CAFE Guidance Note
Sensory viewing rooms

Centre for Access to Football in Europe
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Introduction

An estimated 20 million people—over 2% of the world's population—are learning disabled. 1 in 160 children has some level of autism\(^1\) and 5% of children have a sensory processing disability.\(^2\) Approximately 50 million people worldwide have dementia.\(^3\) With football being the world's most popular sport, it can be assumed that a large number of learning disabled people and people with sensory processing disabilities are football fans. It is therefore vital that stadiums and clubs provide adequate services and facilities to ensure differently disabled people are able to enjoy an inclusive and accessible matchday experience.

In the past, accessible services and facilities have been aimed predominantly at overcoming or removing physical barriers. More recently, the provision of services such as audio descriptive commentary and assistive hearing devices has become more prolific, removing sensory barriers on a matchday. Increased understanding and knowledge has helped to break down attitudinal barriers. Accessible facilities and services—such as clear, easy-to-read signage—can benefit both physically disabled people and learning disabled people. Finally, there are further facilities, which are dedicated to improving access specifically for learning disabled people and people with sensory processing disabilities\(^4\) that should be considered.

This document aims to provide useful information on the provision of sensory viewing rooms in stadiums. It will explain who might benefit from such a facility, detail suitable furniture to be included and will explain how to manage use of a sensory viewing room. A case study example can also be found at the end of this document.

CAFE follows the social model of disability, whereby a person is disabled only by the environment around them. In other words, a person is not in themselves disabled, but is disabled by barriers which prevent them from fully participating in society. These barriers can be physical, sensory, attitudinal and / or intellectual. Throughout this guidance document, CAFE will be using the terms ‘people with sensory processing disabilities’ and ‘people with mental health problems’. CAFE has consulted a number of experts and has been advised on the most up-to-date and suitable language to use. While CAFE is conscious these terms do not fit into the social model of disability, the terminology surrounding sensory-related disabilities is still evolving. As such, at the point of publication, these terms are the most appropriate available.


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The concept of a sensory viewing room in sports stadia was innovated in 2014, by the Shippey Family. Following a successful campaign by the Shippeys, the world's first football stadium sensory viewing room was opened at Sunderland AFC in 2015. Since then, awareness around learning disabilities and sensory processing has grown and, as a result, further sensory viewing rooms have been installed at football clubs across England and Scotland. This reach has now gone beyond the UK, with a pilot project at Khalifa International Stadium in Qatar.

Nonetheless, there is still progress to be made. In most countries, information on learning disabilities, autism, sensory processing disabilities and dementia is still limited. The atmosphere at a football stadium – with its loud noises and crowded environment – can be overwhelming. Without an alternative method of viewing the match, learning disabled people, people with sensory processing disabilities, their friends and families can be excluded from attending live matches alongside their fellow fans.

It is therefore strongly recommended that sensory viewing rooms are installed within football stadiums to ensure all fans are able to fully participate in the matchday experience.

**What are sensory viewing rooms?**

Sensory viewing rooms can be a game changer for a wide range of football fans, including those who are learning disabled, autistic, have sensory processing disabilities or dementia. Such rooms are therefore vital in ensuring an accessible matchday for all.

During a match, football stadiums can become noisy and crowded. Strong smells from food and drinks can also be prevalent. All of these sensory elements can be overwhelming for learning disabled and other differently disabled people. A sensory viewing room provides a space for disabled people and their families to watch the match, without any potential sensory overload coming from the main stadium bowl.

A sensory viewing room provides a range of different stimuli to engage a person's senses and help them to calm down, if required. While the sensory experience within the main stadium bowl is difficult to control or anticipate, the experience within the sensory viewing room should be carefully moderated. For this reason, sensory viewing rooms should be soundproofed. Some stadiums, upon consultation with users, also opt to pipe-in noise from the stadium bowl, with the possibility to control the volume. Additional noise-cancelling headphones should also be provided for users who find this level of noise overwhelming. Other equipment to appeal to a person's sense of smell, touch, vision, hearing and motion should also be available.

It is important that sensory rooms have a view of the pitch so that disabled fans can watch the match. It is therefore common to find sensory viewing rooms in

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5 The Shippey Campaign [https://theshippeycampaign.com/](https://theshippeycampaign.com/)

converted hospitality boxes. A TV screen should also be installed in sensory viewing rooms so that users who choose to come away from the window are able to continue following the match.

