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Creating Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience (TrACE)- Informed Physical Environments

A guide to support the TrACE-Informed
Organisation Toolkit 'Physical Environment'
domain

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This guide was co-produced with members of the National Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience (TrACE) Community of Practice (CoP), including representatives from Housing, Substance Use, Higher Education, Further Education, Criminal Justice and Health.

Introduction

This guide is part of a suite of resources within the [Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience \(TrACE\)-Informed Organisations Toolkit](#) (known as the TrACE Toolkit) which supports organisations to embed and TrACE-informed practice in the physical environment.

It assumes a basic awareness of what ACEs are and the importance of access to support to prevent a risk of negative health and social outcomes for individuals who may experience them. It also assumes an understanding of how, for some people, experiencing adversity may become traumatic. Prior to using this guide, we advise becoming familiar with Section 3 of the [TrACE Toolkit Guidance Document](#) and also the [Trauma-Informed Wales Framework](#), which defines the Welsh trauma-informed approach and the five practice principles that underpin it.

TrACE-informed organisations in Wales create environments that are trusted, compassionate, and safe for the workforce and the people they support; environments that minimise exposure to adversity, trauma and distress. This guidance will help organisations consider how to approach this task when thinking about where and how they operate, whilst recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

The TrACE Toolkit comprises of six domains which should be considered by organisations on their TrACE-informed journey:

- Governance, Leadership and Organisational Culture
- Policies and Procedures
- Workforce Training and Support
- Physical Environment
- Organisation Design and Delivery
- Monitoring and Evaluation

This guidance supports the **'Physical Environment'** domain. The TrACE Toolkit's [Self-Assessment](#) process asks organisations to consider the following in this domain:

- What the current physical and social environment is like.
- How the physical and social environment can be improved to promote a sense of safety and wellbeing for all people experiencing the setting.
- That there is a consideration for aspects of the physical environment that may be traumatising/re-traumatising.
- That there are spaces provided that promote health and wellbeing and for people to use to practice self-care.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is to support organisations implementing the TrACE Toolkit, ensuring that they consider all aspects of their physical and social environment and the impact that it can have on staff, service users and anyone else who accesses the organisation. It is relevant to all those who are actively seeking to make their organisation's physical environments more TrACE-informed. This guide seeks to illustrate that even small changes can have a big impact on how people interact with, and experience, an environment and how all organisations can seek to improve their physical environments regardless of budgetary and other constraints. It emphasises the need for careful planning, design, and implementation to create safety and promote healing and well-being for those who experience the environment and seeks, as far as is possible, to resist re-traumatising people who use the space.

Throughout this guide, we will refer to "those who experience the organisation"- this encompasses all people with a link to the organisation, including staff, service users/ those who benefit from the organisation, parents/carers/family members, volunteers and visitors. This is in no way to suggest that we are grouping all people together or suggesting that they are all the same or that all organisations will need to consider them all based on their unique organisation provision. We understand that every person is an individual and they will bring their own perspective.

The need for Trauma-informed physical environments

The importance of trauma-informed physical spaces is well documented. Dr Karen Treisman, a clinical psychologist and author who specialises in trauma-informed care, outlines the significance of the physical environment:

*"The physical environment and the general feel of a place can make a big difference to people's feelings, and the overall ambiance. It not only shapes how people feel but can also convey important messages about the services which someone might receive, and about the energy, care, and personality of a place. The building is generally the first thing people see and notice – the face of an organisation – so it really does count. A building can either increase or decrease our levels of stress, our arousal levels, and our mood; it can make us feel calmer, welcomed, looked after, and safer, or tense, on edge, and disorientated."*¹

1 Treisman, K. (2021) A treasure box for creating trauma-informed organizations: A ready-to-use resource for trauma, adversity, and culturally informed, infused, and Responsive Systems.

