# **Frequently asked questions relating to staff disability support**

Over the Summer of 2024, we worked with Sarah Stephenson-Hunter (the then Staff Disability Advisor) and colleagues in the Equality and Diversity Unit (EDU) to understand and share some of the most common questions the EDU receive in relation to disability support. While they do not cover everything, we hope they are a useful starting point to understanding and navigating disability support for staff in the University.

Where we would normally signpost to speak to the Staff Disability Advisor, for now we advise you to contact Occupational Health or, if appropriate, the central Equality and Diversity Unit for guidance, while the Staff Disability Advisor role is being recruited to.

# **For all staff**

## **1. Can the University support me with getting a diagnosis of my disability or neurodivergent condition?**

There is currently no provision within the University for providing a formal diagnosis of a disability or neurodivergent condition. If you wish to pursue a formal diagnosis then you will either need to speak with your GP or seek support privately.

## **2. Do I have to have a diagnosis to get the support/adjustments I need?**

No, it is not essential to have a formal diagnosis of a disability or long-term health condition to receive the relevant support and/or workplace adjustments. You do however need to be able to demonstrate that your disability or health condition meets the definition of a disability under the [Equality Act 2010](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents):

“A physical or mental impairment that has a significant and long-term impact on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.” ‘Long-term’ means that the condition has lasted, or is likely to last for more than 12 months.

## **3. I’ve been told by Occupational Health that I’m covered by the Equality Act 2010 on the grounds of disability, what does this mean?**

To be covered under the disability-related provision of the Equality Act, someone needs to be able to demonstrate that they have a disability or health condition that meets the legal definition as above. Being covered by the disability-related provision of the Equality Act means that you are entitled to certain legal protections and the University is required to provide appropriate support and reasonable workplace adjustments.

There is no such thing as a ‘register’ of people who are disabled and there is no central University mechanism to record whether you have a disability or long-term health condition, other than within the HR self-service system. The HR self-service system enables individuals to disclose information relating to disabilities if they wish. The relevant question is ‘What impact does the disability or health condition have on your ability to perform your job to the best of your ability and what, if any, support or adjustments might you need to enable you to do this?’. This can be explored in more detail through a discussion with the central Equality and Diversity Unit (and then specifically the Staff Disability Advisor, when that role is recruited to).

## **4. I’ve recently been diagnosed with a disability; what support is there available at the University?**

This very much depends on the nature and impact of the disability and/or health condition and will vary from person to person. There are certain types of adjustment that can be of particular benefit to those with certain conditions which can be found on the [Equality and Diversity Unit website](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/reasonable-adjustments), however the specific support you may need will depend on the specifics of your condition, job role and working environment. The Equality and Diversity Unit are currently recruiting to the Staff Disability Advisor position, but in the interim it may be that [Occupational Health](https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/) are able to support.

## **5. Does the University have a specific policy on leave related to disability as opposed to sick leave?**

The University does not currently have a specific disability leave policy and there are at present no plans to introduce one. The [handbooks for support staff and academic-related staff](https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/staff-handbooks) both state the following:

“If it is necessary for you to arrange to visit, during the normal working day, to your doctor, dentist or a hospital to receive treatment, or for medical screening (e.g., tests for cancer), attempts should be made to arrange the visit in such a way as to disrupt the work of your department as little as possible. Permission to attend will not be unreasonably withheld.

The University is under a duty to provide reasonable adjustments for employees who are covered by the Equality Act 2010. Such adjustments can include appropriate time off for medical visits and treatment in relation to the disability. For further advice on disability-related issues, please contact the [University Occupational Health Service](https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/) or the [University Staff Disability Adviser.](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/support-for-disabled-staff)”

Academic staff and all other staff are encouraged to follow the above.

