to help a young person judge whether it suits them.

WHY URGENCY MATTERS

The case for urgency rests on two converging realities. First, many neurodivergent young people currently in secondary school are undiagnosed or lack adequate support plans, and they are approaching the transitions at 16 and 18 without the self-knowledge or guidance to make informed choices. Second, the economy is changing. Platform work, freelancing and portfolio careers have made the boundary between employment and self-employment increasingly porous. For neurodivergent young people, who already gravitate towards self-directed work, this is both an opportunity and a risk: an opportunity if they are prepared and supported, a risk if they arrive at self-employment without the awareness, skills or scaffolding to sustain it.

> *"It feels like a battle to me. I honestly feel like it's a battle all the time, and when I look back I realise that that's always how it's been for me. I just didn't really understand it... I've been masking for decades."*
>
> Mo, ADHD; a long history of masking

The cost of inaction also falls on the wider economy. Research links several traits common in neurodivergent profiles, including risk tolerance, non-linear thinking, hyperfocus and pattern recognition, to entrepreneurial behaviour and innovation (Lerner, Hunt & Verheul, 2018; Wiklund et al., 2017). A labour market that keeps losing this talent through inadequate support falls short of the inclusive economy it says it wants.

03
A Two-Fold Failure

The difficulties neurodivergent young adults face between school and working life come from two interlocking problems that reinforce each other: inadequate support for neurodivergent young people specifically, and a broader failure of career education around self-employment.

THE FIRST FAILURE: SUPPORT BUILT ON THE WRONG FOUNDATIONS

Support for neurodivergent young people in education and careers settings is widely recognised as inadequate. It is underfunded, and it is also conceptually misaligned with the people it is meant to serve. Four failures characterise the current landscape.

Career advisors receive little training in neurodiversity. In mainstream schools, careers staff typically have little formal knowledge of how different neurodivergent profiles affect working style, communication or career fit. Expert interviews in this project confirm the pattern: one practitioner described neurodivergent young people being told they don't fit the usual mould, by advisors who don't know what to do with them (expert interview, Brightwire participatory research programme). The cause is systemic: careers advisors have no requirement to understand neurodiversity and limited professional development in this area.

Support tends to be generic. Where neurodivergent-specific provision exists, it often defaults to one approach for everyone, which cannot accommodate the variation within and across profiles. What works for one young person with ADHD may be unhelpful for another with a different pattern of traits, or for an autistic young person whose challenges are mainly social rather than attentional. Generic approaches miss the most important feature of neurodivergent experience: its specificity.

The system is built around diagnostic labels, and those labels are unevenly distributed. Access to diagnosis is constrained by long waiting lists, systemic bias and socioeconomic factors, so many neurodivergent young people, disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, reach adulthood without a formal diagnosis. Support gated by diagnosis therefore excludes the young people most likely to

benefit from early help. Even with a diagnosis, a label such as "ADHD" or "autism" says relatively little about the specific strengths and challenges that shape a person's experience. Two young people with the same diagnosis may share very little functional overlap.

Deficit framing remains pervasive. Despite growing public awareness of neurodiversity, institutions still frame neurodivergence mainly by what a young person cannot do, cannot cope with or needs help to manage. This framing shapes everything from assessment to career guidance. It produces young people who have heard repeatedly about their limitations and rarely about their capacities, which is the wrong preparation for working for oneself.

THE SECOND FAILURE: CAREER EDUCATION THAT LEAVES OUT SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Career guidance in schools defaults overwhelmingly to traditional employment. The dominant model, qualifications leading to applications leading to a job, reflects a mid-twentieth-century labour market that no longer describes the careers of a large part of the population. For neurodivergent young people, for whom conventional employment is often the hardest route, this default is especially damaging.

