

# Improving predictability

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There's all the things sensory things in a supermarket, the noises, the air conditioning, the cold fridges, but you can manage that when you know what's coming, and it's easier

Autistic research participant

## Providing information

Uncertainty can be challenging for some autistic people. So, knowing more information about public spaces can make them more enabling. This can include information such as:

- How to engage with the space and staff (e.g., how to queue or pay for your goods)
- The layout of the space and products, and where to find help or assistance
- Where different types of sensory input can be expected and areas with less input
- Times of day when spaces may be less busy



One way of creating more certainty, is to provide a map of the layout that shows places to seek assistance, locations of more challenging sensory input (e.g., areas that are particularly noisy), and locations of sensory friendly space that has reduced sensory input.

To the right is an example sensory map of a supermarket



## Communicating changes

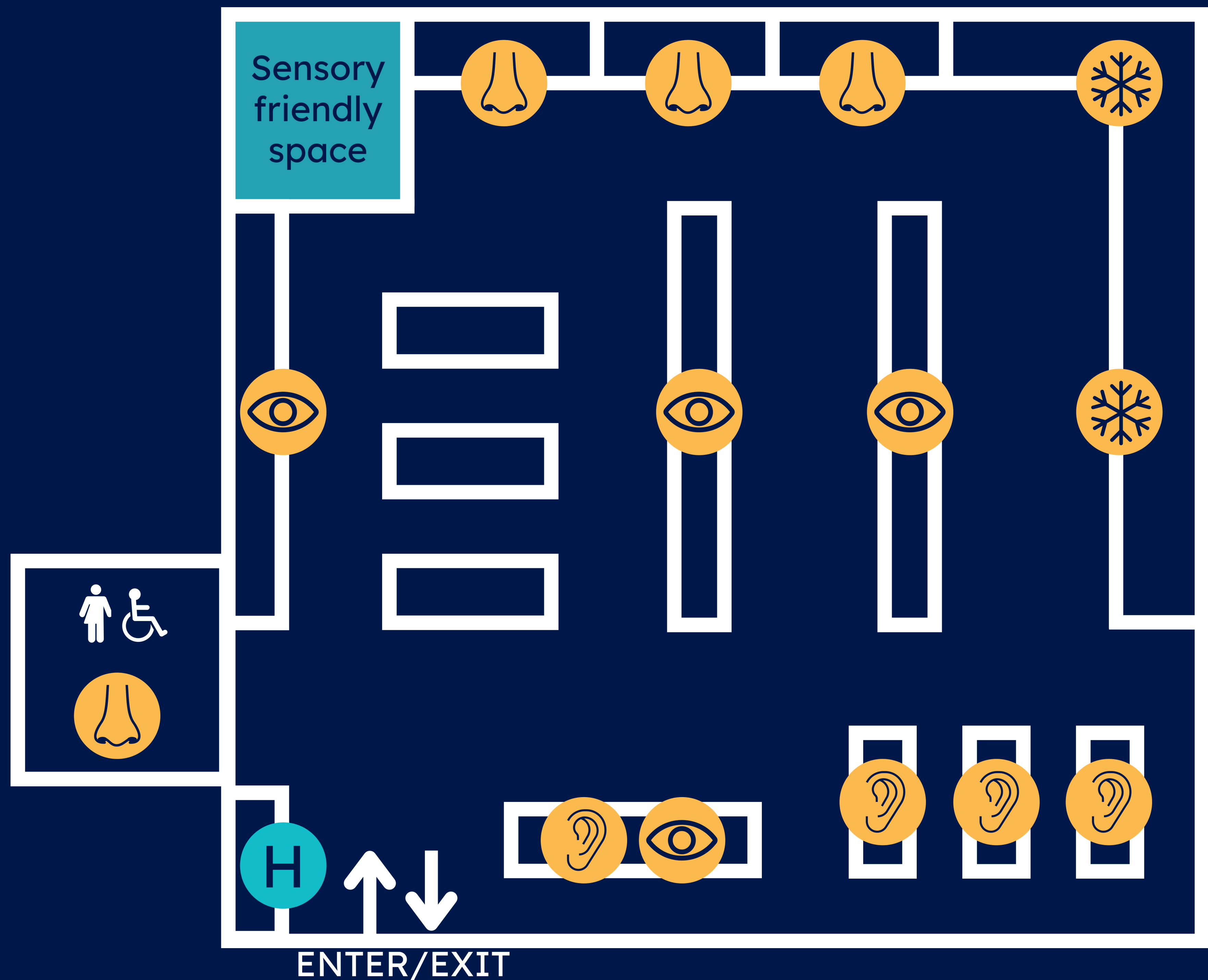
Changes to the product layout of supermarkets can be challenging for autistic people. This unexpected change can make them less able to tolerate the sensory environment.

Communicating these changes, either online or at the entrance to the store, can be enabling for autistic individuals.



