White Paper:

Designing for Neurodiversity in the Workplace

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Tailored Round Tables

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White Paper:
‘Designing for Neurodiversity in the Workplace’

As workplaces evolve to become more inclusive, the conversation around designing for neurodiversity has gained significant momentum. Neurodivergent individuals, including those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other conditions, bring exceptional talents and perspectives to the workforce. However, the traditional design of workplaces, policies, and support systems often overlooks the diverse ways people engage and contribute, leading to barriers to equity and inclusion.

On November 13, 2024, Tailored Round Tables hosted a round table discussion on this critical topic at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London. The event (chaired by Jacqui Wallis, CEO of Genuis Within) brought together a diverse panel of eight thought leaders and professionals, including architects, HR specialists, workplace designers, and neurodiversity advocates. The discussion aimed to explore the intersection of workplace design, policy, and neurodivergent inclusion, offering actionable insights for organisations looking to promote environments where everyone can thrive.

The panel included:

- Lutfur Ali, Senior Policy and Practice Advisor at CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)
- Leena Haque, Senior UX Designer, BBC Inclusive Design & Accessibility & BBC CAPE Program Co-Lead
- Jean Hewitt, Associate and Accessibility & Inclusive Environments Specialist at Buro Happold; Hon Assoc Professor at UCL; and the Government’s Disability Access Ambassador for the Built Environment.
- Stephanie Kyle, Senior Architect and Inclusive Design Specialist at Floyd Slaski Architects
- Catherine Rayner, Owner of Squarepeg Design and volunteer with the charity NiB (Neurodiversity in Business)
- Suzan Ucmaklioglu, Associate Architect and Inclusive Design Specialist at Foster + Partners
- Onyinye Udokporo, CEO and Founder of Enrich Learning
- Jacqui Wallis, CEO of Genius Within

Prepared by:

- Laura Shadwell, Founder & Managing Director of Tailored Round Tables

"**Effective inclusion should leave no one behind**"
Jacqui Wallis, Genius Within

This white paper — sponsored by Buro Happold and Foster + Partners — combines the key themes, insights, and recommendations that emerged from the round table. It highlights the challenges neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace, explores innovative strategies to address these challenges, and underscores the importance of holistic design thinking. By integrating the perspectives of experts from multiple disciplines, this document aims to provide organisations with a roadmap for designing workplaces that are not only functional but also equitable and empowering for all.

It is also important to mention at this point that most British businesses are small to medium-sized enterprises, as opposed to large corporations with thousands of employees where audits or baseline diversity assessments are feasible. Smaller businesses, often with just a few employees, require a different approach. To drive mindset, change and integrate inclusivity into daily operations, we need universal principles that apply regardless of business size — whether there are 3 employees or 30,000. Effective inclusion should leave no one behind.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for the variation in neurocognitive profiles across the whole population.

To quote directly from The British Standards Institution's PAS 6463, *Design for the Mind: Neurodiversity and the Built Environment* (2022) [1]:

"Neurological profiles can sometimes be collectively grouped as:

a) neurotypical (someone fitting a majority neurological profile and is not neurodivergent)
b) neurodivergent (someone who fits outside majority neurological profile and is commonly associated with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and Tourette's syndrome – there is no definitive list of conditions associated with neurodivergence)
c) neurodegenerative (whereby sensory processing differences develop over time through brain diseases, such as different forms of dementia or Parkinson's.)"

There are many people without a formal diagnosis of a neurodivergent or neurodegenerative condition who experience hypersensitivity and sensory processing difference from the expected or societal perceived norm, and many others who are undiagnosed. Some people are hypersensitive through one sense but hyposensitive or neurotypical in others, hence there is a huge spectrum of diversity of how people are affected.

To drive mindset, change and integrate inclusivity into daily operations, we need universal principles that apply regardless of business size.

Introduction to designing for a neurodiverse workplace

The 2024 Neuro-inclusion at Work survey report by the CIPD, authored by Thompson and Miller [2], builds upon earlier research conducted two years ago, in which the CIPD provided guidance for employers on integrating neuro-inclusion into the workplace. The report explores the complexities of language within the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) landscape, which often complicates efforts not only in neurodiversity but across the broader EDI spectrum.

The CIPD has long emphasised the importance of EDI as a central priority for organisations. Historically, discussions on equality have focused on treating people "regardless of" gender, ethnicity, or age, but the language has evolved. The shift towards recognising individuals "in light of" their differences is vital for crafting effective policies and practices.

The benefits of effective EDI delivery include: reduced costs; improved attraction, recruitment and retention of required personnel; better products and services; enhanced corporate image; improved creativity and problem-solving; better decision making; innovation; greater flexibility; increased productivity; improved organisational performance and efficiency; enhanced trust in relationships, satisfaction and commitment within the workforce; and improved customer relations and service delivery. However, recent pushback from business leaders questioning the business and equalities outcomes value of EDI has led for the need to review, clarify and strengthen the evidence base.

For example, CIPD has conducted separate research (to be published) to assess whether concerns about the so-called "backlash" against EDI are affecting organisations' ability to implement these initiatives. Less than 2% of British businesses reported being influenced by such backlash. Despite anti-EDI rhetoric from previous government leaders, it has had minimal impact on how businesses operate or prioritise EDI issues.