## **6. I need some assistive technology/specialist equipment for reasons related to my disability, can this be provided by the University or are there other sources of support I need to know about?**

It depends on exactly what equipment is required. If it’s a case of ergonomic equipment such as a keyboard or mouse then this is something that should be provided under our duty of care as an employer and so should be provided as a matter of course by your department. If it’s more specialist assistive technology, then this can be provided through the [Government Access to Work Scheme](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding), but this is not a straightforward process and can take a long time to be resolved. In terms of assessing what equipment a staff member needs, the Equality and Diversity Unit or Occupational Health may be able to provide some advice and guidance (in the absence of a Staff Disability Advisor) but cannot carry out formal workplace assessments. If you don’t go down the Access to Work route then there are external providers who can carry out assessments at a cost which would be expected to be met by your department.

## **7. I have a disability and would like to discuss what support or adjustments might be available to me, do I need a referral to Occupational Health for this?**

It depends what the nature of the issues are. If it’s around a clinical / medical condition then yes, a management referral to [Occupational Health](https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/) will help. If, however it’s around things like a neurodivergent condition or sensory / mobility impairment then it’s more appropriate to speak to the Staff Disability Advisor (when recruited). In some more complex cases the Staff Disability Advisor and Occupational Health will work closely together to support both you and your line manager/supervisor. Occupational Health may be able to provide some support in the current absence of a Staff Disability Advisor.

## **8. I really struggle working in a large open plan office, what support is available to me and can I ask to be moved to a different location?**

This is a very common question and the answer very much depends on the nature of your role and the work of the team you’re in, as well as what scope there is for flexibility of moving workstations and perhaps agreeing to additional time working from home. Sadly, there are no easy answers to this. You will need to speak with your line manager/supervisor and/or department to understand what is feasible here. Some people find noise-reducing headphones or ear plugs helpful. There are also isolation screens that can sometimes be put up. But really there are no quick answers and will involve conversations with your line manager/department.

# **For managers/supervisors**

## **9. A member of my team has just been diagnosed with a new medical condition / disability, do I need to do a management referral to Occupational Health or to the Staff Disability Advisor?**

It very much depends on the nature of the condition, how it’s impacting the staff member and what support if any the staff member thinks they may need. Both the Staff Disability Advisor and Occupational Health do work closely together so if you do make a referral to either and it’s more appropriate for it to be dealt with by the other party then they will indicate this. As a quick shorthand if it’s an issue relating to a neurodivergent condition, a sensory or mobility impairment or a more specific disability then it’s probably best to refer to the Staff Disability Advisor. If it’s more of a long-term medical condition then it’s best to refer to Occupational Health in the first instance. [Occupational Health](https://occupationalhealth.admin.ox.ac.uk/) may be able to provide some support in the current absence of a Staff Disability Advisor.

## **10. Is the University signed up to the Disability Confident scheme and if not are there any plans to do so?**

No, the University is not signed up to Disability Confident and currently has no plans to do so. Interestingly, there is research which suggests that those organisations who are signed up don’t actually have any better outcomes or engagement from their disabled staff. The main reason we’re not pursuing this at Oxford is due to the decentralised nature of our recruitment processes.

## **11. I’d like my team to receive some training on disability/neurodiversity, is this something the University can provide?**

There is currently no formal provision within the central University for training on a range of disability-related issues. MPLS does have its own [programme of training](https://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-in-mpls/mpls-ed-i-training-programme) and some departments facilitate their own workshops. Other than that, it’s usually a case of working with third party suppliers.

## **12. I have a staff member who needs some specialist software, is this something that can be funded centrally?**

No, there is no central fund for providing staff with assistive technology or other specialist support. If the staff member has been in post for less than six weeks then it could be worth making an application to the [Government Access to Work programme](https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding), however it should be noted that this is an incredibly prolonged and bureaucratic process – it will likely take up to 6 months for the application to be approved and funding provided. If the staff member is already in post, then the department will be expected to pay the first £1000 of any recommended support, so in many cases it’s not really worth going down the route of Access to Work unless the cost is substantial.