NEUROEMPOWER WORKPLACE GUIDE

Making Open Plan Offices Work for Neurodivergent Employees

What employers, managers and colleagues can do, and what individuals can do for themselves

For employers, HR teams, line managers and neurodivergent employees

November 2026

Why this guide matters

Open plan offices were designed to bring people together. For many neurodivergent employees, including autistic people and people with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's or sensory processing differences, they can also be the hardest part of the working day.

Noise, movement, bright lighting and the feeling of being on show all take energy to manage. That energy is then not available for the job itself. People can end up exhausted, anxious or underperforming in a role they are very good at, simply because of where their desk is.

Most of what helps is simple, costs little and makes the office better for everyone. This guide sets out what employers, managers and colleagues can do, and what individuals can do for themselves. It works best when both sides use it together.

The picture in numbers

- Around **1 in 7** people in the UK are estimated to be neurodivergent (BSI, 2022).
- Neurodivergent employees are more likely than neurotypical colleagues to say they feel exhausted at work: **45% compared with 30%** (CIPD, 2024).
- In a controlled study, just eight minutes of typical open plan noise raised negative mood by **25%** and a physical marker of stress by **34%** (Sander et al., 2021).
- When two large companies moved staff into open plan space, face to face conversation fell by around **70%** and email increased (Bernstein and Turban, 2018).

Everyone is different

There is no single neurodivergent experience of an office. Some people find a busy room energising and a silent one much harder. Some need to move, others need stillness. What nearly everyone benefits from is choice and some control over their surroundings, so the most useful thing you can do is ask the person.

Why open plan can be hard

Understanding what is going on makes it much easier to find the right fix. These are the most common pressure points.

Pressure point	What is happening	How it can show up
Sound	Overlapping conversations, phone calls, keyboards and kitchen noise. Many neurodivergent people cannot filter out background sound, so everything arrives at the same volume.	Rereading the same line, headaches, wearing headphones all day, staying late to get quiet time.
Light and movement	Bright or flickering overhead lights, glare from windows, people walking past, busy walls and screens.	Eye strain, tiredness, difficulty settling to a task, always choosing a seat that faces a wall.
Smell, temperature and touch	Food smells, perfume, air conditioning draughts, uncomfortable seating or clothing.	Feeling unwell or irritable, avoiding certain areas, moving desks often.
Interruptions	Being approached without warning or asked a quick question. For some people it takes a long time to get back into a task.	Unfinished work, small mistakes, frustration, coming across as abrupt.
Being on show	Feeling watched and hiding natural ways of moving, fidgeting or concentrating. This is often called masking.	Exhaustion by the end of the day, needing a long time to recover at home, dreading office days.
Unpredictability	Hot desking, changing neighbours, not knowing where you will sit or who will be in.	Anxiety before arriving, coming in very early to secure a seat, more time off.

Acas guidance recognises that masking at work can leave people exhausted and isolated and can harm mental health. An office that removes the need to mask is a healthier and more productive one.

What the law says

- Under the **Equality Act 2010**, employers must make reasonable adjustments when a disabled worker is placed at a substantial disadvantage. Section 20 covers the way work is organised, the physical features of the workplace and the provision of equipment or support.
- Many neurodivergent people are protected by the Act, including some who would not describe themselves as disabled.
- Acas is clear that a worker **does not need a diagnosis** to be considered disabled under the Act, and that employers should offer support whether or not there is one.
- An employer cannot ask the employee to pay for a reasonable adjustment.
- **Access to Work** is a government grant that can help with the cost of practical support at work. The employee applies. It does not replace the employer's own duty to make reasonable adjustments, and waiting times can be long, so it is worth applying early.

PART 1

What you can do as an employer or manager

Practical steps for the space, the working day and the team around the person

Start with a conversation

The person is the expert on what helps them. A short, private conversation will tell you more than any checklist.

- **Ask everyone.** "What helps you do your best work here?" is a good question for the whole team, including people who have not told you they are neurodivergent.
- **Do not wait** for a diagnosis or a formal request before you offer support.
- **Write down what you agree**, for example in a workplace adjustments passport, so the person does not have to explain it all again when their manager changes.
- **Review it.** Needs change with workload, health, the seasons and office moves. Put a date in the diary.
- **Keep it confidential.** Share only what the person has agreed you can share.

Make it easy to ask

When Acas polled 1,650 line managers in November 2024 about barriers to making adjustments for neurodivergent staff, the most common answer, chosen by 72%, was employees not saying that they needed one. In the same poll, 39% said managers find the conversation difficult to have. The more openly you invite the conversation, the sooner problems come to light.