The CIPD's Neuro-inclusion at Work report's survey of 1,000 UK senior managers with decision-making influence revealed that 60% say that neuro-inclusion is a focus for their business. For a third of businesses (33%), it's in their EDI strategy or action plan, and just under a fifth (19%) say that although it's not specifically called out in their EDI strategy or action plan, it is part of their work to improve EDI in their organisation. A further 8% say it's an area of focus for their business, but not specifically within EDI. Almost a third (32%) of organisations say neuro-inclusion is not a focus for them.

The CIPD's *Inclusion at work 2022 report* | CIPD [3] identified the gap between high levels (79%) of recognition of EDI as compared to having an EDI strategy (48%) and measuring outcomes and impact (17%). This emphasises the importance of leadership follow through to ensure effective systems of accountability and ownership. One of the primary barriers to implementing effective EDI strategies is the complexity of language (covered in greater detail later in the white paper.) Leaders are often concerned about inadvertently saying or doing the wrong thing, particularly in an era where cancel culture looms large. With terms like "equality," "equity," "diversity," "inclusion," and "psychological safety" often used interchangeably, confusion arises even among HR professionals and EDI experts.

Research shows that while neuro-inclusion is seen as a more approachable area within EDI, it often ranks lower on the priority list compared to other equality issues, such as women's equality or ethnic diversity. This reflects a broader hierarchy of equalities within organisations, which can hinder the true spirit of inclusivity. Notably, neurodivergent traits do not always align neatly with the disability category, and many neurodivergent individuals are reluctant to disclose their identities due to fear of being marginalised in hiring or promotion opportunities.

Research shows that neuro inclusion often ranks lower on the EDI priority list compared to other equality issues.

The CIPD has long emphasised the importance of EDI as a central priority for organisations

The report stresses that neuro-inclusion cannot be approached with standardised solutions. It is not always possible to tailor to individual requirements, however, where possible, a personalised approach is preferable. Designing workplace policies and physical environments based on individual requirements, rather than broad categories, is key to supporting neurodivergent employees effectively.

Personalised sensory profiles enable employees to specify their environmental preferences, which can be integrated into workspace management systems to create more supportive work environments. For example, SAP's Autism at Work program [4] customises workspaces based on individual sensory preferences, highlighting the benefits of personalised sensory profiles in fostering a comfortable and inclusive workplace. However, this flexible approach does pose challenges, as it requires a shift from traditional, one-size-fits-all strategies to more flexible, responsive systems.

An important takeaway from the research is the need for businesses to build trust and create environments where neurodivergent employees feel safe to disclose their identities. This begins with the recruitment process, where forms should be inclusive of neuro-inclusion and clearly communicate how such data will be used.

Additionally, external research by PwC *No holding back: Breaking down the barriers to diversity* [5] highlights that 80% of people born between 1980 and 1995 said that an employer's policy on EDI is an important factor on deciding whether or not to work for them. This reflects views expressed through platforms like Glassdoor, underscoring the growing importance of EDI in attracting talent.

Ultimately, the Neuro-inclusion at work report 2024 | CIPD reinforces that creating a neuroinclusive workplace requires intentional, thoughtful design, supported by clear language and practices that consider individual requirements.

Only by doing so can organisations strengthen true inclusion and reap the business benefits of a diverse workforce.

Practical design strategies for neuroinclusive work environments

The three C's: Clarity, Control, and Calm

Jean Hewitt, the Technical Author of PAS 6463 *Design for the Mind – Neurodiversity and the Built Environment* (2022) emphasises the importance of Clarity, Control, and Calm in neuroinclusive environments:

- **Clarity:** Environments should be easy to navigate, with clear signage, advance information, and logical layouts to reduce cognitive overload.
- **Control:** Employees should have the ability, where practicable, to adjust their surroundings or choose spaces that align with their preferences, whether quieter areas or less visually stimulating environments.
- **Calm:** Access to sensory-friendly zones allows individuals to reset and recover when overwhelmed.

Practical design strategies for a neuroinclusive work environment can draw on these 3 principles, offering a foundation for creating spaces that are intuitive, adaptable for diverse preferences and ways of working.

The PAS 6463 offers design principles for neuroinclusive design of buildings and external spaces. This Publicly Available Specification (PAS) provides practical guidance for reducing environmental triggers that may cause sensory overload, such as poorly designed lighting or inadequate acoustic treatments. Developed with extensive public consultation, PAS 6463 serves as a critical first step toward creating environments that do not overwhelm and can cater for a spectrum of neurological and sensory processing differences.

For someone with extreme visual hypersensitivity, inappropriate LED lighting has been shown to induce reactions in some individuals, such as non-verbal episodes, highlighting the need for careful consideration of sensory impacts. By addressing such "worst offenders" in design, and allowing for choice and flexibility, workplaces can significantly improve conditions for people with sensory processing differences and hypersensitivities.

PAS 6463 serves as a critical first step toward creating environments that can cater for a spectrum of neurological and sensory processing differences.

An example case study is the BBC Cymru Wales HQ, designed by Foster + Partners, with Sheppard Robson overseeing the interior fitout with Jean Hewitt serving as the inclusive design consultant. The project incorporated soundproofing and dynamic lighting to support neurodivergent individuals, enhancing both concentration and collaboration (Architects Journal, 2019) [6].

