



**Changing  
Our Lives**

**Sonja West  
Working 9 to 5!**



**No one is too disabled,  
or too affected by  
mental health difficulties,  
to lead an ordinary life**

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## An Ordinary Life

Changing Our Lives' work is rooted in the belief that no one is too disabled and no one's mental health is too complex to lead an 'ordinary life'. Whatever our area of work, the drive for people to lead ordinary lives is at the heart of our approach. An ordinary life, first coined by the King's Fund in their seminal report *An Ordinary Life* (Kings Fund 1980), promoted the concept that people with learning disabilities should live in ordinary houses, in ordinary streets, and be part of ordinary communities.

Kings Fund. (1980). *An Ordinary Life: Comprehensive locally based residential services for mentally handicapped people*, London: Kings Fund.

We often take for granted certain things such as having a partner, a good job, or living in our own home. These are ordinary and everyday things that make up our life. Disabled people are often faced with barriers which make these everyday, ordinary things very difficult to achieve. Some of these barriers may be internal, but more often than not society places barriers in the way of individuals. These barriers can be other people's attitudes, a lack of creative thinking or physical barriers.

Sonja's story is one in a series of Ordinary Life books. Each story illustrates that an ordinary life is possible for disabled people if they have the right support and resources to make this happen.





My name is Sonja. I live with my parents in Sandwell and I have a great life! One of the things I am proudest of is my job. I work 21 hours a week doing something I love, where I am valued, respected and part of a great team of people. My work is really rewarding and very important to me. Like for many disabled people, my journey to work was a long one. But I am a positive and determined person so I never gave up until I finally achieved my goal.

## Long road to work

I went to school in Tipton and really enjoyed it. I was always the one the teachers came to for help with jobs like putting up new displays and organising fundraising events. I loved getting involved and having some responsibility. When I left school in 1996 I knew I wanted to get paid work and have a career just like other young people. I wanted to do something useful and productive, earn my own money and make the most of my strengths.



People with a learning disability face lots of barriers to getting work. I knew it would be difficult, but I stayed focused on my goal. I did whatever I could to take me closer to a job. My first step was to go to college to get some qualifications. I went to Dudley College and tried a hairdressing course. It was OK but not what I really wanted so alongside this I took courses to improve my literacy as I was really keen to work in administration. I also love writing and have always kept my own journal so it was a win-win option for me!

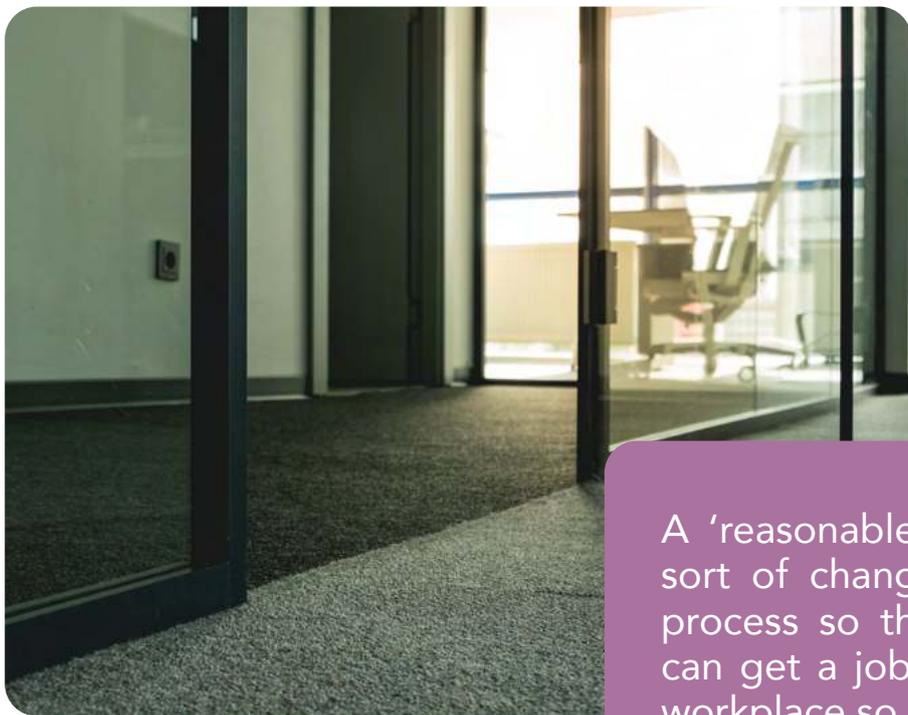


In addition, I took on volunteering roles and work placements to help me build my skills, employability and work experience. These roles were in care work supporting elderly people and people with a learning disability. I enjoyed helping other people and liked feeling part of a team. It was also important to me to be doing something useful and productive even though it wasn't paid work.

## A doorway opens

Thirteen years ago, I had support through the Workstep employment programme which provided support to disabled people facing complex barriers to getting and keeping a job. This support was crucial in opening the door to paid employment for me.

One of the key things Workstep did was make sure that the right reasonable adjustments were in place for me. The law says that an employer must think about making reasonable adjustments when they know a job applicant has a disability.



