



**empower**

**ACCESSIBLE**

**APPRENTICESHIPS**



SPECIALISTERNE



# CONTENTS

<b>About</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Empower Partners</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>What happens to my benefits?</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>What support can I get?</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>What to expect on day one?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>What happens after I start?</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Case studies</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>For more information</b>	<b>15</b>



# ABOUT

Accessible Apprenticeships is a guide created to support individuals with diverse abilities and long-term health conditions in successfully pursuing apprenticeships.

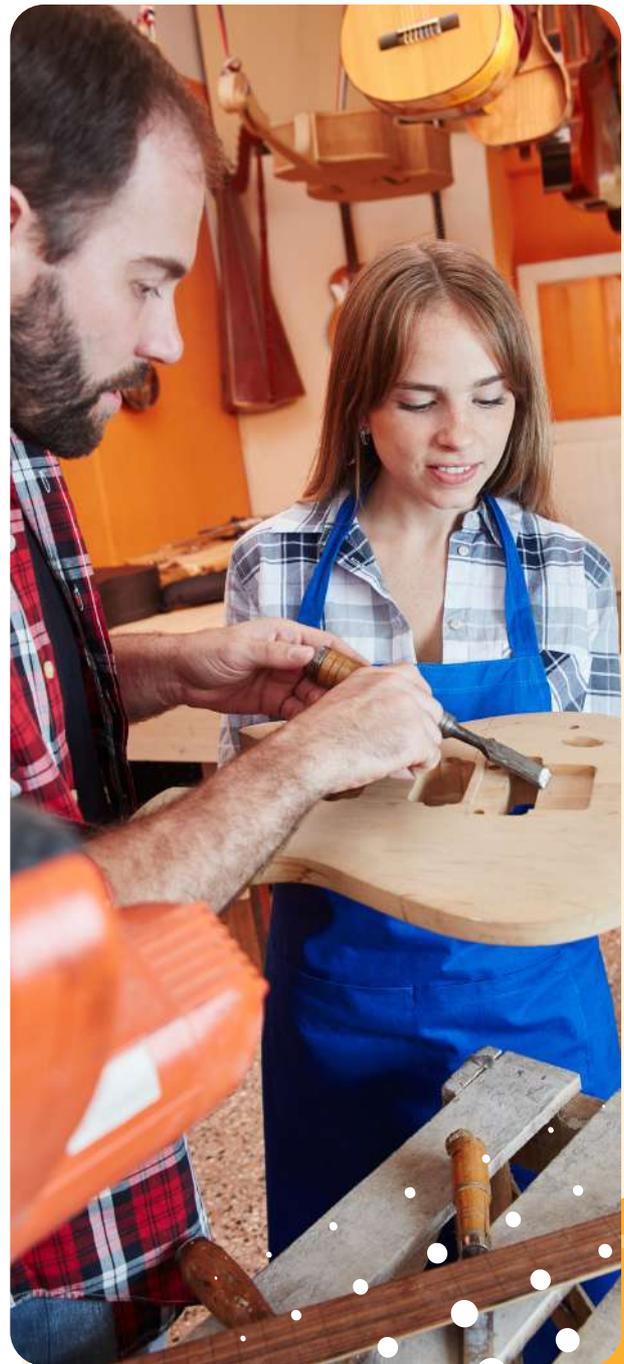
## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Accessible Apprenticeships is a resource designed for anyone seeking information on starting an apprenticeship in Northern Ireland. This guide provides information on discovering apprenticeship opportunities and accessing personalised support to initiate and gain valuable experience throughout your apprenticeship journey.

The guide includes personal stories from disabled apprentices, sharing their unique experiences and the barriers they've overcome. In addition to explaining the support that they accessed, these apprentices highlight the importance of their own creativity, perseverance, and motivation.

The guide also provides a valuable resources section, with a list of websites, and organisations to access more information.