It is crucial to understand that individuals who have experienced trauma are much more likely to struggle with sensory processing difficulties² and trauma itself can heighten sensory awareness. For many, certain smells, sounds, or colours become deeply connected to past traumatic events, triggering a “fight” or “flight” response.³ This means that everyday environmental features, which most of us might overlook, can become powerful reminders of trauma, influencing how someone feels and reacts in the world around them.⁴ Recognising this connection helps us better support those navigating the lasting effects of trauma.

People who have experienced trauma often have particular memories which are associated with certain environmental features which may cause negative reactions and potential re-traumatisation.⁵ Similarly, for people who have had negative encounters with specific organisations such as child protection, criminal justice, or health care, simply entering a building that brings back memories associated with that organisation can be overwhelming.⁶ These memories could be as a result of elements like the location, furniture, signage, smells, or entry process, and can impede individuals’ ability to engage by compromising their feelings of safety and trust with organisation providers.⁷ For example parents accessing support organisations often express feeling defensive and anxious when entering rooms that feel cold, sterile, and ‘business-like’ and this creates additional barriers for them to engage.⁸ Conversely, entering a building where people are warmly greeted, offered a seat, or their child a snack can establish a welcoming and relaxed environment, fostering positive associations with the space and enhancing the overall experience.⁹

In addition to this, people who have experienced a lack of parental warmth, inconsistent and unresponsive parenting and abuse, can experience a heightened sensitivity to environmental stress and a prolonged reaction to it.¹⁰ It is well-documented that exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse and neglect, can also impact the development of a child’s brain, immune system, and hormones.¹¹ Further, when children face constant stress, their bodies can become stuck in a heightened state of alert, always ready to react to danger, resulting in their bodies being constantly prepared for survival, even when the stress is no longer present.¹²

For people who are neurodivergent, some physical environments can be particularly overstimulating. One study consulted with people aged between 16-25 and had experience of being in hospital on a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

2 De Bellis and Thomas, 2003; van der Kolk, 2014 cited in Robinson and Brown, 2016

3 Carroll et al., 2013 cited in Robinson and Brown, 2016

4 Ibid

5 Robinson and Brown, 2016

6 Bulling and Kristine, 2023

7 Ibid

8 Bulling, Chrissy and Hickie, Kristine (2023). Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment. University of Sussex [Creating-a-Trauma-Informed-Environment-FINAL2_Aug-2023.pdf](https://theinnovateproject.co.uk/Creating-a-Trauma-Informed-Environment-FINAL2_Aug-2023.pdf) (theinnovateproject.co.uk)

9 Ibid

10 Carroll et al., 2013 cited in Robinson and Brown, 2016

11 Bellis, et al. (2016) Adverse Childhood Experiences and their association with chronic disease and health organisation use in the Welsh adult population

12 Ibid

(CAMHS) ward and found that the sensory environment in the inpatients units was considered chaotic. It was further described as hindering the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions which was largely attributed to the increased distress caused by the sensory environment.¹³

Research that explores the impact of physical environments on people with autism outlines the need to tailor physical environments to meet their neurological needs as some environments are likely to cause sensory distress.¹⁴ For example, evidence suggest that the prison environment is overwhelming for people with autism due to distress caused by intense sensory input, such as high levels of noise and lighting.¹⁵

What to Consider when Creating a TrACE-informed Environment

Control over one's environment is a crucial factor when considering physical spaces as a perceived lack of control can trigger or exacerbate many mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, particularly if a person has a history of trauma.¹⁶ Ensuring, where possible, that people accessing organisations are given choice over their space and opportunities are given for privacy and autonomy is important in ensuring a trauma-informed environment.¹⁷



*By offering **flexible workspaces, adjustable furniture and areas that can be personalised**, organisations can empower individuals to make choices and shape their environment. This approach respects individual autonomy and fosters a sense of empowerment and control. Moreover, by providing opportunities for involvement and feedback in designing and maintaining physical environments, organisations can foster a **collaborative and inclusive culture**; a key component of the TrACE Toolkit and one of the five practice principles in the Trauma-informed Wales Framework.*

