



Department of
Building and Housing

Te Tari Kaupapa Whare



**Barrier Free
NEW ZEALAND
TRUST**



Accessible reception and service counters



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Disclaimer

This booklet is not a Compliance Document, and may be updated from time to time. It is issued as guidance information under section 175 of the Building Act 2004. It has been produced by the Department of Building and Housing in association with the Barrier Free New Zealand Trust. This document is not a substitute for professional advice, and advice should be sought for establishing compliance with the relevant requirements of the Building Act 2004 in individual cases.

Introduction

This booklet provides information on good design solutions for counters and desks that can be used by people with disabilities.

It has been produced by the Department of Building and Housing in association with the Barrier Free New Zealand Trust. The Trust offers guidelines for constructing accessible counters.

GOOD DESIGN

Counters should be constructed so that everyone visiting a building can use them. Good design can achieve a functional result and be pleasing to look at in an architectural context. Good design means the provisions for people with disabilities do not appear to have been added on as an afterthought.

Approaching a reception or service counter or desk and interacting with staff is a normal activity within many types of building. In addition, a writing surface is needed when forms must be filled in.

The Barrier Free Trust recommends that where a series of identical counters is provided, such as in a bank, the best solution is often for all of them to be equally accessible for people with disabilities. The Trust also says people with disabilities do not want to be treated differently from other customers, and staff need flexibility over which counter they attend. Accessibility for people with disabilities should not be seen as being 'special', but should be incorporated as part of the overall design. Desks and counters should be usable by everyone.

The critical questions are:

- what sort of building is the counter intended for? For example, it could be a bank, office, shop, supermarket or hotel.
- what tasks are to be performed there?

Good design takes into account height, reach and sight line requirements to accommodate the physical differences between all users.



An excellent example of usability for staff and visitors with a disability.



A good example of counters at a bank that are all accessible to everyone.

WHAT DOES THE NEW ZEALAND BUILDING CODE SAY?

Clause G5 Interior Environment says:

Objective

G5.1 The objective of this provision is to: [...]

- d) Ensure that *people with disabilities* are able to carry out normal activities and processes within *buildings*.

The clause also says:

Functional requirement

G5.2.1 *Buildings* shall be constructed to provide: [...]

- c) *Accessible* spaces and facilities.

and:

Performance

G5.3.4 Where reception counters or desks are provided for public use, at least one counter or desk shall be *accessible*.

G5.3.4 applies to communal residential, communal non-residential and commercial buildings (communal residential includes hotels and motels; communal non-residential includes cinemas and museums; commercial includes shops, offices and banks).

The Department of Building and Housing publishes Acceptable Solutions that provide one means of demonstrating compliance with the clauses of the Building Code. Acceptable Solution G5/AS1 does not provide any guidance on the design of accessible counters, but NZS 4121 is also a means of compliance and it includes a section on counters and desks.

WHAT DOES THE NEW ZEALAND STANDARD SAY?

In NZS 4121: 2001 Design for Access and Mobility, section 11.1 refers to public counters and desks. It says:

Reception counters and desks for public use on an accessible route shall have at least one space for use by people in wheelchairs as visitors and staff working in the reception area (see figure 36). Such a space shall be at least 900mm wide.

Figures 36 and 37 in the Standard provide examples of public counters in public bars and shops, and of supermarket checkouts, along with an example of a desk. These examples provide only one solution and designers are encouraged to be creative in exploring alternative solutions, taking into account the dimensions required for usability (see 'Counter dimensions' on page 8).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The term 'reception counter or desk' is not defined in the Building Regulations or in the Building Act 2004.

The dictionary definitions of 'counter' refer to a 'fitment' or 'table' across which 'money' or 'business or goods' are transacted with customers.

While there is slight variation in wording between the Building Code and NZS 4121: 2001, the intention behind the phrasing in both documents is the same.

This was clarified in Determination No. 2004/65 made by the former Building Industry Authority, which states:

The Authority takes the view that the difference in wording between *counters or desks* and *counters and desks* is of no practical significance. The essential point is that people with disabilities must be able to carry out the normal activities and processes for which counters or desks or both are provided.



