

Brightwire

Helping Neurodivergent Young Adults Transition to Self-Employment

Why career guidance built for a neurotypical majority is failing one in five young people — and why self-employment, understood through traits rather than diagnoses, may be the pathway that actually fits.



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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 base behind it, and the rationale for its design. Technical specification is documented separately in the Brightwire Technical Annex, available under confidentiality agreement (see Section 9, Technical documentation).

IMPORTANT

Brightwire is an exploratory tool for self-understanding and career exploration. It is not a diagnostic instrument and does not provide clinical, psychological, educational, or careers advice. It must not be used for selection, streaming, grouping, or any formal determination about a child.

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01

A Different Kind of Worker

Neurodivergent young people are entering a labour market that was not designed for them. For many, the question is not whether they can contribute to the economy; it is whether the economy is willing to accommodate how they think, work, and create.

Neurodivergence is not a rare phenomenon at the margins of the working population. Estimates suggest that between 15 and 20 per cent of the global population is neurodivergent in some form, a broad term that encompasses ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and related profiles (Armstrong, 2010; Singer, 1999). In the United Kingdom, ADHD alone is estimated to affect approximately four per cent of the population, or around 2.6 million children and adults (NICE, 2018). For young people, the figures are even more striking: national surveys consistently suggest that neurodivergent conditions are present in one in five pupils in secondary education.

These are not marginal numbers. They represent a substantial portion of the young people currently moving through schools, colleges, and into working life. Yet the systems designed to support their transition — career guidance, enterprise education, vocational training — have been built with a fundamentally different type of learner in mind. The result is a persistent and well-documented gap between the potential of neurodivergent young adults (NDYA) and the support they actually receive.

Among those who do make it into work, a striking pattern has emerged: neurodivergent individuals are disproportionately drawn to self-employment. Approximately 25 per cent of UK founders identify as neurodiverse (Made By Dyslexia / EY, 2018). More tellingly, among neurodivergent people who are self-employed, 54 to 64 per cent report that self-employment was not simply a career preference but the only

viable way to earn a living (Doyle, 2020). This is not a story of aspiration fulfilled. It is a story of people finding refuge in self-employment because conventional employment failed to accommodate them.

This foundational document sets out the problem, the evidence, and the rationale for a new kind of intervention: a trait-based assessment tool and resource platform designed to help neurodivergent young adults aged 14 to 18 understand themselves better, and to explore self-employment as a meaningful, supported career pathway. It introduces the conceptual and empirical foundations for the Brightwire platform, and explains why this approach — focused on traits rather than diagnoses, on strengths as well as challenges, and on self-employment as an occupational fit rather than a last resort — represents a different and necessary response to a persistent and costly problem.

02

The Scale of the Challenge

When significant proportions of young people leave school without the tools to understand their own working style, and without access to career guidance that reflects their neurological reality, the consequences extend far beyond individual frustration.

WHO WE ARE TALKING ABOUT

Neurodivergent young adults are not a homogeneous group. They include young people with ADHD, autistic profiles, dyslexia, and combinations of these and other conditions. What they share is a set of neurological differences that cause them to process information, manage attention, regulate emotion, and engage with the social world in ways that diverge from the majority. These differences are not pathologies to be corrected; they are variations that can generate both distinctive capabilities and specific challenges, depending heavily on context, support, and the fit between the individual and their environment.

The employment picture for this group is stark. The Buckland Review of Autism Employment (2024) found that only three in ten autistic people are in employment, compared to eight in ten of the general population, a gap that has barely narrowed in a decade. For young people with ADHD, research documents higher rates of job loss, lower occupational status, and greater difficulty sustaining workplace relationships (Young Foundation, 2021). These are not primarily problems of capability. They are problems of fit: between neurological profile and the demands, structures, and social conventions of standard employment.

15–20%

of young people are neurodivergent.

3 in 10

Only autistic people are in paid employment.

25%

of UK founders identify as neurodiverse.

54–64%

of ND self-employed say it was the only viable option.

