



Choosing an accessible venue or making an event accessible

When it comes to choosing a venue for a workplace event from conferences to Christmas parties, there are a lot of things to check ahead of time. It doesn't have to be stressful once you know what to look for when finding a venue.

Venue audits and planning

Doing a venue audit ahead of an event is a great idea. Where possible, travelling to the venue or doing a virtual tour online can show you what improvements need to be made. Sometimes, venues or businesses may be under the impression they are accessible, and mean well, but sometimes they aren't as inclusive as they think they are.

An easy way to find out people's access needs is to ask instead of assuming. If you plan on sending an email then why not ask for people's access needs along with pronouns, and dietary requirements ahead of time? This will give you a great idea if you need a certain amount of car parking spaces or dairy-free food while there is still a chance to organise them.

It's also important to note that some people may have disabilities they choose not to disclose.

Pre-planning

Here are some of the ways to make your venue accessible that you may consider ahead of the event.

1 - Getting there

Accessible Parking

Has the venue got accessible car parking spaces or are there places within a reasonable distance? This should be within 50 meters.

If you know there are going to be a certain number of event attendees who would need a space, then why not check if you can pre-book spaces at the venue? If the venue doesn't allow this, you may need to look at alternative arrangements. If you cannot pre-book spaces, then make a note of the nearest accessible street parking or car parks.

If people are getting lifts to the venue, marking, or noting drop-off points is also recommended. Hotels or conference centres should know where they are, but it is worth double-checking that they are in safe, accessible locations without lots of traffic and with space to exit cars.

Public transport

Are these easily accessed public transport links such as trams or trains? Not everyone will be able to drive, and public transport can be stressful for a lot of disabled people.

It's worth having a think about the route where possible as not all stations are created with accessibility in mind. Of all 272 tube stops in London, only 92 have step-free access so this would mean someone will have to think around those particular stations.

Once someone reaches the station, the route may have big kerbs, bridges, steep hills, or things that make travel harder for them. It's handy to add these points to a travel document which includes all the information someone might need to find and travel to the venue. Ideally, this would

include simple directions, information on accessible parking, drop-off points and accessible public transport too.

You can then share this with attendees in advance. Make sure there are clear contact details so that people know how to get in touch if they have questions.

If there are a lot of difficulties which disabled people may face when travelling to the venue, then you need to consider if this is the right venue for the event. Could there be a better venue out there that is more easily reached or has better facilities or parking?

2 - Communication requirements

Good lighting

Good lighting for notetaking, reading or lip reading is important, especially for Deaf or visually impaired people.

Here are some of the points to consider when thinking about the lighting in a room:

- Are the lights adjustable so they can be changed if needed?
- Consider glare: visually impaired people may find glare from windows or screens difficult. Different light sources can contribute to this.
- Are there blinds that could be used and are they in working order?
- Can you provide task lighting? This is extra lighting for specific tasks such as reading or writing. For example, this could mean providing lamps on tables if there are written tasks as part of a conference or event.
- Can you manage the brightness so there are no shadows or dark spaces?

- Are the windows in the room clean or free from clutter? If not, you need to ask the venue to clean or clear them.
- LED lights can help with glare: check if the room uses LED bulbs and if not, would the venue mind switching where possible?

Check with the brightness or if there are any flashing lights on presentations or videos being screened during the event that may be difficult for people with epilepsy or seizures.

BSL interpreters

For some people, having British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters is essential and they will need to be booked in advance. The interpreters will need to be provided with as much information as possible as well as speeches and slides prior to the event.

Technology

You will need to think about your media platforms. Is the tech being used accessible and does it work with screen readers and other assistive technology? This is essential for those with visual impairments.

Can you adjust the technology or equipment you are using for different speakers? Such as ensuring microphones can be adjusted for height or adding subtitles to videos for anyone who may not be able to hear the audio.

Loop systems are often set up in venues to help those who are using hearing aids. The loop system helps people to hear sounds more clearly as it reduces or cuts out background noises. Do not hire a venue without loop systems in place. If you cannot avoid this, portable loop systems can be hired but they are often not as effective.