Starting an apprenticeship is a fantastic way to earn money, learn new skills, get qualifications, and build your career. This guide is here to make things easier for you, so you can make the best choices and get any support you need.



# EMPOWER PARTNERS



## Disability Action: For Change and Empowerment

Disability Action, empowering individuals in Northern Ireland, advocates for rights and policy changes across various disabilities, representing 100 member groups. With a focus on pan-disability, they offer services such as Info & Advice, Advocacy, Training, Job Support, Capacity Building, Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Accessibility initiatives. Serving the 1 in 5 people with disabilities, Disability Action makes a positive impact on individuals and the community, inviting others to join their empowering journey.

Contact: **028 9029 7880** or [empower@disabilityaction.org](mailto:empower@disabilityaction.org)



## Usel: Championing Ability

Usel, Northern Ireland's largest provider of disability employment support, helps over 1,000 individuals into employment every year. Under the guidance of the Department for Communities, Usel delivers a range of pre-employment programmes to empower individuals with the confidence and skills needed to secure their perfect job with the right employer. Usel covers all 11 council areas and has a partner network of 100+ employers across various industries.

Contact: **028 9035 6600** or [empower@usel.co.uk](mailto:empower@usel.co.uk)



## Specialisterne NI: Passion for details

Specialisterne NI is a consultancy specialising in recruiting and supporting talented individuals with autism, Aspergers, or communication differences in the workplace. They assist employers in recruiting and retaining individuals with communication differences, contributing to the global goal of creating one million jobs for autistic people as part of the Specialist People Foundation.

Contact: **028 9073 9601** or [sharond@specialisterne.com](mailto:sharond@specialisterne.com)

# INTRODUCTION

An apprenticeship is a real job where you get paid and gain knowledge and valuable experience. Apprenticeship opportunities are available for a wide range of job roles across different industries. Most apprenticeships can be adapted to your needs, and there's help available to support you throughout your learning and work journey.

## ACCESSIBLE APPRENTICESHIPS

Traditionally, apprenticeships focused on specific trades like crafts, engineering, and building. However, modern apprenticeship programmes cover a wider range of jobs, offering various flexible entry paths. Colleges, universities, and training providers are there to support your training journey. At the same time, outdated perceptions of apprenticeships are evolving.

Apprenticeships are now more inclusive, welcoming individuals with diverse abilities and long-term health conditions. Employers are recognising the importance of providing everyone an equal chance, realising that gives them access to a wider talent pool.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), employers and apprenticeship Training Providers have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for disabled individuals.

This means offering additional support during work and training.



The government's Access to Work scheme can provide grants to pay for any specialist equipment and support costs in the workplace. While, the **Workable NI** programme can provide ongoing support in work from a disability employment specialist.

Now, considering these factors, apprenticeships serve as a direct and advantageous pathway for disabled individuals to secure skilled jobs and build a fulfilling career.

## WHAT ARE APPRENTICESHIPS?

Apprenticeships offer individuals aged 16+ an opportunity to gain practical training while working in a real job and studying at the same time. As an apprentice, you will:

- earn while you learn
- work alongside experienced staff
- receive off the job training specific to your apprenticeship
- gain qualifications

## WHO CAN DO AN APPRENTICESHIP?

Anyone aged 16 or over, and not in full-time education can apply for an apprenticeship. Apprenticeship opportunities should be accessible to everyone, including individuals with a disability who are now considering an apprenticeship several years after leaving school.



## HOW MUCH DO YOU GET PAID?

Your employer will pay you just as they would any other employee. The National Minimum Wage (NMW) is a minimum amount that workers in the UK are entitled to be paid.



## **CAN I DO AN APPRENTICESHIP PART TIME?**

Part-time apprenticeships should be an option across all types of apprenticeships, providing extra flexibility, especially for candidates with a disability. It's worth directly asking employers about this, as they might not always be aware that part-time is a choice. If a part-time schedule is agreed upon, the apprenticeship duration will be extended to ensure enough time for successful complete the training. Make sure you, your employer, and the training provider all agree on the extended duration and keep records of the agreed average weekly hours.



