

Good Practice in Inclusive Employment

Produced by Difference North East as part of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Making Every Contact Count for Work (Disabled People)

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Introduction

This report sits alongside an Early Insights report that explored disabled people's experiences of work systems throughout their lives. People spoke honestly about what made work harder, and what helped them enter, stay in, or return to work.

This report builds on those early conversations with disabled people and focuses on what good practice looks like. It also includes the experiences and reflections of employers who are trying to remove barriers and create inclusive workplace cultures. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide, but reflects the areas disabled people identified as making a difference, alongside what employers described doing in practice.

This work is undertaken through the lens of the social model, focusing on how systems, processes, and attitudes create barriers, rather than locating the problem within individuals. Participants consistently described barriers arising from systems, environments, and expectations. Good practice is therefore about removing barriers to make work fairer, more flexible, and more inclusive.

The conversations that informed this report took place across the North East Combined Authority region. Throughout, examples of employer practice sit alongside what disabled people said would make a difference, to show how lived experience can shape everyday decisions and workplace culture.

Disabled People's Experiences

Disabled people often described their relationship with work as shifting over time. Whether work feels sustainable often depends on the level of flexibility and the workplace culture.

Across conversations, several consistent themes emerged. Support was often described as focusing on getting people into work, rather than helping them stay there. Asking for help could feel risky, particularly during probation or in the early months of a role. Experiences varied depending on individual managers, and practical barriers, such as transport, inaccessible information, or rigid processes, could quickly make a good job unsustainable.

This tension between fluctuating capacity and fixed expectations shaped how safe work felt and how much risk people could take when considering employment. One participant described the reality of fluctuating capacity in this way:

“You get these peaks where you can take on the world. You get these troughs where you just do what you can manage, but your bills are consistent and never go away.”

When flexibility is designed in from the start, problems are less likely to escalate, and people are more likely to remain in work over time.

With these experiences in mind, the next sections look at what we heard from disabled employees and employers about how inclusion is practised in day-to-day working life. This includes how some organisations are responding to the kinds of barriers disabled people have described.

Good Practice

Inclusion From the Start

Disabled people told us that recruitment is often the first point where employers show whether inclusion is built into how things are done. When information is clear and the process is accessible, people are better able to prepare and show their strengths.

People said they wanted:

- Clear signals that adjustments are available.
- Less pressure to disclose personal or medical information early on.
- Enough time and information to prepare, including interview questions in advance and clear information about the environment.

Some employers are building accessibility into recruitment as standard practice, rather than waiting for individual requests.

One employer described this as a gradual process rather than a single change. Over time, they developed clearer recruitment packs, repeated access prompts, and established recruitment timelines that could be reused and adapted.

Examples include:

- Job adverts that clearly list examples of available adjustments.
- Separating conversations about access needs from decisions about suitability.
- Sharing interview questions in advance with all candidates.
- Giving clear information about interview locations, including photos or short videos.

Employers said that sharing interview questions in advance meant candidates were better prepared and more confident.

This matched what disabled people told us mattered most in recruitment: knowing what to expect and not having to justify their access needs in order to take part.

One disabled person also reflected on the emotional calculation involved in applying to unfamiliar organisations:

"I always have to think twice about whether I'm going to put myself through that... because I will eventually need an absence."

Employers also acknowledged the importance of supplying clear written information about pay, hours, and contract terms before work began, rather than depending solely on verbal discussion. Supplying written information as standard meant people did not have to ask additional questions or explain personal circumstances in order to understand how work would affect their income.

Employers described inclusion as something that developed through practice, and that changes may not be perfect at the start, but could be improved through repetition and feedback.

Good Practice in Action

Example One

In one organisation, job adverts include a clear paragraph encouraging applicants to request adjustments, with examples. These include a different room or set-up, an informal conversation before applying, or any other changes that would help someone take part confidently.

The organisation now also sends interview questions in advance to all candidates.

"We're now giving out the questions in advance to every person that comes in, because it just makes it fair. And also someone might have a condition that they haven't disclosed because they don't want to say it yet."

They also described the importance of small practical details, such as providing visual information about the building.

"At that very start, when people are so vulnerable and they don't know what they can ask for and even just looking at the job advert, they might think that's not for me, because it hasn't got anything on there that I can actually hang on to."

These changes were described as requiring little cost, but noticeably reducing anxiety and widening access.

Example Two

In a small organisation with a largely freelance workforce, inclusive recruitment has been built up over several years. Opportunities are advertised through open call-outs rather than informal networks, with clear information about fees, timelines, and access.

Recruitment packs reuse established wording around access and Disability Confident commitments, and interview questions are shared in advance. Candidates can choose to interview online or in person.

By reusing and refining these materials over time, inclusive recruitment has become part of routine practice rather than something that has to be redesigned each time. The employer reflected on making changes to access in recruitment: "What we realised is that it's getting quicker and quicker. The more you do it, the quicker it becomes."

