

'My future, I feel has just begun. When you're disabled and unemployed, life is all about what you can't do. Now I've just started an advanced apprenticeship I can dare to dream. I can start thinking about my goals, long and short term. When I've completed the three years, I hope to get a permanent role, then I can get my own home, travel and build a fulfilling life'

Joe is 28 years old, and has recently started an apprenticeship with [ITM Power](#) in Sheffield, a company that, 'manufactures integrated hydrogen energy solutions to enhance the utilisation of renewable energy that would otherwise be wasted.' Joe's college time will be spent studying at the [AMRC](#), regarded as the 'Centre of Excellence' for apprenticeship delivery within Yorkshire. Despite being a little tired from the early starts and everything being new, Joe is really enjoying it, and relishing the opportunities that such a prestigious apprenticeship brings.

The road to get to this point for Joe has been long, and at times frustrating. Joe has autism, and after leaving school he took various courses and part time jobs, being supported by several agencies over time, but eventually the support would finish and "simply evaporate". After being on the Work programme for two years, Joe was getting increasingly disheartened by promises that agencies made continually being broken, and feeling like he was being sent on courses as a "box ticking exercise".

Then Joe met with Lisa from [Woodthorpe Development Trust](#), who mentioned [Aspire](#) to him. Joe had heard about Aspire as one of his friends had tried to get a placement there before, so he was interested to find out more. After an interview with Dave, which went really well, Joe started volunteering in Aspire's recycling unit, before moving on to the shop with Steve.

The relaxed working atmosphere at Aspire was perfect for Joe, as he can struggle to work in an officious environment. Dave's friendly, tolerant and helpful management style helped Joe to easily settle into the work, and as a qualified electrician's mate, it played to his strengths and interests in electronics and engineering. Joe explained that in previous roles he always, "had the fear that my disability would get in the way. Working with Dave and the team at Aspire gave me the confidence to develop strategies to deal with busy and stressful times". Joe enjoyed his time at Aspire so much that he stayed for three years, with a paid placement making up part of his time - it simply became part of his life.

Joe had been receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) in relation to his autism, but when the benefits system changed, Joe had to attend a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) interview, and as many people did, he got turned down, meaning his benefits were cut. Joe's Mum, Trish, who is a huge advocate for Joe, marched down to the Job Centre and demanded that they support him better. Joe was matched with a helpful support worker from Opportunity Sheffield who helped him to focus on what he had learned at Aspire and all the skills he had developed, then applied them to his job search.

Joe explained, “Aspire gave me the confidence to go into a big organisation like ITM and not be put off. I needed the experience and skills that I developed at Aspire to help me apply for the apprenticeship. My support worker helped me put in place strategies for my interview such as prompt cards which made the whole process much less stressful!”

Having watched the journey that Joe has been on, Trish is understandably extremely proud of him. “He has achieved so much, and been so resilient, despite the knockbacks along the way. Dave at Aspire played a huge part in supporting Joe. Without his time there, Joe may not have got to this point. He simply accepted Joe for who he is and allowed him to shine.”

You can find out more about the work of Aspire, and the training they offer here:

<https://www.aspire-sheffield.co.uk/training/>