Optimising design beyond acoustics and lighting

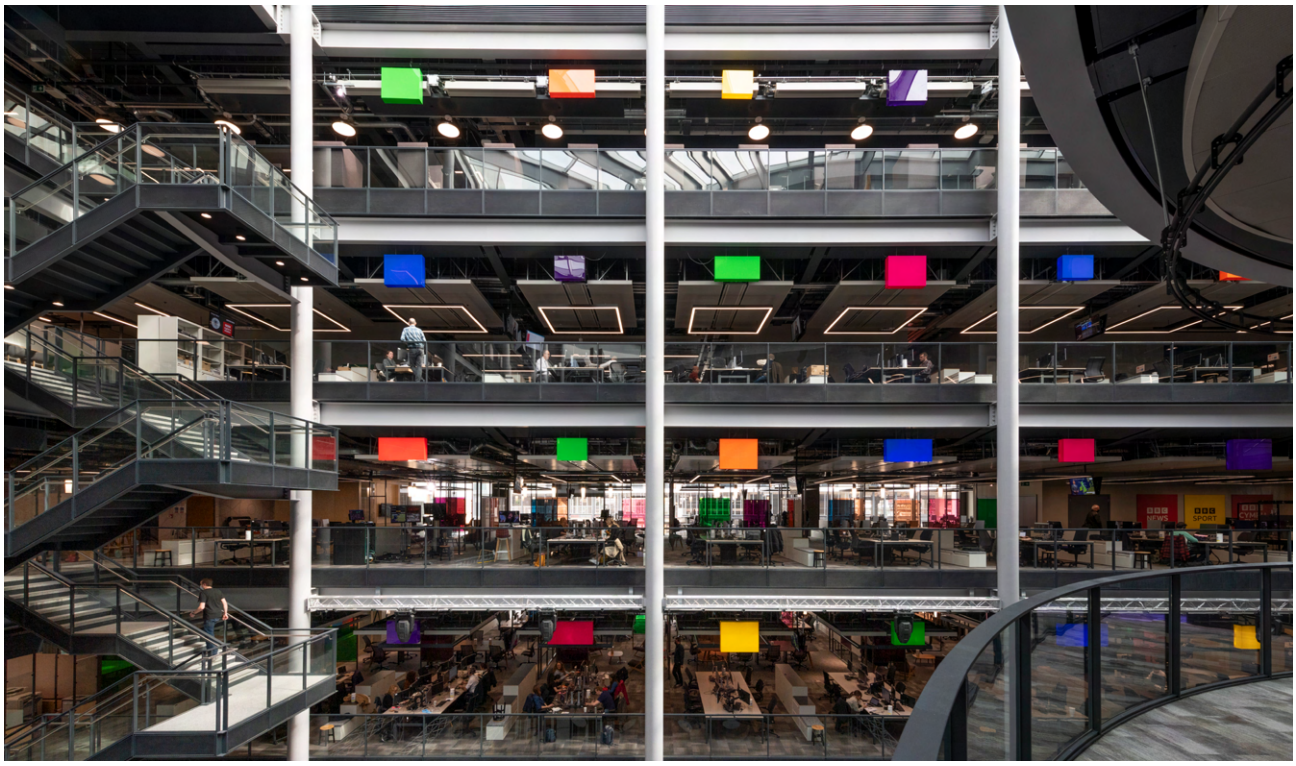
Creating neuroinclusive workplaces requires more than incorporating optimised acoustic and lighting elements, though these are often the initial focus. While such measures are vital, they address only a part of the broader and more nuanced considerations important to neurodivergent individuals. Neuro-inclusive design must consider the complexity of human sensory processing, encompassing numerous senses, many of which function subconsciously. The dominance of auditory and visual considerations in workplace design reflects the industry's tendency to address what is immediately apparent rather than delving into the full sensory experience.

Adaptable workspaces for diverse preferences

Workplace design often adheres to standardised templates based on functionality, location, and previously perceived workforce needs. However, neuro-inclusive environments demand a more flexible approach, considering the unique needs of each organisation and its employees and anticipating a range of information and sensory processing differences. Fit-out and turnkey design firms frequently prioritise current trends, but there is an urgent need to incorporate neuro-inclusion understanding into professional training and development. Establishing neuro-inclusive design as a recognised discipline could create specialist roles within design teams, enhancing their ability to meet diverse requirements but it would be preferable for all designers to have this core understanding.

As neurodiversity becomes a greater focus in business policies, design must evolve alongside. Collaborations between occupational health professionals and neuroinclusive designers could bridge early knowledge gaps, ensuring workspaces are genuinely inclusive rather than simply meeting basic compliance standards.

BBC Cymru Wales HQ © Nigel Young / Foster + Partners



The role of social environments

Workplace design must also consider social environments. Trends like open-concept offices or café-style spaces may appeal to some but can cause discomfort and anxiety for neurodivergent individuals who struggle with sensory distractions and/or social pressures. Providing options such as quiet spaces or distraction-free zones as well as collaborative spaces ensures that employees can choose environments that best suit their working styles, reducing the need for masking behaviours and encouraging authenticity.

