

# A Handbook for **Accessible Events**

By Broadsword





# Welcome

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As event organisers, we know the power events can have on attendees whether it be that they take away new connections, knowledge, or memories. Everyone deserves to experience events fully and safely, yet often accessibility is not considered.

Our diversity, equity and inclusion working group have been committing to championing, creating awareness of accessibility at events, and consulting experts in the field to hone our approach. At our core is collaboration, which we believe is integral to creating a truly accessible experience. It's listening to those with lived experiences and creating the space for voices to be heard.

Only by actively engaging different perspectives can we challenge and stretch thinking and enrich the experience of our attendees, no matter their background.

This was truly brought to life when we were tasked in producing a Disability and Equality Awards event in which two thirds of attendees had complex disabilities and needs. Working closely with a group of accessibility champions, we were extremely proud to create a safe space for the disabled community. It was a privilege to work on the experience, for which we won multiple awards including Gold: Diversity and inclusion, and an eye opener on how we do things inclusively.



# Events Without Limits

Accessibility and inclusion are broad ranging terms with plenty of technical definitions, but the overall goal is to remove barriers to participation. When we think about 'access' we tend to think about 'disability' but accessibility and inclusion go far beyond this. We all experience the world in different ways and we are all inherently unique in our own identities so it is not just about removing physical barriers.

For events, it means providing equal access to the same networking opportunities, educational content, celebrations, and conversations for every person regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities. Consider an event from different perspectives and imagine how it would feel if you were experiencing the event through a different lens. Nothing will land better for an attendee than being met by an event team who are secure and comfortable with equitable thinking, inclusive attitudes, language and behaviours.

There's a business case for accessibility too. You're reaching the broadest possible audience, capturing more of your target market, driving positive awareness, and doing your part to create a more inclusive world.

According to Forbes magazine, "When people are regularly reminded that they belong, they are likely to give their best, think clearly, feel safe to express their views and ideas and be happier, engaged and supportive of others, too."

But breaking down these barriers doesn't happen by accident. It is much easier, more efficient, more creative and more cost effective, if access and inclusion are built in at the start and are at the heart of the design, rather than trying to retrofit. **It takes intentional planning and continuous improvements. Within this guide, we will take a look at various areas of an event that can be made more inclusive for attendees with varying accessibility needs.**



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# 01

# Planning



Event organisers, by nature, are planners. We plan each element of an event meticulously, with backup plans in place, for those just-in-case moments. Yet, too often, accessibility is only planned if it's requested. This way, it ends up being so close to the event date that you find yourself in a position where you cannot provide the access required for someone to attend. The first step to an accessible event is being proactive.





# The Accessible Venue Checklist

Below are some things to check for on your initial venue search or starting to think about making an event more accessible. These will help you get thinking about your attendee's journey from street level but it's key to speak to your attendees about what specific needs they may have to understand what barriers to participation they may face across different touch points. For more personalised recommendations or comprehensive support with your venue search you can talk to our team.

## Location

- ☐ Accessible parking on site, drop off points, and reserved spaces
- ☐ An accessible main entrance, or safe alternative entrance
- ☐ Level and firm ground leading to the venue
- ☐ Close by accessible transport links
- ☐ Accommodation with elevators and wheelchair friendly rooms
- ☐ Large high contrast signage with braille

# Space

- ☐ No columns that obstruct sight or mobility
- ☐ Step free access throughout (with easily accessible elevators)
- ☐ Ample space for navigation
- ☐ Doorways and walkways wide enough for a wheelchair (minimum 32in)
- ☐ Space close by where service animals can drink water and go outside
- ☐ Doors with automatic openers or ability to prop them open
- ☐ No steps or lips that prevent wheelchair access to key areas
- ☐ Ramps with handrails on each side and a gentle gradient (1:20)
- ☐ Accessible toilets
- ☐ Accessible fire-escape routes and visual fire alarms
- ☐ A room that can act as a low-sensory space
- ☐ Ventilation systems
- ☐ Flexible seating arrangements

