

Planning for neurodiversity

The term 'neurodivergent' is very broad and includes those with conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, auditory processing disorder, autism, ADHD, and dyspraxia. Many of these conditions are defined as a spectrum condition, which means that it can manifest differently in each person and the conditions can also overlap. [700,000 autistic adults and children live in the UK \(which is about one in 100 people\)](#) and around [15% of the total population is neurodiverse](#), but these are only estimates and a lot of people remain undiagnosed. People who have a neurodivergent condition are more at risk of developing a mental health condition and this can be exacerbated by the environment they live in.

Beyond these diagnosed conditions, the neurodiversity movement applies to the whole population and is centred around the principle that there is no "normal" or "right" type of brain. People learn, socialise, process emotions, and perform many other mental functions very differently from each other. Some people may also experience over or under sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours or temperatures.

Some environments can be particularly overwhelming and cause sensory overload to lots of people and for different reasons, but there are many simple adjustments to the way we plan and design public spaces that can make a difference. For example, Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York was designed in such a way as to provide a multitude of spaces to satisfy nearly all types of park users. The park's designer Michael Van Valkenburgh described his [inclusive design approach](#) as being "like cooking a holiday meal, if you have to invite all of the relatives then there has to be a dish for everyone".



Brooklyn Bridge Park

Yet, many public spaces remain severely inaccessible due to a lack of understanding of neurodiversity and poor planning and design. ‘Inclusive design’ approaches remain primarily focused on the accessibility of buildings and tend to overlook the diversity of people’s sensory requirements. According to a recent survey quoted in an [RTPI event on Neurodiversity in Planning](#), only 6.2% of interviewed architects claimed that they consider non-physical impairments in their design approach, compared to the 89.7% who thought inclusive design mainly refers to accessibility for wheelchair users.

Inclusive planning and design require the participation of all members of society. Every individual has completely different needs and will process their surroundings differently. As an example, one person may have sensitivity to certain lighting conditions and smells, while another may find discomfort with spatial proximity and noise. Proactive and early engagement informed by the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals is required to understand how they experience their local environment.

Community engagement tips for your neighbourhood plan

- When planning community engagement, consideration should be given to different communication methods and types of events, such as running smaller events and focus groups for people who find large, noisy public consultation events off-putting, or having designated less busy slots for people during the day.

- Provide a choice of consultation methods – some people might need to hear information to process it, others will prefer to read it. Some may wish to go away and type their response using a spell check rather than writing it down with a pencil and paper, while others may prefer to do it verbally.
- Consider using images as well as text in consultation documents, also consider how language, text length, size and colours, can affect readability of any documents.

Tips for your neighbourhood plan policies and guidance

- Public spaces should feel connected and legible, with a sense of hierarchy.
- Consider “high-stimulus” and “low-stimulus” with transition zones aiding the shift from one zone to the next within sites and public spaces. Visual qualities, materials and textures, clutter, activity, noise, smells and odours can contribute to high and low stimulation areas. Separation between different areas within a public space need not be harsh, but can be through furniture arrangement, difference in floor covering, difference in level or even through variances in lighting. Include escape spaces that provide a neutral sensory environment with minimal sensory stimulation.
- The London Borough of Islington’s Inclusive Landscape Guide has a list of landscape aspects that can create different sensory experiences, such as space and enclosure, colour, tones, texture, patterns and shapes, shelter from or exposure to the elements, scents from planting. Also consider daily and seasonal variation in intensities and tones of light and avoid harsh artificial lighting.
- People’s perceptions of safety are linked closely with feelings of enclosure and lines of sight. Good design principles such as more and wider entrances and exits within an amenity space, shelter, visible footpaths which are clear and easy to see where they lead, areas for rest and lingering, social interaction and activity and good quality toilets can make a park more appealing. Incorporate views of internal activities from outside and external activities from within the public space.
- Use clear wayfinding - carefully considered on street signs and maps which are clear and use symbols and text can help people with way finding.
- Consider housing for people with different needs, as well as ages and life stages in your policies and site allocations. Around 75% of autistic people live with their parents, with many being housed inappropriately in inpatient and institutional settings and separated from the community. Specialist housing accommodation like Pilgrim Court in Plymouth can allow vulnerable adults to live independently, in high quality affordable flats which have been purpose built to meet specific housing needs, while helping to regenerate unused and derelict sites.
- Finally, you may find this guidance on neurodiversity in the built environment helpful: <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/standards/pas-6463/> . It would also be worth contacting relevant charities or health organisations to understand the needs of people with conditions such as autism.