



# Positive Workplace Conversations Guide

**Supporting employers to normalise  
conversations about workplace needs,  
reduce stigma around disclosure, and  
build inclusive cultures.**



# An inclusive guide for every business

**This guide was developed in partnership with the SUSE Experience Network of people with lived experience of disability.**

SUSE also worked with Changing the Chemistry, a SCIO who deliver a range of programmes and interventions that support more inclusive workplaces and leadership. [www.changingthechemistry.org](http://www.changingthechemistry.org)

This guide has been designed to work for businesses of any size and sector.

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# Why Positive Conversations Matter

Disability inclusion is a positive benefit to businesses because it strengthens their workforce, improves business performance and offers a selling point to recruit talent.

Positive workplace conversations are a key element in creating an inclusive environment. If we remove unnecessary barriers, we enable employees to perform at their best, increase their productivity and make it less likely they will move on, reducing absence and turnover and avoiding the cost of recruiting a replacement.

Positive conversations allow everyone to share information in a way that is safe and built on trust. Employers can tailor support and feel confident they are meeting their legal obligations.



# Disability Disclosure and Reasonable Adjustments

Positive workplace conversations can encourage employees to disclose if they are disabled and lets the employer put in place the support they need.

You can't address what you don't know – so it is better to find out what is needed and do something positive about it.

Once a disability is disclosed, a plan can be developed that works for everyone –including reasonable adjustments that allow the person to do their job well and thrive in their role.



**It's important to make clear that sharing information is voluntary and that employees are valued, respected and understood.**

# Why we need positive workplace conversations

- **Positive and inclusive** conversations build safety and trust – they show you care about the person, not just their performance, and that it is okay to speak openly.
- **They encourage people** to disclose a disability – because they feel safe to do so.
- **Disabled people may hesitate** to disclose or ask for support – they may worry about being judged, treated differently or misunderstood, especially for less visible disabilities.
- **Leaders may avoid** initiating conversations – usually because of uncertainty about language, not wanting to offend, or feeling unsure about boundaries.
- **Early conversations** can prevent issues escalating – before they have a negative impact.
- **Inclusive conversations** can strengthen overall team culture -creating a workplace where everyone feels valued.
- **Leaders can create** a culture where people feel safe to speak and confident they will be listened to.
- **You don't need to be an expert** – just caring, open and respectful.

# Positive conversation in practice

**Inclusive conversations don't need to be formal** – they can be everyday interactions, when you pause, notice, and choose to connect.

**Here's some examples:**

- **Regular check-ins** -how someone is doing, not just what they're doing.
- **Open and respectful questions** -“How are things for you at the moment?”
- **Noticing changes in behaviour** –is someone quieter, distracted or withdrawn -checking in with curiosity rather than judgement.
- **Avoiding assumptions** -you don't know what someone's dealing with -allow them to share at their own pace.
- **Exploring support early** -before challenges escalate.
- **Following up** -returning to the conversation shows care, builds trust and reassures the person.
- **Staying curious, not intrusive** -being thoughtful about language, tone and pace –allow the person to decide how much to share.

# Setting the tone for a positive conversation

**Think about your approach. As a starting point:**

- Show care for the person, not just the situation.
- Be clear about why you're checking in.
- Enter the conversation with curiosity, not assumptions.

**Ask open, respectful questions:**

**“How are things  
for you at the  
moment?”**

**“What would  
make work more  
manageable this  
week?”**



# Share observations, not assumptions



A useful observation could be:

**“Maybe I’m wrong, but you seem to have been much quieter lately.”**

**“We were under a lot of pressure last week to meet that deadline, how did you find it?”**



An unhelpful assumption could be:

**“You seem to be really stressed.”**

**“I’m worried that you are not coping with your work.”**



Work together to explore support and adjustments

Some examples:

**“We’ll work together to figure out what would help.”**

**“Would it be helpful to have a chat about what might make things easier?”**

# Create a culture of trust and safety



## **It's normal to talk about what people need**

Include disability inclusive messaging into everyday communications, not just during recruitment or formal reviews.



## **Reinforce that conversations aren't about labels**

They're about understanding what helps individuals thrive at work.