A 'reasonable adjustment' is some sort of change to the recruitment process so that a disabled person can get a job and a change to the workplace so that a disabled person can do their job (or get a job).



For me this meant:

- I had a working interview where I sat with one of the business support staff and answered the phone, sent an email and did some typing. This was a good interview for me because it was easy to understand and I got to show off what I can actually do in real situations.
- My job was “job carved”. This means it was shaped around the things I am good at.
- The Workstep programme gave me experience of what going to work was like, helped me learn what to do and helped me settle in.



I started on a 12-month contract. I was so excited – finally my hard work had paid off! I was going to get the chance to prove myself in the real world of work – and have my own income!

The first year went well and at the end I had to go for another interview. I had to do a typing test; I was very nervous. Three people were interviewed but I got the job! Finally, all my hard work and determination had paid off. It was a fantastic feeling and I haven't looked back since!

## My job in the council

I have now worked for Sandwell Council for 13 years. I love my job and I am really happy at work. I work in the Core Business Support Team in Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing. This is great because I get to help people who are supported by social care as well as my colleagues. I do the filing, shredding and laminating, make appointments in the managers' diaries, sort the post, prepare packs for the STAR team's frontline officers to take to people's homes, answer the phone, photocopy, organize stationary, send emails and type up notes and minutes. I am confident using Word and Excel. I also prepare the packs for staff doing the Care Certificate.

I am very busy! I have a timetable for my day and this helps me. I sign in when I first get into work. I fetch the post for the whole floor and sort it and stamp it. This can be a big job because it can include post for the Council House and other places. I deliver the post. Then I do the next job. I like the routine. I am good at typing minutes of team meetings. I do stationary orders and keep a check on this in everyone's work area. I have someone to help me if I am unsure what to do and I can ask anyone in the team for help. I am on the council Yammer where we share knowledge and information.

As well as the independence and fulfilment I get from working, I also really love the opportunity to mix with people and be part of a team. I am very much a team player always ready to help and support colleagues. We all get on well and – very importantly – we take it in turns to make the hot drinks! I get involved in projects too like putting on displays and events for International Woman's Week. I like doing different and interesting things as well as the usual day to day stuff.

People say how committed I am to my career as I have to catch three buses to work every day now.

*“Sonja is a team player and very helpful. Sonja will always participate in tasks where required and asked of her, asking for help if needed. If she has completed all her tasks, she will always approach members of the team and ask to see if they need help with anything.*

*Nothing is too much trouble for Sonja and she is always someone to rely on. Sonja is a good listener and takes on board all that is said. There is never a dull moment with Sonja, from singing Abba songs (her favourite band) to having her photo taken to appear in Women’s Day communication (and plenty of other publications).*

*Sonja is a confident and professional individual and communicates well with all colleagues within Adult Social Care, has always got a smile and a very positive attitude to work and life in general, she is amazing!!”*

Sonja’s manager



## Work and change

Like most workplaces, there has been a lot of change over the years. I have had different managers and seen a few staff come and go. I take it all in my stride and maintain my cheerful outlook.

Working through the COVID pandemic has been a major change to how we work, and most of our team worked from home. I was given a ThinkPad laptop and a lot of my time was spent on emails and typing up meetings.

Working at home was OK – I was happy to be able to carry on working as it helped me to keep busy through the lockdowns and with being home all the time. Although it was a bit strange and I missed being in the office, I just got on with it!

The team moved from a building called Jack Judge House to the Council House before we all went back in to work. I helped with the move – it was a lot of hard work but it was fun and really satisfying getting it all done. It was great to get back in to the office and see my colleagues again.



## Making friends and having fun!

I am very popular with my team and do a lot of talking to people at break and lunchtime. I think my positive nature draws people to me.

**I'm never grumpy –  
I'm always cheerful.**

I really love being out with people from work too; the Christmas party is a highlight. Last year, I celebrated my 40th birthday; my team had a collection for me which was a lovely surprise. I had a party for family and friends and my manager from work came which was great.

Of course, I love getting paid! I have money to spend on things I like such as handbags, briefcases, boots, shoes and DVDs. I also pay rent so having a good job is essential.

## Independence and a life outside work

Like any adult living at home I contribute to the household, paying my rent and helping around the house. Mum does a lot of the cooking but I sometimes cook too and help wash up.

My working days are quite long with the travel so I like to chill out in the evenings. I watch all the classic soaps, write in my journal and watch my favourite DVDs, mostly musicals which I am passionate about.

Weekends are usually spent at our family caravan. I have Fridays off so we usually travel down then and stay until Sunday night. The caravan park is right by the river and surrounded by the mountains of Mid Wales. It's a very beautiful, peaceful spot so it's great for winding down after a busy week and getting away from the noise of the West Midlands. We have got to know quite a few of the other people who have caravans there so will sometimes have BBQs together.

The nearby market town is a friendly, welcoming place. I like going into town to look around the shops and, chat to people and soak up the hustle and bustle. We sometimes visit other local places too. I love going to the caravan each weekend and miss it when we can't.







Changing Our Lives

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