Balancing employer responsibility and individual agency

Employers have a duty to ensure their workspaces have reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act [7]. However, the Act is not prescriptive, so designers look to building regulations and standards for how to meet this duty and the mandatory regulations offer basic accessibility only and do not consider sensory differences at all. In addition, fostering neuro-inclusion involves empowering individuals to actively advocate for their unique needs and strengths. By striking a balance between organisational responsibility and personal agency, workplaces can cultivate environments where everyone feels supported to thrive.

The language of neurodiversity in the workplace

The broader EDI landscape, including the topic of neuro-inclusion, can often be challenged by the casual misuse or misinterpretation of terms. It's not the role of this document to dictate what language people should use, but it's important to engage in conversations to establish a shared understanding of the language and terms used.

Language is inherently dynamic, evolving alongside societal changes. Recognising this, there is a need to continuously adapt and refine the understanding of language to align with these shifts.

The concepts of equality and equity, while distinct, share deep historical roots, emerging in the 13th century with 'equity' rooted in French and 'equality' in Latin. From the Magna Carta's early recognition of rights to Renaissance philosophies like the "veil of ignorance," these ideas have evolved, shaping modern governance and ongoing discussions about fairness and inclusion.

Workplace design must also consider social environments.

'A quiet space' @ the RNIB Grimaldi Building © Buro Happold

Modern day language

Modern understandings of equality emphasise recognising differences, not ignoring them. Historically, policies from the 1970s onward often framed equality as treating people "regardless of" factors such as gender, ethnicity, or age. Today, the language is shifting towards treating people "in recognition of" these differences. This small yet significant change in wording can profoundly impact how we design policies and practices.

Using phrases like "regardless of" is problematic, as it suggests a one-size-fits-all approach. This mindset is outdated and often oblivious to the nuances of gender, race, disability, and neurodiversity. Treating everyone the same can unintentionally discriminate against those with different starting points, particularly those who face systemic disadvantages.

The Equality Act of 2010, section 10.1 and 10.2 incorporates provisions for "positive action", which aim to address these imbalances by providing equitable support. These provisions are vital for helping individuals overcome historical and current disadvantages, enabling them to compete on a level playing field. Yet, positive action is often overlooked in discussions about equality in the workplace and service design. Recognising and embracing differences is essential in creating truly inclusive environments, especially in the context of neurodiversity.

Understanding equality vs. equity

To create truly inclusive organisations, it is essential to understand the distinction between equity and equality. Equity focuses on providing individuals with tailored support to level the playing field, rather than assuming equal starting points suffice. However, many organisations misunderstand this, prioritising equality over the nuanced needs of diverse individuals, particularly neurodivergent people.

Language plays a critical role in driving this shift. By addressing the unique challenges faced by those with undiagnosed or masked neurodivergence, policies can move beyond rigid requirements like formal diagnoses. With assessment waiting times often stretching to several years, organisations must offer accessible, flexible support systems that allow individuals to self-identify their requirements and access support sooner.

Normalising inclusivity means providing a "buffet" of options for support, enabling individuals to access resources that suit them. This approach reduces reliance on formal diagnosis and empowers individuals to thrive, fostering workplaces and spaces that reflect true equity.

Recognising and embracing differences is essential in creating truly inclusive environments, especially in the context of neurodiversity.

Introducing AI and technology for a human-centred approach

Organisations are increasingly adopting technology and AI-driven solutions to support the creation of neuroinclusive work environments. For many businesses, the motivation to implement these changes stems from workforce needs, talent retention, and a growing demand for inclusivity, especially as younger generations, such as Gen Z (those born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s) appear to show higher rates of neurodivergence. According to Understood.org and The Harris Poll "Neurodiversity at Work" survey [8], "Gen Zer's are significantly more likely than any other generation to report having any learning and thinking differences," therefore businesses must adapt to attract and retain top talent, or risk falling short of hiring goals.

Integrating technology for personalisation:

AI and emerging technologies offer practical and scalable solutions for improving the sensory experience in workplaces. For instance:

Environmental adaptation:

AI Systems connected to sensors can monitor environmental factors such as noise levels, temperature, and lighting, automatically adjusting these conditions to suit individual preferences. Such systems might lower noise using sound-dampening tools or modify lighting based on real-time feedback from users' sensory profiles. For example, BrainBox AI's ARIA platform [9] optimises HVAC (heating, ventilation and air-conditioning) systems in commercial buildings by analysing data such as humidity, ventilation, and temperature. While designed for energy efficiency, its dynamic adjustments could also be applied to sensory-friendly office solutions, benefiting employee comfort, including for neurodivergent individuals.

Customisable spaces:
Technologies integrated into "quiet pods" could allow users to personalise lighting, temperature, and noise levels to create optimal working conditions. This supports a human-centred approach, enabling spaces to adapt dynamically to the experiences of neurodivergent employees.

Enhancing accessibility with wearables and biofeedback:
Wearable devices are another promising avenue for integrating neuroinclusive design. Biofeedback tools can measure heart rate, stress levels, or other indicators, allowing systems to suggest environmental adjustments or behavioural interventions, such as taking a break or relocating to a quieter area. These innovations cater to individuals with strong interoception — those who can identify specific triggers like temperature discomfort or overstimulation.

