CITY OF BALLARAT

# DISABILITY ACCESS AND INCLUSION PLAN 2026–2030

## Engagement Report

Proudly working with and for our community



# ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY REPORT

## Executive summary

The City of Ballarat undertook community engagement to inform the development of its next Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) between 16 February to 22 March 2026.

The aim of this engagement was to hear directly from the Ballarat community, including people living with disability and chronic health conditions, carers, and local organisations, about the barriers they experience and the opportunities to improve accessibility over the next four years. Using a range of engagement methods including a survey, in person sessions, 1-1 discussions, drop in visits to programs and an online blog the process ensured that people with disability, carers, service providers, and the broader community could share their experiences, ideas, and priorities in meaningful ways.

The feedback gathered reflects lived experience across the community, highlights what is working well, and identifies priority areas for improvement. The findings reveal a range of systemic and environmental barriers and clear priorities for action across transport, the built environment, tourism, communication and information, service navigation, employment, and community inclusion. The findings will guide a targeted and evidence-based approach to disability access and inclusion and directly inform the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2026–2030.

The Plan sets out the City of Ballarat's commitment to reducing barriers and creating equitable opportunities for people with disability to participate fully in all aspects of community life. Building on the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2022–2026, the next Plan will guide the City of Ballarat's work over the next four years to enhance accessibility across buildings and public spaces, service delivery, organisational practices, events, and community programs, aligning with legislative obligations and community expectations.

# The Community Response - Key Themes

Across the survey, engagement sessions, blog, and drop in visits, several key themes emerged. These are highlighted below:

## Travel and Transportation

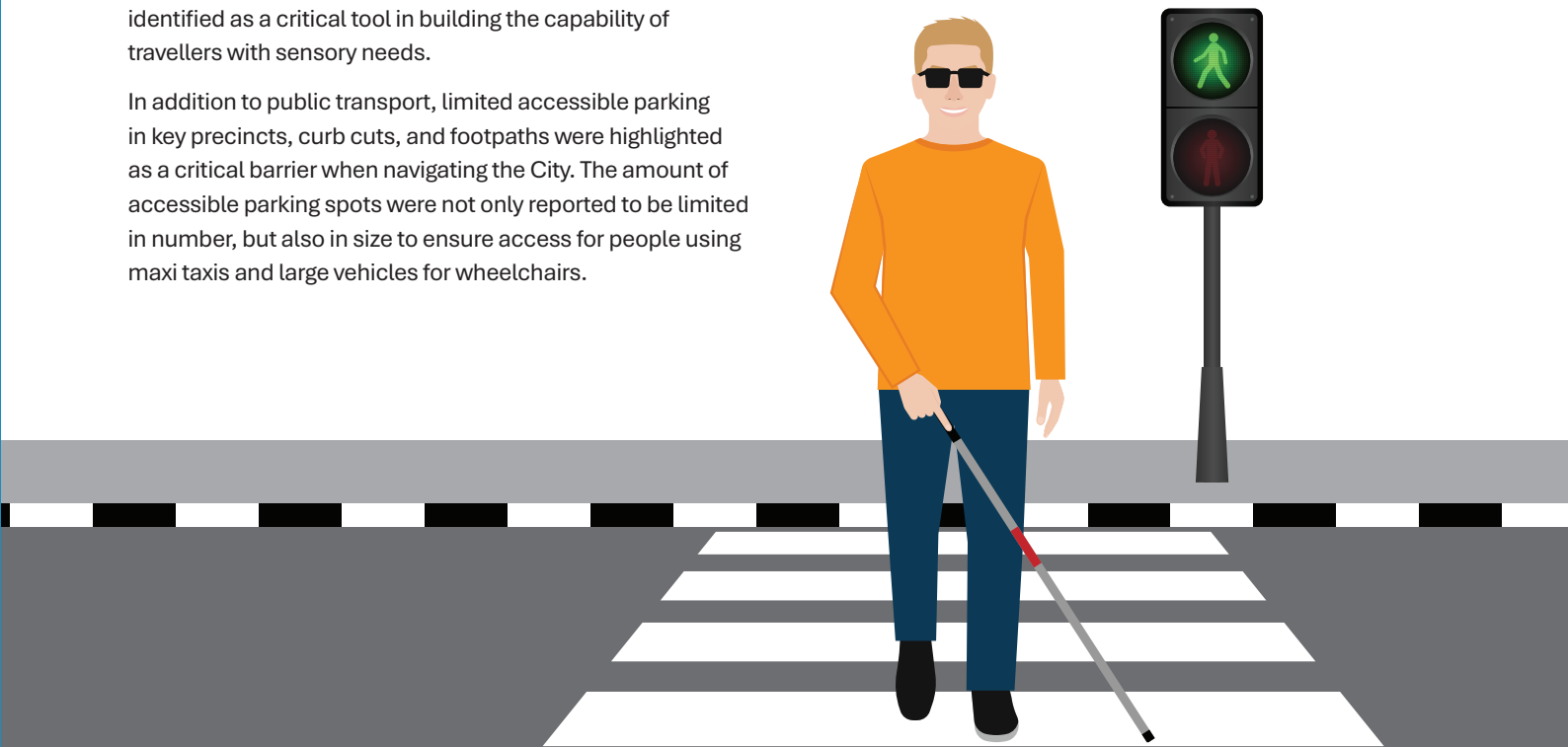
Accessible and available public transport remains one of the greatest barriers for people living with a disability in Ballarat. Stakeholders highlighted the lack of connectivity of the bus network and accessibility of buses particularly in Winter Valley, Bonshaw, and growth areas limiting access to employment opportunities, medical appointments, volunteering, social connection, events and critical services. Bus drivers were reported to be a critical source of information and community support for navigating the City, and everyday assistance, building the capability of bus drivers in disability awareness was highlighted as a key opportunity.