WHY URGENCY MATTERS

The case for urgency rests on two converging realities. First, a growing proportion of the young people currently in secondary school are neurodivergent, many of them undiagnosed or without adequate support plans. They are approaching critical transition points, at 16 and at 18, without the self-knowledge or the guidance to make informed choices about their futures. Second, the economy is changing. The growth of the gig economy, platform-based self-employment, and portfolio careers has created a landscape in which the boundary between employment and self-employment is increasingly porous. For neurodivergent individuals, who already gravitate towards self-directed work, these structural shifts represent 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 is not only individual. Neurodivergent founders make up a disproportionate share of the innovative start-up ecosystem. Research consistently links neurodivergent traits — high risk tolerance, non-linear thinking, hyperfocus, pattern recognition — to entrepreneurial behaviour and innovation (Lerner, Hunt & Verheul, 2018; Wiklund et al., 2017). A labour market that continues to lose this talent through inadequate support is not merely failing individuals; it is failing to build the inclusive economy it claims to want.

03 A Two-Fold Failure

The challenges facing neurodivergent young adults as they transition from school to working life are not the product of a single systemic failure. They reflect 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 adults in educational and career settings is widely recognised as inadequate: not simply underfunded, but conceptually misaligned with the people it is meant to serve. Several specific failures characterise the current landscape.

Career advisors are consistently under-trained in neurodiversity. In mainstream schools, career counsellors typically have little or no formal knowledge of how different neurodivergent profiles affect working style, communication, or career fit. Expert knowledge gathered through this project confirms the pattern: as one

practitioner noted, neurodivergent young people are routinely told they don't fit the usual mould and that advisors simply don't know what to do with them (expert interview, Brightwire participatory research programme). This is not a reflection of individual failure but of systemic absence: there is simply no requirement for career advisors to understand neurodiversity, and very limited continuing professional development in this area.

Support tends to be generic rather than tailored. Where neurodivergent-specific provision does exist, it often defaults to a one-size-fits-all approach that cannot accommodate the substantial variation within and across neurodivergent profiles. What works for one young person with ADHD may be actively unhelpful for another with a different pattern of traits, or for an autistic young person whose challenges are primarily 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 that mean many neurodivergent young people, disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds, reach adulthood without a formal diagnosis. Support systems gated by diagnosis therefore exclude precisely the young people most likely to benefit from early intervention. Even for those with diagnoses, labels like “ADHD” or “autism” say relatively little about the specific profile of strengths and challenges that shapes an individual's experience. Two young people with the same diagnosis may share almost no functional overlap.

Stigma and deficit framing remain pervasive. Despite growing public awareness of neurodiversity, the dominant institutional framing remains one of deficit: 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 been told repeatedly about their limitations and rarely about their capacities, which, in the context of self-employment, is exactly the wrong preparation.

THE SECOND FAILURE: CAREER EDUCATION THAT IGNORES SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Career guidance in schools defaults overwhelmingly to traditional employment pathways. The dominant model — qualifications leading to job applications leading to employment — reflects a mid-twentieth-century labour market that no longer describes the career realities of a significant portion of the population. For neurodivergent young people, for whom conventional employment often represents the least viable option, this default is especially damaging.

Self-employment is not taught as a career pathway in most secondary schools. Where enterprise education exists, it tends to be theoretical, focused on the business functions within organisations rather than on the practical realities of founding and running one's own enterprise. As the grey literature review in this project documents, very limited academic or policy attention has been paid to enterprise education in secondary schools specifically, and almost none of it is designed with neurodivergent learners in mind. The 2023 report *Neurodiversity and Enterprise Education* (Edwards & Treanor) concluded that traditional enterprise education not only fails to play to the strengths of neurodiverse students but may actively disadvantage them by prioritising presentation, conventional group work, and written outputs over the hands-on, autonomy-driven learning that tends to suit neurodivergent profiles.

Practical skills relevant to self-employment — financial management, client communication, project planning, managing variable income — are rarely addressed in secondary education. Yet these are precisely the skills that neurodivergent self-employed adults most commonly identify as insufficiently developed when they begin working for themselves. The gap between what schools provide and what independent working requires falls hardest on those who arrive at self-employment least prepared.

Career guidance fails to connect neurodivergent traits to self-employment as a career option. Even advisors with some neurodiversity awareness rarely frame self-employment as a positive fit for young people with ADHD or autistic profiles. The result is that many NDYA arrive at self-employment through a process of exclusion — pushed out of conventional work — rather than through a process of supported exploration and informed choice. The difference between these two pathways is not merely psychological. It affects 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 adults must move away from condition-based deficit frameworks and towards inclusive, trait-informed approaches that recognise both the diversity within the neurodivergent population and the genuine strengths that 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.