Creating a **calming environment** to reduce anxiety and stress can help create an environment where people **feel safe**. This can include ensuring there is adequate natural light, clear signage, soothing colour schemes, furniture and soft textures which can add warmth and comfort.¹⁸

13 National Development for Inclusion (2020) "It's Not Rocket Science" Considering and meeting the sensory needs of autistic children and young people in CAMHS inpatient organisations

14 Ibid

15 HM Government, 2021; Care Quality Commission, 2022

16 Owen and Crane, 2022

17 Treisman, 2021; Owen and Crane, 2022

18 Jantz, 2024



When considering the physical environment, it is important to include all of the spaces that an organisation occupies, including the external space. This would include considering how people locate the organisation through clear and considerate signage, safe, accessible access. When doing so, applying the Trauma-Informed Wales practice principles will help to ensure that a diverse range of perspectives are included to create a universal space that does no harm.

Physical environments need to take account of the sensory sensitivities of individuals who have suffered trauma through adopting neutral smells, low arousal colours and limited noise will avoid overarousal which will help to aid their recovery.¹⁹ However, 'clinical' spaces free of warmth and colour can be counterproductive to trauma recovery; therefore, a balance needs to be made between reducing harsh sensory inputs and creating an environment that is comforting and **welcoming**.²⁰

Finally, the evidence base surrounding trauma-informed physical environments highlights the importance of **prioritising nature** wherever possible, as it has a calming and healing effect. For people who are currently experiencing trauma and who struggle with relationships and trust, nature can help them feel more secure and grounded, aiding in **relationship-building**.²¹



There are many practical ways of introducing nature to the physical environment, much of which will depend on the resources available and specific health and safety requirements of the organisation. Some examples are: introducing outdoor support sessions/staff supervision; increasing outdoor activities that involve nature such as allotments/gardens for people to share responsibilities for; designing indoor spaces to include plants, water features or naturalistic art.

These factors illustrate the significance of creating a TrACE-informed physical environment for all people who experience the organisation. Incorporating the opportunity to include and listen to the voices of people who experience the organisation in the design of a TrACE-informed physical environment is essential for creating a truly supportive and safe environment that does no harm and that takes account of what people need in a very visible way. This relational approach ensures that the space is not only functional but also healing, fostering a sense of ownership, trust, and inclusion that is critical for people who have experienced trauma and / or adversity. By recognising and incorporating people's expertise and lived and / or

19 Robinson and Brown, 2016

20 Ibid

21 Evans, 2023; Pritchard et al., 2019; Owen and Crane, 2022; Leydecker, 2017 cited in Jantz, 2024

living experience we can create environments that are more than just physical spaces – the visibility of what people said in the physical attributes of the space means that the space itself can become one of the catalysts for recovery, building resilience, with dignity. These factors align with the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework, where implementing a TrACE-informed physical environment within organisations can be guided by the five practice principles within it.

Health & Safety Considerations

When making changes to a physical environment, it is crucial to consider health and safety to prevent harm, ensure compliance with regulations, and maintain a safe and efficient environment for everyone involved. Some of the areas to consider are how we:

- **Assess Regulatory Requirements:** Identify the specific health and safety regulations relevant to the space (e.g. fire safety, accessibility, soft furnishings, floor plans).
- **Bridge the Gap:** Analyse where regulations might conflict with the TrACE-informed goals of the organisation and identify solutions.
- **Engage Stakeholders:** Involve health and safety officers, estates team and TrACE-informed champions in the design process to balance priorities.
- **Consult Regulations:** Regularly consult updated health and safety standards to ensure compliance while pursuing innovative designs.
- **Seek Feedback:** Collaborate with those that access the space to understand how the space can meet their needs while adhering to safety regulations.

How to create TrACE-informed physical environments in practice

As noted throughout this guidance document, a range of people's experiences are needed to ensure that any physical environment is considerate of as many needs as possible. Below is an overview of steps that could be considered when reviewing an organisation's physical environment(s) and a practical tool can be found in Appendix A which is designed to assist with a walk-through of any environment and can be completed by multiple people to capture their own unique viewpoints.