## **HOW DO I GET CAREERS ADVICE?**

Guidance on careers should cover all the opportunities in school, college, university, apprenticeships, and jobs with training. This advice should be unbiased and focused on promoting your 'best interests.'

**For careers guidance, advice or support you can contact the NIDirect Careers Service for help by phoning 0300 200 7820, by email or webchat at [www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/careerswhole](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/careerswhole)**

# WHAT HAPPENS TO MY BENEFITS?

Throughout your apprenticeship, you should continue receiving your Personal Independence Payment (PIP). The earnings from your apprenticeship may impact means-tested benefits, but if your income remains low, you might still qualify for support like Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, or Council Tax Reduction—especially if you're earning the apprenticeship minimum wage.

## PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT (PIP)

For individuals aged 16 to 64, PIP has replaced Disability Living Allowance. PIP is a benefit independent of means testing, designed for those requiring assistance in daily activities or facing challenges in mobility. It is always provided in addition to other benefits.

There are no restrictions on the number of hours you can work each week under Universal Credit. As you earn more, your Universal Credit payment will decrease gradually, ensuring you won't lose all benefits at once, especially if you're an apprentice with a low income. The amount you receive depends on your personal circumstances, and Universal Credit is disbursed monthly, covering any entitled support for housing costs.

## UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Universal Credit introduced across the UK to replace means-tested benefits for working-age individuals, Universal Credit is a new means-tested benefit.

For additional details: for more information on potential benefits for disabled apprentices you can also reach out to local advice agencies like the **Citizens Advice Bureau**.



# WHAT SUPPORT CAN I GET?

Individuals with a disability can access all kinds of apprenticeships with support available for learning and working. Legal protection against discrimination is in place, and funding is available to assist with additional disability-related costs.

## GETTING SUPPORT

If you have a disability, you may require additional support to successfully complete your apprenticeship. The legal definition of disability is broad, covering specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, medical conditions, visual or hearing impairments, and mental health conditions such as depression. You don't have to embrace the term 'disability' as a label, but it can serve as a gateway to getting the support you need. Remember, anyone can ask for help. Your apprenticeship training provider should take the lead in assisting you. You may also need to have a discussion with your employer to figure out the best way to support you in the workplace.



## HOW DO I GET SUPPORT?

In Northern Ireland, many apprenticeship training providers have dedicated staff, often known as Learning Support or Disability Advisers, to assist disabled apprentices. You can have a confidential discussion with them about your specific needs.

Support may include:

- specialist equipment, such as a voice-activated computer
- sign-language interpreters
- digital recorder for keeping notes
- extra tutorial help
- changing the height of desks
- providing handouts on different colour paper, or in a larger font
- allowing you extra time to complete any assessments or tests.

**Under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), these institutions are obligated to make reasonable adjustments, ensuring they not only refrain from discrimination during recruitment but also provide necessary support and accommodations for your learning.**

# WHAT TO EXPECT ON DAY ONE?



Feeling a bit nervous about your first day on an apprenticeship is totally normal—even seasoned professionals get the jitters. Don't stress; starting an apprenticeship is a positive and exciting move, and there's a supportive network to guide you.

During your induction, the training provider will outline the skills you'll acquire and provide insights into your daily tasks. Making a good first impression is key, so gather information about your employer beforehand, dress appropriately (ask the training provider for advice), and be punctual and polite. Remember, as an apprentice, you're not expected to be an expert from the get-go. Relax, show your eagerness to learn, and take your time to understand the apprenticeship. Don't hesitate to ask questions—it's all part of the process.

