



Workplace Sensory Environment Audit

Assess sensory load across your organisation... from lighting to noise to workflow.

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

A clear orientation (for organisations)

This is not a compliance checklist.

It is not a diagnosis tool.

It is not a way to assess individual tolerance or resilience.

This audit exists because **sensory load is one of the most common, invisible drivers of stress, burnout, shutdown, and reduced performance...** particularly for neurodivergent (ND) staff... and yet is rarely examined at a system level.

The purpose of this audit is to help organisations:

- notice where sensory load is unnecessarily high
- understand how environment shapes capacity
- identify low-cost, high-impact adjustments
- reduce cumulative strain across teams

This audit should be used to **change environments**, not to expect people to adapt to harmful conditions.

1. A core reframe: sensory load is a design issue

Sensory stress is often misinterpreted as:

- distraction
- sensitivity
- lack of focus
- attitude or preference

In reality, sensory load is a **physiological processing demand**.

When environments include:

- constant noise
- harsh or flickering lighting
- visual clutter
- unpredictable interruptions
- high sensory contrast

...the nervous system expends energy *just to stay functional*.

For ND staff... especially autistic, ADHD, AuDHD, and trauma-exposed individuals... this cost is significantly higher.

If multiple people struggle in the same space, the issue is not individual tolerance.

It is **environmental design**.

2. Why sensory load is often invisible to leadership

Sensory load is frequently overlooked because:

- it accumulates gradually
- people mask discomfort to stay professional
- impact appears as fatigue, errors, or disengagement
- environments were designed for “average” nervous systems

By the time sensory strain becomes visible, staff are often already:

- overloaded
- burned out
- shutting down
- reducing hours
- leaving roles

This audit is about **earlier detection**, before harm escalates.

3. How to use this audit safely

This audit is intended to be:

- completed by leaders, facilities, HR, DEI, or project teams
- informed by staff feedback **without requiring disclosure**
- revisited periodically, not once

Important guardrails:

- Do not ask individuals to justify needs
- Do not use results to deny adjustments
- Do not treat findings as complaints
- Do not frame this as “special treatment”

The goal is **load reduction**, not accommodation policing.

4. Understanding cumulative sensory load

Sensory stress rarely comes from one source.

It accumulates across:

- lighting
- sound
- visual input
- movement and proximity
- digital interfaces
- workflow and pacing

A space may seem “fine” in one category...
but still be overwhelming in combination.

This audit looks at **patterns**, not perfection.

5. Audit Area 1: Lighting

Lighting is one of the most underestimated sensory stressors.

Consider:

- Is lighting harsh, overly bright, or flickering?
- Are fluorescent lights used without alternatives?
- Do staff have any control over lighting levels?
- Is natural light used where possible?
- Are there strong contrasts between light/dark areas?

Common impact:

- headaches
- eye strain
- irritability
- reduced concentration
- faster fatigue

Low-cost improvements often include:

- task lighting instead of overhead lighting
- warm bulbs
- desk lamps
- permission to adjust local lighting

Control matters as much as brightness.

6. Audit Area 2: Noise & Sound

Noise is one of the most consistently reported sources of overload.

Assess:

- Is background noise constant or unpredictable?
- Are conversations, phones, or equipment audible across spaces?
- Are there quiet areas available and protected?
- Are headphones or ear protection permitted?
- Are alarms, alerts, or notifications frequent or loud?

Noise that is:

- unpredictable
- layered
- difficult to escape

...is especially taxing.

Silence is not always required...

predictable sound is often more regulating.

7. Audit Area 3: Visual Environment

Visual load affects cognitive capacity more than many organisations realise.

Review:

- Is the space visually cluttered?
- Are there constant screens, movement, or signage?
- Are desks or shared areas overloaded with materials?
- Is branding or colour use intense or high-contrast?

High visual load can:

- increase cognitive fatigue
- reduce processing speed
- trigger shutdown
- worsen headaches or nausea

Not everything needs to be minimal.

But **visual rest zones** matter.

8. Audit Area 4: Movement, Proximity & Spatial Safety

Physical closeness and movement patterns strongly affect regulation.

Consider:

- Are desks closely packed?
- Is there frequent movement behind or beside people?
- Are there predictable pathways through spaces?
- Are meeting rooms overcrowded?
- Do people feel watched or interrupted easily?

Lack of spatial safety increases:

- startle response
- hypervigilance
- self-monitoring

Small changes (layout, seating options, buffer space) can significantly reduce load.

9. Audit Area 5: Digital Sensory Load

Digital environments are also sensory environments.

Assess:

- Frequency of notifications
- Number of platforms used simultaneously
- Expectation of constant responsiveness
- Use of video calls by default
- Bright or complex interfaces

Digital overload often shows up as:

- decision fatigue
- slower responses
- missed information
- emotional exhaustion

Asking “does this need to be synchronous?” is a powerful load-reduction question.

10. Audit Area 6: Workflow & Sensory Pacing

Workflow design can amplify or reduce sensory strain.

Review:

- Are tasks frequently interrupted?
- Is multitasking expected or rewarded?
- Are deadlines stacked without recovery time?
- Are transitions rushed?
- Is urgency constant or situational?

High sensory load is often worsened by:

- rapid task switching
- unclear priorities
- unpredictable escalation

Clarity and pacing are **sensory supports**, not just productivity tools.

11. Listening for Patterns (without spotlighting individuals)

When gathering input:

- look for repeated themes
- avoid focusing on who raised what
- normalise sensory feedback
- invite anonymous contributions

Helpful prompts include:

- “Where does the environment make work harder?”
- “Where do people feel most drained?”
- “Where is concentration hardest to sustain?”

If the same issue appears across roles or teams, it is **systemic**.

12. Interpreting audit findings safely

When reviewing results:

- prioritise areas with highest cumulative load
- start with changes that benefit everyone
- treat feedback as data, not criticism

Avoid framing improvements as:

- exceptions
- accommodations only

- perks

Designing lower-load environments is **good organisational practice**.

13. Common mistakes to avoid

Avoid:

- fixing one sensory input while ignoring others
- adding solutions that increase complexity
- introducing changes without communication
- making adjustments conditional on disclosure

Sensory safety fails when it becomes complicated or conditional.

14. A simple audit snapshot (copy-adapt-use)

Organisations may find it useful to capture:

- **Highest sensory load areas:**
- **Most common triggers:**
- **Spaces with least regulation support:**
- **Quick wins available:**
- **Longer-term design changes needed:**

This keeps the focus on **action**, not analysis paralysis.

15. What good sensory design enables

When sensory load is reduced, organisations often see:

- improved focus
- fewer errors
- reduced sickness absence
- increased retention
- calmer communication
- better collaboration

These outcomes come not from asking people to cope better...
but from **removing unnecessary strain**.

16. Guardrails (non-negotiable)

This audit must not be used to:

- assess individual tolerance
- deny adjustments
- label staff as “sensitive”
- require disclosure
- justify rigid environments

Sensory safety is a **collective responsibility**.

A closing note for organisations

Workplaces are sensory systems... whether they are designed intentionally or not.

When sensory load is ignored, people burn out quietly.
When it is addressed thoughtfully, capacity returns.

ND-inclusive organisations do not demand resilience.

They **design for sustainability**.

This audit is not about perfection.

It is about noticing where the environment is asking too much...
and choosing to reduce harm at the source.