Some stadiums provide sensory rooms separate from the main stadium. These sensory rooms do not have a view of the pitch, but instead show the match on a screen via live TV broadcasting. While not considered best practice, sensory rooms with live TV coverage of the match are a possibility where alternative facilities around the main stadium bowl are unavailable. Stadiums should nonetheless continually seek to improve the matchday experience for disabled spectators and consider the creation of a sensory viewing room at the next opportunity.

Learning disabilities, autism and other sensory processing disabilities affect people in very different ways. While some disabled people may want to watch the entire match from the sensory viewing room, others may only need to use the sensory viewing room for brief periods in order to avoid sensory overload or to calm themselves down. It is therefore recommended that sensory viewing room users are also given a ticket to a seat in the main stadium bowl. This is particularly important for users of sensory viewing rooms where the match is only viewable on television screens.

Who benefits from a sensory viewing room?

People’s sensory processing can be affected for many different reasons and in many different ways. As such, a number of different people can benefit from a sensory viewing room. Research on sensory processing and learning disabilities, their causes and related conditions is ongoing. The below list is therefore not exhaustive, but mentions just some of the key beneficiaries of sensory viewing rooms.

1. **People with sensory processing disabilities**

When discussing sensory processing disabilities, 8 senses are referred to, rather than the usual 5. These 8 senses are: visual, auditory, smell, gustatory, tactile, vestibular (balance), proprioceptive (muscles and joints) and interoception (internal organs).

Sensory processing disabilities can relate to one or more of the above senses being over-stimulated, under-stimulated or interpreted in a different way.
It is important to remember that there are many categories and sub-categories of sensory processing disabilities which affect each individual differently.

In an uncontrolled sensory environment, a person with a sensory processing disability can feel disorientated or overwhelmed.

Where a matchday could be an overwhelming sensory experience, sensory viewing rooms provide a space for people with a sensory processing disability to relax or to engage one particular sense, depending on the individual’s needs.

2. Learning disabled and autistic people

Autism and learning disabilities can impact how a person communicates and interacts with the world around them. There are many different types of learning disabilities.

Learning disabled and autistic people may have difficulties processing sensory stimuli. For some, sensory viewing rooms can be beneficial as a space to relax and avoid sensory overload. For others, sitting and watching the match in the main stadium bowl may not be providing enough stimulation, so a sensory viewing room enables the person to increase their sensory engagement, focussing on one or several particular senses, according to their needs.

Routine can also be important to some autistic and learning disabled people. While the environment within a football stadium is unpredictable, a sensory viewing room can be regulated and familiar which can soothe and comfort the user.

For people who have difficulties communicating or for non-verbal people, special equipment such as picture exchange boards can be installed. Communication aids can help to calm people down and create a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

3. People with dementia

Dementia is caused by damage to nerve cells in the brain. Most commonly, dementia is a result of Alzheimer’s Disease. Dementia is progressive and can affect a person’s memory, problem-solving ability, concentration, visual perception and language.
Without suitable sensory stimulation, people can become unhappy and frustrated. For people with dementia who may have difficulties communicating the cause of their frustration, this can lead to aggressive or restless behaviour.

A sensory viewing room can help to relieve stress for people with dementia. A carefully regulated sensory environment can help a person with dementia to meaningfully engage with their surroundings and facilitate verbal and non-verbal communication.

Sport can play a key role in supporting people with dementia. As the work done by the Sporting Memories Foundation7 shows, sport can help people with dementia access memories and positive emotions which in turn enables them to actively engage with the world around them. It is therefore important that people with dementia are able to continue attending sporting events, and sensory viewing rooms can provide a safe space for them to do so.

4. People with mental health problems

A person's mental health can be impacted in a variety of ways and, as a result, their needs can differ greatly too. The sensory viewing room provides a space for people to calm down, reduce agitation, engage their senses and manage their emotions.

What does a sensory viewing room include?

Potential beneficiaries of a sensory viewing room may have more than one disability. Sensory viewing rooms must therefore be fully accessible so that everyone can access and enjoy them.

There must be accessible toilets and concessions within close proximity of the sensory viewing room.

As evidenced above, a sensory viewing room can benefit a wide range of disabled people with different sensory needs. As such, equipment must be varied in order to cater to different users' needs, and to individually engage each of the human senses.