# Venue features

- ☐ Adjustable lighting levels
- ☐ A working loop system in your meeting room for hearing aid users
- ☐ Electrical outlets available in seating areas
- ☐ Height adjustable counters and furniture
- ☐ Customer service policies
- ☐ Kitchen can cater for special dietary requirements



## Excel London becomes first UK venue to work with leading accessibility consultants

Excel London and The Disability Taskforce have announced a collaboration designed to set new standards in venue accessibility and become the first of its kind across UK venues. The Taskforce will provide in depth insights across the entire Excel visitor journey to ensure that access improvements are holistically inclusive. They will work closely to produce a new accessibility strategy and roadmap for Excel, with a commitment to improvements in the coming months and years, and a long-term goal for the venue to be accessible for all visitors, organisers, exhibitors and employees alike. Excel's director of venue operations, Kerrie Kemp, said: "While it is important to be ambitious, we also recognise that change doesn't occur overnight and that before we can make any impactful adjustments, we must first better understand where any potential barriers may lie, and that's where the brilliant team at The Disability Taskforce come in."

### **WelcoMe**

WelcoMe is an online tool to find accessible places where visitors can browse a directory of venues and share their accessibility preferences with venues. It allows visitors to know what to expect as well as discover places that are accessible to them. It allows businesses to understand individual needs and receive tips on how to assist with these needs. [Explore here.](#)



# Creating Content

For any event, presentations should work for everyone in the room including those sitting in the far back in the corner, who may not be able to see the presenter and slides as clearly. It often means changing the seating layout, having a larger screen or having additional screens towards the back. But, planners can go further to ensure the content is accessible by adhering to the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#).

- ☐ Use an easy to read font size and type
- ☐ Consider the use of colours: would it work in grey scale?
- ☐ Avoid using italics and underlining
- ☐ Think about the amount of text on each slide and if this is necessary
- ☐ All videos shown should have a voice over and closed captions
- ☐ Add video and image descriptions





# Are Virtual Events Accessible?

Virtual events remove many barriers for some. They eliminate the need for travel, making them more accessible and sustainable as well as allowing planners to connect attendees across the world. While planners may see a virtual events as the solution for accessibility needs, it's not as simple as this. While a virtual component is a great addition for attendees who don't feel safe or comfortable attending the live event, it should be there as a choice between participating in the virtual event or the live event; a hybrid model.

In turn, virtual events present access barriers of their own and aren't inherently accessible for everyone. Accessibility means different things in a virtual environment compared to a physical one, and the type of event you choose to put on will ultimately inform the kind of resources required to make it happen. There a number of digital accessibility requirements to consider such as site functionality and the WCAG guidelines.

Event technology can be instrumental such as the use of AI to remove budget barriers through transcription tools that provide an alternative to a live transcribe for those with a smaller budget. We're always working to find solutions and partners for varying different budgets.



# 02

# Promotion



Creating a safe space for all attendees starts with your event promotion. Active listening and excellent communication continue to be key and you shouldn't be afraid to open up the conversation around accessibility or ask for more details to ensure attendees get what they need.



# Event Website

All of your digital assets should follow accessibility best practice and guidelines including:

- Access through a keyboard and screen reader compatibility
- Underlined and clearly explained links
- Clear contrast ratio between colours and text
- Ability to resize the font, switch fonts, and greyscale the website
- Link to the sitemap
- Hover states so users can clearly see where they are on the page
- Simple navigation
- Captioned videos and alt text on images.

## Communications

Communication to attendees that their needs matter is integral, and in turn enables you to better understand how someone might be excluded from an experience, providing valuable insight.

An example of being proactive rather than reactive is including details on the accessibility of the event when promoting the event and communicating with your attendees. The more you can share in advance, the more comfortable, welcome, and prepared attendees will feel. This could be a know-before-you-go guide including venue maps, FAQs, and policies on accessibility. This encourages attendees to register and prevents issues on the day.

Your event information should include links to accessible transportation routes and offer an accessible shuttle service that guests can sign up to for getting to off-site activities such as evening entertainment and networking .