Travellers who are deaf or hard of hearing reported significant barriers in accessing transport as a result of audio only announcements. Travellers living with sensory disabilities were highlighted as a priority group for difficulties in navigating busy networks and stations, social stories were identified as a critical tool in building the capability of travellers with sensory needs.

In addition to public transport, limited accessible parking in key precincts, curb cuts, and footpaths were highlighted as a critical barrier when navigating the City. The amount of accessible parking spots were not only reported to be limited in number, but also in size to ensure access for people using maxi taxis and large vehicles for wheelchairs.

Participants also reported reluctance to use accessible parking bays due to fear of judgement when using disabled parking permits for hidden conditions and disabilities, despite legitimate need. Footpaths and curb access were frequently raised as a key accessibility barrier, resulting in longer and more exhausting routes of travel, an inability to cross roads, leading to major safety risks throughout the City.

> "Whenever I am in public, I ask myself, if I was a wheelchair user, could I do this on my own? The answer is usually no."
>
> Community member.





## Built Environment and Accessible Design

Inaccessible buildings, including the lack of accessible entrances, wheelchair circulation space, seating, desk heights, parking spaces, consistent internal accessibility, and suitable pathways such as kerbs, bluestone terrain, footpaths and ramps into buildings, were identified as critical issues for people living with disability. Participants also described the significant tension between heritage protections and necessary accessibility upgrades, as well as a shortage of accessible housing and accessible accommodation. Critical public services such as hospitals, medical services, kindergartens, sporting venues, schools, train stations, VicRoads-managed infrastructure and bus stops were reported to be highly inaccessible. Many reported that local cafes, bars, hotels, restaurants and shops are largely inaccessible in the City of Ballarat as a result of heritage or lack of investment in accessible infrastructure. Embedding lived experience and universal design at the earliest possible point was identified as an ongoing priority for the City of Ballarat, developers and non-local government owned buildings rather than retrofitting designs later.

The demand for more Changing Places facilities, accessible toilets, play spaces, outdoor pools and buildings across growth areas and key suburbs including Wendouree, Buninyong, Sebastopol and Delacombe were identified as priorities in future development to support vital community access and inclusion. More accessible walking tracks, recreation facilities, sporting stadiums, performing arts centres and theatres were also identified as a major accessibility gap not only for physical and sensory accessibility but also for community who are blind, low vision, deaf or hard of hearing.