Self-employment is rarely taught as a career pathway in secondary schools. Where enterprise education exists, it tends to be theoretical, centred on business functions inside organisations rather than the practical realities of starting and running something of one's own. The grey literature review in this project found very limited academic or policy attention to enterprise education in secondary schools, and almost none designed with neurodivergent learners in mind. The 2023 report *Neurodiversity and Enterprise Education* (Edwards & Treanor, 2023) concluded that traditional enterprise education may disadvantage neurodiverse students by prioritising presentation, conventional group work and written outputs over the hands-on, autonomy-driven learning that tends to suit them.

Practical skills relevant to self-employment, such as managing money, communicating with clients, planning projects and handling variable income, are rarely addressed in secondary education. Neurodivergent self-employed adults commonly identify these as the skills they lacked when they began. The gap between what schools provide and what independent work requires falls hardest on those who arrive least prepared.

Career guidance also rarely connects neurodivergent traits to self-employment. Even advisors with some neurodiversity awareness seldom frame self-employment as a possible fit for young people with ADHD or autistic profiles. Many therefore arrive at self-employment through exclusion from conventional work, rather than through supported exploration and informed choice. The route matters: it shapes preparation, performance and wellbeing.

> *"In terms of pushing myself for different careers, or putting myself into the wrong types of careers, or just not understanding and just thinking, oh, well, I'm just not good enough to do that... now I've unlocked all this information... I'm actually like, right, okay, well, that explains everything."*
>
> Rachel, on the years before she understood her neurodivergence

04
What Needs to Change

Two shifts are required. First, support for neurodivergent young people must move from condition-based deficit frameworks to inclusive, trait-informed approaches that recognise the diversity within the neurodivergent population and the real strengths neurodivergent profiles can bring to working life. Second, self-employment must be repositioned, in schools, in career guidance and in wider policy, as a viable, worthwhile and actively supported career pathway.

Both shifts call for a different starting point: the individual, with their specific traits, working preferences and context, in place of their diagnostic label or their distance from a neurotypical norm. They also call for a wider destination, one that includes self-employment, portfolio careers and flexible independent work as concrete, attractive options alongside education, training and employment.

Trait-based support means giving career advisors tools and language to talk about how a young person works, including their tendencies around focus, risk, creativity, social interaction and sensory sensitivity, without requiring a diagnosis. It means resources that acknowledge the individual variation within any neurodivergent group and keep complex profiles intact. It means a strengths-based orientation that names challenges and sets them in the context of the whole person.

A better-supported pathway to self-employment means introducing young people to independent work earlier, through age-appropriate exploration. It means connecting the traits associated with neurodivergent profiles to the real demands and opportunities of working for oneself. And it means scaffolding for the specific challenges self-employment presents, such as executive function, managing money and irregular workflow, so that young people move into independence with the support structures to sustain it.

05
Beyond the Deficit Narrative

Support for neurodivergent young people has long been organised around what they struggle with. A more complete and more useful picture gives equal attention to what they are capable of.

Neurodivergent young people do face specific difficulties in attention regulation, sensory management, emotional processing and social interaction. Those difficulties are real, consequential and deserving of support. When the entire framework is built around managing deficits, however, something important is lost: the same traits that create challenges in one context often create distinctive capabilities in another.

Impulsivity that derails planning in a classroom can fuel quick opportunity recognition at a market stall. Sensory sensitivity that makes a noisy office unbearable can produce the detailed aesthetic awareness that distinguishes a designer or craftsperson. Hyperfocus that makes switching tasks on demand very

hard can generate weeks of remarkable output on a task of deep interest. Pattern recognition can underpin strong analytical capability. None of these capabilities is guaranteed. Context, scaffolding and the stage of a venture all matter. They are documented in research and consistently overlooked in support frameworks built mainly around limitation.