However, many neurodivergent individuals struggle with interoception, making it difficult to pinpoint sensory challenges. Research initiatives, such as the University of Nottingham's study on thermal comfort modelling that Stephanie Kyle from Floyd Slaski Architects is involved, aim to bridge this gap by helping neurodivergent individuals better identify sensory preferences. This knowledge can inform future design strategies to create spaces that support sensory regulation more effectively.

Promoting inclusivity through pre-preparation tools:
Technology also aids in reducing anxiety and improving accessibility through pre-preparation tools. For example, the BBC piloted an augmented reality (AR) and gamification-based experience for studio tours, enabling individuals with sensory or navigational challenges to prepare in advance. The results were significant; oversubscription of tours and positive feedback from families of autistic children and individuals with dementia, who could now participate in an enjoyable experience. Similar tools can be applied to workplaces, such as virtual reality (VR) simulations or digital twins of office environments, helping employees familiarise themselves with new spaces before their first day. As an example, BBC CAPE created VR scenarios showcasing sensory overload, used in training sessions (BBC CAPE VR Experience). [10]

Wearable devices are a promising avenue for integrating neuroinclusive design

BBC CAPE VR example © BBC

As another example, Foster + Partners worked with the Sociability app (an app that is working to change the way people think about accessibility) to map their own campus to provide easily accessible access information. Employees can now choose rooms that match their needs, such as avoiding ground floor meeting rooms where one could easily be distracted by passers-by to glazed facades, or choosing rooms with more natural lighting vs artificial lighting etc. This emphasis on choice fosters autonomy, improving user experience without the need to share personal preferences, as these tools operate without requiring personal data.

The role of wayfinding in neuroinclusive design:

Wayfinding is another critical aspect of neuroinclusive design. Navigation apps can help employees transition seamlessly between workspaces, mitigating anxiety and ensuring a smoother experience.

Sensory mapping can be used alongside or combined with a wayfinding app to provide real-time information about lighting, noise levels, and temperature, empowering employees to choose spaces that support their wellbeing.

The importance of co-design and lived experience engagement:

Foster + Partners recently initiated a user research project, in partnership with the Sociability app. As part of this project, the team revisited the Imperial War Museum (Lambeth Rd, London) with a focus group, to understand how people with disabilities experience the space today. These conversations will feed back into the practice's design guidance and inform its approach to future projects. [11]

The practices phase 1 masterplan for the Imperial War Museum involved the sensitive refurbishment of the existing museum, improving access and circulation, opening the interiors to daylight and views and establishing direct links with the surrounding park. The floor of the atrium was lowered to park level, in anticipation of a future phase of development, in which the approach to the building will be scooped out to create a single, accessible entrance for all below the existing portico stair.

Wayfinding is another critical aspect of neuroinclusive design.

Cost considerations for inclusive design

The financial challenges of implementing workspace design are often a deterrent, especially during economic downturns, as organisations struggle to fund necessary changes, highlighting the need for government support or dedicated budgets. However, inclusive design doesn't always require costly overhauls. Many solutions can be implemented cost-effectively through strategic rethinking and reorganisation. For example, a consultancy team observed a large organisation where a red wall, chosen for branding purposes, inadvertently made employees avoid that area. The consultant recommended repainting the wall in a neutral colour, emphasising that creating a comfortable environment would ultimately enhance employee productivity. Simple, cost-effective changes like this can have a significant impact on workspace inclusivity.

While retrofitting older buildings can be challenging, integrating inclusive design at the strategy stage of new projects helps minimise costs and ensures future-proof designs. Many companies already invest heavily in technology to improve productivity, but spending on EDI-related adjustments is often met with scepticism. This reluctance may stem from a narrow view of value — while investments in productivity tools are widely accepted, inclusive design spending is often seen as a lower priority, especially by leadership.

Culture, policy and holistic approaches

Cultural change within an organisation often begins with identifying the stimulus for transformation. This could stem from a single employee courageously voicing their need for better working conditions, sparking broader reflection, or a senior leader's personal experience driving awareness. The critical question is: where does the drive for change originate, and how is it embraced?

Inclusive design doesn't always require costly overhauls.

Assessing an organisation's current culture is essential — benchmarking where it stands in terms of inclusion. Without understanding this baseline, the concept of cultural change remains abstract, with no clear direction. Organisations often express a desire to "be better," aiming for decency, fairness, equity and inclusion, but competing priorities can impede meaningful progress.

If an employee feels any fundamental part of their identity, such as ethnicity, socio-economic background, faith, etc is marginalised, excluded or less respected, they may be less likely to voice any specific needs, like different workplace conditions in anticipation that discrimination may arise. Addressing these foundational issues around inclusion is critical for promoting an environment where all employees feel empowered to contribute.

Creating a culture where individuals feel confident being themselves is essential. Storytelling initiatives provide neurodivergent employees with a platform to share their experiences, promoting understanding and reducing biases. An example of this is the BBC CAPE's interactive films, which highlight employee perspectives and foster empathy among neurotypical colleagues (BBC CAPE). [10]

The organisation's role

The need for specialist expertise in neuro-inclusive design is becoming increasingly important as the proportion of employees with neurodivergent traits grows. This emerging field has already moved beyond ad hoc, light-touch efforts and is already becoming a specialist area of inclusive design, like specialised design approaches for dementia care. By targeting both academic and professional bodies, the built environment industry can continue evolving to absorb new understanding and skills and create spaces that support everyone.