Some examples of sensory viewing room furniture are listed below. When designing and creating a sensory viewing room, it is important to consult with experts and local disability organisations, as well as the club's disabled fans, to ensure the room has the most relevant and suitable equipment installed. Your

football club could also work together with local schools to receive user feedback and encourage future football fans to attend your stadium once the room has opened.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Recommended furniture</th>
<th>Furniture to avoid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>• Softer light sources such as fibre optics and bubble tubes;</td>
<td>• Fluorescent lighting as it creates harsh light and background noise which can be disruptive to people with sensory perception disabilities;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A projector, the content of which can be altered to suit different users’ needs;</td>
<td>• Multi-coloured or cluttered wallpaper;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lighting should be controllable to meet the specific needs of sensory viewing room users;</td>
<td>• Patterned flooring, shiny surfaces, dark colours and sudden changes in floor design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safety mirrors with cushioned frames.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory</td>
<td>• Sound-proofed room;</td>
<td>• Loud, distracting noises or music;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Possibility to pipe in noise from the stadium bowl with volume control;</td>
<td>• Hard flooring as it can create distracting noise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ear protectors to help block out any additional noise coming from the stadium bowl, or noise from other sensory viewing room users which may be distracting;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relaxing music;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A speaker to allow users to control the music.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Overpowering smells.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverages</td>
<td>• If provided, both hot and cold food and drinks should be available.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactile</td>
<td>• Stress balls;</td>
<td>• Hard, uncomfortable furnishings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Soft furnishings and carpet:**
- Mats and cushions with different textures;
- Vibrating or massage cushions;
- Ball pit;
- Tactile wall and panels.

**Motion**
- Compression and weighted vests;
- Bean bags;
- Tunnels;
- Rocking chairs;
- Hammock.

As mentioned earlier, picture exchange boards can also be a valuable addition to a sensory viewing room as it assists with communication for non-verbal people.

It is advisable to use football- or club-themed furniture and equipment, although this should be decided upon in agreement with local experts. Whatever colour scheme is chosen, furniture should also contrast visually against surrounding surfaces. The Light Reflectance Value between contrasting colours should have a differential minimum of 30.

Some clubs install stadium seating within the room to help users familiarise themselves with the environment within the main stadium bowl, which could in turn lead to users transitioning to general access areas.

A variety of soft and hard furnishings should be provided to ensure the room is accessible to differently disabled people. There should be no sharp corners or edges exposed.
The window looking out to the stadium should be one-way or tinted glass to give users privacy.

It is important that sensory rooms are sound-proofed. There should be two sets of doors leading out from the sensory viewing room to the stadium bowl to prevent excessive noise when someone comes in or out. While some clubs have found it beneficial to pipe in crowd noise from the stadium bowl (provided the volume is controllable), other clubs have found relaxing music more popular amongst users. It is important to liaise with users and local experts to decide which approach is best. In addition, ear protectors should be provided for all users to block out any distracting background noise.

In order to ensure a sensory viewing room is suitable for as many people as possible, it is advisable to have equipment appropriate for users of all ages and with differing sensory needs. Equipment can be stored away when not required or unsuitable for the sensory room users on a particular matchday.

Going a step further, some clubs, such as Notts County, have created multiple sensory viewing rooms to meet the different needs of fans. Multiple sensory viewing rooms enable a club to offer, for example, one room for calming and soothing and another room for interaction and sensory engagement. If your club is only providing one room, it is vital to talk to local experts and users to ensure the equipment and its layout is suitable for a variety of sensory needs.

It is important to remember that differently aged people may require different furnishings. For example, people with dementia may find a sensory viewing room filled with lots of coloured lights disorientating, and games which are suitable for children may not be engaging for an older audience.

**Promotion and managing use of a sensory viewing room**

Sensory viewing rooms should be promoted on club websites and in ticketing offices. Fans wishing to use the sensory viewing room should be able to contact the club in a variety of ways, including in person, by email, through the club website and over the phone. This will make booking the sensory viewing room accessible to all. A dedicated contact point, such as a club's [Disability Access Officer](https://www.cafefootball.eu/en/news/uefa-and-cape-publishes-disability-access-officer-handbook), should also be appointed.

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6 Notts County Sensory Rooms, [https://www.nottscountyfc.co.uk/fans/sensory-rooms/](https://www.nottscountyfc.co.uk/fans/sensory-rooms/)
If interest in using the sensory viewing room exceeds capacity, a rota system could be introduced. Similar schemes have been successfully introduced at other clubs.

It could also be possible to arrange a rota based on the timing of matches, to ensure the room is suitable and relevant to everyone using it. At Rangers in Scotland,10 young children get priority use of the club's sensory viewing room at afternoon games, while young adults get priority at evening matches. It may not be necessary to separate users based on age if, as explained above, a range of equipment is provided.

Sensory viewing room users should also be given a ticket for a seat in the stadium. For sensory viewing rooms which are converted hospitality boxes, this could be a seat directly outside the hospitality box.

