

Building Inclusive Workplaces: A Good Practice Guide for Employers

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How to Use This Guide

This guide shares reflections from disabled people and examples of employer practice. It can be used in different ways:

- As a starting point for internal discussions about inclusive employment
- As a resource for HR teams and managers reviewing their recruitment or workplace practices
- As a learning tool for organisations seeking to strengthen accessibility and inclusion.

The questions throughout the guide are intended to support reflection rather than provide a checklist.

1. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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.

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

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.

Questions To Guide You

- How clearly do we signal that adjustments are welcome at recruitment stage?
- Do candidates need to justify their access needs in order to take part?
- Is key information about pay, hours and expectations provided in writing as standard?
- Would a first-time applicant know what to expect from our process?
- Are our recruitment practices consistent, or dependent on individual managers?

2. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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.

Questions To Guide You

- Do early conversations about "what helps you work well" happen routinely?
- Is support discussed proactively, or only after someone discloses?
- Are wellbeing and performance clearly separated in early conversations?
- Do new starters receive information about Access to Work as standard?
- Would someone feel safe raising an issue during probation?

3. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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."

Questions To Guide You

- Is flexibility built into roles from the start, or treated as an exception?
- Does flexibility depend on a particular manager's goodwill?
- Are outcomes prioritised over monitoring where possible?
- Would someone feel safe asking for a later start on a difficult day?
- How do we demonstrate trust in practice, not just in policy?

4. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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.

Questions To Guide You

- Does access support rely on one individual, or is responsibility shared?
- What happens if a line manager changes?
- Are access messages and processes consistent across teams?
- Do we revisit support needs over time, or only at the start of employment?
- Is inclusive practice embedded in team culture

5. 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."

What Good Practice Looks Like

In contrast, in one organisation disabled people were 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.

Questions To Guide You

- Is disability visible at different levels of the organisation, including leadership?
- Do progression opportunities feel accessible to disabled staff?
- Would someone feel safe disclosing when applying for a senior role?
- How do senior leaders model inclusive practice?
- Is diversity reflected in decisi

6. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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.

Good Practice in Action

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.

Questions To Guide You

- What financial or practical risks might someone be weighing before accepting a role?
- Is information about contracts, pay and sickness arrangements clear and accessible?
- What happens if someone's circumstances change after three months?
- Do we act early on information shared, or wait for problems to escalate?
- How predictable and reliable are our responses to change?

7. 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.

What Good Practice Looks Like

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

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.

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.

Questions To Guide You

- Could financial arrangements unintentionally pressure someone to return before they are well?
- Are disability-related appointments treated flexibly?
- Do access-related costs ever fall on the individual?
- Are repayment processes fair and agreed in writing?
- Do our policies reduce fear, or create it?

8. Moving Forward

Inclusive workplaces are built through consistent practice rather than single policies. Small, deliberate changes can significantly reduce risk and increase sustainability for disabled employees.

Employers may wish to reflect on:

- Where are we already demonstrating good practice?
- Where does practice rely too heavily on individual goodwill?
- What small changes could reduce risk or increase predictability?
- How do we ensure inclusion is part of everyday culture, not an occasional initiative?

Questions for Employers Who Want to Go Further

Organisations that are interested in developing their inclusive employment practice further may wish to explore some of the following questions. These are intended to support deeper discussion across leadership teams, HR, managers and staff.

Culture and Leadership

- How do we demonstrate that inclusion is part of everyday culture rather than a single initiative?
- What signals do staff receive from leadership about disability and access?
- Do leaders actively model openness around access and wellbeing?
- How do we ensure inclusive practice continues when individual managers move on?

Recruitment and Progression

- Are there patterns in who applies for our roles and who progresses within the organisation?
- Do recruitment processes unintentionally favour particular communication styles or working patterns?
- How accessible are promotion and progression opportunities within our organisation?
- Do disabled employees feel able to apply for more senior roles?

Trust and Psychological Safety

- Would staff feel safe sharing when something at work is becoming difficult?
- Do employees believe that raising an access need will lead to support rather than scrutiny?
- What happens when someone's circumstances change after they have been in a role for some time?
- How do we respond when someone says something is not working?

Consistency and Systems

- Are access conversations built into existing processes, such as induction, supervision and team meetings?
- Where does responsibility for inclusive practice sit within the organisation?
- Are inclusive practices written down and shared across teams?
- How do we ensure inclusive practice is not dependent on individual goodwill?

Financial and Practical Barriers

- Are there hidden costs associated with working in our organisation that might affect disabled employees?
- How do we support staff during periods of sickness or fluctuating health?
- Do our policies unintentionally create pressure for people to return before they are ready?
- How clearly do we communicate pay, contracts, expectations and support options?

Learning and Improvement

- How do we learn from the experiences of disabled staff and applicants?
- How often do we review our employment practices with accessibility in mind?
- Are there opportunities to share learning across teams or with other organisations?
- What small changes could make work feel more predictable and sustainable for staff?

Bonus Section

Moving Beyond Impairment Categories

Some organisations are beginning to explore monitoring approaches that focus less on medical categories and more on understanding the kinds of barriers people may experience at work.

This approach recognises that different impairments may lead to similar workplace barriers, and that improving accessibility often requires understanding what kinds of adjustments or support are needed rather than the specific diagnosis someone has.

For example, organisations may invite staff to indicate the areas where they may experience barriers in the workplace. These could include:

- Mobility or movement
- Vision or visual information
- Hearing or spoken communication
- Speech or communication
- Memory, concentration or information processing
- Mental health or emotional wellbeing
- Energy levels, fatigue or fluctuating health
- Pain or long-term health conditions
- Learning or processing information
- Sensory environments (such as light, sound or busy spaces)
- Other access needs

This type of question can provide employers with more practical information about where workplace adjustments, communication changes, or environmental improvements may be helpful.

It can also make monitoring questions easier to answer for people who may not identify with medical terminology or who prefer not to disclose a specific diagnosis.

As with all equality monitoring, participation should be voluntary and information should be handled sensitively and confidentially.

Collecting Disability Data That Improves Accessibility

Some organisations have found it helpful to begin with a single question based on the Equality Act definition of disability. This helps people identify whether they experience barriers without requiring them to disclose a diagnosis.

For example:

Do you consider yourself to be disabled or to have a long-term health condition that may affect your day-to-day activities or your experience at work?

Response options may include:

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Where someone selects “Yes”, organisations may optionally ask a second question about the kinds of barriers or access needs they experience.

For example:

If you are comfortable sharing, which areas best describe the kinds of barriers or access needs you experience?

Mobility or movement

Vision or visual information

Hearing or spoken communication

Speech or communication

Mental health or emotional wellbeing

Memory, concentration or information processing

Learning or processing information

Energy levels, fatigue or fluctuating health

Sensory environments (light, noise or busy spaces)

Long-term illness or health condition

Other access needs

This two-step approach allows organisations to:

- Understand how many disabled people are present in their workforce

- Identify common barriers that may affect staff
- Improve accessibility without requiring people to disclose medical diagnoses

Participation should always be voluntary, and staff should be clearly informed about why the information is being collected and how it will be used.

Questions To Guide You

- Does our organisation collect disability data in a way that helps identify barriers?
- Do staff understand how equality monitoring information is used?
- Could collecting information about access needs help improve workplace practices?
- How do we ensure monitoring processes respect privacy and confidentiality?

Conclusion

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

Thank you to everyone who contributed their time and experience to this work.

We are especially grateful to the disabled people who shared honest accounts of their working lives, and to the employers who reflected openly on what they are doing and what they are still learning.

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