## SHOULD I DISCLOSE MY DISABILITY?

If you haven't shared this information, discuss necessary support with your training provider or HR. Expect questions if your disability is visible; positive inquiries about needed support are beneficial. Be aware that occasional personal questions may arise, touching on physical aspects or the onset of your disability. People might overlook less apparent factors like fluctuating health. Maintaining a relaxed demeanor is key to making others feel comfortable around you. If uncomfortable, talk to your line manager or the learner support coordinator. Remember, the Disability Discrimination Act protects you from offensive comments.



# WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I START?

Embarking on an apprenticeship is thrilling, yet it's normal to feel a bit nervous. Take the time to ease into your new routine. If you encounter any challenges related to your disability, keep in mind that there are plenty of people available to assist you.

## WHAT IF MY SUPPORT IS STILL PENDING?

Occasionally, it may take some time to arrange the necessary support. Adjusting to interpreters or notetakers, familiarising yourself with new equipment, or waiting for training styles to adapt might take a few weeks. Patience is key as you navigate this initial phase. Make sure to keep the communication lines open with your training provider. Update them on your progress and inform them promptly of any challenges, especially if you find yourself falling behind in your training or work. Addressing issues early can prevent them from becoming major problems.



## WHAT IS THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT?

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), referenced throughout this guide, is aimed to protect individuals with disabilities in the UK. Applied to apprenticeships, it prohibited discrimination in application, training, and employment. The DDA mandated reasonable adjustments to ensure no disadvantages for individuals with disabilities. It also provided protection against harassment and victimisation, fostering an inclusive apprenticeship environment.

If you believe you've experienced discrimination, feel free to reach out to the Equality Advisory Support Service (EASS) for information and advice.

**Contact the Disability Action for advice on informal resolution methods and guidance on making a complaint if needed.**

**Call: 028 9029 7880**

**Email: [empower@disabilityaction.org](mailto:empower@disabilityaction.org)**

# CASE STUDY 1



At the beginning of his programme, Stephen's\* Employment Officer (EO) learned that his aim was to find an employer to enable his participation in an Apprenticeship.

Stephen was supported to engage with and identify a willing employer. Eventually, an employer was identified, and he was offered employment with IceMOS as an Apprentice Technician.

Prior to his start date, he completed a detailed Job Analysis with his EO to identify his needs within his new work environment. Stephen has autism that presents as sensory sensitivity and difficulty with social interaction. The reasonable adjustments he required had no associated cost and included establishing a trusted colleague he could report to with work-related queries, and a basic level of autism awareness among his colleagues.

Stephen was provided further support from his EO to discuss and address issues within his employment and training environment, liaising with his tutors and manager to resolve issues promptly.



Stephen's Manager at IceMOS has said the following of Stephen:

'He has a keen interest in learning and developing skills, attention to detail, and ability to focus. He shows good initiative as well as a good attitude. He shows the ability to work independently as well as part of the team and has exceptional communication skills.'

On his contribution to business operations, his Manager said:

'Stephen has provided excellent support to our Technicians/Engineers in the areas of equipment maintenance and repair... Stephen has surprised us with his level of IT skills: installation, upgrades, and repairs; providing great support and working closely with our team. His work is always of a high standard, with perfect timekeeping. Stephen is extremely beneficial to IceMOS.'

On the benefit of apprenticeships, his Manager said:

'IceMOS strongly believes that apprenticeships are valuable to both the employer and the student.'

Stephen said he was 'loving his job' and extremely grateful for the support he received from Disability Action.

Feedback from his Training Provider has been very encouraging too, saying 'his performance in training has been excellent, achieving top of his class in exams.'