> "It makes you feel visible when accessibility is considered and front of mind... you matter and you belong here"
>
> Community member.



## Inaccessible Communication and Information

The need for more accessible information was highlighted as an ongoing barrier for people living with intellectual disability, low literacy levels, vision impairment, those who are deaf and hard of hearing, psychosocial disability and those who are nonverbal. Critical communication tools such as communication boards, visual information, easy read information, Auslan, captioned and audio formats for information ensure consistent accessibility throughout the City.

Hearing loops were reported to be available but not usable as a result of the lack of knowledge from staff on how to operate them. Participants expressed a need for communication tools such as symbol based boards linked to apps, Auslan interpreted, large-print materials and easy-read information, including social stories to support navigation of large events and public spaces. Campaigns on disability awareness, hidden disabilities, deaf and hard of hearing awareness, disability rights, and carers of all ages were emphasised as a central action for the City of Ballarat to increase community understanding of disability and accessibility.

There was strong support for improving the promotion of accessible events, activities and venues. Participants recommended that event listings clearly identify accessibility features using recognised symbols such as the sunflower icon, supported by an accessibility verification process overseen by an Inclusion Officer or through event registration requirements.

The demand for specialist disability awareness training, and supporting people living with intellectual, complex trauma, deaf and hard of hearing awareness, and neurological disability in customer service settings and service settings were raised as a priority for increasing accessible communication, and positive service experiences throughout the City. Emphasis on building relationships, scheduling additional time to ensure comprehension and understanding, as well as identifying other supports that may be helpful for the individual.



## Service System Navigation and Gaps

The service system in Ballarat was widely described as highly complex, difficult to navigate and challenging to understand, creating significant barriers for people to access the supports they need. Participants reported multiple entry points, inconsistent intake processes and limited clear information about available services, including eligibility requirements, duration of support, safety planning procedures and pathways for escalation.

> "NDIS funding cuts are having a profound effect, people are losing resources to participate in the community."
>
> Community member.

Across all service areas, participants expressed a strong need for a single, reliable source of truth to understand what supports exist, who is eligible and how to access them. There was a clear demand for a dedicated community connector role to help people navigate services, complete complex applications and link into the right supports in a timely and personalised way. A lack of Easy Read materials and limited coordination between services were identified as major contributors to confusion and inaccessibility. The diagnostic process itself was reported to be highly inaccessible, costly and lengthy, creating further obstacles to accessing services and determining eligibility for specialist supports.

A significant gap was identified for adults aged 25 to 40, who often fall between youth service eligibility and aged care access, leaving them without appropriate supports during a stage of life associated with complex responsibilities, transitions and increasing care needs.

Programs for students living with disability in "mainstream" schools, accessible performing arts and general arts programs, intergenerational events and programs for people living with disability, young carer support groups, social meet up events and social events were emphasised as key gaps particularly for those not on the NDIS.

> "People just stay home because it's too hard"
>
> Community member.

Many participants reported a general lack of understanding about their rights within the justice system, along with experiences of discrimination and barriers when seeking legal or advocacy support. The need for sensory friendly consultation rooms, intake processes, and accessible information were crucial to ensuring fair, safe and dignified access to services.

> "Negative attitudes toward people with disability often stem from biased assumptions and a lack of awareness about the cognitive load and financial burden involved in accessing the support they need"
>
> Organisation Representative.

## Economic Tourism and Development

The lack of employment opportunities and meaningful work experience for people living with disability remains a key barrier in Ballarat. Inaccessible recruitment practices, interviewing, worker screenings including Working with Children Checks, Police Checks, and pre-employment checks medical screening remain key barriers to securing employment. Additionally, inaccessible workplaces and lack of supports in place to set employees living with disability up for success were reported to limit workforce participation.

Accessing local businesses were reported to be a key barrier for social participation and tourism in Ballarat. Not only did participants emphasise the lack of physically accessible entrances, parking, toilets, seating, and paths of travel but the lack of awareness for business owners and their staff of inclusive customer service, and creating holistically accessible experiences for patrons living with disability. Business accreditation programs led by the City of Ballarat was highlighted as a key opportunity to enhance accessible tourism in the region including a holistic approach to accessibility including deaf or hard of hearing awareness, physical accessibility, customer service, and supporting customers living with a range of accessibility needs.