> *"I tried to force myself into a box, like, why aren't I thinking like all these people who are really good at maths?... my brain just cannot follow that linear process. And now I've just kind of welcomed that. So it's given me confidence."*
>
> Rachel, runs a marketing and events-management business (dyslexia)

Adequate support treats neurodivergent traits as having both facilitative and constraining sides. For each trait, a young person should learn where the tendency may create friction, in social settings, structured environments or routine tasks, and where it may be an asset, in creative problem-solving, self-directed work, specialist domains or the early stages of starting something. This dual framing reflects the research evidence, and for many young people it is a significant reorientation of how they see themselves.

06

Self-Employment as Occupational Fit

Self-employment is often presented as the domain of the bold, the unusually creative or the desperate. For many neurodivergent young people it is better understood as the career context most structurally aligned with how they work.

Occupational fit is the degree of alignment between a person's traits, values, needs and working style and the demands, structures and culture of a career environment (Holland, 1985). Research on ADHD and self-employment has repeatedly found a positive association between ADHD traits and entrepreneurial orientation and action (Verheul et al., 2015, 2016; Wiklund et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2021). Dimic and Orlov (2014) found ADHD associated with a higher probability of entrepreneurial intentions and of being self-employed.

The fit argument is straightforward. Self-employment offers autonomy over working conditions, pace and schedule, which removes many of the environmental stressors that make conventional employment difficult. It lets effort concentrate on areas of high interest and capability, where a job description usually demands performance across every task. It rewards divergent thinking, high energy, quick decisions and unconventional problem-solving, traits that structured employment may penalise. And it lets people build support structures around their own needs.

> *"[When I set up] I look back on my career, and looked at where I was happiest, and I was happiest when I was doing technical work and actually problem solving... I'm working with my strengths, if that makes sense, rather than my weaknesses."*
>
> Peter, former IT professional, now runs a web-development company; diagnosed as an adult

Research also shows that self-employment does not automatically produce good outcomes. Patel, Rietveld and Verheul (2021) found that ADHD genetic predisposition is positively associated with starting a business and negatively associated with earnings in self-employment, which suggests that the traits that help with founding do not automatically sustain growth. Rajah, Bamiatzi and Williams (2021) found that ADHD-like symptoms in childhood positively predict entrepreneurial entry and negatively predict survival and performance over time. Wiklund et al. (2017) associated inattention specifically with lower performance in later-stage ventures. This entry and sustain asymmetry, where the same profile helps a person start and makes it harder to keep going, is well documented.

This asymmetry is the problem Brightwire addresses. Understanding a young person's specific trait profile, including where their particular combination of impulsivity, energy, hyperfocus and executive challenges sits, makes it possible to anticipate both the strengths they bring and the structural support they are likely to need. A young person with high creativity and high hyperfocus, high rejection sensitivity and low attention to routine detail needs very different scaffolding from one with high novelty seeking and high energy, lower pattern recognition and high sensory sensitivity. Generic entrepreneurship support serves neither well.

Lerner, Hunt and Verheul (2018) decomposed the entrepreneurial process into stages, from initial interest through opportunity recognition, nascent activity, resource acquisition and coordination, value capture and innovation, and showed how neurodivergent traits function differently at each. The impulsivity that drives early action can become a liability in coordinating resources; the hyperfocus behind strong early output can make the move to routine operations feel very hard. These patterns become predictable once the trait profile is understood. Good support makes the asymmetry visible, and visible problems can be planned for.

The aim is to make self-employment available as a well-understood, supported option, without pushing young people towards it or presenting it as a cure-all. It should be entered with self-knowledge and sustained with appropriate structures. For young people whose way of working sits most comfortably outside the conventions of standard employment, this is a matter of economic inclusion (OECD/European Commission, 2023), wellbeing and the chance to build a working life that works for them.

07
Why Traits, Not Conditions

Brightwire is built around traits rather than diagnostic categories because traits are what is useful when supporting young people in career exploration and planning for self-employment.

