

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

Environments should be:

- Clean
- Tidy
- Safe
- Well Presented
- Appropriately decorated
- Appropriately furnished

Be sure to audit communal areas of the school, such as corridors and halls and if possible conduct the audit at different times of the day and year, as there may be considerable differences in levels of lighting.

You may not be able to address all the concerns raised by your audit and indeed some aspects may call for large amounts of money to be spent, but there will be something everyone can do to make the environment less confusing for pupils who have a visual impairment. Priority areas should be identified on the school development plan and it may be useful to see the school plan.

Safety is the main consideration when making recommendations. Try to be familiar with the Local Education Authority Guidelines and the schools "Health and Safety" policy to ensure that possible changes are appropriate for pupils and staff.

It is useful to conduct the audit with the child present so you can be sure of the child's needs.

Don't be budget led, make the recommendations that you feel are necessary having consulted with the specialist teacher of the visually impaired.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Best (1992) states that there are three aspects of the child's learning environment that requires special attention:

- The Visual Environment (Key Words: Contrast and Clarity)

For those visually impaired children with some useful residual vision, the visual environment is an important factor, which can aid or hinder their learning. The two factors, which require careful consideration, are interrelated:

1. Décor: (walls, floors, ceilings, furniture, displays and people)
2. Lighting:

The décor will have an effect upon the lighting levels of a room in addition to aiding the mobility and general learning of the child.

A major problem is glare created by light reflecting off walls and surfaces. Glare can cause discomfort and can be disabling. Ideally there should be blinds at the windows and shiny surfaces should be avoided. Is there contrast between the doorframe and the wall, the handle and the door, the notices from their background.

Careful consideration should be given to:

Walls and Windows

Walls and windows in school are often covered with complex visual displays, mirrors and window paintings. Whilst it is important to provide a stimulating and varied visual environment, it is also important to ensure that the environment does not become too cluttered, that furniture and equipment can be seen clearly against walls and that shiny displays or mirrors do not provide confusing images. Sometimes painted scenes on windows can be reflected onto surfaces and floors creating very confusing shapes and patterns. Doors or walls painted with glossy paint may cause glare and therefore cause difficulties, whereas blocks of colour forming a strong contrast can be a useful aid to orientation

Furniture

- Is there an orderly classroom layout?

- Does the furniture have sharp edges?
- Is the storage space clearly marked and easily accessible?
- Do the tables have reflective surfaces
- Are there different coloured table surfaces for presentation of different materials? e.g. A dark coloured surface for light materials and a light coloured surface for dark objects
- Does the edge of the tables form a contrast with the flooring

Displays

- Are displays orderly
- Are the children aware of what is on display
- Are notices at the correct height
- Are they visually attractive or do they cause visual clutter
- How many old notices are there around the school

Floors and Furnishings

The type of floor covering used in the classroom provides its own clues as to the area of the school the child is in, but it also creates its own difficulties. Patterned carpets or tiles can add to clutter making contrast poor. Tiles and lino can also provide glare. It may be possible to cut down on the amount of glare by using blinds or curtains to block out strong light. Plain mats can also be used to provide boundaries for pupils to work in.

People

People in the environment need to be considered. What people wear can be an aid or hindrance. Very patterned clothes although visually attractive, can cause confusion if you are holding something for the child to see. If the child is also hearing impaired, signs may be lost in the background pattern, again contrast and clarity are key words to consider. If working with MDVI pupils, beware of sharp or rough items of clothing when continually lifting and moving pupils from one place to another.

Lighting

When considering lighting for visually impaired children this does not necessarily mean 'bright lights'. Many eye conditions require lower than normal lighting levels. It should not be so strong as to cause discomfort, glare or deep shadows. Certain conditions will make some pupils more

sensitive to bright lights whilst others may benefit from additional lighting. There are two types of lighting:

Environmental and On Task.