These are not minor adjustments to existing practice. They require a different starting point: one that begins with the individual, their specific traits, working preferences, and context, rather than with their diagnostic label or their distance from a neurotypical norm. They also require a different destination: one that includes self-employment, portfolio careers, and flexible independent work as concrete attractive options, not fallback positions.

More inclusive, trait-based support means equipping career advisors with tools and language that allow them to talk about how a young person works — their tendencies around focus, risk, creativity, social interaction, and sensory sensitivity — without requiring a diagnosis. It means designing resources that acknowledge the substantial individual variation within any neurodivergent group and that resist the reduction of complex profiles to simple labels. It means a strengths-based orientation that does not ignore challenges but refuses to make them the whole story.

A better-supported pathway to self-employment means introducing young people to independent work earlier, through age-appropriate exploration rather than premature pressure. It means connecting the traits associated with neurodivergent profiles to the real demands and opportunities of working for oneself. And it means providing scaffolding for the specific challenges self-employment presents — executive function, financial management, irregular workflow — so that young people are not simply launched into independence without the support structures to sustain it.

05

Beyond the Deficit Narrative

For too long, support for neurodivergent young people has been organised around the question of what they struggle with. A more complete and more useful picture requires equal attention to the question of what they are capable of.

This is not a call for naive positivity that ignores real challenges. Neurodivergent individuals do face specific difficulties — in attention regulation, sensory management, emotional processing, and social interaction — and those difficulties are real, consequential, and deserving of support. But when the entire support framework is built around managing deficits, something important is lost: the recognition that the same traits that create challenges in one context often create distinctive capabilities in another.

Impulsivity that derails planning in a classroom can fuel rapid opportunity recognition on the floor of a trade fair. Sensory sensitivity that makes a noisy office unbearable can produce the detailed aesthetic awareness that distinguishes a designer or craftsperson. Hyperfocus that makes it impossible to switch tasks on demand can generate weeks of extraordinary output when the task is one of genuine interest. Pattern recognition that makes standard assessments feel trivially easy can underpin analytical capabilities that are exceptional. None of these capabilities are guaranteed. Context matters, scaffolding matters, and the stage of self-employment matters. But they are real, empirically documented, and consistently overlooked in support frameworks built primarily 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 is one that understands neurodivergent traits as having both facilitative and constraining dimensions. For each trait, young people should learn not only where that tendency might create friction — in social settings, in structured environments, in routine tasks — but also where it might represent a real asset: in creative problem-solving, in self-directed work, in specialist domains, in the early stages of entrepreneurial action. This dual framing is not simple rhetorical balance. It is an accurate reflection of the research evidence and, for many young people, a significant reorientation of their self-understanding.

06

Self-Employment as Occupational Fit

Self-employment is often presented as an exceptional or risky choice: the domain of the bold, the unusually creative, or the desperate. For neurodivergent young adults, it is none of these things. For many, it is the career context most structurally aligned with how they actually work.

The concept of occupational fit refers to the degree of alignment between a person's characteristics — their traits, values, needs, and working style — and the demands, structures, and culture of a given career environment (Holland, 1985). Research on ADHD and self-employment has consistently found a strong 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 that ADHD diagnosis increases the probability of entrepreneurial intentions by 26 per cent and the probability of being self-employed by 30 per cent. Adults with ADHD are estimated to be around three times more likely to start their own businesses than their neurotypical counterparts (ADHD Centre, 2022).

The occupational fit argument is straightforward. Self-employment offers autonomy over working conditions, pace, and schedule, removing many of the environmental stressors that make conventional employment difficult for neurodivergent individuals. It permits the focus of effort on areas of high interest and capability, rather than requiring performance across the full range of tasks that a job description typically demands. It rewards divergent thinking, high energy, rapid decision-making, and unconventional problem-solving — traits that may be penalised in structured employment. And it allows individuals to build support structures around their specific needs rather than adapting to structures built for others.

