Understanding the New Disability Confident Levels and Criteria

A practical guide to what each level means, what employers need to do and how to progress

What is changing?

Disability Confident is changing to provide a clearer and more supportive framework for employers to build confidence, improve disability inclusion and demonstrate progress over time.

The reformed scheme reflects what employers, disabled people and stakeholders told us through extensive engagement and research. They want a scheme that provides clearer expectations for employers and gives greater confidence in what Disability Confident membership represents.

The new framework has been designed to recognise that employers are on different journeys. Some organisations may be taking their first steps towards becoming more disability inclusive, while others may already have well-established approaches and wish to demonstrate leadership across the sector.

To support this, the scheme remains built around three levels:

Level 1 – Foundation (Respond)

- Building confidence and putting key approaches in place

Level 2 – Practitioner (Make it Routine)

- Embedding disability inclusion within everyday organisational practices.

Level 3 – Champion (Improve and Influence)

- Driving continuous improvement and supporting positive change both within and beyond the organisation.

At every level employers work through the same three core themes:

- Recruitment and Onboarding
- In-Work Support
- Absence and Return to Work

What changes between levels is not the focus of activity, but the maturity, consistency and impact of an employer's approach.

The framework recognises that employers will start from different positions, while setting clear expectations for continuous improvement and progression. Employers are supported to build on what they already do, identify

opportunities for improvement and take practical steps towards creating more inclusive workplaces.

Alongside the core framework, employers can choose to participate in Innovation Zones. Further information and examples are provided later in this document.

How the framework works for smaller employers

Smaller employers may have fewer opportunities to recruit or support disabled people, make workplace adjustments or manage periods of sickness absence. The framework recognises that employers' experience of these situations will vary.

The Disability Confident criteria recognises both experience and preparedness. Employers can demonstrate progress not only through what they have done, but through having clear approaches, confident managers and suitable plans in place to respond effectively when situations arise.

This document explains the expectations associated with each level and provides an overview of how employers can progress through the reformed Disability Confident scheme.

Overview of core criteria and progression within the scheme



Level 1 – We respond > Level 2 – We make it routine > Level 3 – We improve and influence.

Area	Level 1 – Foundation	Level 2 – Practitioner	3 – Champion
Overall Focus	Putting the basics in place and removing barriers as they arise.	Making inclusive practice routine and reliable, not dependent on a few individuals.	Leading by example, with inclusion shaping decisions and shared beyond the organisation.
Recruitment and Onboarding	Recruitment is easy to access, with support offered when needed and issues sorted out as they come up.	Inclusive recruitment is applied consistently across roles and teams, so candidates know what to expect and have a consistent experience.	Recruitment is designed to work for everyone and improved over time using regular feedback from managers and lived experience.
In-Work Support	Support is agreed through conversations, with adjustments made as needed.	Support is planned, recorded and reviewed so it is consistent and predictable over time.	Employees help inform how support works, improving inclusion for others through feedback and learning.
Absence and Return to Work	People are supported to stay in work, and return where possible, with wellbeing and adjustments discussed openly.	Employers learn from key moments such as absence and use this to improve retention following a return to work.	Employers routinely use feedback and lived experience to identify patterns, remove barriers and improve retention outcomes for disabled employees.

Progressing through the scheme – The reformed Disability Confident scheme is designed to encourage improvement over time.

Employers are not expected to move immediately between levels. Instead, organisations can use each level to build confidence, strengthen their approach and develop their capability for disability inclusion.

As employers develop and are ready to meet the next level's requirements, they may progress to the next stage of the scheme. Guidance, tools and support will be available throughout the Disability Confident Journey.

The Core Criteria – detailed

Foundation Level 1 – At Level 1, employers begin their disability inclusion journey by putting practical foundations in place, removing barriers and building confidence to support disabled people effectively. This level focuses on preparedness and capability, ensuring employers can respond appropriately when recruitment, workplace support or health-related situations arise.

Recruitment and Onboarding	• Recruitment is easy to access, with support offered when needed and barriers addressed once identified, including flexibility in how applications, assessments or work patterns operate where this would remove barriers. • Managers understand their role in supporting disabled applicants fairly and know where to go for advice when unsure. • Physical spaces, digital systems and communications are adjusted when accessibility issues are identified.
In-Work Support	• Support and workplace adjustments are agreed through conversation and tailored to individual needs and strengths, including changes to how work is organised where this would help someone stay well and perform. • Employers act when they know, or reasonably ought to know, that someone may need support to remove or reduce barriers. • Employees are offered conversations to understand what works for them, with adjustments changed as needs change. • Issues raised by employees are listened to and acted on.
Absence and Return to Work	• Employers take steps, including making reasonable adjustments/workplace adjustments, to support disabled employees to stay in work before health issues escalated, and return where possible following an absence. • Wellbeing and inclusion are part of open, ongoing conversations, including during and after a period of absence. • Career development and progression routes are considered so disabled people are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Practitioner Level 2 – At Level 2, employers move to consistent action, embedding disability inclusion into the way their organisation works. This may look different depending on the size and structure of the employer. For some organisations this will involve formal processes and systems, while for others it may be demonstrated through consistent approaches, shared understanding and clear responsibilities that do not depend on any one individual.

