

A Guide to creating Inclusive Workspaces



Inclusive
Employers

“We all experience the same workspaces differently”

- Design Council UK

INTRODUCTION

An inclusive working environment is one that allows everyone to perform to their full potential regardless of difference. In the UK, the commercial value of diversity and inclusion is recognised and as a consequence, many employers have put in place policies and practices aimed at creating a more inclusive culture.

However, one element that is sometimes overlooked is the contribution the physical workspace can make towards building a feeling of inclusion within an organisation. This document seeks to provide best practice guidance on the steps you can take to design inclusive spaces in your working environment. In doing so, it assumes that you are already compliant with your legal requirements with regard to the accessibility and use of buildings.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY AN INCLUSIVE WORKSPACE?

An inclusive workspace is a working environment that is designed in such a way as to take account of the individual needs of those that work in there. This includes providing the opportunity for people to work flexibly within (or outside of) the space and making adjustments for those with different needs. In optimising the workspace for employees, you maximise the productivity and contribution of each individual who uses it.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The scope of any workspace transformation will be limited by the budget available to you and the extent of the change you wish to undertake and so with this in mind and for ease of use, this document has been divided into sections that can be referenced and applied individually.



GETTING STARTED

Successfully designed inclusive spaces put those that will use it at the heart of the design process. It is recommended therefore, that at the outset you consider how best you can get the employees who work /will work in the space involved:



DO

- Get to know the impacted group, including their demographics and needs.
- Get representatives involved from your employee network groups, trade unions or other consultative bodies.
- Where appropriate groups are not in place, create a special project team that includes representatives from the affected population for this purpose.
- Representatives should collect, share and present the views of those that use the space in order to shape the design process.
- Remember that the new environment should be welcoming and inclusive for all.
- Review the existing work environment and the factors that impact people.

DESIGNING YOUR SPACE – HIGH LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Be proactive - undertake a workspace preference questionnaire or “comfort-at-work” survey, asking for details of required adjustments.

Flexible and remote working - consider if you can offer flexible or remote working to your employees. Flexible and remote working is increasingly popular and can be particularly beneficial for employees with caring responsibilities or with health issues. It also reduces the number of desks required in the office.

Create unique spaces - consider creating discrete communal spaces for different purposes. Create spaces that encourage collaboration and idea sharing or quiet areas where people can go if they need to concentrate. Breakout areas, informal meeting areas and creative spaces for brainstorming and collaboration can all help to improve well-being in the office. Employees benefit from working in different ways and appreciate having different options available so that they can choose the best place to work for them.

Create a checklist - that helps those designing the office consider the different aspects of an office space and their impact on employees with different needs e.g. what are the sources of noise, what fabrics are being used in the office?

Noise considerations - be aware of the location of existing and proposed communal spaces. Notice external noise in your building. Excessive noise can trigger a stress response in individuals, which can lead to anxiety and depression in the long-term.

Lack of daylight - Notice the light levels in different parts of the office and consider adjustments. When people work in offices with limited natural light it can cause them to suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) throughout the year.

Overcrowding - Be aware of the impact of office overcrowding on those hot desking as this can create a feeling of stress about coming into the office and securing somewhere to work. A stress reaction can also be instigated where the office is cluttered and personal space is lacking. Stressed or anxious employees experience significantly lower concentration levels, productivity rates and overall mental and physical wellbeing.

Air quality and office temperature - Consider ventilation as offices that have poor air quality or that are too hot or too cold can affect employee wellbeing. Advanced options include smart technologies and apps that allow staff to adjust their ambient environment in line with their own personal preference.

Cost - Cost is a consideration for most organisations embarking on creating an inclusive workspace. It is worth noting that it is not difficult to find building and interior design products that promote accessibility with style, at reasonable cost. Even if you do not have the budget to undertake a full scale transformation of your workspace in one go, there are small things you can do that can make a big difference for the people working there.