Implementation Steps to Consider

- 1. Review:** Start by reviewing the current environment by carrying out a walk-through activity of using the TrACE-informed Principles for Physical Environments Review in [Appendix A](#). Ensure that all those who experience the organisation are involved in the walk through to gather insights into their experiences and perceptions. Understanding how the organisation is perceived by multiple people will help to build a baseline of how accessible, safe and welcoming the organisation is, identify positive examples as well as areas that may need improvement. Ensuring there is a way for people to receive feedback from their participation in the reviews, as well as providing this to the wider organisation, is important in keeping people engaged with wider TrACE Toolkit implementation.
- 2. Planning:** Once there is confidence that the review process has gathered a range of insights into the current environment(s) it is time to develop an action plan based on the review findings. An example of a TrACE-informed Environment Action Plan is available in [Appendix B](#). It is important to ensure that changes are co-produced with those who engage with the organisation and consider differing needs. While planning, it is really important to consider the sustainability of the changes, for example by putting in place a mechanism for feedback and how this will inform future updates. Planned changes need to occur as an organisational change activity, rather than relying on a group of specific people.



Prioritise changes that can have the most significant impact, taking into account the organisation's budget and resource constraints. There will be desired changes that are not possible at the time that the review takes place and may require more long-term planning and budgeting. There may also be changes that may never be possible (e.g. complete re-design of buildings) so it is important to communicate to everyone why that is. Remember, even small changes can make a substantial difference, considering what small changes are achievable in their place will help ensure suggestions feel considered.

3. Implementation: Introduce the planned changes from the review, ensuring minimal disruption to daily activities. It is very important that changes are communicated to everyone, so that all people experiencing the organisation can know what to expect from the changes and understand why the changes are being made. From the start, there also is a need to set up a mechanism to regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of any changes and test whether they are having the desired outcome.

4. Evaluation: Use feedback from staff and those who benefit from the organisation collected from the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms established when implementing the changes, to continuously improve the environment. This may mean that the approach taken will need to be adapted based on new insights and emerging needs. Reflection and review are a continuous process, embedded in this work. Further information can be found in the Monitoring, Evaluation and Review Section of the [TrACE Toolkit Guidance Document](#).

Budget Constraints

While budget limitations are common, there are many ways to make changes to the physical environment without significant financial investment:

- **Volunteers:** Engage volunteers for tasks such as painting or gardening.
- **Donations and Grants:** Seek out opportunities to ask for donations or apply for grants to fund specific projects.
- **Repurposing:** Repurpose existing furniture and materials to suit the identified needs rather than purchasing new ones.

Below is a case study from a representative of the joint Welsh Government and Ministry of Justice Women's Justice Blueprint. The Women's Justice Blueprint is a partnership of public, private and third sector organisations committed to adopting a gender-based and trauma-informed approach where professionals respond to the specific needs of women from at risk of or involved in the justice system in Wales. This case study outlines their experiences when considering the creation of gender-specific and trauma-informed physical environments for women. It is an example of how they recognised the need to strike a balance between health and safety requirements and trauma-informed principles within Justice environments.

Women's Justice Considerations for TrACE-informed Physical Spaces in Wales

Creating a TrACE-informed physical space or improving current spaces to make them more TrACE-informed/trauma-responsive is a unique challenge for organisations working with justice involved women. The guiding principles of the joint Welsh Government and Ministry of Justice Women's Justice Blueprint are to adopt a gender-based and trauma-informed approach in which professionals respond to the specific needs of women. Women are often sentenced for non-violent, low-level offences thus receiving short custodial sentences. However, there is evidence that short custodial sentences are less effective in reducing reoffending than community orders.