Recruitment and Onboarding	• Recruitment and onboarding practices are applied consistently whenever recruitment takes place and reviewed to identify and remove barriers. • Workplace adjustments are considered as part of normal recruitment activity and offered consistently. Roles are reviewed before being advertised to identify where flexibility in hours, location or tasks would remove unnecessary barriers. • Everyone involved in recruitment understands what inclusive practice means in their role. • Accessibility is embedded routinely across recruitment platforms, assessment methods and communication.

In-Work Support	• Workplace adjustments and support plans are agreed, noted and reviewed so those who need to, know what support is in place. • Support arrangements and agreed changes to role design or workload do not depend on individual managers and continue if roles or managers change. • Adjustment requests are responded to in a timely way, with clear communication and interim support where needed. • Support and adjustments are part of routine conversations about wellbeing and performance. • Managers are supported to have confident, timely conversations about disability, health, flexibility and adjustments, and know when and how to act without unnecessary delay. • Development and progression opportunities are inclusive and tailored to the aspirations of individuals.
Absence and Return to Work	• Employers reflect on what helps disabled employees stay, progress and succeed within the organisation, using learning and feedback to improve how support is provided. • Flexible working as an adjustment, adjusted duties or job carving/crafting opportunities are considered as part of supporting a phased return or retaining an individual. • Feedback is gathered at key moments including emerging health or workload concerns, sickness absence and return to work and used to improve how things are done.

Champion Level 3 – At Level 3, employers show sustained leadership and demonstrate a disability inclusive culture through the decisions they make, the experiences of their employees and the influence they have within and beyond their organisation. Employers may demonstrate leadership in different ways depending on their size and circumstances, but all Level 3 employers use learning and lived experience to drive continuous improvement.

Recruitment and Onboarding	• Recruitment is designed to work for everyone, with barriers removed across the whole candidate journey. • Recruitment approaches and role design are changed and improved using feedback from managers and lived experience. • Adjustments are openly discussed and proactively considered (where appropriate) at attraction, application, recruitment and onboarding. • Employees and applicants with lived experience can help inform how recruitment and onboarding approaches are designed, reviewed and improved.
In-Work Support	• Employees actively inform how support is provided, influencing policies, practices and everyday decisions. • Feedback and lived experience are actively gathered and used to improve the support offer for everyone. • Peer support and other tailored approaches are used to build inclusion and confidence from day one. • Support approaches for individuals and the design of roles and workloads are reviewed and improved over time to reflect what employees say works best.

Absence and Return to Work	• Employers use feedback and lived experience insight to improve retention, progression and job satisfaction. • Learning from absence and return to work leads to changes in roles or ways of working across the whole organisation, not just individual support. • Employees continue to help inform recruitment, development and employment practices. • Employers share learning, collaborate with others and help influence positive change beyond their organisation through networks, partnerships, peer support, supply chains or wider engagement opportunities.

Remember, Champion organisations are not defined by size, but by their commitment to continuous and sustained improvement, learning and sharing good practice.

Promoting innovation and creativity

Innovation Zones are optional. They give employers the chance to try small improvements that build on the core criteria.

They are not requirements, should not add burden, and do not replace meeting the core criteria.

Employers should focus on one or two changes that make a real difference, rather than lots of activity. For smaller employers, innovation may be as simple as trying one new approach and seeing whether it works.

Innovation should:

- Build on the core criteria, not duplicate them.
- Focus on addressing real barriers or improving consistency
- Be realistic for the size of your organisation.
- Not rely on extra or unpaid work from employees.

The examples below are illustrative only. Employers may choose approaches that best suit their organisation and workforce.

Innovation Zone – Level 1 – Test small changes that remove barriers

This goes beyond responding to individual issues by testing a different way of working.

At Level 1, Innovation focuses on safe, low-risk experimentation linked to real barriers that have already been identified.

Example approaches may include:

- Use outside support to solve a known challenge – Talk to government backed, local or specialist organisations to find out about other ways you could address a known access or inclusion challenge.
- Trial a small change to an existing process – Test a simple adjustment to recruitment, onboarding or in-work support to see whether it improves access or experience.

Innovation Zone – Level 2 – Improve Consistency and Reliability

This goes beyond having consistent practice by deliberately reducing variation and learning what works best.

At Level 2, innovation focuses on making sure things are done in a consistent way whoever the manager is.

Example approaches may include:

- Make responses more consistent – try simple tools or prompts (for example, a checklist or short guide) to help managers respond in a similar way to recruitment, support requests or absence.
- Refine systems learning from practice – Use insights from key moments (e.g. adjustments, sickness

absence and return to work) to test improvements that strengthen consistency across teams.

Innovation Zone – Level 3 – Scale, Impact and Influencing Others

This goes beyond internal improvement by influencing practice beyond your organisation.

At Level 3, innovation focuses on scaling what works and influencing wider practice using evidence and learning.

Example approaches may include:

- Scale approaches that improve outcomes – Expand practices that have clearly improved outcomes in retention, progression, access or experience across the organisation.
- Share what works – Share approaches, tools or learning that have clearly improved outcomes, so other employers can use them.

What happens next?

The reforms outlined in this document will be introduced gradually. Existing Disability Confident members will continue to receive information about transition arrangements and available support.

Employers do not need to make immediate changes as a result of this publication. Further guidance, resources and support materials will be published before implementation.