They're about respect, inclusion and understanding that everyone has support needs.



## **It's important to have clear boundaries**

Managers need to be conscious about what is appropriate to ask.

Don't be intrusive or overstep into personal information.

The focus should be on work related impacts and support needs.



**It's important to make clear that sharing information is voluntary and that employees are valued, respected and understood.**



### **Questions should be open and respectful**

- Invite the person to share – without pressure, judgement or assumptions.
- Give the person control over what they share.
- Encourage natural conversation.
- Avoid leading questions or suggesting answers.



### **People may worry about:**

- Being asked overly personal questions.
- Being expected to explain their medical history.
- Having to justify their experience.
- Being judged for needing support.
- Getting into a conversation they can't control.



### **Examples of respectful questions:**

- “How have things been for you recently?”
- “What would help things feel a bit easier just now?”
- “What’s been most challenging or tiring for you lately?”
- “How can I best support you at the moment?”
- “What would make work feel more manageable this week?”

# Inclusive Communication and Accessible Information



**Inclusive Communication** is how you think about communicating with your audience.

Before you communicate – think about how you are doing it:

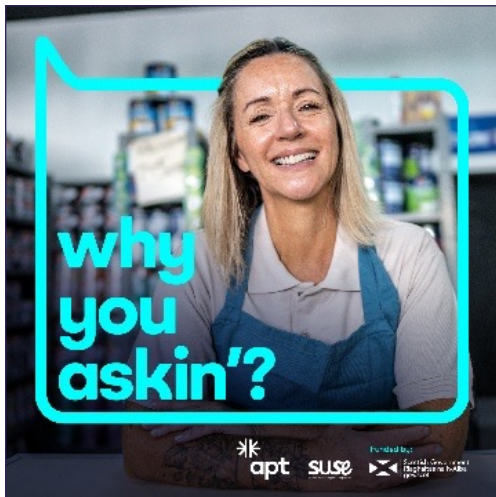
- Will everyone understand what you are trying to put across?
- Is there a better way of doing it to reach everyone, and not exclude people?



**Accessible Information** is how you make sure the information and services that you provide can be used by everyone who need the information (e.g. employees or customers). Accessible information is the tools that you use to make communication accessible and inclusive.

Five things to start with:

1. Can you produce documents and forms in a variety of formats?
2. Are you using plain language and avoiding jargon?
3. Are there people with lived experience in your business that could look at the information and give you feedback?
4. Can you provide communication support for people who need it?
5. Are your sites, venues and online meeting spaces accessible for disabled people?



# Why You Askin'?

**SUSE has developed a range of resources for employers - including the Why You Askin'?' campaign.**

These resources were developed by employers and people with lived experience of disability.

The Why You Askin'?' campaign has been designed to support employers to encourage positive workplace conversations about disability, helping you to gather disability data and create an environment where disabled employees can discuss, for example, what reasonable adjustments can help them to achieve their full potential.

**The resources include** an employer induction and practical materials, such as posters, leaflets and social media graphics, you can use to encourage positive workplace conversations.

You can use these resources, or they can serve as a template to design your own.



This guide is designed to support you on how to have positive conversations, the Why You Askin'? campaign is designed to help you promote that you are a workplace that encourages positive conversation about disability.



### **Further Resources and Guidance.**

Find a link to more information about the Why You Askin'? campaign at the end of this guide.

# Benefits for Employers and Employees

**We know that if employers have more meaningful information and data, you can:**

- Better understand your workforce and therefore better support them. Ultimately improving engagement and retention levels in your organisation.
- Pinpoint barriers in your recruitment process that could be working against your disability inclusion efforts.
- Improve the diversity of your workplace and be able to measure impact and successes.

**And for employees the benefits are clear too:**

- Developing a culture of trust which encourages ongoing open communication leads to greater engagement and higher levels of employee satisfaction.
- Which in turn leads to employees feeling valued, respected and understood.



**Why You Askin'? campaign provides you with messages and materials to encourage open dialogue and positive workplace conversations, so that candidates and employees feel comfortable disclosing disabilities, in particular hidden or invisible disabilities.**

# Make Disclosure Safe, Confidential and Useful

The information in this guide can be used alongside Why You Askin'? or a similar campaign to encourage positive workplace conversations and make employees feel safe about disclosing a disability and their support needs.