There are 12 women's prisons in England but none in Wales, and the Blueprint is committed to seeing less women sentenced to prison, and greater uptake of early intervention diversionary schemes and alternatives to custody (including residential options). The justice sector in Wales understand that there must be a balance struck between health and safety requirements in relation to the physical environment for justice involved women, for example the need to have certain systems in place (e.g. CCTV, access controls). This can create challenges when considering trauma-informed principles within the justice sector physical environment (for example within police custody suites, prisons and probation offices), however there are ways to deliver trauma-responsive solutions.

The Women's Justice Blueprint have developed resources that support with the development of trauma informed spaces including Best Practice Specifications for Women's Accommodation and Women's Centres. This work has been informed by the Trauma-Informed Practice Framework and the Gender-Informed Psychologically Led Model. The Gender-Informed Psychologically Led Model was developed by Forensic Psychological Organisations on behalf of the Blueprint specifically for women at risk of or involved in the justice system in Wales. The Model is underpinned by a set of principles for how practices (including physical environments) can be psychologically informed and implemented by a range of professionals.

Top Tips:

- For newly established physical spaces where women access justice organisations collaborate with lived experience/experts by experience to co-design these physical environments.
- For existing physical spaces, consider engaging with women who have had contact with the justice system when planning improvements (such as repairs and/or renovations) and include trauma-informed principles.
- For women's centres, have a balanced approach that focuses on the creation of a 'safe space' along with having the necessary safety aspects.
- Simple, low-cost changes to physical environments like use of certain paint colours, private areas for sensitive conversations and softer furnishings can help to improve justice environments and make them appear less institutional.
- Where the physical environment's health and safety measures could impact on re-traumatisation, considering the way that these elements are communicated is key. Transparent communication about health and safety within physical spaces including provision of clear signage and information about these elements' forms part of trauma-responsive approach.

For more information on the Women's Justice Blueprint and/or to obtain a copy of the Accommodation and/or Women's Centre Best Practice Specifications please email wales.womensblueprint@justice.gov.uk



Conclusion

Implementing the TrACE Toolkit includes a journey towards creating environments that support healing and well-being. Mirroring the ethos of the TrACE Toolkit as a whole, this guide promotes collaborative leadership that includes the views of all who benefit from the organisation and is vital when considering making changes to the physical environment. Through careful planning, thoughtful design, and collaborative implementation, organisations can assure their spaces are safe, nurturing places that positively impact everyone who interacts with them.

Creating Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experience (TrACE)-Informed Physical Environments

A guide to support the TrACE-Informed Organisation Toolkit 'Physical Environment' domain

Appendices

This document has been designed to be downloaded to your computer. The document will need to be opened in Adobe Acrobat or Adobe Acrobat Reader which can be downloaded for free from <https://get.adobe.com/uk/reader/>



Once saved to your computer you will be able to input your information into the appropriate columns. *(The form will allow you to enter as much text as you require, a scroll bar will appear if there is too much text to view in the window).*

Please note that, without Acrobat, you will be able to view the document but you will not be able to add your own information or save the file.

Further support can be found by visiting www.acehubwales.com

or by contacting the ACE Hub directly via ace@wales.nhs.uk.

Appendix A:

TrACE-informed Practice Principles for Physical Environments Review

Below are some reflective questions to help identify how taking a TrACE-informed approach to the physical environment can align to the five practice principles outlined in the *Trauma-Informed Wales Framework*. This is not an exhaustive list, rather some examples to help you consider what is already in place and what could be built into the physical environment as part of the TrACE-informed organisational journey.

It is recommended that a 'walk-through' of the environment takes place, which would involve people physically experiencing the space(s) whilst considering the below reflective questions. This would include the exterior of the space/building from arrival (including car parks and entrances) and each space within and outside the space/building. This activity should involve as many different people as possible with different perspectives, needs and roles within the organisation and their views can be captured in the comments section below.

Organisation name:

Completed by:

Date:

1. A universal approach, that does no harm:

Reflective Questions

Comments

Is there clear communication regarding the use and upkeep of spaces? Are there transparent processes for reporting and resolving issues, with clear feedback mechanisms? All of these will support the building of trust.