Questions you could ask

- "Which parts of the office work well for you, and which get in the way?"
- "When and where do you do your best thinking?"
- "What would you like me to know about how you work best?"
- "What is one change we could try this month?"
- "How would you like me to check in with you about this?"

Space and seating

- Offer a **consistent desk**. If you use hot desking, let people who need it book or keep the same one.
- Offer seats at the **edge of the room**, with a wall behind, away from doors, kitchens, printers and walkways.
- Create **zones**: a quiet area for focused work, a space for collaboration and somewhere to take calls. Label them clearly and agree what each one is for.
- Provide a **quiet room or booth** that anyone can use without having to explain why.
- Use screens, plants, shelving or desk dividers to cut down visual movement.
- Keep walkways and shared areas tidy and clearly signed.

Sound

- Say yes to **noise cancelling headphones, ear defenders or earplugs**, and make it normal to wear them.
- Move phone and video calls out of the main space wherever you can.
- Add soft surfaces such as acoustic panels, carpet and fabric screens.
- Keep background music and radio out of work areas.
- Check the small sounds too: ticking clocks, humming fridges, slamming doors and loud ringtones.

Light, smell and temperature

- Replace flickering lights quickly. Offer desks near natural light, and desks away from it for people who find glare difficult.
- Allow desk lamps, screen filters, caps or tinted glasses.
- Keep strong food smells in the kitchen and ask the team to be thoughtful about perfume and air fresheners.
- Give people control where you can: a fan, a blind, a small heater, an extra layer.
- Relax dress codes where particular fabrics or fits cause discomfort.

Time and flexibility

- Offer **flexible start and finish times** so people can travel and work when it is quieter.
- Offer **home working for focused tasks** where the role allows it.
- Allow short, regular movement or sensory breaks without the person needing to ask each time.
- Agree office days in advance so the person knows who will be in and where they will sit.
- Give **notice of changes** such as desk moves, building work, visitors and fire alarm tests.

CIPD research in 2024 found that flexible working had the most positive impact of the practices it looked at, yet fewer than half of the people surveyed said their organisation offered it.

Team habits and culture

- Agree a team signal for “please do not interrupt”, such as headphones on or a small desk flag, and respect it.
- Encourage a quick message first instead of arriving at someone's desk.
- Protect focus time in shared calendars.
- Do not read headphones, limited eye contact or eating lunch alone as unfriendliness.
- Give managers neurodiversity training so they feel confident having these conversations.
- Involve neurodivergent staff when you plan a move or refit. The British Standards Institution guide **PAS 6463:2022 Design for the Mind** gives detailed advice on lighting, acoustics, layout and wayfinding.

What it costs

Many of the most effective changes are free. This table can help you decide where to start.

Free	Low cost	Needs planning
A consistent desk	Desk dividers and screens	Acoustic panels
Headphones welcomed	Desk lamps and screen filters	Booths or a quiet room
Flexible hours	Noise cancelling headphones	Lighting upgrades
A team signal for focus time	Clear signs for zones	A design review using PAS 6463
Notice of changes	Plants and soft furnishings	Manager training across the organisation
Agreed quiet hours		

What colleagues can do

- Take calls and long chats away from the desks.
- Check before you interrupt. A quick message helps.
- Believe people when they say something is difficult, even if it does not bother you.
- Keep shared spaces tidy and be thoughtful about strong smells.
- Include people in ways that suit them. An invitation to lunch that can be turned down without fuss is still a welcome one.

Employer and manager checklist

Tick what is already in place, then choose one or two things to work on next.

- ☐ We ask every team member what helps them work well
- ☐ Agreed adjustments are written down and reviewed
- ☐ People who need one can keep a consistent desk
- ☐ There is a quiet space that anyone can use
- ☐ Headphones and ear defenders are welcomed
- ☐ Calls are taken away from the main desks
- ☐ Lighting is checked and flicker is fixed quickly
- ☐ Flexible hours and home working are offered where possible
- ☐ The team has an agreed signal for focus time
- ☐ We give notice of moves and changes
- ☐ Managers have had neurodiversity training
- ☐ Neurodivergent staff are involved in decisions about the space

PART 2

What you can do as an individual

Ways to understand your own needs, shape your space and ask for support

You should not have to fix a workplace on your own. The legal duty to make adjustments sits with your employer. There is still a lot within your control, and knowing what helps you makes it much easier to ask for it.