*\*Participant's name has been changed throughout*

## CASE STUDY 2



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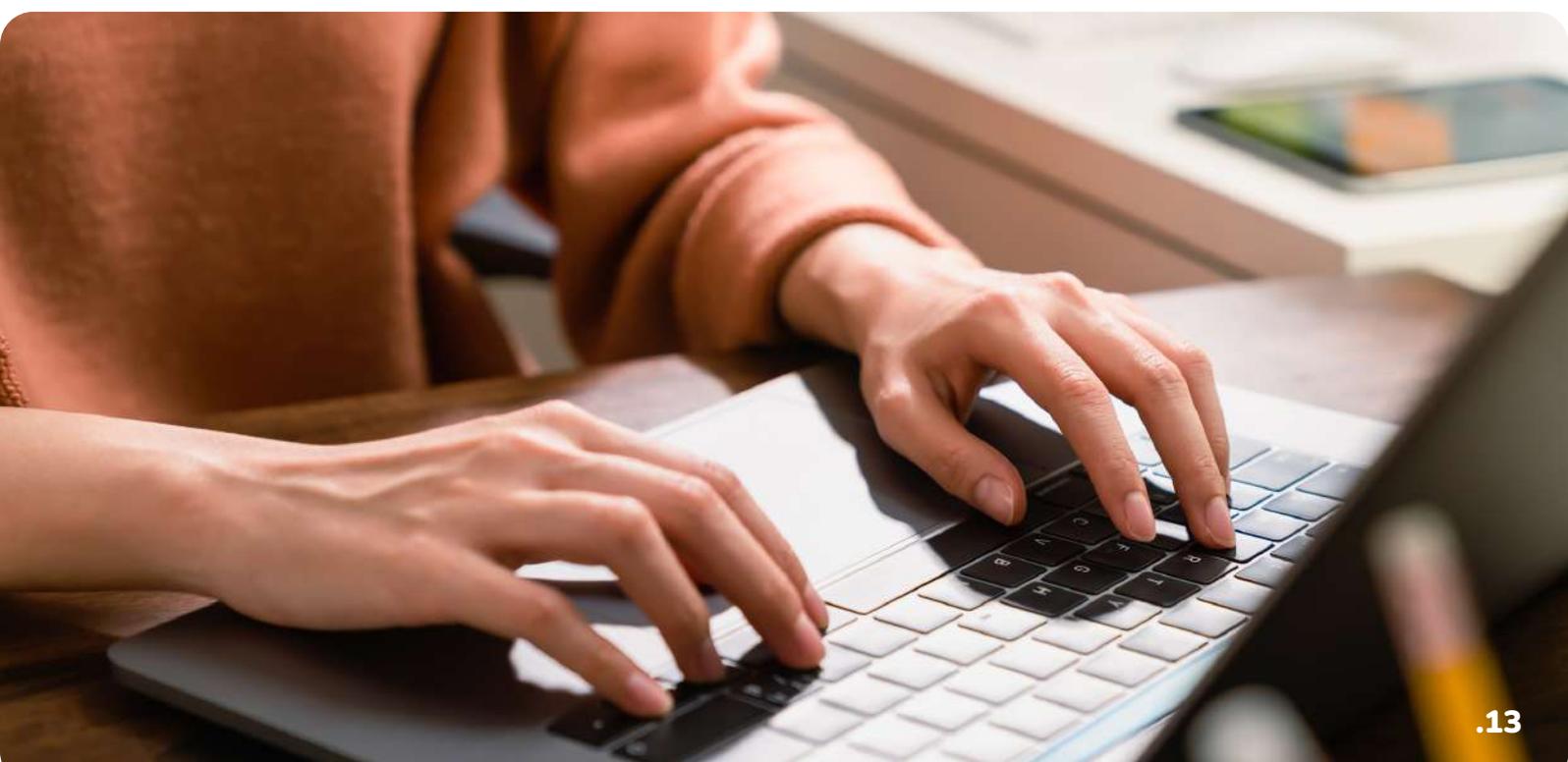


Simon contacted Specialisterne after doing some independent research into organisations that focus on employability and career support for neurodivergent individuals. At the time Simon had been out of employment for around 6 months after being in a job they hadn't enjoyed and hadn't wanted to pursue long term. Simon wanted to pursue a career in IT or Tech and had no formal qualifications or experience. Job searching felt overwhelming as it involved a change in career.

