



Diversifying Real Estate: Disability

Guidebook commissioned by CPA & WPA NextGen

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This guidebook aims to help individuals and organisations make central London's real estate sector more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities. It acknowledges the significant role that our sector plays in shaping the built environment and encourages greater awareness of the needs of disabled people. It provides best practice examples, signposts to resources, and reflects on personal experiences.

This guidebook has been informed by interviews and roundtables with members, co-opted experts and disability specialists, and stakeholders from local government, including Westminster City Council.

We hope that this guidebook will inspire and inform our members at Westminster Property Association (WPA) and City Property Association (CPA), and the wider property industry, so that together we can make our profession more inclusive, diverse, and dynamic.

This booklet is part of a series of themed guides commissioned by WPA and CPA's NextGen networks, produced by London Property Alliance, and supported by Gardiner & Theobald.

Find out more at londonpropertyalliance.com

Foreword

I am very pleased to support the launch of this new guide which recognises the vital role that London’s real estate sector has to play in opening up opportunities and choice for disabled people.

I believe that no one wants to get it wrong, but that too often we simply “don’t know what we don’t know”. Inclusive design that involves people with the widest possible range of lived experiences from the outset is critical in identifying and designing without barriers. Without that involvement we might – wrongly – assume that because a lift or a building or a room or a toilet is accessible to one wheelchair-user that it is accessible to all. We also need to challenge some preconceptions: inclusive design can be good and even aspirational design. Indeed, I’d argue that design that isn’t inclusive cannot be considered to be good.

Accessible design is not only the right thing to do, it’s good for business too. The “Purple Pound” is estimated at £274bn annually in the UK alone. Customers who can’t access your services – in person or online – will simply go elsewhere.

It’s about recruitment too. With fierce competition for talent, accessible buildings are a crucial part of your attraction strategy. Your physical environment sends out a strong signal about what matters and who and what you value.

Of course, getting it right is not just about the real estate itself but also the wider infrastructure of transport, parking, green spaces and more that support it. It’s about the customer facing teams and messaging that together send a message that “you belong”.



Diane Lightfoot

CEO

Business Disability Forum

Understanding the challenge

One in five people living in the UK has a disability that effects their day-to-day life.¹ Disabilities can be physical, mental, or neurological, and many are non-visible or 'hidden'. With a hand in the creation and shaping of the places in which people work, live and play, the property sector has a responsibility to deliver inclusive, accessible spaces that consider the needs of all people with disabilities.

Understanding the varied forms that disabilities can take is crucial for ensuring that central London's property sector can support accessibility. This guide suggests ways for organisations to develop their understanding of disabilities and provides examples of simple design features, technologies and initiatives that can improve the accessibility of the built environment.

Key opportunities for making the real estate sector and built environment more inclusive for people with disabilities



Improve disability awareness of both visible and non-visible disabilities



Utilise and grow disabled talent within organisations



Consult with users & experts



Communicate accessibility (physical and digital signposting)



Design innovative buildings and spaces which raise the bar and go beyond minimum building regulations



Challenge entrenched stereotypes of what disabled people want to do, and where they want to go

A key way that our sector can improve is through building a workforce that includes and listens to disabled people. Fair recruitment practices and ongoing support for staff is vital for attracting and retaining diverse talent.

This guidebook suggests best practice in the recruitment and retention of employees, and provides a number of practical steps that organisations can take now.

While improving the accessibility of the built environment (and the workforce that drives it) presents a challenge, it also presents extraordinary opportunity. Diverse teams result in less staff turnover², better employee performance and engagement³. A recent survey conducted in the United States showed that, compared to other similar firms, companies with high levels of disability inclusion reported on average 30% higher revenue⁴.

There is also a business case to be made for improving accessibility of our city's spaces - the spending power of disabled people and their families (sometimes referred to as the 'purple pound') is estimated to be worth £274 billion and is rising by 14% per year.⁵ According to advocacy group Purple, less than 10% of organisations have a targeted plan to access this market. Not only does this lead to the exclusion of disabled people, but it also presents a missed opportunity for organisations who could benefit socially and commercially by accessing the disability market.

On all counts, the case for improving the accessibility of the built environment for people with disabilities is clear. We hope that this guidebook will encourage individual and organisations to take up the challenge and make positive changes now.

Creating inclusive spaces

The UK’s building regulations set out minimum requirements for accessibility but leave significant room for improvement. By developing a better understanding of disabilities and incorporating innovative design and technology adaptations into buildings and public realm, the property sector has an opportunity to raise the bar.