"[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

However, research has also shown that self-employment does not automatically produce good outcomes for neurodivergent founders. Patel and colleagues (2021) found that while ADHD genetic predisposition is positively associated with starting a business, it is negatively associated with earnings in self-employment, suggesting that the same traits that facilitate founding do not automatically sustain growth. Rajah et al. (2021) confirmed this pattern, showing that ADHD-like symptoms in childhood positively predict entrepreneurial entry but negatively predict survival and performance over time. Wiklund et al. (2017) identified inattention symptoms specifically as associated with lower company performance in later-stage ventures. The ADHD entrepreneurship paradox — enabling initiation while potentially undermining execution — is well-documented.

This paradox is exactly the problem we should be addressing. Understanding a young person's specific trait profile — not just whether they have ADHD, but where their particular combination of impulsivity, energy,

hyperfocus, and executive challenges sits — makes it possible to anticipate both the strengths they bring to self-employment and the structural supports they are likely to need. A founder with high creativity and high hyperfocus but high rejection sensitivity and low attention to routine detail needs very different scaffolding from one with high novelty seeking and high energy but low pattern recognition and high sensory sensitivity. Generic entrepreneurship support serves neither well.

Lerner et al. (2018) decomposed the entrepreneurial process into seven stages — from initial interest through opportunity recognition, nascent entrepreneurial behaviour, resource acquisition, resource coordination, value capture, and innovation — and documented how neurodivergent traits function differently at each stage. The same impulsivity that drives early-stage action can become a liability in resource coordination; the hyperfocus that produces exceptional early output can make the pivot to operational management feel almost impossible. These patterns are predictable if the trait profile is understood in advance. Adequate support is one that does not eliminate the paradox, but it does make it visible, and visible problems can be planned for.

Ultimately, the aim is not to push neurodivergent young people towards self-employment, nor to romanticise it as a panacea. It is to ensure that self-employment is available as a well-understood, supported option: one that is entered with self-knowledge rather than desperation, and sustained with appropriate structures rather than abandoned for lack of support. For young people whose neurological wiring sits most comfortably outside the conventions of standard employment, this is not a marginal aspiration. It is a matter of economic inclusion (OECD/European Commission, 2023), wellbeing, and the opportunity to build a working life that actually works for them.

07

Why Traits, Not Conditions

The choice to build this tool around traits rather than diagnostic categories is not a matter of convenience. It reflects a substantive argument about what is actually useful when supporting neurodivergent young adults in career exploration and self-employment planning.

Diagnostic categories describe clusters of symptoms and experiences that meet clinical thresholds. They are useful for certain purposes — access to support services, medication, legal accommodations — but they tell us relatively little about how a specific individual actually functions in work-related contexts. Two people with the same ADHD diagnosis can have radically different profiles: one highly impulsive and energetic with strong divergent thinking; another primarily inattentive with deep capacity for sustained focus on topics of interest. Both will have very different relationships to self-employment. A diagnosis treats them the same; a trait profile does not.

"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), reframes neurological variation as natural diversity rather than disorder. From this perspective, the relevant question is not "what is wrong with this person?" but "how does this person's cognitive and behavioural profile interact with the specific demands of a given environment?" This is precisely the question that matters for career guidance: not whether someone has ADHD, but what their 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 significant practical advantages. Many young people, disproportionately those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have not been formally diagnosed. A tool gated by diagnosis would exclude them entirely, even though their trait profiles may be highly relevant to how they engage with work. By focusing on traits, the Brightwire platform is accessible to any young person whose working style is shaped by neurodivergent tendencies, regardless of whether those tendencies have a clinical label attached to them. This is both more inclusive and more practically useful.

This has a consequence worth stating plainly. Because the platform measures traits rather than sorting students into categories, it is not only usable by neurodivergent young people — it is usable by anyone. Every young person sits somewhere on impulsivity, on how they focus, on how they handle feedback; these are dimensions of ordinary human variation, not markers of disorder. Brightwire is designed for neurodivergent young people because that is where the need is sharpest and existing provision weakest, but nothing in its architecture excludes a neurotypical student, and nothing about a neurotypical profile makes the result less informative. 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 and who is not — a judgement schools are often poorly placed to make, which delays support while students wait for assessment, and which singles out the very young people most wary of being singled out.