Organisations must prioritise continuous learning and development to prevent the industry norms from becoming outdated. This requires investment of time, resources, and energy to foster a culture of lifelong learning within the profession.

RNIB Grimaldi Building © Buro Happold

Systemic inclusion and auditing practices

The goal of systemic inclusion is to embed accessibility and inclusivity into the foundation of organisational practices, ensuring individuals can self-manage most needs without extra requests. However, progress has been slow, with accessibility and inclusive design currently always optional rather than mandatory in professional and academic training programmes, even across built environment disciplines such as architecture and facilities management. This lack of prioritisation risks perpetuating outdated standards, such as the Building Regulations Part M baseline for accessibility, which has seen minimal updates over the last 20 years.

Audits are one tool organisations use to assess accessibility, but they often focus on physical access and can become tick-box exercises. These audits can miss the human experience by emphasising technical compliance over lived experiences. Moreover, companies may avoid audits altogether due to fear of an overwhelming obligation to make costly changes.

Effective inclusion requires holistic audits that consider sensory, cognitive, and physical accessibility, alongside intersectional considerations for faith, gender etc.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) also play a critical role in fostering inclusion. These collectives provide a platform for employees to voice concerns and drive change, ensuring organisational practices align with the lived realities of a diverse workforce. Combining comprehensive audits and ERGs can help organisations move beyond surface-level compliance to create genuinely inclusive environments.

As an example, Foster + Partners, has six employee led EDI networks — Suzan Ucmaklioglu is the co-lead of the disabilities network — having actively embraced the conversation on neurodiversity, particularly following the introduction of the PAS standard.

The release of the PAS 6463 has sparked interest across the practice, including architects, workplace specialists, urban designers, and the inclusive design team.

The ensuing dialogue culminated in a Neuroscience and Architecture Week, driven by shared interest among these groups, and created a platform for employees to openly share their experiences with neurodivergence and disability. Insights from these internal discussions have since grown the disabilities network and helped raise awareness towards the importance of inclusive design.

Moving beyond accessibility to belonging

As previously mentioned, designing for neurodiversity requires a holistic approach, moving beyond a tick-box mentality. Often, basic accessibility is interpreted as inclusive design, but the difference is vast and crucial: accessibility focuses on technical compliance and functionality, with the regulations founded on minimum access requirements related to physical disabilities, while true inclusive design prioritises people and their experiences and takes an intersectional approach.

People's interactions with the built environment inevitably shift over time, influenced by life stages and circumstances, personal energy levels, or daily fluctuations in capacity. A space that feels supportive one day may not fully meet someone's needs the next. Standards must account for this variability, ensuring designs remain adaptable to both individual and societal changes. Returning to the three C's which Buro Happold describe as framing the PAS principles, clarity of a space, control (either through choosing different types of space or adjusting the environment) and calm (somewhere to reset and recover when all goes wrong) go a long way to meeting such a variety of sensory experiences.

The value of intersectionality

Intersectionality plays a critical role in understanding and addressing neurodiversity in the workplace, yet it often remains underexplored. The way neurodivergent traits are diagnosed, communicated, and supported intersects with broader aspects of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. For instance, the delivery and framing of diagnostic reports can significantly influence how individuals perceive and share their neurodivergence, highlighting the need for organisations to go beyond standard audits and incorporate lived experiences into their strategies.

Designing for neurodiversity requires a holistic approach, moving beyond a tick-box mentality.

Organisations often silo neurodiversity efforts, treating them as separate from other diversity initiatives. However, collaborative approaches demonstrate the value of intersectionality. For example, when Mindshare facilitated a joint event between its Neurodiversity ERG, Disability ERG, and Women's Network, it allowed for a richer dialogue among neurodivergent individuals, allies, and those with personal connections to neurodivergence. Such initiatives encouraged disclosure, with some employees revealing their neurodivergent challenges for the first time.

Intersectionality also informs design practices. By creating personas that reflect diverse identities — considering factors like ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status — designers can better accommodate the multifaceted experiences of neurodivergent individuals. Additionally, addressing issues like masking — particularly prevalent among women — requires the opportunities for safe spaces and open conversations to reduce barriers and empower individuals to seek support.

Encouraging organisations to embed intersectionality into their policies, events, and design processes not only enriches understanding but also ensures that neurodiversity is addressed holistically, creating environments that are inclusive and supportive for all.

Embracing intersectionality for true inclusion

Many individuals may feel hesitant to disclose aspects of their identity, such as being neurodivergent, due to societal stigma. For example, people of colour or women often face compounded challenges in the workplace, where openly sharing conditions like autism or ADHD, which can lead to further marginalisation. Allies who provide support and encourage open dialogue play a vital role in amplifying marginalised voices, ensuring equity beyond token diversity.

This includes recognising the full spectrum of diversity — not only race and gender but also social class, which is often overlooked. Neurodiversity remains stigmatised across different social classes. In wealthier circles, neurodivergence is sometimes hidden or mocked, while in working-class communities, it may be dismissed as an excuse to overcome adversity. By fostering inclusive conversations and allowing people to share their experiences authentically, industries can challenge misconceptions and develop more equitable standards that embrace the realities of all individuals, regardless of race, class, or neurodiversity.