Induction and Early Support

Disabled people said the early weeks in a role can feel high-risk. Many described trying to "prove themselves" before asking for help. They wanted conversations about barriers to be routine, not dependent on disclosure.

They also wanted the option to discuss well-being separately from performance management.

Some employers are addressing this by building accessibility into the induction process.

In practice, this has included:

- Providing information about adjustments and Access to Work in the first week.
- Normalising conversations about what helps someone work well.
- Offering alternative routes to discuss support outside of a direct line manager.

One employer reflected that some people do not consider themselves disabled, but still have access needs: "people don't always recognise something as an access need." Similarly, regarding access adjustments: "they haven't recognised that that is something that they could request."

In response, the organisation described taking responsibility for initiating early conversations about what helps someone work well, rather than relying on people to identify as disabled or to know what they are entitled to ask for. When offering freelance contracts, they ask whether someone has an access statement or would

prefer to talk things through, allowing practical support to be planned early and without linking it to performance.

Good Practice in Action

In one organisation, all new starters receive information about Access to Work in their first week, whether they have disclosed an access requirement or not.

Their advice to other employers is: "Make sure that people get information about that, whether they're disclosing a disability or not, in case there's something hidden that they don't want to say about."

In this workplace, induction meetings include prompts such as "What helps you at work best?" This approach lowers pressure upon individuals to initiate difficult conversations and signals that support is expected and normal.

Flexibility and Trust

Disabled people said flexibility at work only works when they can trust that it is genuine. Flexibility that can be withdrawn, questioned, or treated as exceptional does not feel safe.

People described feeling more secure in workplaces that focus on outcomes rather than monitoring flexibility arrangements.

One employer described helping flexibility feel trusted rather than conditional by "demonstrating it by action." They also explained that when people share information about what helps them work well, it is acted on without being questioned or calling for further justification.

Good Practice in Action

One disabled employee described working in an organisation where flexibility is built around agreed duties and deadlines.

"If you are doing the things you have been asked to do by the date you've been asked to do them. They really don't care on your ways and means."

They described being able to message their manager on a difficult morning and agree a later start without it becoming a performance issue.

"I now feel comfortable enough to message my line manager and say, I'm up and about. I'm okay, but struggling a bit this morning. I've got no meetings. I'll just start at 12 today and make up that time is that okay?"

Managers also check in without assuming wrongdoing. For example, noticing late-night emails and asking if everything is alright, rather than treating it as a problem.

This tone of communication and the culture of the workplace made a significant difference in how flexibility was both requested and responded to. One disabled

person who had experienced varied responses to requesting flexibility in the workplace said that it was usually the culture of the workplace that made the difference, but acknowledged that “culture is the hardest nut to crack.”

Making Support Consistent and Reliable

Disabled people described how much difference it makes when support does not depend on one sympathetic manager. Consistency among teams builds confidence that when managers change arrangements will remain the same.

One employer described learning that consistency depends less on individual goodwill and more on shared ways of working. Over time, they moved away from access support sitting with one person and towards collective responsibility. As they put it, “as a team, we work on it collectively,” with everyone engaging in access and taking a level of responsibility rather than it being seen as one person’s role.

This included using the same access messaging and processes for everyone, regardless of whether someone was already known to the organisation, and responding in the same way when people shared what they needed. This reduced the risk that support would vary depending on who someone spoke to.

Good Practice in Action

In one organisation, openness about health and access needs is actively maintained.

“It’s a constant effort to maintain that. And when new staff come in, it’s ingrained in them that that’s just the culture.”

Talking about what people need to work well is routine in team spaces, including weekly meetings and internal equality groups to reinforce the culture. Staff are always free to share as much or as little as they choose, and practical help is often offered informally as well as formally. Consistency was described as helping to reduce the fear that disclosure will later close down opportunities.

Leadership and Visibility

Several disabled people described feeling accepted in junior roles but encountering barriers when applying for more senior positions. Disclosure that appeared safe at one level in an organisation became risky when applying for a more senior role.

One disabled person described a visible shift when moving toward more senior roles: “Once you get up into the kind of the higher end roles, the head of and coordinator positions, there was a lot less diversity, or visible diversity, and it felt a lot more corporate.”

In contrast, another person described working in an organisation where disabled people are visible at all levels, including leadership roles. "I counted at least four members of the team had walking aids of some sort." They said that seeing disabled colleagues in senior positions changed how safe it felt to be open and how they felt about opportunities for progression within the organisation.

For many disabled people, visibility at senior levels was closely linked to whether a workplace felt safe and sustainable over time.

Reducing Risk Through Good Practice

For disabled people, risk at work can be about whether work feels stable enough to sustain. This includes financial risk, the risk of requesting adjustments, and the risk that future opportunities will be limited.