- The Sound Environment
- The Tactile Environment

Chapman and Stone (1988) include a fourth:

- The Social Environment

CLASSROOM AUDIT

POSITIONING

Where are the children expected to work	
In what position and on what surfaces	
Where does the light source come	

LIGHTING

Where are the natural light sources	
At what time of day is sunlight at its strongest in each teaching area	
Are there blinds or plain curtains available to block out some of the light	
Do these work	
Does the light fall onto any work areas	
If so, is there any glare from these surfaces	
Do children lie or move into these areas to play or rest	
What forms of lighting are there in the classroom, eg strip, spot etc	
Are lots of shadows created when the sun shines into the classroom or from overhead lighting	

CLOTHING

Is clothing worn by staff visually confusing	
Are there any items of dress dangerous to the children, eg buckles	

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Are visually impaired ambulant children encouraged to move around on their own	
Are they encouraged to move with the other children between activities	
Are they encouraged to collect their own equipment themselves	
Do they have their own equipment	
Is their equipment always kept in a particular place	
Is all equipment and storage clearly marked	

BUSY TIMES IN SCHOOLS

Identify the busy times in schools	
Identify the busy areas in school	

FLOORING AND FURNISHINGS

What type of flooring is there – lino or tiles	
Is the flooring patterned or cause glare	
Blinds - do they fit, do they work	
Curtains – do they fit the windows – Are they thick enough to block the light out totally	
Are there clearly defined areas/layouts for furniture/does the furniture clearly contrast to the floors and walls	
Steps/stairs – are edges of steps clearly highlighted	
Slopes – is there a handrail at the correct height for when using the slopes	
Is the furniture frequently moved around for different activities	
Are particular areas of the classroom designated for particular activities	
Are the classrooms cluttered with furniture that is not used	

SURFACES

Are they shiny, causing glare	
Are they patterned, causing confusion	
Are they matt	
Do they create good contrast	

FLOOR

Are there clearly defined changes in surfaces	
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TABLE TOPS

Do they produce glare	
Is there good contrast	

TRAYS/STANDING FRAMES

Do they produce glare/good clear contrast	
Are they at the correct level	

NON-SLIP MATS

Do they provide glare or good contrast	
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EQUIPMENT

Is equipment kept in the same place and clearly defined/labelled	
Is any equipment left lying at a low level or on the floor	
Is any equipment kept at a high (above eye) level	

WALLS

Are they plain or patterned	
Do the doors and floor create a good contrast	
Cluttered displays	
Patterned	
Shiny/producing glare, eg mirrors, formica surfaces	
Ceiling – dark or light	
Clearly defined areas for storage	
Are door knobs, light switches highlighted	

Is there clear labelling on cupboards	
Are there areas of the room that can provide clear contrast where necessary	
Is it free of clutter	
Are there lots of mobiles etc dangling at a low level or are they in a particular area	

AUDITORY

Does the sound produced amplify or is it softened	
Is the area shared by lots of children	
Are groups restricted in numbers to reduce noise level	
Are there any constant sounds in the room, e.g. humming light	
Are sound making toys stored in one particular place	
Are there different floor surfaces which give different auditory clues	
Are sounds used to indicate different activities	

CORRIDORS/ENTRANCE HALL

Are these well lit	
Are the doors clearly marked	
Are there any obstacles	
What guides exist to indicate where areas/classrooms are	
Are displays at eye level/whose eye level	
What auditory clues exist as guides	
What olfactory clues exist as a guide	

AUDIT OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Glare from windows	
Identify an area of the school where there is: Glare from surfaces	
Poor Lighting /Natural	
Poor lighting /Electric	
Poor control of the lighting level, e.g. no blinds or curtains	
Some control of lighting level e.g. thick curtains	
Inadequate control of lighting level, e.g. curtains or blinds not working	
Good auditory clues	
Auditory confusion	
Strong olfactory information	
Dangerous access to a building	
Obstacles in a common area	
Frequent changes in physical arrangements	

WALLS

Identify which walls:

Are visually cluttered	
Are glare producing, e.g. mirrors	
Are heavily patterned	
Have clearly defined doorways, shelves, storage, plug sockets	
Have visual displays at inappropriate height	

PEOPLE AUDIT

Identify a member of staff who is wearing very visually attractive clothes	
Clothes which provide good contrast for signing to children	
Identify a member of staff whose voice is easily definable	