

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2138](#): Make publicly owned buildings accessible for people with colour blindness, lodged by Ian Hume McKee

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petitioner is:

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make the design and signage for publicly owned buildings accessible for people with colour blindness.

The petitioner refers to the use of red and green colours to signify information in buildings, as opposed to words or symbols. For example, instead of using the words 'vacant' or 'engaged' on public toilets, the colours red and green are used.

The use of colours instead of words or images may present challenges to people with colour blindness. Although, the use of colours may be helpful to those who do not have English as their first language.

While there are regulations and guidance on inclusive access to public buildings, there is limited specific guidance on addressing the challenges associated with colour blindness.

There is also a duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people to access services, under the Equality Act 2010. However, colour blindness would have to meet the disability definition in the Equality Act, and this would depend on how the condition affects the individual.

Access Panels in Scotland can assist with accessibility in their local areas, this includes accessible signage.

A Westminster Hall debate was held in the House of Commons in 2023 on the subject of colour blindness in sport.

Colour blindness

The [NHS defines](#) colour blindness as:

“Colour vision deficiency (colour blindness) is where you see colours differently to most people, and have difficulty telling colours apart. There's no treatment for colour vision deficiency that runs in families, but people usually adapt to living with it.”

The charity [Colour Blind Awareness](#) said that:

“Colour (color) blindness (colour vision deficiency, or CVD) affects approximately 1 in 12 men (8%) and 1 in 200 women. In the UK there are approximately 3 million colour blind people (about 4.5% of the entire population), most of whom are male.”

This charity provided resources and education on colour blindness, but it is [no longer active](#), as of 1 January 2025.

Equality Act 2010

Reasonable adjustments for disabled people

The Equality Act 2010, which is reserved under the Scotland Act 1998, requires service providers (public, private or voluntary) to take reasonable steps to make adjustments for disabled people, where the service puts them at a substantial disadvantage compared with non-disabled people.

There are three reasonable adjustment requirements under [Section 20](#):

- changing provisions , criteria or practices
- changing or removing a physical feature or providing a reasonable alternative way to avoid that feature
- providing auxiliary aids.

An adjustment should, as far as possible, remove or reduce any disadvantage faced by a disabled worker or service user.

Whether an adjustment is reasonable depends on all the circumstances including:

- how effective the change will be in avoiding the disadvantage
- how practical it is for the organisation to make it
- the cost
- the organisation's resources and size
- whether financial support is available to help the organisation make it.

The test of what is reasonable is ultimately objective and not simply a matter of what an individual may personally think is reasonable.

It is important to note that this duty is also anticipatory, so service providers must plan for provision for disabled service users, within reason.

Definition of disability

The Equality Act [s.6](#) defines disability as:

‘a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’.

[Schedule 1](#), and associated regulations, provide further detail on the meaning of the definition. For example:

- **'Long-term'** means at least 12 months.
- **'Substantial'** means "more than minor or trivial" (section 212 (1)).
- **Normal day-to-day activities** - this is not defined in the Act. UK Government guidance suggests it would include things people do on a regular basis, such as shopping, reading and writing, using the telephone, watching television, getting washed and dressed. There are also work-related activities, such as following instructions, using a computer, and preparing written documents.
- Three medical conditions come under the definition of disability automatically upon diagnosis: **Cancer, HIV infection, and Multiple Sclerosis (MS)**.
- A person is "deemed to have a disability," and hence to be a disabled person, "where that person is certified as blind, severely **sight impaired**, sight impaired or partially sighted by a consultant ophthalmologist." This does not apply to sight impairments that can be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.

Based on this definition, it is not clear whether colour blindness would constitute a disability under the Act; it would likely depend on the individual.

Current signage regulations and guidance

Building regulations

The [Building Standards Technical Handbook \(January 2025, non-domestic\)](#), provides guidance on the standards set in the Building (Scotland) Regulations 2004.

The regulations are mandatory, but the choice of how to comply lies with the building owner.

Signage does not appear subject to building standards. However, Mandatory Standard 4.1 provides that:

“Every building must be designed and constructed in such a way that all occupants and visitors are provided with safe, convenient and unassisted means of access to the building.”

Reference is made to inclusive design and the [Planning Division Planning Advice Note PAN 78: ‘Inclusive Design’](#) which promotes the merits of an inclusive approach to the design of the built environment.

It states:

“A diverse range of people have a role to play in delivering inclusive environments – including the built form and the spaces in between. This Planning Advice Note sets out the roles of those instrumental in delivering more inclusive environments - from developers to designers, local authorities to Access Panels”.

Safety signs and signals

The [Health and Safety \(Safety Signs and Signals\) Regulations 1996](#) apply across Great Britain, under the [Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974](#). Part 1 of the 1974 Act, which covers the general duties on employers regarding health and safety at work, is [reserved under Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998](#).

[Guidance on the regulations](#) sets out what is required in terms of signage for the health and safety of staff. The focus is on safety signs at work, and there is guidance on the use of colours to confer safety messages. For example, red means ‘danger’, and green means ‘no danger’.

The guidance also suggests the use of symbols or pictograms to describe a situation or prescribe a behaviour.

Access Panels

Access Panels are groups of disabled people who volunteer to help improve accessibility in their local area.

There are currently 35 [Access Panels](#) across Scotland, and [Disability Equality Scotland](#) is the umbrella body which provides them with guidance and support.

The [Access Panels website provides a set of Access Symbols](#) that can be downloaded. These are all in black and white and use images or pictograms to display their meaning.

UK Parliament

The House of Commons Library prepared a briefing on [Access to sport for people with colour blindness](#) for a Westminster Hall debate on 9 March 2023, which [took place on 15 March 2023](#). While focussing on access to sport,

It references the Sports Grounds Safety Authority [guidance on colour vision deficiency \(colour blindness\)](#). This guidance states that colour blindness has safety implications for the following reasons:

- members of the safety management team, including stewards, may be unable to interpret accurately information this conveyed in colour alone
- spectators may be unable to interpret accurately colour-coded information on tickets, ground plans, and wayfinding signs.

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21 February 2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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