



Access For All

A Model Code for Local Government

1. Introduction

Equal access to all services, buildings and facilities is a fundamental human right. No-one should be denied this right simply because they cannot navigate the stairs – or have limited mobility or vision. Unfortunately, all too often poor planning and/or sub-standard building design result in equal access being denied to hundreds of thousands of people. This limits the ability of a large sector of our society to participate fully in their community.

Regardless of whether a person chooses to enter a building via the stairs, a ramp, or the elevator, access should be on equal terms for all. Sadly, people with limited mobility are often forced to enter via the back door or, worse still, denied access altogether.

There is simply no excuse for people being made to feel like second-class citizens because they are unable to use the front stairs.

Architects have a responsibility to design all buildings for easy access. Town planners and engineers need to ensure signs, street furniture and phone booths do not turn footpaths and public places into obstacle courses. Landscape designers and gardeners need to keep tree branches trimmed from over hanging walkways and public places. Everyone has a role to play.

Against the backdrop of an ageing population and expectation that most people, at some point in their lives, will either push a pram or have an accident that limits their mobility for some period, this is an issue that affects us all. Equity of access is not a demand from people with disabilities - but an ease of access issue for everybody!

2. Local Government can make a difference

Local Government is ideally situated to make a difference. Councils have both direct and indirect control over a wide range of areas that affect people living with limited mobility.

These include;

- Providing services directly from council buildings
- Funding and/or auspicing secondary services in healthcare, youth, aged and recreation
- Building and maintaining public infrastructure and buildings
- Setting and enforcing standards and guidelines
- Acting as consent authority for residential and commercial buildings
- Facilitating and supporting groups working in the disability sector

- Acting as a coordinated sector to lobby state and federal governments on disability issues.

Given the scope of areas where councils have the opportunity to make a difference, it is essential that local government takes a proactive role.

To do this, individual councils must have in place internal mechanisms that enable them to develop and implement initiatives in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

3. What Local Government Can Do

By law, all councils in NSW are required to adopt a Social Plan that takes account of disability issues. This ensures that disability concerns are included in the strategic planning and decision-making process of council.

Some councils have gone further and have developed a range of additional initiatives. These include;

- Establishing an Access Committee
- Developing an Access and/or Disabilities Development Control Plan (DCP)
- Employing a Disability Officer
- Employing an Access Planner
- Developing an information kit for people with a disability
- Internal training for all council staff on disability awareness

The table below shows the range of strategies employed by different councils in the Sydney metropolitan area. This table is indicative only and is drawn from information available on each councils website.

Comparison of Sydney Councils

Council	Access/Disability Committee	Co-ordinator or Officer	Other
The Council of the Municipality of Ashfield	✓	-	DCP
Auburn Council	✓	-	DCP
Bankstown City Council	-	-	
The Council of the Shire of Baulkham Hills	✓	-	
Blacktown City Council	-	-	
Blue Mountains City Council	✓	✓	Working Group
The Council of the City of Botany Bay	-	-	
Burwood Council	-	-	
Camden Council	-	-	
Campbelltown City Council	-	✓	
City of Canada Bay Council	✓	-	
Canterbury City Council	✓	✓	
Fairfield City Council	✓	-	
Gosford City Council	-	-	

Hawkesbury City Council	-	-	
Holroyd City Council	✓	✓	
The Council of the Shire of Hornsby	✓	✓	
The Council of the Municipality of Hunters Hill	✓	-	
Hurstville City Council	✓	-	DCP
Kogarah Municipal Council	✓	✓	DCP
Ku-ring-gai Council	✓	-	Awareness Kit
Lane Cove Municipal Council	-	-	
Leichhardt Municipal Council	✓	✓	DCP
Liverpool City Council	✓	✓	
	✓	-	Aged & Disability Planner
Manly Council			DCP
	✓	✓	Planning kit
Marrickville Council			DCP
	-	-	Advisory Group
Mosman Municipal Council			
North Sydney Council	✓	-	
Parramatta City Council	-	-	
Penrith City Council	✓	-	
Pittwater Council	-	-	
Randwick City Council	✓	-	
Rockdale City Council		-	DCP
Ryde City Council	✓	-	
Strathfield Municipal Council	-	-	
Sutherland Shire Council	✓	✓	
Council of the City of Sydney	-	-	DCP
	✓	✓	Information Service
Warringah Council			
Waverley Council	✓	-	DCP
Willoughby City Council	✓	✓	DCP
Wollondilly Shire Council	✓	✓	
Woollahra Municipal Council	✓	-	DCP
Wyong Shire Council	✓	-	

Note: Some websites provide better 'access to information' than others. This is a salient point given that many people with disabilities rely heavily on electronic information. Councils may have a wide range of excellent initiatives, but unless those initiatives are accessible via the web, (or at the very least information provided via the web), access will be severely curtailed.

Two initiatives jump out of the table above. Councils that have taken the lead in responding to access and disability issues have;

1. formed an Access Committee
2. employed an Access Officer

The Greens consulted widely within the disability sector and various councils exploring whether these two initiatives are effective.

All of the organisations consulted were of the view that all councils, as a bare minimum, should have both an Access Committee which functions effectively and a Disability Officer.

4. Access Committees

Access Committees have a number of important functions and benefits. They provide a link between council and disability sector organisations, help co-ordinate activities within council and play a key role in establishing networks with other groups within the community such as parents with prams, people from non-English speaking background, aged and youth groups, etc. Without a Disability Committee it is difficult for a council to build and maintain these relationships, and to sustain the momentum within council.

