



Inclusive local communities for children with disability and their families

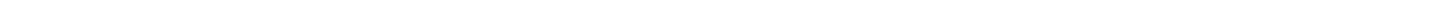
Local government action plan



Association for
Children with a
Disability

Contents

Association for Children with Disability	3
Building inclusive local communities.....	3
1. Disability-confident workforce	4
2. Accessible and inclusive infrastructure	5
3. Accessible and inclusive services.....	6



Association for Children with Disability

ACD is the leading advocacy service for children with disability and their families in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

For more than 40 years we have been advocating to improve the lives of children with disability and their families.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

Building inclusive local communities

Local communities are important places for children and families to learn, play and connect. For children with disability, they begin with playgrounds and playgroups and continue into after-school activities, sport, and recreation. But for many children with disability and their families, local communities aren't fully accessible and inclusive.

Local governments play a leading role in investing in workforces, infrastructure and services to ensure children with disability and their families can be active and engaged members of the community.

This local government action plan outlines ways individual local councils can ensure their communities are places where children with disability and their families feel a sense of belonging.

'Accessible doesn't mean inclusive and we need the two to go together.'

Engage with children with disability and their families

Building inclusive local communities starts by engaging with children with disability and their families to understand their needs in the context of their unique local community, and ensuring they are represented in key discussions and on advisory groups.

Disability Access and Inclusion Plans, and Family, Child and Youth Plans should be developed through targeted consultation with children with disability and their families. Too often these plans are adult-focused, or don't consider the intersection of disability for children and their families.

Similarly, local councils should do their best to connect with young people with disability so they are active participants and represented on youth advisory groups.

1. Disability-confident workforce

1.1 Maternal and child health nurses

Maternal and child health nurses play a key role in the early years of a child and family's life to support the child's health, wellbeing, safety, learning and development.

However, for families raising children with disability, there is concern that maternal and child health nurses aren't equipped with evidence-based information about different developmental milestones and expectations when children have developmental delay or disability.

Invest in maternal and child health nurses so they have the knowledge and disability confidence to support families raising children with disability or developmental delay.

'I stopped going to the MCHN once we had a paediatrician because all their evidence-based advice was only relevant for neurotypical babies. It would have been helpful for the MCHNs to be able to provide advice for children who were not meeting milestones.'

'A wider range of advice from MCHNs that helps children with atypical development [would have made the service better].'

1.2 Local government services staff

Families want to use local services more but identified workforce knowledge and skills as a gap across sport, recreation and leisure centres; library staff; child and family workers; and youth workers.

Families speak about not feeling welcome and gaps in staff knowledge to support children with disability to engage in services. Families also report limited understanding of disability-specific equipment and infrastructure. This means areas such as disability change rooms and hydrotherapy pools are often utilised by everyone, making them unavailable or inaccessible for their children and family.

Boost the disability knowledge and confidence across these workforces to increase the inclusiveness of service design. It would support children with disability and their families to take advantage of services that help them feel connected and part of the community.

'A lot of times they're making environments accessible in as far as the infrastructure ... But I think one of the main downfalls is that sometimes you can have services and recreation places and sporting clubs that are supposedly accessible, but they do not have the level of training required particularly for children who have complex disabilities.'

'Playgroups and youth services have limited knowledge of disability issues and inclusive practices. We haven't always been made to feel welcome.'

2. Accessible and inclusive infrastructure

2.1 Playgrounds

Play is universal and children with disability love to play. Well-designed playgrounds enable children with disability to engage in play that supports them to connect with other children and create the space for everyone to belong. Children with disability are very diverse and there is no perfect inclusive playground. Variety in playgrounds that incorporate accessible and inclusive design is what gives children with disability the right space for them to play.

Ensure every community has a diverse range of inclusive playgrounds that meet the different needs of children with disability.

'More inclusive playgrounds with sealed pathways, access to different equipment for all abilities and fenced spaces.'

2.2 Changing Places facilities

Changing Places are the gold standard in accessible toilets. These facilities can enable play and recreation. They're vital infrastructure for children with disability and their families. But some local communities don't have any, or they're not close to important services and activities such as playgrounds, leisure, sport and recreational facilities.

Work with state and federal counterparts so that every suburb and every town has a Changing Places facility.