1. Developing knowledge

Few organisations have robust in-house knowledge of the broad range of disabilities that can affect individuals – whether these be physical, mental, or neurological. Organisations involved in planning, design and development should consult with service users and disability consultants to ensure that accessibility needs are properly considered. They should also consider collecting and utilising data to better understand the needs of their users. Individuals should also take steps to educate themselves about visible and non-visible disabilities. The UK Government’s Disability Unit provides useful information on different forms of disabilities – [see this useful guide non-visible disabilities](#).

Organisations should also seek to challenge entrenched stereotypes of what disabled people want to do, and where they want to go. Too often, disabled people are presumed only to want to visit certain types of places, and as a result some types of buildings are not as accessible as they could be.



Resource:

AccessAble Consultants and Proudlock Associates are just two of a number of accessibility consultants which can provide advice in this area.

- [accessable.co.uk](https://www.accessable.co.uk)
- [proudlockassociates.com](https://www.proudlockassociates.com)

“All buildings have the technological ability to become accessible for those with disabilities but there is an ongoing battle in maintaining your determination because of the long process.”

- Proudlock Associates

Case study: Hammersmith & Fulham Civic Campus



Throughout the design process for Hammersmith & Fulham's Civic Campus, the RSHP team consulted with access audit and disabilities consultancy Proudlock Associates and co-produced the proposals with local residents with a wide range of people with disabilities. One of the key priorities for the Leader of the Hammersmith & Fulham Council, Councillor Stephen Cowan, was to set up a Disabled People's Commission to create a ruthlessly inclusive zero harm scheme at the heart of Hammersmith's community.

The process revealed the limitations of current Building Regulations, which do little to take the varied types of disabilities into account. For instance, the consultation process revealed how certain decorative colours can trigger anxiety with people with neurodiversity, while some respondents noted missing provisions for guide dogs and mobility scooters. The findings also revealed that lighting and visual contrast of interior finishes must be developed with careful consideration.

RSHP worked closely with local stakeholders and groups to understand and implement intuitive, best practice wayfinding and to ensure that every surface, space and aspect of the Civic Campus is inclusive.

2. Designing innovative, accessible places

The inclusion of simple design features can make a significant difference for users with varied disabilities. As well as considering the needs of people who use mobility aids like wheelchairs, designs should consider how to support people with 'hidden' disabilities. Within offices, for example, light dimmers and the provision of quiet workspaces can support the needs of neurodiverse workers.

Improving accessibility should be understood as a living project that requires ongoing engagement with disabled stakeholders and feedback-gathering. Regular consultation and opportunities for feedback should be included in the development process, even after a development is completed.

Case study: 8-10 Grosvenor Street

8-10 Grosvenor Gardens demonstrated how inclusivity and accessibility can be made a priority in listed buildings. Access, wayfinding, flexibility, and comfort were main points of focus in the design of this people-friendly and inclusive building. Despite initial conservation concerns, the Council was very receptive to proposals, recognising the vital importance of delivering a building that is open and accessible to all. Planning and listed building consent was granted for a platform lift inserted into the heritage façade with associated alterations.

Key design features that support accessibility include: a user-friendly platform lift; elimination of floor level changes; the introduction of a feature ramp that wraps seamlessly around the reception space; and level access to an external terrace.

Additional features that consider neurodiversity include: design elements such as symmetry and rhythm which provide calmness, regularity and predictability; transitional and dimmable lighting to aid hypersensitivity; calming and stress relieving colours that help with building navigation; clear graphics and text; flexible seating options and quiet break spaces for those with sound sensitivities.



Case study: The Crown Estate: Regent Street Public Realm scheme

WPA members, The Crown Estate, collaborated with charity AccessAble on the design of their Regent Street Public Realm scheme from the outset to make it more accessible for all visitors.

Key design features included:

- New seats amid the new planting and trees to enable people to pause and rest for the first time on Regent Street. These incorporate armrest, backrest and kickback features to optimise accessibility.
- Widened pavements, by reducing four lanes of traffic to two, to maximise the amount of accessible space to move along the street.
- Designing the planters with a lighter colour lip along the top, to better stand out to those with visual impairments.
- Accessible public transport provisions, with expanded waiting areas at bus stops with accessible boarding spaces.

