# **IMPROVING PHYSICAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION**

## Guidance and advice notes

These documents should be helpful for schools and staff trying to create the right kind of physical environment to promote access to the school and trying to minimise, where possible, any physical conditions within the school which might create barriers to access and learning.

The guidance notes can be used when planning any changes to the school décor or layout.

Deafness

**To reduce effects of noise external to classroom**

* Location of classroom away from noise of traffic etc. A wall or landscaping can improve soundproofing.
* Location away from toilets, canteen, music rooms…
* Efficient double-glazing, door seals.
* Doors not placed opposite each other, but staggered.
* Avoid large areas of glass, e.g. atriums, where normal noise is a problem.

**To reduce effects of internal noise**

* Enclosed classroom preferable but, if open plan, use sound absorbing panels/partitions. HVAC systems: non-convection.
* Acoustic panels and baffles to absorb noise. Placement and number would depend on size and shape of the room. Some reflective surfaces required to transmit useful sound. Acoustic specialist would advise.
* Foam-backed carpeting. Where inappropriate, e.g. wet areas, cushioned vinyl and /or rubber feet on furniture reduces noise of scraping.
* Wooden furniture, rather than metal.
* Door closers to avoid noise of slamming.
* White boards, rather than blackboards, positioned to avoid glare from windows.

**To maximise visibility**

* Minimise fluorescent lighting where there is the possibility of users with hearing aids as it can cause interference.
* Dimmer switches on lighting.
* Vertical blinds give better control of light/glare than curtains.
* Avoid positioning of visual clutter behind teaching area.

**Reception**

* Induction loop fitted at reception.
* Security phone should be videophone with flashing light as well as buzzer.
* Avoid glare from glazing behind reception counters.

**General**

* Provision of a canteen separate from teaching/assembly area.
* Provision of a quiet room for visiting teachers/ therapists.
* Fire alarms: flashing lights should be installed in line of vision (particularly important in toilet area). Where profoundly deaf people are moving independently throughout building, a vibrating pager system might be considered.
* Use of an induction loop (portable?) for assemblies/meetings.

Visual Impairment

**Car Park and Dropping off Points:**

* As close to the school entrance as possible.
* Be clear of any trip hazards or waste bins attached to the exterior walls of the building.
* Area clearly marked and contrasted with appropriate signage fixed at eye level\*.
* Where there are dropped curbs it is important that appropriate tactile surfaces are used.

**Entrance Areas**

* These should be well lit and clearly marked.
* Any steps should be evenly sized and with the nosing marked with white or yellow.
* The edges of any ramps should also be marked in white or yellow.
* The door should stand out from the doorframe and the handle or door lever should contrast from the door.
* Any large areas of clear glass should be avoided and would recommend the fitting of horizontal blinds to prevent excess glare.
* Door intercom should again be clearly marked and visually contrasted as well as tactile markings used. They should be recessed and positioned at a height for ease of location and use.

**Reception / Office Area**

* These areas should be clearly signed, with any signage positioned at eye level\*.
* They should be in an obvious and logical position or if not possible, a section of flooring in colour contrast can help “lead” people to the counter.
* Reception areas should be free of any clutter and trip hazards.
* Seating and coffee tables should be well contrasted with the surroundings.
* The area should also be appropriately lit and the lighting should be consistent avoiding shadow and dark areas.

**Corridors**

* Lighting should be consistent throughout with the light fittings running in the direction of the corridor as this produces less glare.
* Doors should be contrasted with frames and frame with the walls.
* Avoid using gloss paint and shiny flooring as these cause glare. Flooring should avoid large or confusing patterns e.g. stripes or chequer boards.
* Light colours well contrasted with frames and skirting can boost and improve lighting levels throughout the school.
* Door numbers should be large and at eye level, as should any other signage, such as subject or departments.
* Displays should be positioned not to provide an obstacle or reduce lighting levels.
* Bins, radiators, fire extinguishers and hoses should be recessed whenever possible and clearly marked.

**Classrooms**

* The use of colour contrast can be used to highlight desks, chairs and other furniture. This is so desks etc can easily be located against the background.
* Desk tops and flooring should be matt in finish to reduce glare and reflective materials should be avoided when possible.
* Flat trays should be used for storing pencils, scissors etc.
* All windows should be fitted with directional vertical blinds again to combat glare.
* Lighting should be consistent throughout avoiding shadows and darkened areas.
* Whiteboards offer better contrast than chalk blackboards.
* Avoid visual clutter behind the “teaching” area to aid concentration on the teacher.

**Gymnasiums and Assembly Halls**

* These areas should be consistently lit avoiding shadows and darkened areas.
* Windows should be fitted with directional vertical blinds.
* Wall bars and other equipment should be contrasted with the walls in order for them to stand out and be easily found.
* High gloss flooring should be avoided in favour of a matt finish, to reduce glare. Cleaning of floors should not polish them to a high loss finish.
* The flooring whenever possible should contrast with the walls as should any doors and frames.
* Equipment such as benches should contrast with the flooring.
* Any steps/stairs should be contrasted as well as the edge of any staging.

**Toilet / Accessible Toilets**

* Signage should be at eye level and consistent throughout, the same type of signage throughout the school.
* Lighting should be consistent and even throughout.
* Light switches should be well defined by use of colour contrast.
* The use of colour contrast is essential to highlight cubicles and fixtures.
* Toilet seats should be well contrasted with the toilet.
* Locks should be easily seen.
* A matt finish to all surfaces would be recommended.
* Provision of an **exit** sign on the inside of the exit door will reduce confusion especially in large toilet facilities.

**Stairwells and Lifts**

* There should be a clear indication between bottom and top of the stairs as well as each level, such as a different flooring surface.
* Handrails should contrast to the walls and should have one rail that covers the whole stairwell without a break.
* The edge of each step should be clearly defined. Signage should be clear and at eye level and indicate each floor level.
* The area should be well lit at all times and avoid gloss finishes to any of the surfaces.
* Any windows should be fitted with antiglare foil to cut down glare. Blinds or curtains in these areas are seldom if ever pulled across.

**Playground Areas**

* All surfaces should be flat and even. (Whenever possible)
* Ramps and stairs/steps should be clearly marked and contrasted with the background.
* The border of playgrounds should be clearly identified.
* Any furniture should be a contrasting colour to the surroundings.
* All signage should be at eye level and at a size that can be easily read\*.
* Adventure playground equipment, swings, slides etc, should be well contrasted to their surroundings in order to stand out.
* Low windows that open out onto a play area should be permanently fixed to prevent them opening out or barriers erected externally to prevent people from getting to close to the projecting edge of the window.
* Waste paper bins if attached to the building should be recessed into the wall and brightly painted.
* Free standing bins should be well contrasted with the floor.
* Doors leading in and out to these areas should be well contrasted to the building and well-lit in the winter months.

**\*Signage**

* Signs should be clear, readable and meaningful.
* They should benefit from good colour/tonal contrast and logos should be kept to a minimum. (Things that have nothing to do with the information on the sign) although pictorial signs can be very beneficial for people with visual impairments or learning disabilities.
* Clear uncomplicated print fonts such as Arial, Comic Sans or Helvetica are good to use.
* Use upper and lower case lettering. (Never use just upper)
* Signs should have a matt finish and placed in good lighting.
* They should be placed at approximately to eye level for an adult, for Infant and Junior schools this should be lower.
* Signage should be consistent throughout the building, same size, colour and height.