Noise

In the event being held in a room with low background noise? It may be difficult for people with certain conditions such as ADHD to concentrate in

rooms with a lot of movement or noise. We can often think of noise in terms of people and music, but it can also include things like air-con, radiators or appliances. It can be difficult to concentrate or overwhelming for people.

You need to physically check for noises by visiting the venue to make a note of how noisy it is.

3 - Building access

Access for wheelchair users

There are lots of considerations to take into account when making venues accessible for attendees who may use wheelchairs. Some are listed below as ramps, lifts, and toilets. Doing a walk-through from the front door of a venue to the stage to the seating to the restaurant or bathrooms can show you what changes need to be made.

People need space to manoeuvre so this means measuring space around chairs or tables. Circulation route widths should ideally have a clear width of 1200mm or not less than 1000mm over a short distance.

It is not always just step-free access that you need to think about as door frames may need to be a certain width or hallways.

Ramps or lifts

Are there ramps available where there is a need for them? It is worth doing a walk around the venue with this in mind to see where you need ramps to be added and how many you may need. Check with the venue owners to see who is responsible for making sure these are installed and if they are in working order.

It's worth checking that the alternative access route is one that you wouldn't mind taking. This means ensuring that it's not through dark alleyways or refuse collection areas or anywhere nasty!

If the event is above the ground floor, then you will need a lift. You will need to liaise with the venue to make sure they are in working order and have sturdy handrails inside that people can grab. Check people can use the lifts easily and independently.

Signage

People will not know things are in place or where to go without signage. But, has the signage on site and additional signs you have prepared been checked to see if they are accessible?

Here are some points to consider:

- Is there a logical and consistent use of signs with information and directional signs positioned at key locations?
- Are signs short, simple, and easy to understand?
- Is there a good clear colour contrast between the letters and the background?
- Are symbols and pictograms used as well as text where possible?
Is tactile signage provided and positioned within easy reach?

Stage access

You may choose to have a stage where people can present but, have a think about how people actually access this such as stairs. Are there ramps available for the stage? Who is responsible for making sure the ramps are accessible and in working order? You may need to change the seating arrangement to allow people to move easily to and from the stage. Handrails are another consideration to make sure people, especially those who may have balance issues can get down from the stage if they need to.

Alternatively, you may choose to use different areas of the room for presentations so that people have a choice.

Toilets

There are lots of considerations when it comes to accessible toilets.

- Is there a good clear colour contrast between the letters and the background?
- Is the accessible toilet easy to find and well-signposted?
- Is the door easy to open? Is there a power-operated door and are controls at a height easily reached by a wheelchair user? If the door is not power operated how easy is it to open? Could you easily do this with one hand?
- Are grab rails provided?
- Is there room for someone to be able to position a wheelchair and transfer to the toilet from both the side and in front of the toilet?
- Is the room clear of items and not being used as a storage area?

It's worth checking the toilets before the event and on the day to ensure they are in good working condition and that they are fully stocked with soap and toilet rolls.

You will need to check that the red cords are in good working condition.

Red cords help to ensure the safety of people who may lose their balance or need assistance. This needs to be in a position where if someone does fall, they can reach the cord and it needs to be left untangled and untied. If staff are checking the bathrooms, do they also check on the red cords as part of their duties? If not, who is responsible for this?

Toilets also need to be brightly lit with easy-to-read signage. They also need to have enough space for people to use them easily.

The accessible toilets need to be left unlocked or checked if they use a radar key. Not everyone may have access to a radar key so there should be one available at the venue. Radar keys are a national scheme which provides a standard key that can be used across the UK. The key should be easily accessed and available to staff who should know what and where it is.

Wheelchair users are not the only people who need to use accessible facilities. People with different impairments need to access them for varying reasons, so avoid making assumptions.

4 - Emergencies

Evacuation policies

Every venue will have an emergency evacuation plan in place. Ask to see the plans and ensure that they have been created with disabled people in mind. Staff working at the event, both yours or those hired by the venue will need to be informed and trained on what to do.