DESIGNING YOUR SPACE – DIFFERENT NEEDS TO CONSIDER

Disability is a broad subject, but for the purposes of creating an inclusive workspace, breaking down disability into

the four categories below is an easy way to check you have given consideration all aspects when creating an inclusive workspace.

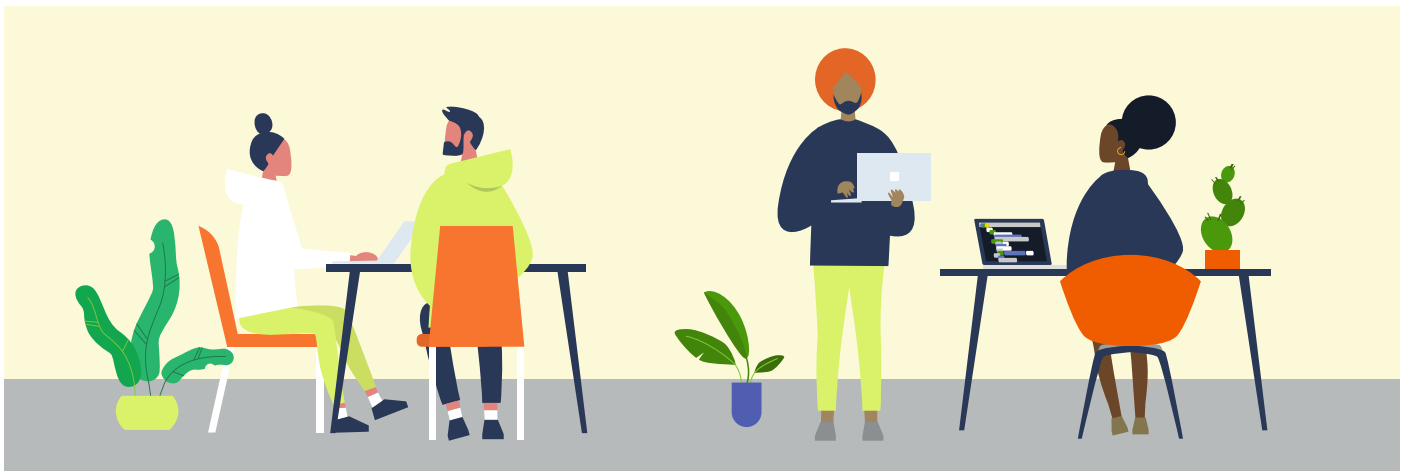
Mobility impairment can limit an employee's ability to do a physical activity such as walking. This could be due to a condition or injury. Some employees may use a mobility aid such as a wheelchair to assist them.

To make the workspace more inclusive for a physically-impaired employees:



DO

- Change door handles to levers instead of knobs that require a firm “grip and twist”.
- Switch to flat-panel light switches rather than smaller toggle switches that require dexterity.
- Widen interior doors and hallways, and alcoves with generous turning space for wheelchair users.
- Lower light switches and make plug sockets accessible to all.
- Include ramps as well as stairs and make sure the office is accessible and free of obstruction.
- Provide adapted equipment or furniture such as adjustable tables.
- Ensure communal areas and meeting booths have wheelchair accessibility.



Visual impairment - an employee with a visual impairment could be registered blind or partially sighted, or they could have a condition such as glaucoma which affects vision.

To create an inclusive workspace for employees who are blind or partially sighted:



DO

- Use different colours for horizontal and vertical surfaces, including changes in elevation. This will reduce the risk of trips and falls.
- Provide blinds or curtains on windows to reduce glare on computer screens.
- Install multi-sensory safety alarms (auditory; visual), and large-print instructions for emergency and safety equipment.
- Provide software or IT equipment that magnifies text or converts text to sound.
- Supply documents in alternative formats such as audio or Braille.

Hearing impairments - an employee with a hearing impairment may have partial or complete hearing loss or may have a condition such as Tinnitus.

