

PLACE FOR ALL

EQUALITY

DIVERSITY

INCLUSION

“A day in my life.”

Chitra Nadarajah, Head of Climate Change and Environmental Strategy



EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Sharing personal stories and perspectives to foster inclusivity in the workplace

Death by a Thousand Cuts - it isn't the most original heading, but this is the only way I could think to describe my everyday experience as a woman of colour. I'm Chitra Nadarajah and I work for Hampshire County Council.

This isn't about any one incident that happened but about what I am thinking in everyday situations, how that affects me and how most of it is hidden to everyone around me. To help illustrate what I mean I thought a theoretical "day in the life" would help.

I wake up at 6am and take myself off to my personal training session, where somehow my trainer ends up telling me that I am the only person of colour he trains, and that he had not realised that until now. First tick for the day - not necessarily negative but just odd - just me? Really?

I head home, get ready for work and take the bus into town. It's pretty empty when I get on but slowly starts to fill up and yet the seat next to me remains vacant, with some people choosing to stand. And of course, my thoughts start to go to why that might be - I am the only person of colour on the bus, could that be a reason? Today the bus driver was very friendly but there have been mornings when they have been grouchy - why do I immediately start to wonder if it is personal and if it is about my colour...?

I have meetings all morning and head into the conference room for the first one. I have worked here for over two decades so I am in a very familiar place. Nonetheless, I soon realise that yet again I will be the only person of colour in the room. It doesn't affect my

behaviour, and nothing is said that makes me feel uncomfortable, but it's a feeling of being alone - again. No big drama but just a feeling that isn't great.

My experience at work, also inevitably, is influenced by how seriously I feel that EDI is being taken. I have to admit that it feels like it has dropped down the agenda for so many local authorities now they are faced with extremely pressing and serious issues around budgets. We all know that EDI should be embedded in best practice like health and safety. But I fear that across local government, opportunities to increase the diversity of the workforce are being missed, making it harder to see diversity at the most senior levels. We all know that there are serious consequences to this such as the danger of a single mindset for decision-making and reduced organisational effectiveness and success. All these thoughts circulate every day when I am faced with yet another meeting with an obvious lack of diversity.

So, with that heavy morning complete, I decide to walk into town to get some lunch. I love Winchester and have lived here for many years, but as often happens I find myself looking at the people who walk past me - searching for diversity, for someone who looks like me and I don't see it. I pop into an expensive boutique and everyone is very chatty and offering help. I know I am breathing easier because of it, because I am always expecting something less welcoming. Not because I regularly experience anything less than welcoming but because it is now an embedded fear.

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To give an example, a woman walking down a dark road on her own will be on edge and alert to the possibility of something bad happening – most likely this isn't because this has happened to her in the past but because it happens. That's what being a woman of colour feels like everywhere all the time – to me at least – and only really in the last 8-10 years.

I have lived in the UK for 35 years and was never this hyper aware or concerned about my colour until things started to change. Brexit was definitely a major factor. Since then, what you read and see on social media, the news, everywhere, makes it difficult to not think about it all the time. My daughter who is now almost 18 has experienced an unbelievable amount of racism from her classmates and even her teachers. The response from her schools has been woefully inadequate and, in some cases, they have even suggested that my daughter may have done something to instigate it. A 15 year old instigating racism.

Later that day, my daughter and I decide to head into London for a few hours. We catch an 8pm train home. A drunk man sits at our table and makes a comment about “Chinese people” taking over the country. We decide to move to another seat only to be confronted by another drunk man yelling that I am not from this country. No one says anything.

Later that night I am reading the news headlines on my phone. I make the mistake of reading the comments at the end of a news article and see the “woke” agenda repeatedly mentioned. Then it's the screaming headlines about the crazy people saying the countryside is racist – how ridiculous and yet another example of the woke agenda going too far. I read that and I know that I do not feel comfortable in the Hampshire

countryside – I love it – but am I at ease? No, Do I still go for walks? Yes, but very rarely on my own.

It's the possibility that the people that you see writing those comments in newspapers or online is the person that you're sat next to on the bus, or train, in a shop or even worse in your office. And that the possibility is increased a hundredfold now in my head.

So, what is this all for? I am not asking for sympathy or to be treated with kid gloves. I am only trying to bring some of the less talked about impacts to light, in the hope that this helps someone walk into a room right now and have a bit more empathy and understanding of what other people might be feeling. It's not always the big things that we need to step up for, be the ally, call someone out. It's also just having that low level constant awareness that this might be how someone is feeling, not because anyone has said anything, not because anyone's done anything, but just because this is how it is.

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