During the design process and following construction, The Crown Estate worked with a panel of ambassadors with a range of physical and neurological disabilities. They provided lived experience feedback of the scheme and recommendations to help The Crown Estate continue to improve their places.



3. ...and maintaining accessibility

Buildings should be properly maintained, ensuring that lifts are always working, pathways are always clear for wheelchair users and disabled toilets are in operation.

4. Signposting accessible places

Property owners and occupiers should provide information about the accessibility of the spaces they own or manage. As well as physical signposting, information about accessibility should be clearly listed online to help disabled users plan their visits. The accessibility of digital spaces should also be considered. The official 'Web Content Accessibility Guidelines' provide a number of recommendations to make websites accessible to people with disabilities. Disability-led organisations such as Purple can provide assistance in auditing company websites and recommending changes to meet these standards. Find out more from Purple: <https://purpletuesday.co/Support-Services/Accessibility-Audits>

Tip – use the ‘mouse test’: Try to navigate your organisation’s website using only your keyboard. Can you navigate between pages easily?



Resource: Sociability

Sociability helps disabled people find accessible places through their free, user-friendly mobile app. Quickly find detailed, reliable and accurate accessibility information for local hospitality and retail venues in seconds. Better accessibility information not only gives disabled people the confidence and peace of mind to explore places around them, but also highlights the barriers to inclusion that disabled people face every day. By working closely with both disabled users and businesses, Sociability empowers businesses to better understand, communicate and improve the accessibility of their own spaces and products.

Find out more at www.sociability.app

5. Understanding the business case

The spending power of disabled people and their families (sometimes referred to as the ‘purple pound’) is estimated to be worth £274 billion and is rising by 14% per year.⁶ According to the disability-led organisation Purple, less than 10% of organisations have a targeted plan to access this market. Not only does this lead to the exclusion of disabled people, but it also presents a missed opportunity for organisations who could benefit socially and commercially by accessing the disability market.



Resource: Purple Tuesday

Purple Tuesday is a programme which aims to improve the customer experience for disabled people by improving awareness of the value and needs of disabled customers. Participating organisations make public commitments (a minimum of one new activity or initiative) to ensure sustainable changes are made and to open products and services to the disability market.

Register your company here:

<https://purpletuesday.co/get-involved/>



Supporting an inclusive workforce

Fair recruitment and support for employees with disabilities is crucial for growing the diversity of our workforce. Alongside good-practice and growing awareness, the property sector can play an important role in changing the narrative around employing staff with disabilities. Sharing positive stories of employment will help to reduce hesitancy in other organisations and to explain the benefits of a more diverse, inclusive workforce.

1. Fair and inclusive recruitment

HR and Hiring Managers should undergo inclusivity and unconscious bias training and should develop their understanding of the broad range of disabilities employees may have. They should establish recruitment processes which are non-exclusionary, and which reduce barriers for applicants. Also, businesses and organisations should have resources on both intranet and website pages with navigation assistance through imagery and audio.

When onboarding new employees with a disability, a checklist of support options should be provided to help employees understand how they can be supported in their role.

Resource: Disability Confident employer scheme

The UK Government has established a 'Disability Confident' employer scheme to encourage employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they recruit, retain and develop disabled people. Participating organisations are supported in the following areas:

- challenging attitudes towards disability
- increasing understanding of disability
- removing barriers to disabled people and those with long-term health conditions
- ensuring that disabled people have opportunities to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations

Sign up for the scheme here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/disability-confident-how-to-sign-up-to-the-employer-scheme>



Resource: Access to work

Access to Work can help employees get or stay in work if they have a physical or mental health condition or disability.

Access to Work can provide:

- a grant to help pay for practical support with your work
- advice about managing your mental health at work
- money to pay for communication support at job interviews

Find out more here: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>



Resource: Disability Essentials from the Business Disability Forum

This collection of resources contains essential, free disability guidance and resources for business. Guidance covers areas including advice and information around the law about disabilities, managing adjustments, disabled customers and accessibility.

Access the collection here: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/disability-essentials/

Case study: Westminster City Council Supported Internship



Since 2019, Westminster City Council has successfully supported young people between the ages of 17-24 with mild to moderate learning disabilities into employment by running an annual Supported Internship programme in partnership with City of Westminster College and Westminster Employment (WE*).

Each year, 12 young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) have the opportunity to complete three different work placement rotations with the support of an expert job coach. The supported internships are full-time education programmes, based four days a week in the workplace, and one day in college for young people who want to find a paid job. Alongside work placements, the interns study English, maths and entry 3/Level 1 employability qualifications.