Do the spaces within the organisation support reflection, promote transparency, and is there a mechanism in place to actively invite and respond to feedback from everyone who interacts with the organisation?

Reflective Questions

Comments

Does the organisation prioritise input from those who interact with the organisation in the design and management of its physical spaces to create safe and secure environments? Standing in this space now, how would this be done?

Is the physical environment free from health and safety hazards and considerate of people's sensory responses? This will provide for a feeling of safety and security.

Does the environment balance security and health and safety requirements to support people to feel as comfortable as possible?

Does the organisational physical environment allow individuals express themselves safely, without fear of judgment or harm? This may include furniture configuration, provision of private areas and quiet spaces.

Any other observations/comments related to the Universal Principle:

2. Person-Centred:

Reflective Questions

Comments

Where possible, does the organisation offer flexibility and choice to meet the needs of those who experience the organisation, such as offering outdoor spaces, quiet areas or online options to both work in and provide support to those accessing the organisations?

Does the organisation create environments that promote psychological safety, where individuals feel secure, respected, and supported?

Does the organisation engage in ongoing consultation with staff and individuals who may access it to promote an understanding of how physical spaces can affect emotional and psychological well-being?

Does the organisation involve all those who interact with the organisation in the design and decision-making processes and consider their needs and preferences ?

Any other observations/comments related to the Person-Centred Principle:

3. Relationship-Focused:

Reflective Questions

Comments

Is there a focus on building relationships from the very first point of contact, including signage, phone calls, familiarisation videos, walk-in appointments and other interactions?

Are there shared safe spaces available which can include green and outdoor spaces to have conversations or hold meetings?

Does the organisation emphasise the importance of relationships at all levels and promote and enable time to develop compassionate and trusting relationships?

Are there a variety of options available for interacting with both people accessing the organisation and their colleagues fostering diverse and meaningful connections?

Are there welcoming spaces where individuals can connect, build trust and foster a sense of community?

Any other observations/comments related to the Relationship-Focused Principle:

4. Resilience and Strengths-Focused:

Reflective Questions

Comments

How do the organisation's resources (e.g. individual support plans for staff and workforce engagement tools) identify, highlight and promote individuals' strengths ?

What opportunities does the organisation give people who work there to develop their skills and celebrate their achievements?

Does the organisation offer opportunities and spaces for reflective practice to support personal and professional growth?

Does the organisation use/display strength-based aesthetics, such as artwork, testimonials, or messages of hope and resilience, that celebrate individual and collective strengths and are accessible and visible to all?

Any other observations/comments related to the Resilience and Strengths-Focused Principle:

5. Inclusive:

Reflective Questions

Comments

Is the organisational physical space accessible for all individuals, including access ramps, elevators, wide doorways, suitable lighting, accessible restrooms, and appropriate signage?

Does the organisation include spaces that accommodate cultural practices, such as prayer rooms or areas for meditation?

Does the organisation offer private spaces for confidential conversations, personal reflection, or sensitive activities, with features such as soundproofing to ensure that conversations cannot be overheard, maintaining confidentiality and privacy?

Does the organisation use inclusive signage, images and language throughout the space to ensure accessibility and respect for all individuals?

Does the organisation create a TrACE-informed physical environment that thoughtfully incorporates the specific needs of all ages and genders, ensuring safety, comfort, and dignity?

Any other observations/comments related to the Inclusive Principle:

Appendix B:

TrACE-informed Environments Action Plan

The below template is an example of an action plan for a TrACE-informed Physical Environment. Some people may prefer to have a more detailed action plan which breaks down the detail of activity and other variables/factors involved, but this is personal preference and the approach to this stage is personal to the style of working.

Organisation name:

Completed by:

Date:

Planned change	How does the planned change support TrACE-informed principles	Responsibility	Timescale for Completion	Budget	Resources	Impact	Further changes based on feedback

For further information please contact ACE Hub Wales

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