Diagnostic categories describe clusters of symptoms and experiences that meet clinical thresholds. They serve important purposes, including access to support services, medication and legal accommodations. They say relatively little about how a specific person functions at work. Two people with the same ADHD diagnosis can have very different profiles: one highly impulsive and energetic with strong divergent thinking, another mainly inattentive with a deep capacity for sustained focus on topics of interest. They will relate to self-employment very differently. A diagnosis treats them as the same; a trait profile tells them apart.

> *"In doing that research I've learned more about the traits that I have... and how to manage them, and how to rationalise, and how to change things that I fundamentally believe about the world around me."*
>
> Becky, self-employed; late-identified through her own research

The neurodiversity paradigm, developed over more than two decades of scholarship (Singer, 1999; Walker, 2021), treats neurological variation as natural diversity. From this perspective the relevant question is how a person's cognitive and behavioural profile interacts with the demands of a given environment. That is the question career guidance needs answered: what a young person's impulsivity, energy, risk orientation and attentional style mean for the kind of work they are most likely to find sustainable and meaningful.

A trait-based approach also has practical advantages. Many young people, disproportionately those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have no formal diagnosis. A tool gated by diagnosis would exclude them, even though their trait profiles bear directly on how they engage with work. By focusing on traits, Brightwire is open to any young person whose working style is shaped by neurodivergent tendencies, with or without a clinical label.

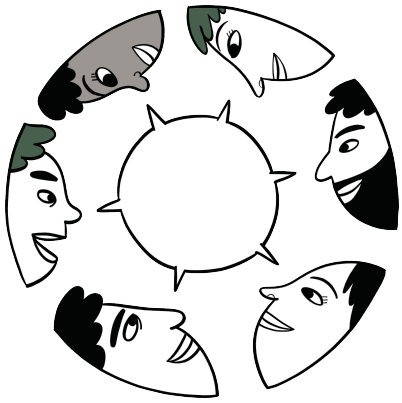
It follows that the platform is usable by anyone. Every young person sits somewhere on impulsivity, on how they focus and on how they handle feedback; these are dimensions of ordinary human variation. Brightwire is designed for neurodivergent young people because that is where the need is sharpest and existing provision weakest, and its results are equally informative for a neurotypical student. The practical consequence matters as much as the conceptual one: a school can offer the platform to a whole class or year group without first deciding who is neurodivergent. Schools are often poorly placed to make that judgement, it delays support while students wait for assessment, and it singles out the young people most wary of being singled out.

The research literature supports this approach. Studies of entrepreneurship and neurodivergence that work at the level of specific traits produce more nuanced and actionable findings than those treating diagnosis as a yes or no variable (Lerner et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2017). Trait-level analysis can separate the parts of a profile that help entrepreneurial action at different stages from those that create friction. It also gives a young person something concrete to work with: in place of "I have ADHD", a statement such as "I tend to act quickly, I think divergently and I find repetitive tasks hard: here is what that might mean for how I structure work of my own."

The approach is also ethical. Condition-based framing carries stigma and activates deficit narratives that many neurodivergent young people have spent years trying to escape. A trait-based approach, within an explicitly strengths-oriented framework, invites reflection centred on capacities and tendencies. For young people who have repeatedly met support systems that emphasise what they cannot do, this change in framing can be transformative.

08
The Existing Support Landscape

A young person who discovers at sixteen that self-employment might fit them will find support built for adults who have already started, and very little built for them.



Brightwire enters an established field. A small, growing ecosystem of support for neurodivergent entrepreneurs has emerged in the UK and internationally, recently mapped by the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Association (Edwards, 2025). Understanding what this ecosystem offers clarifies why a platform like Brightwire is needed and how it complements what already exists.

WHAT IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

Specialist services for neurodivergent business owners now exist across several categories. Dedicated providers offer coaching, mentoring, training, assessments and neurodivergent-aware administrative and accountancy support; examples include Genius Within, Exceptional Individuals, DoIT Solutions, Celebrate Difference and the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Association itself. Government support exists through Access to Work, which can fund assistive technology, coaching and virtual assistance for self-employed disabled and neurodivergent people, although applicants have reported long waits (Edwards, 2025).