People often described having to judge whether a role felt safe to enter or stay in. This was not only about pay, but about how predictable work would be, how supportive the response would be if circumstances changed, and whether asking for help might be used to judge their suitability for a role.

When there is uncertainty about information, it may also increase the feeling of risk. For example, when information about pay, contracts, sickness arrangements, or expectations was unclear, even small unknowns could make work feel fragile. People wanted information on these things in writing, alongside any conversations that take place.

Where employers communicated clearly and followed through, the sense of risk decreased because the information helped people plan and stay in work over time.

Some employers also described reducing risk by acting early on information people shared, rather than waiting for difficulties to arise. One employer reflected that "by having that greater awareness of someone's access needs, we can be more thoughtful during the time that someone's working with us." Using information shared early to plan work helped prevent manageable issues from worsening into health, financial, or employment risks once work was underway.

Good practice reduces risk by making work more predictable and responses more reliable. When people know what will happen if they need support, they seem less likely to minimise barriers or leave work abruptly.

Reducing Financial Pressure

Disabled people described financial pressure as a significant barrier in work systems. This was not only about how to manage financially during a time of

sickness absence, but also about whether work could be sustained, being pushed back too early after an absence, or absorbing extra costs around access itself.

Many described returning to work before they were well because they could not afford the consequences of stepping back. Others described managing additional travel or support costs because asking for help felt risky or unclear.

Good practice reduces financial pressure by ensuring the costs of access, flexibility, or time are not transferred to the individual.

Good Practice in Action

One organisation has a policy designed to reduce financial pressure during sickness absence. Pay is not automatically deducted while someone is off sick. Any overpayment is addressed only after the person returns to work, and only through a repayment plan agreed in writing.

“They have a policy that they will not deduct from your pay unless you’ve returned to work and you’ve organised a sensible payment plan that does not leave you short... and you’ve given your written consent.”

The difference this makes is significant: “I have never once felt pressured to return, not financially, not professionally.”

They also described how work responsibilities were held open during absence rather than permanently reassigned.

“It’s very empowering, because I feel like the things that I care about are still there waiting for me when I go back.”

Another employer described reducing financial pressure by planning work so people are not out of pocket in the first place. When someone shared information about what helps them work well, it was used to think through practical issues such as travel, scheduling, rest, and accommodation during intensive work periods.

When additional support created extra costs, these were covered by the organisation rather than absorbed by the individual. The employer described this as an important part of making work genuinely accessible.

In another organisation, disability-related health appointments are recorded separately rather than treated as standard absence. Where appointments are unavoidable during working hours, time is allowed without penalty.

Together, these approaches reduce panic-based returns, prevent hidden financial burden, and allow decisions about work to be based on health, sustainability, and equity rather than fear around finances.

What This Tells Us About Good Practice

Together, these examples show that good practice is about:

- Building accessibility into recruitment.
- Making support routine rather than reactive.
- Trusting people to manage their work around health, where possible.
- Embedding culture across teams, not leaving it to individuals.
- Reducing financial pressure
- Ensuring disabled people are visible at all levels, including at leadership levels.

When employers communicate early, follow through on commitments, and consider workplace culture in relation to inclusivity, work becomes increasingly sustainable. When people know what will happen if their circumstances change, they are more likely to raise barriers early rather than pushing on until things break down.

Several disabled participants said that what they wanted most was mutual understanding. Not lowered expectations or to feel like they were receiving a special favour - simply a workplace where access needs are acknowledged, taken seriously, and acted on without being questioned.

As one disabled employee reflected:

“Disabled people and employers work best together when they understand each other. I hope we can build an environment where accepting, empowering and inclusive employment is the norm and not an exception, and where disabled people don't feel restricted to 'safe' or limiting career choices.”

Reflections

This report shows that good practice occurs when employers pay attention to what helps remove barriers and consider how to improve access and inclusion in a deliberate, thoughtful way. This sits alongside disabled people's rights to fair treatment, reasonable adjustments, and equal access to work. Good practice does not replace those rights. It is how those rights are made real and workable in everyday working life.

Where inclusive practice worked best, it was described less as a policy and more as a culture. Good practice appeared in everyday decisions, in how people were spoken to or in what happened when someone said they needed something to change. Importantly, responsibility for access and support was shared, and expectations were clear across teams.

During this work, we also heard some nervousness about talking openly about good practice. Employers were often worried about getting it wrong or being seen as claiming they had “got it right”. In some cases, this means that thoughtful and inclusive practices risk remaining hidden rather than being shared.

By accepting that good practice develops through learning and reflection, rather than being a finished or perfect state, and by sharing what is already happening, alongside what disabled people said makes a difference, we hope to encourage more open conversations.

Good practice is about learning, following through on policies and commitments, and taking shared responsibility. This makes work feel safer, more sustainable, and better for everyone involved.

Acknowledgements

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Contact

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