## Registration

Use your registration process as an opportunity to learn about your audience and their needs and help you prepare for additional requirements. For example including a checkbox for service animals or personal care assistants, and leaving forms open for more suggestions - are key to ensure you can put in place preparations for additional attendees. As everyone's needs are individual, accessibility is an ongoing conversation and listening to your attendees throughout is the crucial for an accessible event. Encourage guests to get in touch and share their perspectives, concerns, and requests they have. There should be clear points of contact, and multiple ways to get in touch on the site.

# 03

# Production



## Tip

When it comes to production, every detail matters. A big difference we recommend is changing how you use lighting in the room. Rather than flashing, moving lights consider subtle change in colour. This can give a defined moment in the spotlight for attendees on stage or create an atmosphere change without causing distress.

Below are some areas to think about when it comes to producing your event, things we have come across that have removed barriers for guests. You can do things in every area of production to make the event more accessible.

## Looking at your agenda

A key consideration is ensuring there are regular breaks and quiet spaces. If you are including an exhibition space, exhibitors should be given standards for accessible stands that align with the standard of the rest of the event. Staff at registration areas should be trained on disability etiquette, accessibility protocols, and assistance techniques. For lunch time, provide the option of accessible cutlery, such as cups with handles and bendable straws.



## Layout of the space

All of your attendees should be able to navigate freely throughout your event activities and if you have wheelchair users attending, there should be ample space. As a guideline, think of a wheelchair user trying to turn around in a walkway. For this reason there needs to be a minimum space of six feet in corridors and thoroughfares.

Seating areas should have gaps for wheelchairs and you need to consider extra companions in your seating chart plans. The tables in which the wheelchair users will be sat should be between 30 and 34 inches in height and have at least 27 inches of knee clearance, with table cloths kept short.

Some other considerations include:

- A stage with ramped wheelchair access
- A well-lit, visible space for an interpreter
- Sanitising stations and touch free registration
- Extra seating in waiting areas and walking routes
- Extra space on stage
- The heights of lecturns and microphones on stage



## Spotlight

A QUIET PLACE TO  
CATCH YOUR BREATH

hub  
by  
EventWell



The creation of dedicated spaces for attendees to decompress amidst an energised event can make a world of difference for those with neurodivergence. 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent which encompasses a broad spectrum of neurological differences, including Autism, ADHD, and various learning styles.

**'As a neurodivergent individual, I sometimes find myself avoiding certain events if I anticipate feeling overwhelmed or out of place. However, with the right accommodations and support, I can navigate these situations more comfortably'** – Broadsword employee.

One way to create a sense of comfort is a designated quiet room or sensory calm space, such as those by EventWell, which reduce triggers and feelings of being overwhelmed for attendees who might have otherwise left the event entirely.

Quiet rooms can include any of the following features:

- Noise muffling/closing off from the rest of the event space
- Muted lighting and colours
- Low noise requirements
- Soft, compressive seating
- Weighted blankets
- White noise machines
- Plants and natural light
- Sensory toys
- Weighted blankets
- Disposable earplugs for attendees to take with them
- An option to speak to someone confidentially
- A meditation station
- A screen to stream the live event away from the crowds
- Mindfulness activities

# Accessible Signage 101

Signage plays a crucial role in ensuring attendees can navigate with ease. The clearer the better, which means high contrast colours, large and bold fonts, and clear lettering. The fonts should be conventional so avoid italics or decorative fonts.

For Blind attendees, incorporate tactile elements, such as braille or raised lettering. At restrooms and emergency exit signs, your venue should legally have these in place. To help attendees easily find their way around, keep signage consistent and strategically placed at key points such as entrances, main rooms, and designated areas to be visible from any height. Start at the entrance or drop off point and map out the journey that your agenda will take attendees on to help you.

Attendees shouldn't be straining their eyes or guessing where there going. Implementing these practices especially helps attendees with low vision or smaller heights.

Wayfinding doesn't have to be solely print. It can also be audio or having lots of people across the venue to help guests find their way.





**“We've all been excluded at one point in time or another. We know how it feels and it has a lasting impact”**

After breaking her back at 17, Rachel has gone on to hold leadership positions in business and coach medal-winning para teams in sport. She has used her experience to help businesses turn information around diversity, access and inclusion into deeper understanding, resulting in heightened awareness and appreciation within the working environment. Rachel is an influence and leader in accessible and inclusive practices within business and across the industry. She was a founding member, chair and judge of the M&IT Accessibility and Inclusion Awards.