Adjustments to make the workplace inclusive for those with hearing impediments could include:



DO

- Provide adapted equipment such as a headset or telephone.
- Provide a dedicated desk or use of a quiet area away from distracting noises.
- Install multi-sensory safety alarms (auditory; visual), and large-print instructions for emergency and safety equipment.

Cognitive impairments - Cognitive impairment is experienced as a natural part of the aging process or can be an early sign of a more serious condition such as Dementia. An employee experiencing cognitive impairment may have issues with their memory, language, attention, spatial skills or behaviour. In creating the inclusive workspace, consider the following:



DO

- Provide a dedicated suitable desk in a less distracting office or area.
- Reduce extraneous noises in the workplace.
- Modify lighting as needed.

Neurodivergence - One in seven people in the UK are neurodivergent, a term that describes conditions such as ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. Neurodivergent employees can find working in a busy or noisy environment challenging. Those with ADHD or Autism can be particularly sensitive to sensory inputs, such as sounds, sights and smell.

Considerations include:



DO

- Limiting the amount of information or bright artwork displayed on walls to take account of the different sensory needs of staff.
- Putting up dividers in appropriate areas to block and reduce noise.
- Creating dedicated quiet areas for people with muted décor for individuals to go when they need time out.
- Making private rooms available to use for tasks that require a lot of concentration.
- Labelling cupboards and providing visible instructions next to office equipment and machinery, such as photocopiers.
- Allocating work areas with more natural light to staff that struggle with office lighting or allowing daylight lamps.
- Providing staff with organisers, lockers, cabinets and name labels to help them organise and retain their work and equipment.

Transgender employees - this refers to individuals whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity and who decide to either a) undergo medical or surgical treatment in order to alter their body, or b) do not undergo surgery but wish to live permanently in their recognised gender.

For transgender employees:



DO

- Create all-gender bathrooms available. All gender bathrooms can be achieved by providing floor to ceiling partitions in stalls.

Pregnant colleagues or those that are breast feeding - for those who are pregnant, a workplace assessment should be undertaken and adjustments to the physical environment made as appropriate. For those who are breast-feeding and have returned to work:



DO

- Make available a nursing room with a door that locks, covered windows and proper ventilation.
- A fridge that allows storage of breast milk.

Religion or Belief - some religions require individuals to practice their faith during working hours. To accommodate this in the workplace with minimum disruption:



DO

- Find space for a multi-faith prayer room and be respectful of its purpose.
- Provide a dedicated bathroom or a washing area in existing bathrooms.
- Provide designated fridges and heating facilities for kosher and halal food.
- Make sure food and drink provided includes vegetarian, vegan, halal, kosher and nonalcoholic options.

Menopause - Menopause is a natural process experienced by women usually between age 45 and 55. Women can go through a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms. To make the working environment as comfortable as possible for affected individuals:



DO

- Ensure a means of adjusting temperature is possible at workstations e.g. dedicated use of a fan or making a desk near an opening window available for them.
- Allow use of a quiet room available if overcome by hot flushes or palpitations and needing time out.
- Make fresh, cold water available.
- Be aware and considerate of fact that menopause can impact trans and non-binary people who don't identify as women.

IMPLEMENT, REVIEW AND REVISIT

Once you have completed your inclusive workspace transformation, it is important to undertake a review its effectiveness and the extent to which it achieves your initial aims.



DO

- Get the date for the workspace review in the diary as soon as you can.
- Invite those that use the workspace to input to the review.
- Make sure the agenda provides for open discussion as well as a deeper view of key aspects you were looking to address e.g. interventions to deal with a dark office.
- Don't be afraid to revisit or modify things that aren't working.

CONCLUSION

This document provides an overview of the considerations you should take when seeking to make your physical workspace more inclusive. The extent to which you can implement a transformation of this nature will depend on the budget and resources available to you. Even with a reduced budget though, it is possible to make small changes that will make the lives of those who work for you more comfortable and consequently, more productive.

For more information, please consult with your account manager at Inclusive Employers.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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