The research literature supports this approach. Studies on entrepreneurship and neurodivergence that focus on specific traits rather than diagnostic categories consistently produce more nuanced and actionable findings than those that treat diagnosis as a binary variable (Lerner et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2017). Trait-based analyses can distinguish between the aspects of a neurodivergent profile that facilitate entrepreneurial action at different stages, and those that create friction — a distinction that is lost when the analysis operates at the level of the diagnostic category. From a practical standpoint, a trait profile gives a young person something concrete to work with: not "I have ADHD" but "I have high impulsivity, strong divergent thinking, and low tolerance for repetitive tasks: here is what that might mean for how I structure independent work."

This is also an ethical argument. Condition-based framing carries stigma. It activates deficit narratives that many neurodivergent young people have spent years trying to escape. A trait-based approach, offered within an explicitly strengths-oriented framework, invites a fundamentally different kind of self-reflection: one centred on capacities and tendencies rather than symptoms and impairments. For young people who have frequently encountered support systems that emphasise what they cannot do, this shift in framing is not merely rhetorical. It can be transformative.

08

The Existing Support Landscape

A young person who discovers at sixteen that self-employment might fit them will find a landscape of support built for adults who have already started, and almost nothing built for them.

Brightwire does not enter an empty field. A small but growing ecosystem of support for neurodivergent entrepreneurs has emerged in the UK and internationally, recently mapped in an overview by the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Association (Edwards, 2025). Understanding what this ecosystem offers, and what it does not, clarifies both why a platform like Brightwire is needed and how it is designed to complement, rather than duplicate, what already exists.



WHAT IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE

Specialised services for neurodivergent business owners now exist across several categories. A cluster of dedicated providers offers coaching, mentoring, training, assessments, and even neurodivergent-aware administrative and accountancy support: organisations such as Genius Within, Exceptional Individuals, Do-IT Solutions, Celebrate Difference, and the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Association itself. Government support exists through the Access to Work scheme, which can fund assistive technology, coaching, and virtual assistance for self-employed disabled and neurodivergent people. However, applicants have reported waits of up to a year, and in February 2025 the Government acknowledged the programme was in urgent need of review. Beyond these, a wider circle of neurodiversity-focused organisations — Neurodiversity in Business, Specialisterne, the Institute of Neurodiversity, Made By Dyslexia — works predominantly on employment rather than entrepreneurship; general small-business platforms have begun adding inclusion strands, such as the FSB's Business Without Barriers networking events; and a great deal of day-to-day support happens informally, through peer communities, online groups, neurodiversity-aware coaches, and storytelling platforms run by neurodivergent entrepreneurs themselves (Edwards, 2025). International provision follows the same pattern: promising but scattered initiatives, most oriented towards employment rather than venture creation and self-employment.

WHY CURRENT PROVISION FALLS SHORT

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

Three structural gaps matter even more for this project. First, virtually all existing provision addresses adults who are already running a business or actively starting one. Nothing in the mapped landscape reaches young people at the point where career pathways are actually formed. By the time a neurodivergent person encounters the adult support ecosystem, the decisive transitions — subject choices, qualification routes, first experiences of work — have already happened, often without self-employment ever being presented as an option. Second, none of the available support is anchored in a systematic understanding of the individual. Coaching, toolkits, and communities all work from broad diagnostic categories or self-description; none begins from a validated profile of how the specific person in front of them actually functions. Support that cannot see the individual's profile can accommodate difference in general, but it cannot tailor to difference in particular. Third, the landscape is fragmented. Assembling useful help from scattered services, waiting lists, and informal networks demands precisely the executive functioning, self-advocacy, and social navigation that many neurodivergent people find hardest — a barrier that filters out precisely those who need support most.

09 Brightwire: The Platform

Brightwire is a digital platform that helps neurodivergent young people understand how they think and work, and consider self-employment as one possible path. It brings together an assessment, a set of resources, and a guided ideation module into a single, coherent experience built around the young person rather than around a diagnosis.

The platform (brightwire.org.uk) grew out of a year-long participatory research programme with young people, educators, career practitioners, and organisations supporting neurodiverse workers in the North East of England. It is built for young people aged 14 to 18, and it is intended for use across the UK and beyond.