Rachel's accident meant not only did the world look different, but people treated her differently too, and everyday she has to find her way new challenges .

**“As the industry turned to virtual events, it felt like an opportunity to include everyone. In the virtual world, I felt like I was the same as everyone else”**

With the return of live events and, with it the return of Rachel's exclusion, her passion to educate event planners and reduce the huge amount of times accessibility needs are overlooked.

**“Accessibility for event planners is often one dimensional. It's a tick box exercise”**

In reality, accessibility is multi-dimensional and simply ensuring there is an accessible toilet isn't going to cut it. Rachel shares she has experienced toilets at venues being out of use, locked, and used as storage. And that's just the toilet. Other firsthand examples included no low rise tables, no step free access, and team building which involved running.

**“There are easy fixes for these kind of things if they could just be looked at from a slightly broader perspective”**

Imagine if during that event planning, you've got input and ideas from a diverse and different range of people, with disabilities, coming from different cultures, identities, ages.

**“For me, an inclusively designed event is a space where everyone can access all aspects of that event and where they can feel welcome and have a sense of belonging . They feel equity, they feel on a level playing ground, they feel valued. They all might access it in different ways, but they're all coming together in one space”.**

**[Taken from our podcast interview with Access & Inclusion Educator, Rachel Belliere-Wilson, which you can click here to listen to.](#)**



# Getting Started



## Where to start: 5 foundations of an accessible event

### **The starting point is you.**

Take some time to ask yourself some questions before embarking on the journey. Have a think about what it means to you personally and professionally, what are your expectations of your team, and how you are positioning your ambitions to your stakeholders and clients. This way you can define your purpose around your access and inclusion strategy. If you have accessibility in mind from the offset, this takes the responsibility from your guests to be asking. As you learn more, designing events with accessibility in mind will become a natural part of the process.

### **Invest some time into access and inclusion education.**

This will help create more awareness around differences and understanding of some of the challenges that might arise to equip your team with the right knowledge and attitudes to enhance the customer experience. This really becomes evident during the event as on site team members will have more confidence to offer help, especially as it's rarely the case everyone can navigate all of the facilities and information independently. Additional human touch points are often needed to look out for challenges and help those in need of assistance respectfully.

### **Create guidelines, checklists, and templates.**

Enlisting the help of experts with lived experiences means you can create thorough guidelines for your team. Access and inclusion should be a leading thought, not an afterthought, so including these guidelines from the briefing stage will help to spot accessibility issues before they become a problem.

### **Keep in mind the event experience doesn't begin at the venue.**

Although, you may just be responsible for the venue, the attendee's event experience starts from the moment they receive an invitation or try to register and it's critical to think about how your guests are arriving to the event.

### **Provide accessibility information to attendees.**

This should include what you can and can't do at events to answer the FAQs that people with a disability might have when they are considering attending as well as asking questions of your audience to enable you to understand their accessibility requirements better. Consider how often you ask about dietary requirements compared to accessibility needs.

Overall, be more curious and find out how to make it a great experience for somebody with additional needs potentially through the option of a follow up conversation. There is a balance between making your event accessible before hand and being careful not to assume every attendee has the same need. That's why encouraging attendees to reach out as far in advance as possible and start the conversation early is vital.

# BROAD SWORD.

Broadsword is a global event  
agency leading a mission to  
create experiences that  
create positive change..



## Explore Web Content Accessibility

[Click here for The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.](#)

[Click here for resources on accessible design by UX experts, NN/g.](#)

## Getting Started

For actionable tips on how to improve your event planning strategy to become more accessible and inclusive, you can read and [download our follow up guide: basic, better, and best approaches to accessible events.](#) [Click here to access.](#)

## Let's talk

At Broadsword, we know the importance of a conversation. Let's talk about how we can create more inclusive event experiences together.

[Contact us at hello@wearebroadsword.com](mailto:hello@wearebroadsword.com)

Certified



Corporation