Each sensory viewing room user should receive a complimentary companion ticket and this should be considered when calculating a sensory viewing room's capacity. For example, Scottish club Airdrie United can permit 10 disabled fans and 10 companions into their sensory viewing room. It is important to note that some disabled people may require more than one companion. Where capacity permits, flexible ticketing options should be available for disabled fans who would like to attend matches with additional family and friends.

For some learning disabled people, familiarisation and routine is important. It is therefore recommended that disabled fans and their families are given the opportunity to visit the sensory viewing room prior to a matchday. During the non-matchday visit, a disabled fan will be able to confirm that the sensory viewing room meets their needs and can be reassured that it will be a suitable environment for them on a matchday. An easy-read or Makaton guide could also be provided to help users understand how to get to the stadium and what to expect when there. CAFE would advise liaising with local experts in order to create such documents.

In order to support sensory viewing room users interested in transitioning to general access areas, clubs could invite users and their companions to matches with lower attendances, such as reserve team matches, where not all the stands are open to the general public. During such matches, an additional stand could be opened specifically for sensory viewing room users and their companions to familiarise themselves with the matchday experience in a less overwhelming situation.

On matchdays, the room should be managed by fully-trained staff who are available to provide additional support to sensory viewing room users, where required.

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Case Study

1. Watford FC, England

Watford FC opened its sensory viewing room in January 2017. Choosing to convert space previously earmarked for hospitality, Watford have created a sensory viewing room with an unobstructed view of the pitch.

As well as working closely with the Premier League Charitable Fund and The Shippey Campaign, Watford spoke to and visited local schools with autistic pupils to ensure the room was designed with its future users in mind. The schools who advised Watford during the planning stage have been regular attendees since the room opened.

Since opening, Watford FC's sensory viewing room has been fully booked at every match. Over 40 families, including some away fans, have made use of the room and 5 children have been able to transition into using general access areas of the stadium as a result of using the room.

The sensory viewing room is accessible and includes soft furnishings, a projector, a glitter ball, a communication board and TV screens showing the match in case users want to move away from the one-way window, which provides privacy to users and avoids unwanted attention from fans in the main stadium bowl.

Although the room is equipped with a speaker to allow users to choose their own music, Watford FC has found that users prefer to have the crowd noise from the stadium bowl piped into the room during matches. The club is able to control the volume and tested out different levels during the first few matches before finding the most suitable for all guests.

Watford FC publicise the sensory viewing room on the club's website and social media channels. The sensory viewing room is also included on a local council website which lists services for disabled people. This promotion is important to ensure people who would benefit from the sensory viewing room are aware of its existence and how to use it.
The room is managed by fully-trained staff who have experience in working with learning disabled and autistic people. Other club staff have received Disability Inclusion and Etiquette Training, which includes information on communicating with learning disabled and autistic people. Fans wishing to use the sensory viewing room are asked to contact the club’s Supporter Liaison Officer and may be required to provide proof of eligibility. As Watford FC keep a database of users, spectators are usually only required to provide proof of eligibility on their first visit. Users and their parents or companions are also welcome to visit the room on non-matchdays to ensure suitability.

On non-matchdays, the sensory room is available for use by the local community, including groups of learning disabled adults and people with dementia. As well as extensive coverage by national newspapers and TV channels, Watford’s sensory viewing room has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from its users.

“
It’s hard to explain how emotional it is feeling like a ‘normal’ family for a few hours and not having to do a risk assessment minute by minute. What you’ve created is a safe place for our children to be involved in their community.”

Fan feedback on Watford FC’s sensory viewing room

Contacts and useful links

For further information and any questions on sensory viewing rooms, please contact CAFE:

E: info@cafefootball.eu
T: +44 (0) 208 065 5108

Address: Centre for Access to Football in Europe (CAFE), The European Football Hub, The Record Hall, 16-16A Baldwins Gardens, London, EC1N 7RJ
For more information regarding Watford FC's sensory room, please contact Dave Messenger, the club's Supporter Liaison Officer, by email on Dave.Messenger@watfordfc.com.

For additional information about accessible stadiums, please also refer to UEFA and CAFE Good Practice Guide to Creating an Accessible Stadium and Matchday Experience – Access for All (2011) http://www.cafefootball.eu/en/access-all

This Guide is available in 14 languages and can be downloaded for free from the above link.

Additional useful links:

- The Shippey Campaign, https://theshippeycampaign.com/
- Open up to Autism, http://www.openuptoautism.co.uk/
- SPD Star, https://www.spdstar.org/

Ends.
Total Football Total Access Total Sense