The platform serves three interconnected functions. It is an assessment tool: a structured measure of twelve neurodivergent-relevant traits that produces a personalised profile for each young person, showing their distinctive pattern of strengths and challenges. It is a developmental resource: a set of reflective exercises, guided activities, and practical information that helps young people translate their profile into self-knowledge and career awareness. And it is a communication tool: a shared language that young



people, families, and advisors can use to discuss self-employment as a real, contextualised option, not a vague aspiration or a fallback plan.

The assessment is delivered through three portals. An Admin portal allows schools and organisations to manage cohorts and access aggregate data. A School/Consultant portal gives career advisors access to individual profiles, resource packs, and guidance for supporting young people through the tool. A Student portal provides the young person with a personal interface designed to WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards, with ND-friendly navigation and clear visual feedback.

One feature of that portal deserves particular mention, because it is where the platform turns from self-understanding into support. The portrait belongs to the young person, and nothing reaches an adult unless they choose to share it. When a student does decide to share — with a careers advisor, a teacher, or the staff member administering the platform — the system generates a mirrored set of materials for that adult: a technical companion explaining what each band means and how confidently the result can be read, and a curated set of resources selected for that particular student. An advisor is not left to improvise; they receive the same picture the young person has, translated into terms they can act on. This mirroring is governed by the same guardrails as the portrait itself: it is exploratory rather than diagnostic, it is explicitly prohibited from use in selection, streaming, grouping, or any formal determination about a child, and a teacher should not read anything about a student that the student could not safely read about themselves.

What distinguishes the Brightwire platform from existing career guidance tools is its theoretical grounding. It is not built on generalised personality frameworks designed for the general population, nor on deficit-based accommodations designed for those with disabilities. It is built on a specific empirical body of knowledge about how neurodivergent traits function in entrepreneurial and self-employed contexts, and on a principled decision to make traits, not conditions, the unit of analysis.

The platform is also positioned differently from the support that already exists. As Section 7 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 does not provide coaching, financing, or peer community, and it does not compete with those who do. Instead, it prepares young people to use them well: someone who arrives at an adult programme, an Access to Work application, or a mentoring relationship already equipped with a trait profile and a language for how they work is a better-served client of every service in the existing landscape. Brightwire fills the gap before that landscape begins.

A FOUR-STAGE DEVELOPMENTAL JOURNEY

Understanding oneself and acting on that understanding are not the same thing, and the distance between them is exactly where many neurodivergent young people get stuck. Brightwire is therefore designed not as a single test but as a developmental journey that moves in deliberate steps, each building on the one before.

This is you. The assessment returns trait bands and a personalised portrait — helping a young person recognise that they think and work in a distinctive way.

What it means. Connects the portrait to the kinds of work and self-employment options a particular trait pattern tends to suit.

Where this could lead. Deepens the picture through trait guides, testimonial videos, and signposting to further support.

Things to try. Moves from understanding who you are to trying something small and concrete with it.

Sequencing matters: self-knowledge has to come before action for the action to be well-judged, and each stage is designed to be usable on its own while leading naturally to the next. The journey is also calibrated by age. For 14 to 16-year-olds, the emphasis across all four stages falls on understanding and low-stakes discovery, with shorter horizons, smaller steps, and more built-in 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. In neither case does the platform prescribe outcomes; it offers starting points for reflection and conversation.

STAGE ONE: THIS IS YOU

The first stage helps a young person recognise that they think and work in a distinctive way, and that this is a difference to understand rather than a deficit to correct. It is delivered through the assessment itself, which measures twelve neurodivergent-relevant traits selected on the basis of three criteria: empirical evidence linking them to neurodivergent profiles; the availability of psychometric instruments with the strongest validation evidence for each construct; and demonstrated relevance to the demands and opportunities of self-employment. Each trait is measured using established psychometric instruments drawn from the published research literature, together with one purpose-built scale. The specific instruments, item composition, and scoring rules are documented separately in the Brightwire Technical Annex (see Technical documentation, below).

1

Impulsivity

The tendency to act quickly on impulse, without extended deliberation — associated with rapid opportunity recognition and bold action, but also premature commitments.

2

Novelty Seeking

The drive towards novel, intense, and varied experience — relevant to exploring new markets and resisting the stagnation of routine.