'Of particular note and concern is that on a recent drive from Melbourne to Adelaide it was very hard (or non-existent) to find any Changing Places facilities on the route in any of the regional towns.'

2.3 Leisure and recreation centres

Accessible and inclusive leisure and recreation centres need to consider both physical accessibility and sensory needs. For many families, large open spaces with multiple pools in one area are loud and overstimulating, making the spaces inaccessible for their children.

Having changing rooms' locks out of reach of children, increasing the opening and closing times on automatic doors, and designing facilities to minimise sensory overload would make it easier for their children with disability to engage in local leisure and recreational activities.

Improve accessibility and inclusion at leisure and recreation centres.

3. Accessible and inclusive services

3.1 Playgroups and peer support for parents and carers

Local councils deliver great services that bring families together, like playgroups and activities for carers, but sometimes there are service gaps or services aren't inclusive.

For example, families said playgroups run by volunteers can be difficult to join due to limited structure and resources, particularly when families are supporting their child's behaviour in a social setting. Often, there are no services to bring dads raising children with disability together, or activities for carers raising teenage children with disability.

Invest in more services for families raising children with disability, including inclusive playgroups, services for dads and parents of teenage children.

'Local carers groups for parents of children with a disability. My council has lots of carer's activities and a monthly email newsletter for carers, but no activities specifically for parents with school-aged children.'

'Provide training for playgroups etc about children with disabilities and what helps like sensory fidgets, calming space.'

3.2 Libraries

Libraries are wonderful places for the entire community, and families raising children with disability want to use their local libraries more.

They would like to see libraries offering a range of options such as shorter story-time sessions with smaller numbers to make them inclusive, adding a calming space or corner to each library, and offering more after-school activities for school-aged children that cater to sensory needs.

Support local libraries to design accessible and inclusive services for children with disability and their families.

'I have known of inclusive story times run by libraries. Small gestures can make such a big difference to families and children. It shouldn't be pot luck or rely on one person's interest or insight.'

3.3 Sport, swimming and recreation

Families value all-abilities sport and recreation activities delivered by local councils. They highlighted the need for opportunities to increase their children's ability to continue with sport into their teenage years by offering non-competitive and social sporting activities. In addition to all-ability opportunities, mainstream sports offered by local sports clubs need to be accessible and inclusive.

When leisure centres and swimming pools offer sensory-friendly sessions and swimming programs with flexibility to allow children with disability to engage and progress against non-standard milestones, this helps to support children with disability and their families feel welcome.

Offer accessible and inclusive services that support children with disability to be active, healthy members of the community.

'We ended up having to take a 40-minute drive to get swimming lessons initially because we couldn't find anywhere locally.'

'My son had a motor coordination difficulty and he didn't ever get the dolphin kick. And I had to say he's never going to get the dolphin kick. Can we move on? And then they were like, oh, oh, yeah, of course, of course.'

'I have seen all abilities sports activities advertised however these are held very infrequently. I have found it difficult to find all abilities sports activities for my boys and would find it useful if services such as council rec centres held and advertised activities more.'

3.4 Youth programs

Youth programs, particularly recreational activities, offer a place for young people to connect with others in their local community. Families are keen to see these opportunities be explicitly welcoming of young people with disability. This includes working in partnership with families to understand the young person's support needs, welcoming support workers to attend alongside a young person, and ensuring needs and access needs are incorporated into program planning.

Invest in more youth programs that offer a variety of inclusive activities that support peer and community connection.

'There's not enough social groups for teens around.'

'Our son won't do disability specific stuff, but just needs people to understand him to access mainstream things.'

3.5 Inclusive and welcoming events

Local councils run family-friendly events for the whole community, including summer festivals, winter light displays and carols in the park. Planning for accessibility makes these inclusive of all families.

Examples of accessibility planning include: additional accessible parking; hosting events close to Changing Places facilities; Auslan interpreters; providing a quiet or sensory space; dedicated seating for children with disability and their families; ushers who can assist families, and providing a social script prior to the event.

Embed accessibility planning in all community events.

'I would love our local libraries to have a calming space corner too and range of books about children with disability.'

For more information and an opportunity to meet with families with children with disability to discuss recommendations, contact:

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