Beyond these, a wider circle of neurodiversity-focused organisations, such as Neurodiversity in Business, Specialisterne, the Institute of Neurodiversity and Made By Dyslexia, works mainly on employment rather than entrepreneurship. General small-business bodies have begun adding inclusion strands, such as the FSB's Business Without Barriers events. Much day-to-day support happens informally, through peer communities, online groups, neurodiversity-aware coaches and storytelling platforms run by neurodivergent entrepreneurs (Edwards, 2025). International provision follows the same pattern: promising, scattered initiatives, mostly oriented towards employment.

WHY CURRENT PROVISION FALLS SHORT

Even where support exists, the NEA review identifies consistent shortfalls: curricula that acknowledge neurodiversity without adapting to different profiles; little in-depth support for executive functioning; short workshops where long-term mentoring would serve better; sensory and environmental needs treated as afterthoughts; single-format content; little integration of emotional and mental health support; and few role models from the neurodivergent community (Edwards, 2025).

Three structural gaps matter most for this project.

1. **Provision arrives too late.** Almost all existing support addresses adults who are already running a business or starting one. The mapped landscape does not reach young people at the point where career pathways form. By the time a neurodivergent person meets the adult ecosystem, the decisive transitions, including subject choices, qualification routes and first experiences of work, have usually happened, often without self-employment ever being presented as an option.

2. **Provision does not start from the individual.** Coaching, toolkits and communities work from broad diagnostic categories or self-description; none begins from a structured profile of how the person in front of them functions. Support that cannot see the individual profile can accommodate difference in general and struggles to tailor to difference in particular.
3. **Provision is fragmented.** Assembling help from scattered services, waiting lists and informal networks demands the executive functioning, self-advocacy and social navigation that many neurodivergent people find hardest. The barrier filters out those who need support most.

09
Brightwire: The Platform

Brightwire is a digital platform that helps neurodivergent young people aged 14 to 18 understand how they think and work, and consider self-employment as one possible path. It brings an assessment, a library of resources and a guided ideation module together in a single experience built around the young person.



The platform (brightwire.org.uk) grew out of a year-long participatory research programme with young people, educators, careers practitioners and organisations supporting neurodivergent workers in the North East of England. It is intended for use across the UK and beyond.

It serves three connected functions:

- **An assessment tool.** A structured measure of twelve traits produces a personal portrait for each young person, showing their distinctive pattern of strengths and challenges.
- **A developmental resource.** Guides, activities and practical information help young people turn their portrait into self-knowledge and career awareness.
- **A communication tool.** A shared language lets young people, families and advisors discuss self-employment as a real, contextualised option.

PORTALS, OWNERSHIP AND SHARING

Brightwire runs through three portals. An Admin portal lets schools and organisations manage cohorts and see aggregate information. An Advisor portal gives careers staff the materials a student has chosen to share, along with resource packs and guidance. A Student portal gives the young person a personal interface designed to WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards, with neurodivergent-friendly navigation and clear visual feedback.

The portrait belongs to the young person, and nothing reaches an adult unless they choose to share it. Sharing is per item and can be withdrawn. When a student shares with a careers advisor, a teacher or the staff member running the platform, the system generates a mirrored set of materials for that adult: a

companion report that explains how to read each trait, how to frame a careers conversation around it and what support to offer, together with resources selected for that student. An Advisor Handbook supports staff, and no prior knowledge of neurodiversity is assumed.

The mirrored materials follow the same guardrails as the portrait. They are exploratory. They must never be used for selection, streaming, grouping, exclusion, admissions or any formal determination about a young person. And an adult should never read anything about a student that the student could not safely read about themselves.

WHAT MAKES BRIGHTWIRE DIFFERENT

Brightwire rests on a specific body of evidence about how neurodivergent traits function in entrepreneurial and self-employed contexts, and on a principled decision to make traits the unit of analysis. Generalised personality frameworks designed for the general population, and deficit-based accommodations designed for disability, start elsewhere.