4.1 The Role of a Well- Run Access Committee

The role of the Access Committee is to set the over-arching strategic direction of council on access and disability issues. To maximise effectiveness an Access Committee must have clear terms of reference and be made up of;

- ✓ sitting councillors
- ✓ senior council staff, preferably from both technical and social areas of the organisation (eg. Engineering, Planning and Community Programs)
- ✓ representatives from disability organisations
- ✓ local community members living with disabilities

The brief and Terms of Reference of the committee should be positive to ensure it is not simply a body created to perform a statutory obligation. It is essential to get the structural mechanisms underpinning an access committee right from the start.

For this to occur within any organisation, senior staff must be involved if an initiative is to flourish. Access Committees within councils should include the Mayor and senior council staff.

The Committee should meet regularly (no less than monthly), with meetings open to the public, minutes recorded and publicly available on council's website.

4.2 Disability Officer

The role of a disability officer is to drive and co-ordinate the implementation of initiatives within council. This is vital if initiatives from the Access Committee and elsewhere within council are to be implemented effectively.

An effective model already in operation in some councils is one where the Disability Officer is also a member of the Access Committee and helps to coordinate the activities of the Committee.

The inter-relationship between the Officer and Committee is an important one and must be equal and cooperative. Both should work in unison and ensure that the Disability Officer is not lumped with the responsibility for the 'disability issue' leaving the rest of council to ignore it. Too often, professionals such as the planners and engineers within the council fail to deliver fully on their responsibilities because it is viewed as someone else's job. The responsibility for equitable access lies with the organisation and everyone within it.

Equally unfortunate is a culture within too many councils that a disability officer is unnecessary. This view is clearly outdated and the Greens are working both with Greens councillors, as well as at the state level, to promote the uptake of Access Committees and Disability Officers within all councils.

5. Facilitating culture change within councils

While ease of access affects everyone, individuals and organisations working on the issue seldom work together in a co-ordinated way to bring about systemic change. Parents with prams and strollers, for example, face many of the same issues as people in a wheelchair, yet they often fail to lobby together for the same outcomes.

People living with different disabilities often overlook the opportunity to come together in a unified way to exert maximum pressure on designers, businesses and governments.

Against the backdrop of an adversarial relationship that often exists between people with disabilities and building administrators and policy makers, this tends to lead to a situation where access is dealt with in an ad hoc issue-by-issue manner.

Too many people within organisations, including councils, see access as a ‘disability issue’ that needs to be ‘managed’ and juggled against competing demands. Unfortunately this results in staff trading the ‘disability issue’ off against other lobbying demands.

6. Planning for Access

Some councils have already developed a Disability Development Control Plan (DCPs) and should be congratulated for taking this initiative. Recent sweeping changes to NSW planning laws will result in most of these DCPs becoming obsolete.

Councils will be required to develop new DCPs and new Local Environment Plans (LEPs) within two years. Councils with a Disability DCP should be encouraged to integrate the provisions of the DCP into their new Local Environment Plan (LEP).

Under the new planning regime each Local Government Area (LGA) will be governed by a single LEP, which must conform with to state-wide template.

The Greens strongly support the introduction of standard provisions relating to disabilities being integrated into the state-wide LEP template and for these to become mandatory minimum provisions that apply across all LGAs.

Good planning should promote “adaptable housing”, which involves the creation of a basic building shell able to be adapted at a minimum cost to suit a variety of housing needs and the changing needs of occupants throughout the buildings life span. Typical features may include: level and wider doorways and corridors, non-slip surfaces, easily reachable power points, and easy-to-use door handles. These features should be standard in all new buildings, across all LGAs.

To facilitate this process, some councils have begun to employ Access Planners. This is a relatively new area within the planning profession. Unfortunately, a state-wide shortage of

planners means access planners are very difficult to find. Nevertheless, councils wanting to take the lead on disability issues should consider employing a dedicated access planner.

Access Planners are especially important for councils with large commercial precincts and tourist areas.

7. Tourism and Business

Councils with large commercial precincts, tourist areas or high numbers of visitors have a special responsibility to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are fully met.

The business community is a powerful stakeholder in commercial precincts. For this reason it is imperative to get their support in breaking down barriers and helping to bring about real and meaningful cultural change. With the support of the business community culture change can be swift and profitable.

For example, Westpac has a strategic plan to fully integrate people with a disability into their organisation as both employees and customers and has been working with City Rail to ensure that the branches Westpac is retrofitting for equal access are located near stations that also have equitable access. This kind of coordination is commendable.

Unfortunately, not all members of the corporate sector have been so enthusiastic. New phone booths in central Sydney built on a single pole are particularly problematic for the sight impaired. Councils, Telstra and the private company supplying the ‘pole booths’ have been highly resistant to changing their design.

People with limited mobility find the CBD of Sydney very difficult to navigate and there is no doubt that real and major change is required. Sydney City Council performs a major role in most people’s lives in terms of how they experience day-to-day access in the city.

The City of Sydney appears to be in a somewhat unique position, as a major council without either a Disability Officer or Access Committee. As the heart of global Sydney and a major hub for tourism and business, this is unacceptable.

8. Conclusion

- Equal access is an issue for everybody – not just people with a disability.
- Councils are ideally placed to promote equity of access.
- In addition to the legislative requirement that councils have a Disability Plan, all councils, as a bare minimum, should have both an Access Committee and an Access Officer.
- In order for an Access Committee to be successful, its role and function within council must be clearly articulated.

- An Access Committee needs to be supported by all levels of council - staff, councillors and the Mayor. The Committee should consist of community representatives, councillors and senior council staff.
- A Disability Officer is essential to drive disability issues within council and work with the Access Committee.
- Councils whose areas contain built-up urban areas, commercial hubs and/or tourist precincts attracting large numbers of visitors have a special responsibility to provide equity of access.