At Specialisterne Simon took time to identify career goals, and with his Specialisterne Neurodiversity Consultant developed SMART goals to achieve these. Simon enrolled on the IBM SkillsBuild programme at Specialisterne which is a self-directed learning platform, where Simon completed a cybersecurity certification.

As Simon enjoyed this area of study, Simon decided to study further while working, and therefore chose an apprenticeship as the next step. Having considered different options with his Specialisterne Consultant, Simon chose an apprenticeship programme in the public sector. After 2 mock interview sessions with Specialisterne, Simon secured the role!

Simon has the opportunity to continue developing Digital Credentials on the IBM Skills build platform, and can access support from a Specialisterne Neurodiversity Consultant while in the apprenticeship role, to help ensure that it is a success



## CASE STUDY 3



The participant contacted their local ESO, Christine, for support via their Occupational Therapist following an information session in a local Mental Health Resource Centre. The participant had been out of employment for almost a year due to a poor episode of mental health. The participant felt with the right understanding, support and guidance, that they wanted to find a path back employment with support.

Having already availed of Mental Health services through the Trust, the ESO was able to identify barriers to employment such as low confidence and self-esteem and arrange 1-1 support through USEL's Health and Wellbeing service. The participant was able to set some short-term goals which allowed them to improve focus and confidence and progress towards a return to employment.

ESO, Christine, was able to support with updating the participants CV and the job application process. EEO, Maggie, had an established relationship with a local employer offering short term 4 week cleaning contracts and together, we assisted the participant to move into this role.

This allowed the Participant to gently move back into employment without pressure to commit. After completing the short contract, the participant felt a return of confidence and was ready to apply for a more permanent position.

Within a few weeks we had identified a part-time permanent position with Mercury Cleaning Services and the participant successfully completed an interview and was offered the position in a local Shopping centre. The participant has been in employment for several months and is now supported by Usel's **Workable NI** team.

The participant said "I am so happy that I found Usel. There was not just one, but a whole team of people on the Empower project who were prepared to help me find my way again. I feel like I have had a new lease of life by being able to get back to work and I know there are people willing to help me overcome any obstacles if I have a bad day."



# FOR MORE INFORMATION

## **Access to Work**

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/access-to-work)

## **Apprenticeships**

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/apprenticeships](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/apprenticeships)

## **Careers Northern Ireland**

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/careers](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/careers)

## **Citizens Advice**

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

## **Disability Action**

[www.disabilityaction.org](http://www.disabilityaction.org)

## **Empower Programme**

[www.disabilityaction.org](http://www.disabilityaction.org)

[www.usel.co.uk](http://www.usel.co.uk)

[www.specialisterneni.com](http://www.specialisterneni.com)

## **Specialisterne NI**

[www.specialisterneni.com](http://www.specialisterneni.com)

## **Usel**

[www.usel.co.uk](http://www.usel.co.uk)

## **Workable NI**

[www.disabilityaction.org](http://www.disabilityaction.org)

[www.usel.co.uk](http://www.usel.co.uk)

[www.nidirect.gov.uk/workable-ni](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/workable-ni)

## **Disability Action**

Portside Business Park  
189 Airport Road West  
Belfast

BT3 9ED

**028 9029 7880**

Contacts:

**Karen Smyth**

**Marty McLoughlin**

## **Specialisterne NI**

Skainos, 239 Newtownards Road  
Belfast

BT4 1AF

**028 9073 9601**

Contacts:

**Sharon Didrichsen**

**Elaine Stephens**

## **Usel**

182-188 Cambrai Street  
Belfast

BT13 3JH

**028 9035 6600**

Contacts:

**David Cowan**

**Phil McFall**



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# ACCESSIBLE APPRENTICESHIPS