Know your own pattern

- For a week or two, note when you feel focused and when you feel drained. Look for patterns in the time of day, the place, the noise and the task.
- Name your **top three difficulties** and your **top three helps**. A specific request is much easier for a manager to agree to.
- Learn your early signs of overload, such as irritability, a headache or losing your words, and act on them early.

Shape your space

- Choose your seat with care: the edge of the room, your back to a wall, away from the kitchen and the door.
- Use headphones, earplugs or ear defenders. Try steady background sound, instrumental music and silence to see which suits you.
- Reduce glare with a screen filter, lower brightness, dark mode or tinted lenses.
- Keep a small kit at your desk: earplugs, a fidget item, a warm layer, water and a snack.
- Create a visual boundary with a plant, the position of your monitor or a desk divider.

Manage your energy

- **Match the task to the place.** Keep deep focus work for home days, quiet hours or a booked room, and use busy office time for meetings and quick tasks.
- Take breaks away from your desk, and outside if you can.
- Take movement breaks before you feel you need them.
- Plan a lighter evening after office days so you have time to recover.
- If you have flexible hours, try arriving early or travelling outside the rush hour.

Ask for what you need

- You do not need a diagnosis to ask for support, and you do not have to share one.
- Decide who you feel most comfortable talking to: your manager, HR, occupational health or a staff network.
- Describe the difficulty, the effect it has on your work and what would help.
- Suggest a trial period. It is easier to agree to four weeks than to forever.
- Follow up in writing. Acas has a free reasonable adjustments request letter template.

Words you could use

"I do my best work when I can concentrate without interruption. In the main office the background noise makes it hard for me to focus, and I am finishing the day exhausted. It would help me to sit at a desk by the wall, wear noise cancelling headphones and work from home on the days I am writing reports. Could we try this for four weeks and then review how it is going?"

If that feels like too much, begin with one sentence: **"I work best when…"**, **"I find it hard to concentrate when…"** or **"It would help me if…"**

If you need more

- Ask about a **workplace needs assessment**. An assessor looks at your role and your strengths and recommends adjustments for you and your employer.
- Apply to **Access to Work** for help with the cost of practical support.
- If things are not improving, speak to HR or your union representative, or call the **Acas helpline on 0300 123 1100** for free and confidential advice.
- If work is affecting your health, talk to your GP. The organisations at the end of this guide can also help.

My own plan

Tick what you already have in place, then choose your next step.

- ☐ I know my top three difficulties in the office
- ☐ I know the top three things that help me
- ☐ I have found the best seat available to me
- ☐ I have a desk kit ready
- ☐ I plan focus work for quieter times or places
- ☐ I take regular breaks away from my desk
- ☐ I know who I can talk to about adjustments
- ☐ I have asked for what I need, in writing
- ☐ We have agreed a date to review how it is going
- ☐ I know where to get outside advice

What we do not yet know

It is important to be honest about the limits of the evidence. Most research on open plan offices looks at the workforce as a whole and does not report results separately for neurodivergent people. The two studies quoted in this guide were small: one followed staff at two companies and the other tested 43 people in a simulated office.

Much of what we know about neurodivergent employees in open plan settings comes from surveys, from professional practice and from what neurodivergent people tell us about their own working lives. What helps will differ from person to person, so treat this guide as a starting point and keep asking.

Where to find more help

Organisation	What they offer	How to reach them
Acas	Free, impartial advice on workplace rights and reasonable adjustments, with letter templates	acas.org.uk 0300 123 1100
Access to Work	Government grant towards practical support at work in England, Scotland and Wales	Search Access to Work on gov.uk 0800 121 7479
National Autistic Society	Information and guidance for autistic people and employers	autism.org.uk
ADHD Foundation	Resources and training on ADHD and neurodiversity	adhdfoundation.org.uk
British Dyslexia Association	Advice on dyslexia at work and workplace assessments	bdadyslexia.org.uk
CIPD	Neuroinclusion at Work guide and research for employers	cipd.org
Mind	Mental health information and support	mind.org.uk
Samaritans	Someone to talk to at any time, day or night	samaritans.org 116 123

How NeuroEmpower can help

NeuroEmpower CIC provides CPD accredited neurodiversity training for employers, HR teams and leaders, workplace needs assessments, coaching and free resources. To talk about support for your organisation or for yourself, visit **neuroempower.org** or email **info@neuroempower.org**.

Sources

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