In *The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work,* Ludmila Praslova [12] highlights how workplace decisions often reflect the preferences of those in leadership, typically white men. For example, temperature settings often favour cooler environments, aligning with men's biological tendency to tolerate colder conditions, while women generally prefer warmer temperatures. This illustrates how leadership demographics can shape workplace environments in ways that may not align with diverse experiences.

Recent evidence on representational diversity in organisations reveals a significant challenge: even when leadership includes individuals from marginalised backgrounds — such as women or ethnic minorities — they often perpetuate discriminatory practices. This occurs because organisational success is still defined by existing cultural norms. Leaders from marginalised backgrounds may conform to these norms as a survival mechanism or internalise them over time.

This highlights the need for diversity efforts to go beyond representation and incorporate equality of outcomes. Unlike equal opportunity, which ensures access, equality of outcomes addresses individuals' diverse starting points and needs.

The concept of inescapability further complicates this. Factors like race, gender, or neurodivergence are inherent and largely unchangeable, shaping individual experiences. Achieving true inclusivity requires organisations to recognise and address these intersectional complexities. Life circumstances can also be more significant for people with neurodivergence, for example, women with ADHD who may have been successfully self-managing for years often suddenly find during Menopause that everything has changed.

Influencing organisations and leadership for inclusion

Organisational leaders often prioritise financial targets over inclusion initiatives. Inclusion, especially when it encompasses diverse personal characteristics and identities, is rarely a primary focus. Shifting this perspective requires embedding inclusion into an organisation's culture and demonstrating its tangible benefits to leaders.

Tailoring influence strategies

Leadership is influenced by different factors and individuals. Understanding what drives each leader is essential to elevating inclusion on their agenda. Presenting inclusion not as an abstract value but as a contributor to efficiency, employee satisfaction, and business success can be persuasive. For example, architectural designs incorporating inclusive features can be framed as solutions that enhance productivity while meeting organisational goals. (Most inclusive design and neuroinclusive principles can be embedded at little or no cost if thought about early.)

Listening to employees and marginalised voices

Creating safe spaces for employees to share their needs is critical, but traditional methods like employee resource groups (ERGs) while effective, may exclude those whose needs are the greatest, as they often avoid group settings. Organisations can enrich their value systems by actively embracing the perspectives of marginalised voices. Through inclusive and diverse engagement strategies, they can ensure their efforts truly reflect and meet the needs of those who are often most excluded. Allyship is of significant benefit, and our sponsors advocate these initiatives alongside the creation of specific interest groups and awareness talks.

Embedding inclusion in organisational values

Leaders must embody and act on inclusion as a core value, consistently aligning decision-making with cultural adaptability. Solutions for inclusivity need not always be resource-intensive — simple accommodations like noise-cancelling headphones or hearing aids to cut out background noise can make a significant difference when there is no solution other than tolerating a busy, noisy environment (such as transport intersections.) The key is to foster a mindset that prioritises flexible, human-centred solutions, offering personalised approaches and a variety of space types and adjustment options to support individuals effectively.

RNIB Grimaldi Building © Buro Happold

Decency as a foundational principle

At its core, driving an inclusive workplace is about behaving decency, treating colleagues with respect and curiosity, understanding their needs, and building trust. This simple principle, when consistently practiced, creates a culture where employees feel valued and supported. A culture of decency encourages personal responsibility for cultivating a workplace that benefits everyone and with the adoption of key design and management principles as already set out in the PAS, the overall environment becomes one where everyone can flourish.

Balancing spatial needs for neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals

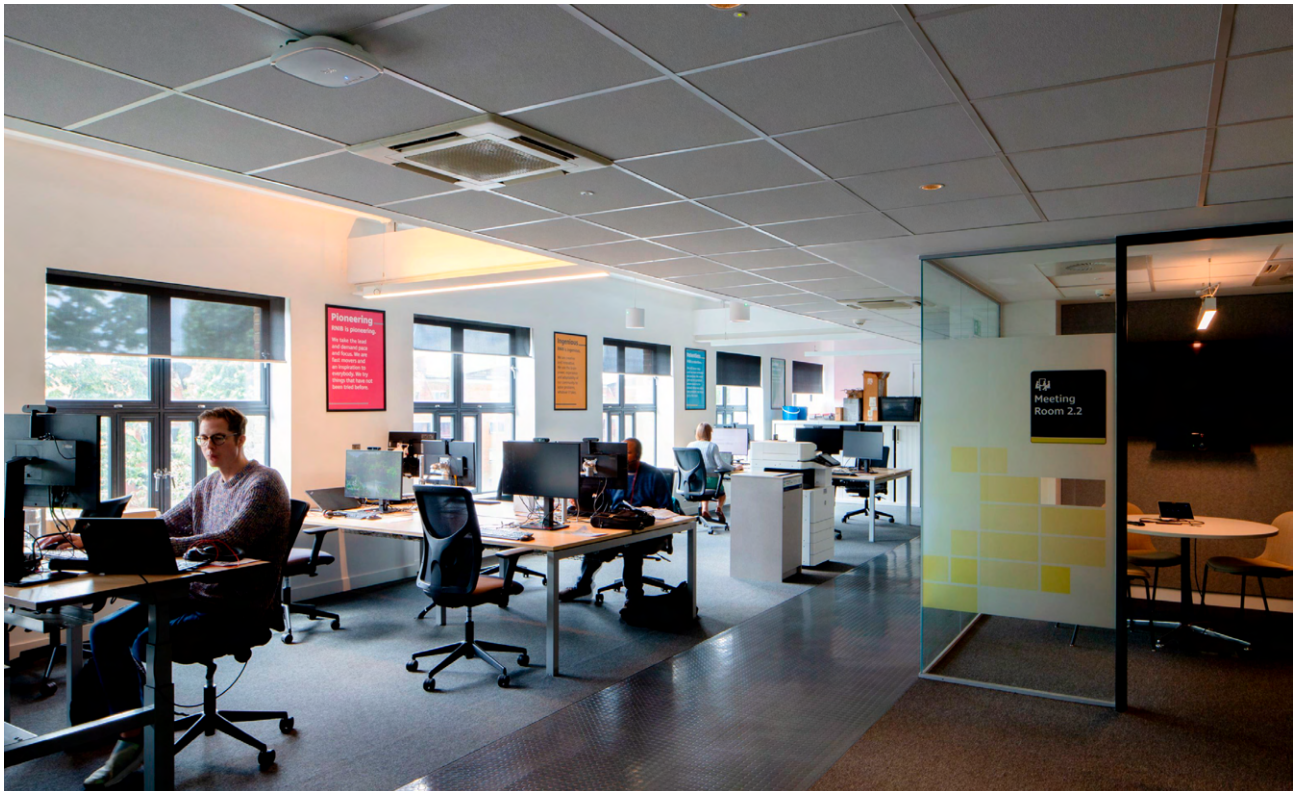
Creating inclusive work environments requires thoughtful prioritisation of spatial and sensory needs for both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Modern workplace trends, such as desk-sharing and reduced office spaces, can be more challenging, but usually offer some flexibility and choice. As hybrid work models evolve, addressing these challenges holistically becomes increasingly critical.

Research, such as Toar Sadia's study *Exploring the Design Preferences of Neurodivergent Populations for Quiet Spaces* (University College London) [13], emphasises identifying common spatial needs and then layering personalised adjustments to enhance accessibility. This approach ensures environments accommodate diverse preferences while maintaining functional design principles.

Flexibility in working arrangements is also key. Organisations, where possible, can foster inclusivity by allowing employees to align their work schedules with their internal rhythms — such as early mornings or late evenings — thereby accommodating individual requirements and optimising productivity.

At its core, driving an inclusive workplace is about behaving with decency, treating colleagues with respect and curiosity.

RNIB Grimaldi Building © Buro Happold



Closing summary

This white paper concludes by emphasising the critical steps and principles needed to design workplaces that embrace neurodiversity. The discussions have highlighted several key areas for action, reflecting a collective call for change that combines thoughtful design, inclusive practices, and cultural transformation. Importantly, these approaches must consider the diverse capabilities and constraints of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as large organisations to ensure equitable outcomes across all business sizes.

Intersectionality remains a crucial but under-explored element in fostering inclusion. Organisations must understand and address the varied experiences of neurodivergent individuals, considering overlapping identities such as ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background. Collaboration between employee resource groups (ERGs) and proactive audits of organisational culture and facilities are valuable starting points.

A clear grasp of the range of information and sensory processing differences — from hypersensitive to hyposensitive — is essential. This understanding, coupled with active listening and genuine engagement with lived experiences, enables better support and resource allocation.

Organisations must collect data that supports the value proposition of neuro-inclusive practices. Metrics that quantify the cost of failing to retain or attract neurodivergent talent, alongside the measurable benefits of inclusive design and policies, can strengthen the case for change.

Leaders play a pivotal role in driving cultural change. By acknowledging and addressing biases, championing inclusion, and sharing success stories, they can inspire others to adopt neuroinclusive practices. Embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion into business priorities ensures longevity and long-term impact.

Future-resilient and inclusive design, supported by thoughtful use of technology, can significantly improve workplace accessibility. Innovations that benefit all employees — not just those with neurodivergent traits — enhance the overall work experience and contribute to organisational success.

Real progress requires a holistic and integrated approach that embraces diversity of mind, body, and space. Language matters deeply — organisations must communicate inclusively and align their actions with their stated values. Small actions taken consistently over time can lead to profound cultural transformation.

By embedding these principles into their core strategies, organisations of all sizes can create workplaces that not only accommodate but also celebrate neurodiversity, setting a benchmark for equity and inclusion for the future.

Innovations that benefit all employees — not just those with neurodivergent traits — enhance the overall work experience and contribute to organisational success.

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11 Inclusive design at Foster + Partners: how can we create spaces that work for everyone? | News

12 The Canary Code: A Guide to Neurodiversity, Dignity, and Intersectional Belonging at Work by Ludmila Praslova

13 Research paper: Exploring the Design Preferences of Neurodivergent Populations for Quiet Spaces by Toar Sadia from Institute for Environmental Design, Barlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources, University College London

Additional reading

1 NDTi & Buro Happold Technical paper on lighting

2 RTPI Neurodiversity Toolkit