

Model of good practice:

Creating appearance-inclusive workplaces for people with a visible difference

What is visible difference?

A 'visible difference' is any condition, injury or side-effect of medical treatment which changes or affects the way someone looks. It can include both acquired appearance differences and those present from birth. Visible difference affects appearance, but sometimes it affects the person in other ways too. For example, some facial differences can affect how someone speaks and hears and their facial expressions. Living with a visible difference can sometimes be psychologically difficult. **The reactions, attitudes and bias of other people towards someone who looks different can be disabling.**

Purpose and scope of this guide

This guide gives practical suggestions about how employers in Britain can ensure people with visible differences are not disadvantaged as at June 2023.

Some people with more severe, long-term visible differences may have rights as disabled people. Employers must not discriminate against them and may need to make reasonable adjustments. The law might sometimes require employers to take different steps and **this guide is not comprehensive**. Data protection is beyond the scope of this note too but do consider any data protection implications of any measures taken. **Always take HR and legal advice on individual circumstances.**

Guiding principles

- ❖ Be proactive in planning how to be inclusive.
- ❖ Reduce the opportunities for people to be judged on how they look.
- ❖ Don't make assumptions. Not everyone with a visible difference feels the same way.
- ❖ If talking about someone's visible difference, use language that the individual prefers.

Suggestion 1: Audit your policies, procedures and branding

- Make sure staff know the rules about how people can expect to be treated at work (no bullying or harassment by colleagues or others) and their entitlements when sick.
- Make sure your branding materials reflect your company's values and diversity. Consider including a brief diversity commitment in job adverts.

Suggestion 2: Introduce staff training on appearance and/or visible difference equality

- Train staff about equality, including disfigurement. See [here](#) for some resources.

Suggestion 3: Review job adverts and forms

- Do not mention appearance (e.g., 'smiley' or 'well-presented') in job adverts.
- Health-related questions are usually not allowed before offering a job (click [here](#) for more info). If needed and permitted, phrase questions carefully, avoid unnecessary categories and explain how the information will be used.

Suggestion 4: Plan inclusive recruitment processes

- Train interviewers about appearance bias. Plan interview questions to reduce judgments (suggestions [here](#)). Have two or more interviewers to get a range of views.
- It usually isn't OK to request photos with job applications (see [here](#)). But if a candidate [chooses](#) to send a photo of their visible difference before a visual interview, ask for their consent to show this to the interviewer(s) first. This might prevent awkward reactions.
- Be wary of using artificial intelligence to sift applications during recruitment.
- Where possible, avoid videoing applicants during recruitment, as many people with a visible difference find this difficult. Allow a photo to be brought from home if needed.

Suggestion 5: Consider support measures

- Some employers tell all staff that they can request support measures at work. This can help people for lots of reasons but not everyone will feel able to ask.

Employers have to balance offering support with respecting the individual's privacy. If the employee doesn't request support and doesn't mention their visible difference to you, don't raise it with them individually *unless* you become aware of a workplace 'trigger' which suggests likely disadvantage. This might include noticing awkwardness with colleagues, or the employee struggling with an aspect of the job where appearance is highlighted. Some employers may consult an Occupational Health service about possible adjustments too.

- Example adjustments (subject to context and individual needs / preferences) include:
 - Adjustments to hours, location (e.g. working from home), uniform or duties.
 - Allowing the person to use "audio" only on Teams calls and no website photo.
 - Somewhere quiet to apply medication/dressings and a locker to store them.
 - A buddy for difficult days.
 - Time off for medical appointments and therapy.
 - Changing interview format.
 - Allowing meeting contributions in writing instead.
 - Flexibility on seating arrangements.
 - The option (at the employee's request) to explain one's condition to colleagues during an information session.

- If a colleague is struggling to develop an effective working relationship with someone who looks different, mentor them in private. Formal HR processes may be needed for inappropriate behaviour.

Suggestion 6: Help with return-to-work plans

- If the employee is due to return to work after acquiring a visible difference, talk about what, if anything, they would like you to say to colleagues about their return. Plan an approach together.