> "When you make things more accessible, it opens up experience...there's a whole cohort of people who can't follow their dreams."
>
> Community member.

The demand for sensory hours within businesses, publicly listed accessibility information, and investment in accessible business was critical for community participation. Accessible tourism campaigns and capability building were highlighted as a critical opportunity for Ballarat to promote the economic benefits for businesses, and community wellbeing. Ongoing grants, and partnerships with Commerce Ballarat, Visit Ballarat and Tourism MidWest to promote accessible tourism practices and information were critical.

Participants stressed the importance of including accessibility details such as wheelchair access, seating options, Auslan interpretation, live captioning, hearing loops, quiet spaces and sensory considerations directly in event listings and promotional material. Where accessible shows were clearly identified in advance, participants reported more confidence and willingness to attend.

> "You want dignity when you enter somewhere, businesses are starting to create accessible entrances through the beer garden that makes me feel almost human"
>
> Community member.



## Community Attitudes, Isolation and Discrimination

The prevalence of negative biases and discrimination towards people living with disability were reported to be an ongoing issue within the Ballarat community. Discrimination was reported to be prevalent in businesses, schools, workplaces and in emergency services. Targeted information and education to these sectors on disability awareness and practices was highlighted as a key priority for the next DAIP to reduce misinformation, ableism and negative attitudes toward disability which discriminate those living with disability and chronic health conditions.

> "They want to feel that they belong, it's not about inclusion, it's about belonging... they want to have input in the community - go to events not laughed at when they get there, so they stay inside... they want to be a part of the community, be involved, and belong"
>
> Organisation Representative.

A lack of awareness of disability was highlighted as a key cause of isolation for people living with disability, when accessibility is not considered and overlooked, in business, events, service delivery, schools, and programs, this isolates and limits social, economic health outcomes, and educational opportunities for people living with disability and their carers.

Participants stressed that inclusion must go beyond "allowing entry" and instead focus on belonging, dignity and meaningful participation. Education was identified as essential to shift culture, particularly in schools, sporting clubs, businesses and workplaces. Participants called for disability led education, inclusive frameworks that organisations actively sign up to, and accountability mechanisms to ensure inclusive commitments are upheld. Positive examples, such as inclusive sporting programs, autism led childcare, and supportive community staff, demonstrate that when understanding is present, inclusion is achievable. Many throughout the engagements highlighted the importance of raising awareness of hidden disabilities in context of their rights using accessible parking and toilets.

Campaigns on disability both visible and hidden were emphasised as a vital role of Council in reducing discrimination and raising awareness on disability. Additionally, delivering training for people living with disability on self-advocacy and their rights across a range of settings was reported to be an important tool in empowering people living with disability.



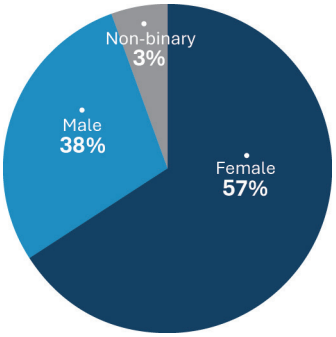
# Audience and reach

Across the survey, in-person engagement sessions, blog, and drop in visits we engaged approximately 325 people. From the survey, we had 56 responses:

## MySay Page

A total of 56 people responded to the survey.
The MySay page received 796 visits, 467 unique visitors, and 8 blog contributions.

### Who we heard from:




Most respondents identified as women (66.07%), followed by men (28.57%) and non-binary people (5.36%). Participants spanned a broad age range, with the largest cohorts aged 36–45 (21.43%) and 56–65 (19.64%), reflecting engagement across working-age and older adults. Smaller proportions of younger people (12–25 years, 5.36%) and those aged over 75 (1.79%) also participated.

A substantial majority of respondents identified as people with disability (71.43%), with more than a quarter identifying as carers (28.57%). Many respondents also reported intersecting experiences of disadvantage, including socio economic disadvantage (39.29%), identification as LGBTIQA+ (16.07%), First Nations (7.14%) or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (5.36%), while only a small proportion (8.93%) indicated none of these categories.