It also sits in a different place from existing support. As Section 8 described, the current ecosystem reaches adults who are already running or starting a business. Brightwire works upstream, with young people aged 14 to 18, before pathways narrow. It provides no coaching, finance or peer community, and does not compete with those who do. It prepares young people to use them well: a young person who arrives at an adult programme, an Access to Work application or a mentoring relationship with a trait profile and a language for how they work is a better-served client of every service in that landscape.

A FOUR-STAGE JOURNEY

Understanding oneself and acting on that understanding are different steps, and the distance between them is where many neurodivergent young people get stuck. Brightwire is therefore a developmental journey in four stages, each building on the one before.

1. **This is you.** The assessment returns trait bands and a personal portrait, helping a young person recognise that they think and work in a distinctive way.
2. **What it means.** Connects the portrait to the kinds of work and self-employment a particular trait pattern tends to suit.
3. **Where this could lead.** Deepens the picture through trait guides, videos and signposting to further support.
4. **Things to try.** Moves from understanding who you are to trying something small and concrete.

Self-knowledge comes before action so that the action is well judged. Each stage works on its own and leads naturally to the next. The journey is calibrated by age. For 14 to 16-year-olds, every stage emphasises understanding and low-stakes discovery, with shorter horizons, smaller steps and more adult support. For 17 to 18-year-olds, each stage carries more autonomy and a slightly longer arc, up to experiments a young person could realistically begin. The platform offers starting points for reflection and conversation and prescribes no outcome.

STAGE ONE: THIS IS YOU

The first stage helps a young person see their way of working as a difference to understand. It is delivered through the assessment, which measures twelve traits chosen on three criteria: evidence linking them to neurodivergent profiles; the availability of measures with the strongest validation evidence for each construct; and relevance to the demands and opportunities of self-employment.

The twelve traits are presented in four groups, so that a young person meets their portrait as a few connected themes.

1 Focus

Hyperfocus
Deep, absorbed concentration on a task of high interest; can enable remarkable output or crowd out less engaging tasks

Attention to Detail
Noticing and remembering specific features others overlook; valuable in precision work

Special Interests
Intense, sustained engagement with a specific domain, building deep expertise

2 Decision-making

Impulsivity
Acting quickly without extended deliberation; linked to quick opportunity recognition and to premature commitments

Novelty Seeking
The drive towards new, intense and varied experience; relevant to exploring new markets and resisting routine

Independence
Preferring to be in charge of one's own time, space and decisions

3 Creativity

Creativity
Generating multiple, unconventional solutions and connecting ideas across domains

Pattern Recognition
Detecting structure and regularities in complex information

Energy and Drive
Sustained, goal-directed effort, often in cycles of intense productivity and depletion

4 Connection

Social Interaction
Ease and comfort in social and professional interaction; relevant to clients and self-promotion

Sensory Processing
Sensitivity to environmental, emotional and social stimuli, and depth of processing

Rejection Sensitivity
Anxiously expecting and reacting strongly to rejection; central to how pitching and feedback are experienced

The traits interact, overlap and combine, so the profile across all twelve is more informative than any single result.

The assessment is a single Portrait Battery of Likert-type statements and short scenario situations, taking about 20 to 25 minutes. Most traits are measured with established instruments from the published literature, several in shortened forms. One trait, Independence, uses a purpose-built scale, and Rejection Sensitivity uses a short youth adaptation of an established measure. The shortened forms, the adaptation and the purpose-built scale are provisional and will be tested for reliability and validity in the pilot. Results are reported as broad bands that feed a narrative portrait, never as clinical scores or comparisons against diagnostic norms.