3

Energy and Drive

Capacity for sustained, goal-directed effort, often presenting in variable cycles of intense productivity and depletion.

4

Creativity and Divergent Thinking

The ability to generate multiple, unconventional solutions and connect ideas across domains — a central entrepreneurial resource.

5

Independence

Preference for being in charge of one's own time, space, and decisions.

6

Rejection Sensitivity

The tendency to anxiously expect and react strongly to rejection — central to how pitching and client feedback are processed.

7

Hyperfocus

Capacity for deep, absorbed concentration on a task of high interest — can enable extraordinary output, or crowd out less engaging tasks.

8

Attention to Detail

The tendency to notice and remember specific features others overlook — valuable in precision-dependent work.

9

Special Interests and Deep Domain Expertise

Capacity for intense, sustained engagement with a specific domain.

10

Pattern Recognition

Ability to detect structure and regularities in complex information — a foundation for analytical and creative work.

11

Social Interaction and Networking

Ease and comfort in social and professional interaction, relevant to client relationships and self-promotion.

12

Sensory Processing Sensitivity

Sensitivity to environmental, emotional, and social stimuli, and depth of processing applied to experience.

These twelve traits are not independent of one another. They interact, overlap, and combine in ways that produce profiles rather than simple scores. It is the profile — the pattern of traits across these twelve dimensions — that is most informative, not any individual score in isolation.

The assessment is delivered as a single Portrait Battery of Likert-type items and short scenario situations, taking approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete. Results are reported as broad bands that feed narrative portraits, never as clinical scores or comparisons against diagnostic norms. A score on its own means little until it is placed in the context of the whole profile — which is what the portrait does.

How that portrait is produced deserves a brief note. A deterministic scoring engine converts each trait's responses into a band and, separately, establishes which tendencies stand out most strongly within the young person's own profile, so that the handful that most define them lead the portrait rather than all twelve being treated alike. For the multidimensional measures the engine also detects a within-trait leaning — whether sensory sensitivity runs towards discomfort or towards attunement, for instance — which steers the practical suggestions the portrait offers. A narrative layer then interprets this structured input against a curated, evidence-grounded library of trait descriptions, counterweights, and trait-combination readings, so that intersections are read as one profile rather than twelve separate results. Every portrait passes through content guardrails and human review before it reaches a young person. The 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 earns its keep when working for yourself — paired, always, with its counterweight, where the same tendency will cost something and what support that calls for. These readings are drawn from a curated, evidence-grounded layer of the platform's content, developed for each of the twelve traits and their common combinations from the research literature and the participant-developed trait guides. The combinations carry most of the meaning: hyperfocus reads differently alongside strong attention to detail than alongside low tolerance for routine, and the platform provides these intersection readings so that the connection to working life reflects the whole profile, not twelve isolated tendencies.

The language of this stage is deliberately disciplined. Futures are described in concrete, everyday terms — work for yourself, be your own boss, start a project, a small business of your own, freelancing — never through abstractions like “venture”, “entrepreneurship” or “enterprise”, which mean little to most 14 to 18-year-olds. Every trait, at every band, is given both a strength angle and a challenge angle for independent work: tools, not superpowers, with no band presented as better than another. And the register is conditional rather than prescriptive — kinds of work a pattern tends to suit, settings where a tendency becomes an asset — because the aim of this stage is a picture a young person can try on, not a verdict to live up to. The two age horizons carry through: for 14 to 16-year-olds, visualisation 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 that the second stage opened up, always from a strengths perspective and always with the counterweight that keeps the strengths honest. It is supported by three resources that read directly from the portrait: downloadable trait guides explaining what each trait is, how it shows up in daily life, and how it tends to play out when running something of one's own; testimonial videos of neurodivergent self-employed people offering realistic role models rather than success stories; and curated signposting matched to the young person's age and interests. Throughout, self-employment is framed as one option among many, never the goal and never 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, framed as experiments to try rather than businesses to commit to. It is means-based rather than plan-based, anchored on effectuation (start from who you are, what you know, and whom you know) and bricolage (make do with the resources at hand), and it carries the portrait's dual framing forward, naming both the strength and its counterweight, so that early-stage ease is treated as a caution flag rather than proof of fit.