5 - Food

Dietary requirements

Many people may have dietary requirements that are part of medical conditions such as no gluten for coeliac disease. If catering is going to be provided, is the venue or catering company comfortable with making adjustments for different diets? It can be helpful to ask people's requirements ahead of ordering the food or provide alternative options where people can select what they would like to eat.

6 - Quiet Rooms

Providing a quiet room where participants can go if they are feeling overwhelmed or tired is a great idea. Many neurodivergent people in particular will welcome a safe, quieter space to collect their thoughts, have time out or move if they need to. This can help to prevent them from

feeling anxious, stressed, or overwhelmed, which can lead to panic attacks or meltdowns.

7 - Brief staff

Sometimes, venues will use outside catering, waiters, or security staff. It is important to make sure that staff are briefed and know what to expect. If someone is neurodivergent and would like to know where the quiet rooms are or if there is a need to get a ramp for someone all staff need to know where these items are and how to use them. They may also need to know what the evacuation policies are and how to implement them if something goes wrong.

Attitude goes a long way as well. A survey by Scope revealed that 67% of people avoid disabled people - part of this is a fear of saying or doing something wrong. A friendly, informed, helpful staff member can go a long way in helping people to feel welcome, included and that they can approach to ask for help should they need it.

Could staff be given disability awareness training ahead of the event?

8 - Headphones

Some events can be too overwhelming for neurodivergent people with sensory issues. This can be the result of loud sudden noises or even just the everyday noise of an event. Headphones or earphones can help reduce this.

Communication in advance

People won't realise what has been put in place and what to ask for if you don't tell them! It's also a good idea to ask people ahead of time what access needs they have.

A great way to let people know about all the things you have put in place is to put together an accessibility document with all the information someone might need in it.

Consider the different ways that people may access information such as audio, visual and written. Could you provide the information in a colourful visual style or through videos?

Ensure there are clear contact details available so that people can easily see how to get in touch if they need something.

On the day

Signage

If you have arranged for things such as quiet rooms or headphones - do you have signs to tell people what is available? People won't know if you don't tell them! Similarly, are there enough safety signs, emergency exit signs or signs that announce where help can be found if someone needs it?

Accessible running order

It can really help neurodivergent people to know the running order of the day ahead of an event. If someone has a condition such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder, they may feel restless or struggle with sitting still for long periods of time. If there are clearly signposted breaks, start and finish times then that can help someone feel more comfortable.

Checking equipment

Technology is great....until it isn't. It just isn't safe to assume it will be all right on the night so running tech checks is essential.

Physical space and seating

Is there enough physical space and seating for people? If someone is using a mobility aid, is there clutter-free access to rooms and can they get to the seating? Tables and chairs will also need careful positioning.

Do a walk-through on the day to make sure everything is in place so you can spot any last-minute things that need to be tweaked.

Move any objects or clutter on the floor that shouldn't be in the way, taking care to tuck in leads or plugs that may cause people to trip.

Provision for assistance dogs

Assistance dogs will need a place to go to the toilet and also water access.

After the event

Feedback

Allow all members of the team and attendees to feedback on accessibility. Don't just ask about the event itself but ask how people found the venue. This can be done through surveys, mailouts or simply asking people for their opinion on how the day went. Understand that while it might be difficult to hear about problems, there may also be positives to how the day went which recognise your hard work.

Information available

Where possible, it's a good idea to email out slides or information to anyone who might need extra time to read through them. This could also include video streams of the presentations or handouts in large print.

Be kind

Things go wrong or technology can fail. It's important to not only seek feedback on what went well or what wasn't great but to implement it. This

might mean a change of venue for the next conference or different caterers. People will understand but make it clear that they are being listened to and that changes will be made.

To learn more

Our website has free resources you can download on a number of topics. Why not book us for disability awareness training? We offer a number of different training sessions which can be tailored to suit you.

For more information click visit

<https://disabilityawareness.training/our-services/>