A good example of usability for everyone. The counter includes safety glass at the main counter height of 900 mm, with a 775 mm high shelf for writing, along with knee and toe space.



This 900 mm high counter is accessible to staff and all customers.

WHAT ARE THE DESIGN ISSUES?

People are not all the same height, and not everyone visiting a building is on foot. Everyone needs to:

- **see and be seen**, as it is important to be able to make eye contact with a staff member, and be in hearing range without being obstructed by the counter
- **reach** items at varying heights, particularly electronic transaction terminals (only a stretch of half an arm's length should be needed to transfer documents and use electronic terminals)
- **sit or stand** at a desk or writing shelf when filling in forms
- **easily see and understand signs**.



Wheelchair users or short people, including children, cannot be seen by the receptionist. Reach is restricted by a counter height of 1200 mm. The lowered section at the end is not seen and is usually filled with despatch material. The counter could have been designed with the lowered section in the centre.

COUNTER DIMENSIONS

Counters come in all shapes and sizes. The only guidance on dimensions for accessible counters is given in NZS 4121: 2001. However, Barrier Free Trust research has shown that other design arrangements are possible and should be encouraged, providing the principles of usability are followed.

Some guidelines for usability are given by the Barrier Free Trust as follows.

- Depending on the purpose of the counter, knee and toe space is usually needed so that a wheelchair user can face the counter rather than being forced to make a side-on approach. Exceptions are supermarket and similar checkout counters.
- Some counters can be 'stepped' because when a person is seated their knees do not require as much depth under a horizontal surface as do their feet.
- Counters can be at two heights with an accessible lower level, but only when neither section is seen as the main part of the counter and both are equally visible when the counter is approached.
- A counter with a lower section that is tucked out of sight or 'around the corner' is a poor solution. A staff member should be able to attend a customer at the lower section without having to disengage from attending customers at another part of the counter.



A high reception counter with the accessible section around the corner and not visible on entering.



An accessible counter that is not used because the cashier operates from another part of the counter.

Counter dimensions continued...

- A 1200 mm or 1300 mm high reception counter in an office or hotel is acceptable for an average-height person standing, but a counter this high can become a separation barrier for many other people and for wheelchair users. Often a high counter is used to provide security or privacy for staff, but it is always possible to provide a good design solution that meets everyone's needs.
- Research has shown that a 900 mm high counter is practical

for wheelchair users. It is a usable height for people standing too, so sometimes the whole counter can be 900 mm high, such as in a shop or food outlet.

- A shelf 250–300 mm deep, lower than the counter top, can be a substitute for providing knee space.

Critical dimensions are:

- knee space at least 250 mm deep, along with toe space 250 mm deep and 300 mm high
- vertical clearance under the counter top (or shelf) of at least 700 mm.



A good design but the pillar affects usability. The action is in the centre of the counter.

DESK DIMENSIONS

Even in this electronic age, there are situations where people need to write or fill in forms, such as at insurance offices or banks. Desks suitable for wheelchair users can be used by everyone.

In NZS 4121: 2001, Figure 37 shows that the height of a desk top or writing surface should be 775 mm with a minimum under-bench height of 675 mm (700 mm is preferred) and a depth for knee/toe space of at least 540 mm.

HAVE THERE BEEN ANY DETERMINATION DECISIONS?

Two determination decisions were made by the former Building Industry Authority about accessible counters (these can be downloaded from the Department of Building and Housing website www.dbh.govt.nz).

Determination No. 2004/13 concluded that the counter in a bar that was 1100 mm high for its full length did not comply with Clause G5 of the Building Code as it made no provision for people with disabilities.

Determination No. 2004/65 related to a bank. Accessible facilities in a separate room from the tellers' counters were not considered to comply with the Building Code. The determination concluded that people with disabilities must be able to carry out the normal activities and processes for which counters and desks are provided.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Designing and constructing an accessible counter is not difficult and need not be more expensive, provided thought is given by the designer at an early stage about who may wish to use it. The purpose of the counter, whether 'meet and greet' only or for filling in forms, needs to be considered.

A counter can be provided that will meet the mandatory Building Code objective of enabling everyone to undertake normal activities in the building. Problems arise only when a counter has been constructed with no thought about making it accessible.

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