#SensorySupermarket

# Improving predictability



Strong smells



Cold temperatures



Busy visuals



Help available



Louder sounds

## Supermarket sensory map

This handy map can make a sensory environment more predictable by showing:

- The layout
- Where to find help
- Locations of potential sensory triggers
- A sensory friendly space

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# Design vs adaptation

## Design

Inclusive design for the built environment is nothing new. In fact, there are many design standards that consider disabled people. The BSI (British Standards Institution) is creating the first sensory-based design guidance. You can scan the QR code to read about this:



Autistic people have told us about inclusive design principles that could make supermarkets more enabling:

- Natural, indirect light, rather than bright unnatural lighting
- Non-shiney floors that don't reflect the light
- Ample, open space, e.g., lower shelving and wider aisles
- Reducing auditory burden by partitioning space and using materials that reduce echo

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...there's a lot of different people that are impacted by sensory sensitivities that would benefit from double-glazing, from awareness that someone may not manage with the lighting, and having that as a standard, and having it in the planning for future developments

Autistic research participant

## Adaptation

But, what about existing public places?

Autistic people told us some of the different ways that supermarkets could be adapted to make them more enabling:



- Less bright and invasive advertising signage
- Providing a sensory map at the entrance (see our 'Improving Predictability' poster board)
- Creating one-way systems to improve the flow and predictability
- Having a sensory friendly space to recover, with seating and reduced sound and lighting
- Ability to turn down/turn off the volume on self-service checkouts

Working with architecture studio, Fortis Design, we have co-designed an example of an enabling supermarket. This includes some of these design and adaptation features suggested by autistic people →

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# Challenging assumptions

Autistic people feel that there are common misconceptions and a lack of public understanding about sensory processing differences and how they experience the sensory world. Autistic individuals of all ages can find some sensory input more enjoyable than others, but it can also be painful, dysregulating, and overwhelming. They also don't all experience their environment in the same way, and experiences can change across time and contexts.



For autistic individuals to thrive, it is important that they feel included, accepted, and enabled by others in public places. The first step is for us all to listen and learn from their lived experiences.

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...something that is important for neurotypical people to know is that we, autistic people, have a range of different sensory sensitivities... it can vary day by day, hour by hour... So a noise that usually doesn't bother you, can really impact you on a different day... there's lots of different ways that you can support someone but at the core of it, it's listening and taking people's individual needs seriously

Autistic research participant

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I think a common misconception is... that all autistic people are the same and have the same sensory triggers, which just isn't true, like what might affect someone pretty badly doesn't affect someone else at all...

Autistic research participant

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...if I'm in an environment where I'm really stressed... I, like, jump around for a minute and like kind of like swing my arms in the air and stuff... you don't often feel like you can do that in public because... people are going to think that you're weird. But actually the relief that you can get from that, to then carry on with an activity, and you know, let it out, is a lot in my experience

Autistic research participant

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# Training and support

Staff and business owners need training to support autistic people with different access needs - including those who may find the sensory environment challenging. This can combat stigma and make sure autistic people are understood, accepted, and supported.



Support for autistic people and sensory processing differences may include:

- Providing options for alternative communication to accommodate non-speaking individuals
- Allowing individuals to take their time and/or giving them space
- Understanding and not judging regulatory behaviours and strategies (e.g., stimming, making noises, or using sensory/fidget toys)

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I think what could be helpful... you know like you go in shops, and you get these first aiders, I think they should have almost someone like an autism champion, like especially dedicated

Autistic research participant

## Community involvement

Some autistic people have expressed that current initiatives and supports in supermarkets are not suitable or effective. It is important that autistic people are included in the consultation process. Staff and community members can work together to ensure that support and access needs are being met, and training and schemes are effective.

### The Sunflower Lanyard Scheme

Individuals with hidden/less visible disabilities may wear a Sunflower lanyard with cards in public spaces to communicate their support needs.

The Hidden Disabilities website offers lots of information for businesses and membership to the scheme to access training and resources. You can scan the QR code to visit the website. →



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# A sensory friendly space

## Sensory overload

Burdensome sensory environments can be overwhelming for autistic people. This can result in individuals 'shutting down' in public spaces and needing to find somewhere safe to retreat and recover away from sensory input.

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I physically feel like my body is shutting down and it takes every ounce of energy I have to like, get home or to a safe space.

Autistic adult on Instagram

## A space to escape

Sensory environments can be more enabling if there is access to a sensory friendly space. This is a designated space where individuals can escape and recover, which often have the following features:



- Reduced sensory input, such as it being a quiet space with dimmed lights and no intense scents
- Adequate seating
- Located in a convenient and easily accessible space that is partitioned away from the main space and clearly advertised

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...having, like, a quiet room can apply to, like, so many different places - even places like concerts, concert halls and things like that... I think that we should have, like, the equal opportunity to still, like, enjoy those things, but also have kind of a backup area if we get overwhelmed

Autistic research participant

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I think it's in New Zealand they actually have implemented quiet spaces in shopping centres so they have like sensory rooms within... where they have like LED lights and like bubble tubes... where people are able to go away from the stimuli. I think that the UK could use that some of that advice going forward

Autistic research participant

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