Disclosing a disability is voluntary but if an employee does disclose, it's important to make sure they understand what happens with the information they share, who sees it and what will happen next.

This is a positive step - it can lead to reasonable adjustments that help the person be more productive and better workplace support for the employee.

Make sure you have a clear privacy statement – in accessible formats - to build confidence for the employee on how their information will be used.



## Further Resources and Guidance.

See our comprehensive list at the end of this guide.

# It's difficult to get it right first time

## **Sometimes it won't go to plan... don't panic.**

Stay calm, acknowledge and pause. If emotions rise or the conversation becomes uncomfortable, slow things down. Offer a pause or a follow up conversation if needed. Giving time and space can help people feel more in control and willing to re-engage when they are ready.

If someone becomes upset respond with empathy, not urgency to “fix” everything straight away. Listen, and avoid interrupting. Reassure the person that they are not under pressure to share more than they want.

If someone doesn't want to engage you should acknowledge that sharing information is voluntary. Trust and safety will build over time. Keep the door open and continue regular, informal check-ins to maintain the connection.

If you say the wrong thing acknowledge it openly and avoid becoming defensive. Start again with a focus on the person's experience and needs. You don't need to be perfect - being honest and respectful will build your credibility.

If there is disagreement about support or adjustments stay focused on finding a solution. Explore options together and be transparent about what is possible. Make use of the support available to you both (e.g. HR, Occupational Health, Access to Work).



# Support and Follow-Up

## **When an employee discloses they are disabled:**

- Make sure they are properly supported and reassured.
- Ensure they know who is available to support them - HR, line managers, Occupational Health, trade unions or staff networks.
- Reinforce that disclosure is a starting point for ongoing dialogue, not a one off event.
- Communicate regularly and informally.

# Reasonable Adjustments

**Reasonable adjustments** are changes an employer makes to remove or reduce a barrier when someone is disabled. For example:

- Finding a different way to do something.
- Making changes to the workplace if it's economical to do so.
- Changing someone's working arrangements.
- Providing equipment, services or support.



Reasonable adjustments are specific to an individual employee and can be for any disability or long-term health condition.



## Some examples of reasonable adjustments:

- Giving written instructions, manuals and policies in plain language.
- Providing some extra support e.g. having a supervisor go over technical information in a one-to-one meeting at the employee's pace.
- Allowing employees to work from home or in a hybrid working pattern.
- Arranging flexible working hours such allowing later start times, reduced hours or amending shift patterns.
- Providing specialist equipment or software for someone to do their job (Access to Work can help).

# Linking Positive Conversations to Reasonable Adjustments

**Frame conversations** around what helps employees reach their potential, linking directly to why disclosure and positive conversations matter.

Have a range of tools and resources available, such as reasonable adjustment request forms and examples of common adjustments.



Not everyone is aware of what is available as a reasonable adjustment so it's good practice to provide examples – this includes for interviews.

**Note:** Employers have a legal duty to provide reasonable adjustments and are expected to take proactive steps to remove barriers rather than waiting for employees to raise them.

# Finding solutions and moving forward

- When an employee requests a reasonable adjustment it's important to make progress quickly and steadily.
- Agree a suitable timescale for taking action, such as reviewing a reasonable adjustment request and feeding back.
- Communicate regularly to keep the person updated.
- Check in regularly to discuss how the changes are working.
- Don't wait for formal meetings like appraisals or supervisions, informal chats are important and useful.

## Supported Employment

Supported Employment is a comprehensive support service from employment specialists who match disabled people with suitable employers, provide job coaching, and offer ongoing assistance to both employee and employer. There are Supported Employment services in all parts of Scotland. They can help you to identify **reasonable adjustments** to support a new employee.



### Further Resources and Guidance.

See our list at the end of this guide for more information on Supported Employment.

# Including People with Lived Experience

**It's beneficial to get feedback** from people who have lived experience of being disabled when you're thinking about making changes in the workplace. They can help design a workplace campaign and support managers to understand how to have positive workplace conversations.