A deterministic scoring engine converts each trait's responses into a band and identifies which tendencies stand out most strongly within the young person's own profile, so that the few that most define them lead the portrait. For multidimensional measures it also detects a leaning within the trait, for example whether sensory sensitivity runs towards discomfort or towards attunement, which steers the practical suggestions. A narrative layer then interprets this structured input against a curated, evidence-

grounded library of trait descriptions and counterweights, so the portrait reads as one profile. Generation runs inside content guardrails. Instruments, scoring rules and generation architecture are documented in the Technical Annex.

STAGE TWO: WHAT IT MEANS

This stage works through the portrait's own architecture. For each trait the profile marks as defining, the portrait carries a forward line: a concrete reading of where that tendency helps when working for yourself, always paired with its counterweight, where the same tendency will cost something and what support that calls for. These readings come from a curated layer of content developed for each trait and their common combinations, drawn from the research literature and participant-developed trait guides. Combinations carry much of the meaning: hyperfocus reads differently alongside strong attention to detail than alongside low tolerance for routine.

The language of this stage is deliberately disciplined. Futures are described in everyday terms, such as work for yourself, be your own boss, start a project, a small business of your own or freelancing, in place of abstractions like "venture" or "entrepreneurship" that mean little to most 14 to 18-year-olds. Every trait, at every band, has both a strength angle and a challenge angle for independent work: tools rather than superpowers, with no band presented as better than another. The register is conditional: kinds of work a pattern tends to suit, settings where a tendency becomes an asset. The aim is a picture a young person can try on. For 14 to 16-year-olds, this stays at picturing how their way of working might fit different kinds of work; for 17 to 18-year-olds, it moves closer to options they could realistically pursue.

STAGE THREE: WHERE THIS COULD LEAD

The third stage deepens the picture from a strengths perspective, always with the counterweight that keeps it realistic. Resources read directly from the portrait and are drawn from a library of more than 200 guides, activities and conversation materials:

- **Trait guides** for each of the twelve traits, explaining what the trait is, how it shows up in daily life and how it tends to play out when running something of one's own.
- **Videos**, with a short instructional video for each trait in each age band and testimonials from neurodivergent self-employed people, offering realistic role models.
- **Understanding guides** on neurodivergence and on what starting something looks like at this age.
- **Signposting** matched to the young person's age and interests.

Throughout, self-employment is framed as one option among several, alongside further study, training and employment, and never as a reason to disengage from education.

STAGE FOUR: THINGS TO TRY

The fourth stage invites the young person to explore projects, freelancing and small business ideas built from their own traits, interests and preferences, as experiments to try. It is means-based: it draws on effectuation (start from who you are, what you know and whom you know) and bricolage (make do with the resources at hand). It carries the portrait's dual framing forward, naming each strength and its counterweight, so that early ease is treated as a caution flag as well as a sign of fit.

The stage follows three moves: a short questionnaire capturing what the young person is drawn to; two or three structured directions, each naming who they would help, what they would make or do, why their traits suit it and one tiny first test; and, once a direction is chosen, a scaffolded guide built for follow-

through. That guide sets a very small first step, specifies intentions as when and where as well as what, externalises executive function through templates and checklists, names a person to check in with and gives explicit, non-shaming permission to stall and restart smaller.

The intended outcome is a completed small experiment, and with it the experience of moving from self-knowledge to action. What a young person writes in these activities is private by default and shared only if they choose.

10
How Brightwire Is Built and Governed

Brightwire was designed with the people it serves, and its content is governed by a written safeguarding charter with independent review.

BUILT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADVISORS

The platform's content and tone were shaped through roundtable discussions and interviews with young people and careers advisors, and through interviews with practitioners and neurodivergent self-employed adults. Participant-developed trait guides feed directly into the portrait's readings. The pilot will provide the first systematic evidence.



GOVERNED BY A SAFEGUARDING CHARTER

Every piece of content is written to the Brightwire Content Safeguarding Charter. The Charter sets the platform's principles: traits rather than diagnoses, strengths with counterweights, conditional language, and young people's control over what is shared. It also sets the prohibited uses listed at the front of this document. An independent neurodiversity and safeguarding specialist reviews content, and no item reaches a young person without a recorded review. Materials for adults follow the same rule: a teacher or advisor should never read anything about a student that the student could not safely read about themselves.

TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION

This document is the public account of why Brightwire exists and how it is designed. The psychometric instruments for each trait, the composition of the battery, the scoring and banding rules, the logic that decides which traits lead a portrait and the architecture of the generation pipeline are set out in the Brightwire Technical Annex. The Annex is available under confidentiality agreement to schools and organisations considering adoption, commissioners and funders, research ethics committees, data protection officers and independent evaluators. Requests go to the project lead via brightwire.org.uk. The separation reflects the licensing conditions attached to third-party instruments and the need to keep the operational detail of a tool used with young people out of general circulation.

11

Conclusion: The Challenge, the Approach and What It Offers

The test of this project is how many young people arrive at their choice, whatever it is, knowing themselves well enough to make it work.

The challenge is substantial. An estimated 15 to 20 per cent of young people are neurodivergent, moving through an education and careers system built for a different kind of learner. The consequences are well documented: a wide employment gap, career guidance that rarely understands neurodivergent traits or mentions self-employment, and a pattern in which neurodivergent people reach self-employment anyway, often through exclusion and largely unprepared for what it demands. Nearly one million young people in the UK are outside education, employment and training, and young people with special educational needs are markedly more likely to be among them.

The approach responds at the level where the problem operates: traits. Twelve traits, each grounded in the research literature and relevant to the demands and opportunities of self-employment, form a personal profile in four groups: Focus, Decision-making, Creativity and Connection. Every trait has both facilitative and challenging expressions, which avoids both the deficit narrative and the superpower narrative. Self-employment is treated as a question of occupational fit: a working arrangement that suits how many neurodivergent people function, provided it is entered with self-knowledge and sustained with support.

The solution is the Brightwire platform. At its core sits the Portrait Battery, completed in about 20 to 25 minutes and producing a portrait across the twelve traits. Around it sits a library of more than 200 guides, videos, activities and conversation materials, calibrated for ages 14 to 16 and 17 to 18. Three portals serve administrators, advisors and students, with accessibility designed to WCAG 2.1 AA and a data model in which students control access to their own results. A pilot in schools and youth organisations in 2026/27 will test its value and validate its measures.

The contributions are threefold.

- **To practice:** a trait-based alternative to diagnosis-led career support, inclusive of the undiagnosed, usable with any student, framed around strengths with their counterweights, and specific enough to inform real decisions.
- **To research:** an evidence base on how neurodivergent traits relate to entrepreneurial activity at the trait level, where findings are more nuanced and actionable than diagnosis-based comparisons allow.
- **To policy:** a working example of career education that treats self-employment as a legitimate pathway and neurodivergence as a difference to understand, at a moment when policy is focused on young people outside education and work.

Each group around a young person benefits. Young people gain a language for self-understanding that is neither clinical nor sentimental. Teachers gain a way to read the uneven pattern of a neurodivergent student, the brilliant coursework next to the missed deadline, as a trait pattern to respond to. Careers advisors gain structured, non-diagnostic tools, a handbook and resources that let them discuss self-

employment credibly with students whose profiles suggest it is worth exploring. Parents and carers gain a way to understand how their child works that needs no diagnosis, steers between worry and blind faith, and helps them support less conventional paths with realistic expectations.

> *"Know your strengths. But also know the areas that you can't, or [are] not comfortable with... Make sure that you're running the business the way that works for you... whatever that is for anybody, that's the way you should run your business."*
>
> Peter, on running a business that fits how you work

Brightwire presumes something modest and important: that every young person deserves to understand how they work before the labour market tells them how they fall short. Self-employment may or may not be the right destination for a given neurodivergent young person. Brightwire exists so that they can make that judgement with self-knowledge.

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