This stage mirrors the assessment engine's architecture — a questionnaire, structured input, AI-assisted generation grounded in a curated knowledge base, guardrails, and human review — across three moves: a short questionnaire capturing what the young person is drawn to; a directions stage returning two or three structured possibilities, 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 with a short, concrete set of next actions built for follow-through — an absurdly small first step, intentions specified as when and where rather than only what, executive function externalised through templates and checklists, a named person to check in with, and explicit, non-shaming permission to stall and restart smaller.

The intended outcome is not a business plan but a completed small experiment, and with it the experience of having moved from self-knowledge to action. Self-employment remains one option among many, and every output passes through human review before it reaches a young person.

TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION

This document is the public account of why Brightwire exists and how it is designed. It is deliberately not the technical specification. The psychometric instruments used for each trait, the composition and length of the battery, the scoring and banding rules, the logic that determines which traits lead a portrait, and the architecture of the generation pipeline are set out in a separate Brightwire Technical Annex. That 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 should be directed to the project lead via brightwire.org.uk. The separation is not a reluctance to be examined: it reflects the licensing conditions attached to third-party psychometric instruments and the need to keep the operational detail of a tool used with children out of general circulation.

10

Conclusion: The Challenge, the Approach, and What It Offers

The test of this project is not how many young people choose self-employment. It is how many arrive at their choice, whatever it is, knowing themselves well enough to make it work.

The challenge this document has set out is neither small nor speculative. Between 15 and 20 per cent of young people are neurodivergent, and they are moving through an education and careers system built for a different kind of learner. The consequences are well documented: an employment gap that has barely narrowed in a decade, career guidance that neither understands neurodivergent traits nor mentions self-employment, and a striking pattern in which neurodivergent people arrive at self-employment anyway — often through exclusion rather than choice, and largely unprepared for what it demands.

The approach developed here responds at the level where the problem actually operates: traits, not conditions. Twelve neurodivergent-relevant traits, each grounded in the research literature, each measurable with validated instruments, each relevant to the demands and opportunities of self-employment, form the basis of a personalised profile. Every trait is treated as having both facilitative and challenging expressions, avoiding equally the deficit narrative and the superpower narrative. And self-employment is repositioned as a question of occupational fit: not a heroic exception or a last resort, but a working arrangement that aligns unusually well with how many neurodivergent people function, provided it is entered with self-knowledge and sustained with appropriate support.

The solution is the Brightwire platform. At its core sits the Portrait Battery: Likert items and short scenario situations, drawn from established psychometric instruments and completed in roughly 20 to 25 minutes, producing a portrait across the twelve traits. Around it sit the resources that make the profile usable: age-calibrated explanatory content, downloadable trait guides connecting each trait to daily life and to self-employment, reflective exercises, and individualised narrative portraits. Delivery runs through three portals — for administrators, for schools and advisors, and for students — with accessibility designed to WCAG 2.1 AA standards and a data protection framework in which students control access to their own results. An initial pilot in secondary schools and youth organisations will test accessibility, usability, relevance, and educational value, ahead of wider use across the UK and beyond.

The contributions are threefold. To practice, the platform offers a trait-based alternative to diagnosis-led career support: inclusive of the undiagnosed, usable with any student rather than only an identified subgroup, framed around strengths without romanticising them, and specific enough to inform real decisions. To research, it contributes 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, it demonstrates what career education could look like if self-employment were treated as a legitimate pathway and neurodivergence as a difference to be understood rather than a deficit to be managed.

The benefits extend to each group involved in a young person's transition. Young adults gain a language for self-understanding that is neither clinical nor sentimental. Teachers gain a way to read the puzzling unevenness of neurodivergent students — the brilliant coursework next to the missed deadline — as a trait

pattern rather than a motivation problem, and to respond accordingly. Career advisors gain structured, non-diagnostic tools, resource packs, and guidance that make it possible to discuss self-employment credibly with students whose profiles suggest the fit is worth exploring. And parents gain a framework for understanding how their child works, that neither demands a diagnosis nor asks them to choose between worry and blind faith, and that 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

None of this presumes that self-employment is the right destination for every neurodivergent young person. It presumes something more modest and more important: that every young person deserves to understand how they work before the labour market tells them how they fall short. That is the gap Brightwire exists to close.

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