## **Some simple things you can do:**

- Provide opportunities for people who have lived experience to express their views on a specific topic, for example, a focus group.
- Have a designated person in the management or HR team for people to contact. Allow this to be confidential.
- Ask people with lived experience if they can be testers for a new process before it is introduced and act on what they tell you.
- Promote the fact that you consult with people who have lived experience. Your customers will appreciate this.
- Include people with a range of identities and backgrounds, recognising that experience of disability differs across communities.

# Remember to monitor impact and keep improving

- Track the trends in disclosure and reasonable adjustments – is the business employing more people with a declared disability.
- Get staff feedback and allow opportunities for this to be done confidentially.
- Encourage people to share their experiences if they want to do so, for example, in employee forums or peer support groups.
- Record outcomes such as adjustments being implemented.
- Monitor changes to staff turnover or sick days.

## Celebrate Success

- It's important to celebrate achievements and improvements.



Gather case studies – these can be used in future to train managers and HR staff as real workplace examples.

# Formal Meetings

**This guide encourages positive workplace conversations** that create trust and give people the confidence to express their needs in a safe environment.

Sometimes these conversations will happen in formal situations like supervision sessions or annual appraisals.

That doesn't mean the approach has to be different. The same rules can apply for the conversations in these meetings:

- Open questions that allow a conversation.
- Show respect and care for the person.
- Don't make assumptions.
- If performance issues have to be discussed, frame these in a positive way, that focusses on solutions - not blame.
- Talk about the support the person is getting – how is it working for them?
- Are the adjustments in place working well – what needs to be improved?
- Allow the person to get peer support if they ask for it.
- Allow the employee the space and time to think about the issues.
- If necessary, offer a follow up meeting to allow the employee to think about solutions and put forward ideas.



## Further Guidance and Resources

These resources provide further guidance on inclusive workplace practices.

- **Why You Askin’? Resources:**  
<https://apt.suse.org.uk/work-with-us/apt-campaign/>
- **Business Disability Forum Briefing:**  
Adjustments in Employment  
<https://www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/BDFForum-Briefing-Adjustments-in-employment.pdf>

- **ACAS: Talking about disability –**  
Supporting disabled people at work  
<https://www.acas.org.uk/supporting-disabled-people>
- **CIPD – People manager guide: developing people with a disability or health condition**  
<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/manager-guidance-recruiting-managing-people-with-disability-or-health-condition/>
- **Health and Safety Executive:**  
Principles to support disabled workers  
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/disability/best-practice/workplace-culture.htm>
- **Example Privacy Statements in an Inclusive Format**  
<https://apt.suse.org.uk/resources/>

## To promote inclusion in the workplace SUSE provides training on:

- General disability awareness.
- Sensory awareness (people who are blind or deaf or have an impairment).
- Neurodiversity awareness.
- Reasonable adjustments and the recruitment process.
- Accessible communication.  
<https://www.suse.org.uk/what-we-do/inclusive-workplace-training>

# Apt Making It Work – Employer Guides

- Employer's Guide to **Equitable Workplace Induction and In-Work Support**.
- Employer's Guide to **Workplace Digital Accessibility**.
- Employer's Guide to **Improving Workplace Consultation**.  
<https://apt.suse.org.uk/resources/>

## General Resources

- **Fair Work** - The Scottish Government's Fair Work policy aims to improve the working lives of people in Scotland and boost economic growth. It outlines what employers can do to build fairer working practices into their organisations.  
<https://www.mygov.scot/browse/business/fair-work>
- **Good Practice Guides** – Top Tips for employers on topics such as writing inclusive job adverts, hosting accessible online events, and making digital recruitment fair.  
<https://apt.suse.org.uk/resources>
- **Local Employability Partnerships** - A network of partners who deliver services for unemployed people and employers. They can link employers to local organisations who have suitable candidates for job vacancies.  
<https://www.employabilityinscotland.com/local-employability-services>



You can access further support from SUSE by going to their website

<https://www.suse.org.uk>



If you need support please  
contact SUSE for assistance.

[www.suse.org.uk](http://www.suse.org.uk)