We spoke to two recent supported intern graduates (Angel and Faisa) and one customer of Westminster Employment (Ali), who are all now employed by the Council. They told us how their supported employment journeys have made them more confident in the workplace and how employers can make the job application process more accessible. They recommended:

- Easy-to-read applications
- A direct contact line for hiring managers
- In person work trials and inclusive interviews

For more information about Westminster City Council's supported internship programme, please contact Service Manager Terrence McKnight at tmcknight@westminster.gov.uk

For more information about Westminster Employment (WE*), please contact Service Manager, Michelle Seale at mseale@westminster.gov.uk

2. Supporting staff & creating an inclusive workplace culture

All staff should undergo unconscious bias training and should be provided with opportunities to learn about disabilities that may affect colleagues. Mentoring and reverse-mentoring programmes are a simple way of encouraging ongoing learning across all levels of an organisation. Organisations should also consider creating disability networks for disabled employees and allies, ensuring that there is a continuous feedback loop with senior management. Instating an “executive sponsor” for disability will also help to ensure that disability awareness remains on the agenda.

Conversations about disability should be woven into workplace events and communications. Simply bringing the conversation around disability to the fore and reversing the onus on disabled people is incredibly empowering and very fruitful for unearthing important perspectives that may have never been shared before.

Organisations should make practical tools and resources available for employees who are encountering obstacles within the workplace. For example, at a recent WPA NextGen reception, WPA & Grosvenor arranged for a sign language assistant to attend the event to assist a guest with hearing impairments. This gesture allowed the guest to network and communicate with keynote speakers.

Sign language interpreter at a WPA event



Any costs required to help disabled people be set up to work should be seen as long-term investments. The upfront costs of improving access are often seen as not worthwhile or unduly high because they are judged on shorter timelines than are appropriate.



Resource: Purple

Purple provides resources and services to help organisations grow disability leadership, inform responsible business programmes, and help understand and evidence good practice that contributes to legislative and reporting requirements.

Find out more: <https://wearepurple.org.uk/business/>

3. Promoting opportunities & positive examples

One of the barriers to the employment of people with disabilities is fear that an organisation may not be able to properly support their needs. In an effort to combat these concerns (and with the consent of the employee) organisations should share positive stories of employment to promote the benefits of having a diverse, inclusive workforce and to provide examples of the simple steps organisations can take to support staff.

Organisations should also consider promoting job opportunities through disability-friendly networks and bulletins such as:

[Diversity Jobs Group](#)

[DisabilityJobsite](#)

[Jobs4Disability](#)

[UK Gov, find a job with Disability confident employers](#)

[Careers with Disabilities](#)

[Employability](#) (helps students with disabilities to find a job)

[Evenbreak](#)

10 ways to make our sector more inclusive for people with disabilities

| At Board level | At middle management | At NextGen |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commit to growing your organisation's knowledge of disabilities and ongoing learning through training, mentoring and reverse-mentoring schemes• Understand the business case for accessible spaces | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embed fair recruiting practices and integrate disability awareness training for hiring managers• Ensure people with disabilities are consulted in the design of buildings and spaces• Consider taking part in supported internship schemes | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undertake unconscious bias training• Form or join a disability network within your organisation• Review your organisation's digital spaces – are they accessible using the 'mouse test'? |

References

1. Family Resources Survey 2018/2019, p.7 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874507/family-resources-survey-2018-19.pdf
2. 70% of respondents to a 2019 survey conducted by Yello said they would consider looking for a new job if their employer didn't demonstrate a commitment to diversity. See Yello's 2018 'Diversity Recruiting Report': <https://yello.co/resource/white-paper/diversity-recruiting-employer-benchmark-report/>
3. Gartner reports that employee performance at diverse companies is 12% higher than at non-diverse firms: <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/diversity-and-inclusion-build-high-performance-teams>

A 2015 Deloitte survey revealed that 83% of millennials reported higher levels of engagement when they believed their company fosters an inclusive culture. See 'The Radical Transformation of Diversity and Inclusion.

The Millennial Influence': <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclus-millennial-influence-120215.pdf>

4. Accenture report 2015: 'Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage': https://www.accenture.com/t20181029T185446Z__w__/us-en/_acnmedia/PDF-89/Accenture-Disability-Inclusion-Research-Report.pdf

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