

Understanding Workplace Environments and Sensory Needs

How environments impact performance, wellbeing and retention.

Who this information sheet is for?

This information sheet is designed for employers, managers, HR teams and supervisors who want to understand how workplace environments can support or exclude people with SEND.

It focuses on practical, low-cost changes that can improve performance and wellbeing for a wide range of employees.

It can be read on its own or alongside the other SEND information sheets (see overleaf for details).

Why environment Matters

For many people with SEND, the workplace environment has a significant impact on how well they can concentrate, communicate and manage stress.

What feels like a “normal” environment to one person can be:

- Overwhelming
- Distracting
- Physically uncomfortable
- Mentally exhausting

Difficulties linked to environment are often misunderstood as poor attitude, lack of resilience or disengagement.

Common workplace sensory challenges

Everyday workplace features that can be challenging include:

- Open-plan offices
- Background noise and conversations
- Bright or flickering lighting
- Busy visual environments
- Strong smells (cleaning products, perfumes)
- Hot-desking or unpredictable seating
- Frequent interruptions

These challenges can build up over time and significantly affect energy, focus and wellbeing.

Sensory processing differences

Sensory processing refers to how the brain receives and responds to sensory information. People with SEND may experience sensory input differently, including:

- Sound
- Light
- Smell
- Touch
- Movement
- Visual clutter

This does not mean someone is “sensitive” or “difficult” — it means their nervous system processes information differently.

Behaviour is often communication

When someone is struggling with sensory overload, this may show up as:

- Irritability or withdrawal
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased anxiety
- Fatigue or headaches
- Avoidance of certain tasks or spaces

These responses are often attempts to cope or self-regulate, not signs of poor motivation or professionalism.

Stress, regulation and performance

Sensory overload increases stress levels and reduces a person's ability to:

- Process information
- Communicate clearly
- Make decisions
- Manage emotions
- Sustain performance over time

What looks like a "performance issue" may actually be a regulation issue caused by the environment. Reducing sensory stress often leads to rapid improvements in performance.

Practical adjustments employers can consider

Many effective environmental adjustments are low-cost and simple, such as:

- Providing quieter workspaces or noise-reducing options
- Allowing flexibility around where and how work is done
- Adjusting lighting where possible
- Offering predictable routines and clear structure
- Reducing unnecessary interruptions
- Allowing use of headphones or assistive tools

Good adjustments benefit many employees, not only those with SEND.

It's about design, not special treatment

Environmental adjustments are not about giving unfair advantage. They are about:

- Removing barriers
- Enabling people to work at their best
- Creating environments that support different ways of working

Inclusive environments improve:

- Productivity
- Wellbeing
- Retention
- Engagement across the workforce

"Many workplace difficulties are environmental, not personal."

Next information sheets in this series to explore:

- Communication and management styles
- Inclusive recruitment and reasonable adjustments
- Job design, job carving and job coaching
- Leadership and organisational culture

Key Messages to take away

Environments directly affect performance and wellbeing

-  **Sensory needs are common and often hidden**
-  **Behaviour is often a response to overload**
-  **Small changes can make a big difference**
-  **Inclusive environments benefit everyone**

Understanding sensory and environmental needs is a key foundation for effective communication, reasonable adjustments and job design.