

# How to be more accessible for people with physical impairments





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A physical impairment is a condition which affects a person's physical functioning, mobility, stamina or dexterity. There are hundreds of physical impairments which affect people differently.

Common physical impairments include:

- Cerebral Palsy
- Spina Bifida
- Spinal cord injury
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
- Arthritis



It's important to remember that not everyone who has a physical impairment has a **mobility aid** or wants to use one. The aids people use can vary depending on their needs on a particular day or in a certain situation. Some people who are wheelchair users are **ambulatory wheelchair users**. This means they can walk in some circumstances but need wheelchairs for longer distances or when experiencing pain or fatigue. If someone uses a mobility aid, treat it as an extension of the person themselves. **Don't touch** or move someone's wheelchair, crutches or any other mobility aid without asking first.

#### **Positive Communication**

**Eye contact:** Generally, eye contact is important. If someone is a wheelchair user or has restricted growth this can be trickier. Either **sit down** to be at the same level or **take a step back**. This stops them having to strain their neck looking up at you. Avoid crouching as this can feel patronising.

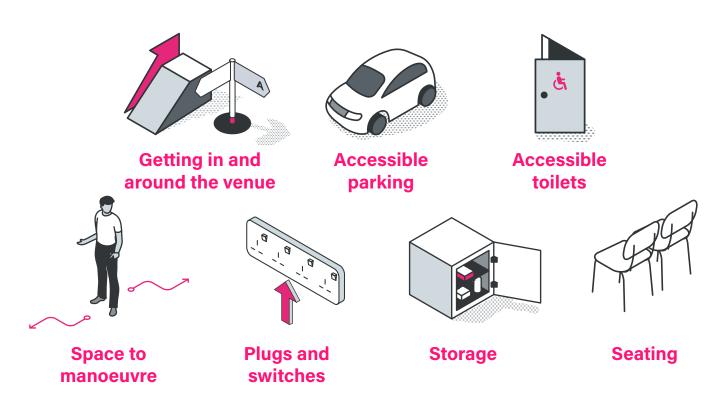
Avoid making assumptions: People often make assumptions about disabled people's capabilities based on misconceptions and stereotypes. Remember everyone is an individual and an impairment will impact people differently. Don't assume you will know what someone's access requirements are or even if they have any. Instead, just ask!

**Keep questions appropriate:** People with physical impairments are often asked **intrusive questions** about their bodies by others. An example is a question like "What happened to you"? There is an expectation that they will share **personal information** about themselves to members of the public, to educate or satisfy the curiosity of others. At times, it is appropriate to ask questions about someone's impairment. But, unless you are good friends, the **focus** should generally be on **access requirements** and whether there is anything you can do to **improve** access and inclusion.

#### Be flexible

We know that flexible working and volunteering is **highly desirable** for many. For some disabled people it can be the difference between working/volunteering or not. Someone may find meetings at certain times of the day more challenging. It could be they need a reduction in hours due to fatigue. Or even the option to have **core working hours** and flexible start and finish times, because they find it difficult to travel in rush hour. Many people find they are **more productive** when they work or volunteer from home in an environment which is comfortable for them. Others may benefit from more but shorter breaks. You won't know unless you ask!

# The physical environment



Getting in and around the venue: It's important that people can easily get into and around your venue. Ideally access should be step free. Some simple things to think about are:

- Is there level access? If needed, are there suitable ramps or lifts available?
- Is the door easy to open? It could be that you have an automatic door fitted or install a door push pad. If this isn't possible, could you have a call bell so someone can help when needed?
- If there is an alternative accessible entrance, is it well signposted and one you would be happy to use?

Accessible parking: Do you have accessible parking spaces available? These are wider and longer than your average bay. They should be clearly marked. If you don't have a car park, do you know where the nearest accessible parking is?

Accessible toilets: These are especially important for many people who have physical impairments. Remember:

- There are plenty of people who need to use accessible toilets who have hidden or non-visible impairments such as Crohn's disease or Colitis.
- If they are kept locked, make sure you have a spare key, and everyone knows where to find it.
- It's important that the room is kept clean and free from clutter.
- The red emergency pull cord should hang freely to the floor.

If you don't have an accessible toilet in your venue is there one nearby?

**Space to manoeuvre:** It's vital that space is left around desks and tables and in meeting rooms for wheelchair users or people who use mobility aids to be able to **move freely**. Independence is important to many people and having to rely on someone to assist with moving furniture so you can move around is not a pleasant experience.

Plugs and switches: Bending can be problematic or impossible for many. So, if possible, avoid putting plug sockets in hard-to-reach places, for example underneath desks. Install them higher on the wall next to workstations or on desk/tabletops. If you aren't in a position to change them, do you know of any that are more accessible? Could you have an extension lead available should it be needed? Also ensure that light switches are in easily accessed places and avoid putting bins, plants and other objects in front of them. This will prevent people having to lean to try and reach them.

Storage: Can someone access everything they need to?

- Consider having some low-level cabinets, bookshelves and lockers.
- Think about where objects are placed to ensure that everyone can access essential items easily.
- Cupboard doors should be easy to open for people with dexterity difficulties and ideally should have lever or D pull handles.

**Seating:** Is there enough seating available for people who may need it? It's important that you have seating with a **variety of heights** and some with and some without **armrests** to be more accessible. Also, consider having some with **straighter backs** as they are often easier to rise from.

### **Assistive Technology**

Many people who have physical impairments use assistive technology. This could be something as simple as a walking stick, reaching aids or a specialist cushion to relieve pressure sores from sitting for long periods of time. Some people who have dexterity difficulties may require **specialist keyboards** or speech to text software. It's important that if you are employing someone with a physical impairment, you have a conversation about whether there is any assistive technology you can provide.

## **Digital accessibility**

Many assistive technologies rely on **keyboard support** to activate functionality provided on web pages and on digital platforms. Someone may also find it difficult to use a mouse or pointing device, for example if they have spasms or shaking hands. They will need to use the keyboard only.



Some people need a little extra time to type, click or carry out any interactions, so it's important that there is sufficient time to respond or to complete tasks, such as to fill out online forms.