Respondents reported a wide range of disability types and access needs, reflecting diverse lived experiences, including physical or mobility disabilities (48.21%), mental health or chronic health conditions (35.71%), intellectual, cognitive or neurological disabilities (26.79%), and sensory disabilities (17.86%). In addition, a significant cohort identified as unpaid carers (33.93%), and a smaller proportion as paid carers, advocates or support workers (8.93%).

### What we heard about City of Ballarat services and experiences of accessibility

The following findings provide insight into how accessible the City is perceived to be, whether accessibility has improved over time, and how easy it is for people with disability to access specific City of Ballarat facilities and services. Overall, the results indicate some progress in accessibility over the past five years, but also highlight significant, ongoing barriers, particularly in the public realm, events, and core infrastructure.

### Perceptions of accessibility and inclusion throughout the City

When asked whether Ballarat is an inclusive and accessible community for people with disability, fewer than one-third of respondents agreed or strongly agreed (28.57%). Almost half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (48.22%), while 23.21% neither agreed nor disagreed. These findings indicate that negative experiences of accessibility are common, with relatively few respondents expressing positive perceptions. The absence of "I don't know" responses suggests participants felt confident sharing views based on lived experience.

### Change Over the Past Five Years

Perceptions of change over time were mixed. While 60.72% of respondents reported that accessibility and inclusion had improved to some extent over the past five years, this was largely reflected in "somewhat" responses (39.29%), rather than a clear sense of improvement (21.43%). One quarter of respondents (25.00%) reported no improvement, and 14.29% were not sure. This suggests that progress has been incremental, uneven, and not consistently experienced across the community. Notably, more respondents reported no improvement than those who felt accessibility had clearly improved, indicating that gains may not yet be strong or widespread enough.

### Ease of Access to City of Ballarat Facilities and Services

Across all services, an average of 29.66% of respondents rated facilities and services as easy or very easy to use. In contrast, 34.42% found them difficult or very difficult, and 35.91% selected "not sure." The high proportion of "not sure" responses suggests limited awareness, inconsistent use, or difficulty accessing clear and accessible information about many Council services.

### What's Working Well

Libraries emerged as a clear strength, with 64.29% of respondents rating them as easy or very easy to access and only 10.71% finding them difficult. Customer service, information about Council events and services, and aquatic and leisure facilities also performed relatively well. These areas provide useful examples of accessible practice that could inform improvements across other services.

### Accessibility Challenges

The greatest accessibility challenges were concentrated in the public realm and Council-run events. Footpaths and roads (76.79% difficult or very difficult) and parking and car spaces (71.43%) were identified as the most significant barriers. Parks, trails and play spaces (60.71%) and Council festivals and events (57.14%) also recorded high levels of difficulty. Among respondents who expressed an opinion, more than 80% rated footpaths and parking as difficult, clearly identifying these areas as priority targets for accessibility improvement.

### Services Requiring Broader Awareness

Youth services, maternal and child health, child care, seniors services and animal management recorded very high "not sure" responses (59–75%), indicating low awareness, limited relevance for some respondents and or difficulty finding accessible information about these services This suggests opportunities for improved communication, discoverability and targeted outreach.

### Limitations to MySay engagement:

This survey was conducted online and, while it generated valuable insights from people with disability and carers, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Participation was voluntary rather than based on random sampling, meaning the results may reflect the views of people who are already engaged with Council processes or who have strong lived experience perspectives.

A self-selected online approach was used to maximise participation, enable timely and cost-effective data collection, and support input from people with disability, carers and advocates; however, online formats can still present access barriers for some individuals, including those with limited digital access or who rely on assistive technologies.

The sample size is not statistically representative of the broader Ballarat population, and some groups were underrepresented. In addition, high "not sure" responses across some service areas limit the conclusions that can be drawn. The findings reflect self reported perceptions at a single point in time and should be considered indicative and used alongside other engagement activities, audits and evidence to inform the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan.



