

Diversability Award Entrant: Ministry of Education

Wellington Accommodation Project. The Ministry of Education is the lead advisor to the Government on education, including early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling and tertiary education.

The Ministry is working towards bringing together staff from four different Wellington locations into one workplace in the heart of Wellington's Central Business District. The project is due for completion in late 2015 and has so far proved to be a unique learning opportunity for the organisation in terms of how it creates a working space that recognises the needs of all its staff.

This is not so much a physical move as a cultural shift for the government department as it looks to provide a new, modern working environment which embeds their vision and expectations into everyday working practices. The organisation aims to be better connected through more flexible work spaces, modern business technology and tools, and spaces which support stronger teamwork and collaboration.

From the beginning of the project, the accommodation has been designed in a way that recognises 'one size doesn't fit all' and provides room for staff to shape and influence the environment in which they will be working. The Ministry has been particularly sensitive to the needs of those with a disability as this group of people may have the most to contribute to ensuring the new environment meets their particular needs.

A Special Interest Group for Disability has been set up in order to provide robust and constructive feedback to the project. It was established last year with eight members of staff with a diverse range of disabilities. One of the important starting points for the group was to understand the scale and scope of disability-related needs among Ministry staff, as well as among visitors to the new building.

The group was encouraged to give feedback on the plans for the exterior of the building, including entrance ways, as well as the availability and appropriate location of accessible parking. The plans for the interior of the building, such as walls, partitions, layout and furniture were also made available for the group to critique in terms of what may cause issues for those with a disability, whether that disability is physical or sensory. Furthermore the group were asked to advise on ways to strengthen the working environment, such as specialised equipment, how to deal with an open plan office, including noise levels, and ensuring reception staff can appropriately support any visitors to the building.

"As well as looking at the plans, we were able to visit a 'concept space' to get an idea of what it might look like. We provided input through testing the furniture and making recommendations before work began," says Christine Whittaker from the Special Interest Group for Disability.

The issues raised by the group have been used to develop actions within the design and build process. The group has been able to influence design recommendations for accessible signage; ensuring the kitchenettes include benches at an appropriate height for wheelchair users; and lifts that have audio feedback to assist those with vision impairment. Recommendations that have been approved for construction include additional dedicated accessible parking, additional accessible toilets and showers, variable height benches and appropriate thoroughfares around printers.

Indeed, the project has demonstrated to the Ministry the importance of keeping lines of communication open. Ahead of the move into their new offices, 'Change Champions' will be appointed in order to continue the conversation. They will facilitate 'Neighbourhood Charters' which means that those sitting together will agree to workplace practices and behaviours that meets individual needs and preferences. This is particularly helpful to ensure the working environment is tailored for staff with unique needs. For example, a charter that includes agreements regarding noise and behaviours in an open plan office can assist those with sensory disability, such as a vision or hearing impairment. It might also include agreements regarding the workspace and storage area for a staff member with a physical disability so that they do not have to move around so much.

"Our 'Diversability' experience during the Wellington Accommodation Project is providing us with the opportunity to build stronger employee engagement and a more responsive, flexible and satisfying workplace experience for our people," says Project Business Change Lead, Suzanne O'Rourke.

The benefits of the project are very apparent, particularly for the members of the Special Interest Group for Disability. Alongside influencing change and creating a voice for disabled employees, the group have also become more visible to each other within the organisation and more understanding of the breadth of individual needs.

The Ministry itself has also learnt some important lessons which it will take to other accommodation projects, such as Christchurch where they plan to move into the new shared Government Building working alongside other government agencies.