# Targeted engagement

Targeted engagement included:

- **4 x in person** community engagement sessions, **1 x online** engagement session
- Targeted engagement session with the **City of Ballarat Youth Ambassadors** and **Disability Advisory Committee**
- **7 x drop in sessions** to NDIS day programs and organisations including:
  - **BADAC**
  - **Scope**
  - **McCallum**
  - **Pinarc My Voice Group**
  - **Deaf Victoria x Ballarat East Neighbourhood House**
  - **Buninyong Primary School**
  - **Wendouree Neighbourhood Centre.**
- **23 x 1-1 online meetings** with people living with disability, and organisations.

A detailed demographic breakdown of in-person consultation has not been included in this report to protect participant anonymity due to smaller sample sizes.

## Overview of participation:

- **51 community members** attended the targeted community focused **in-person or online** engagement sessions.
- **44 organisation representatives** attended the targeted organisation focused **in-person** engagement sessions.
- **132 community members** participated in open **drop-in sessions** to programs and networks
- **23 people** were engaged through **1-1 bookable discussions** with the Community Inclusion Officer
- **8 people** posted through the **online blog** hosted on the MySay page.
- **11 Disability Advisory Committee members** were engaged in a targeted **engagement session.**



# Engagement methods

The following engagement methods were used throughout the consultation period.

- **4x in person engagement sessions** and 1x online engagement session after hours.
- **7x drop-in sessions** to NDIS day programs and organisations including: BADAC, Scope, McCallum, Pinarc My Voice Group, Deaf Victoria x Ballarat East Neighbourhood House, Buninyong Primary School, and Wendouree Neighbourhood Centre.
- **MySay online survey** and online **community blog** hosted at mysay.ballarat.vic.gov.au
- **23 x 1-1 online meetings** with people living with disability, and organisations.
- Information and links to survey sent to disability services and organsiations in Ballarat and the City of Ballarat Disability Access and Inclusion Mailing List.
- Promotion on **social media** (Facebook) on several pages (City of Ballarat; Ballarat Aquatic and Lifestyle Centre; Ageing Well; Pride Ballarat; Parent Place Ballarat).
- Boosted **ad on Facebook**
    - » reached over 533 people
    - » received 544 clicks
    - » 392,462 impressions
- **Media release** on the City of Ballarat website
- **Illustrated video**
- **Hard copies** of the survey were available from City of Ballarat's Phoenix building
- **Posters, flyers and footpath decals** across the city, including a QR that links to MySay survey available across community hubs, neighbourhood centres, and engagement sessions.



# In conclusion

The engagement findings highlight critical progress in accessibility across the City, significant barriers remain prevalent for people living with disability, and carers in day-to-day life. Transport, footpath access, parking, physical infrastructure, service navigation, discrimination and communications were continuously identified as priority areas for the next Plan.

The results of this engagement provide a strong basis for continued and practical focus on removing and reducing accessibility barriers, growing disability awareness and capability across the City of Ballarat and the wider community, and guide improvements for service accessibility. Continued engagement with lived experience of disability remains critical to ensuring ensure the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan leads to meaningful, direct improvements and a stronger sense of belonging across Ballarat.

# Closing the loop and what's next

A summary of these engagement findings will be emailed to participating individuals and organsiations in April 2026, and uploaded to the MySay page. The findings from this engagement process will be used to inform the next Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2026-2030.

This will also be shared with the Disability Advisory Committee and City of Ballarat to inform business unit planning for the 2026/27 financial year and strategic plans open for engagement.



CITY OF BALLARAT

**Customer Service**
Monday to Friday, 8.30am–5pm

**Phone**
5320 5500

**Email**
info@ballarat.vic.gov.au

**Postal Address**
PO Box 655
Ballarat, VIC 3353

**Website**
ballarat.vic.gov.au

**NRS-Friendly Hearing or Speech Impaired?**
Call via the National Relay Service on 133 677

**Translating and Interpreting Services**
Call 131 450 for immediate phone interpreting (available 24 hours)
Visit **tisnational.gov.au** for online service

@BallaratCityCouncil

cityofballarat

ballarat-city-council

All information correct at time of publication.