

**Strathcona County  
Accessibility Framework:  
Toward inclusion for all**



## Territorial acknowledgement

Strathcona County is located on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the St. Albert Métis District 11, North Saskatchewan River Territory. We recognize that we stand upon land that carries the footsteps of Cree, Métis, and Blackfoot amongst many other Nations, who have been here for thousands of years. Therefore, Strathcona County has an inherent responsibility to foster healthier relationships with First Peoples and further the Calls to Action as outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As we advance accessibility and inclusion across Strathcona County, we pay particular attention to our responsibility to First Nations, Indigenous, and Métis peoples and have noted the gaps in our programs, services, information, built environment, employment and procurement processes as they relate to the Indigenous community. We are grateful to the Indigenous Advisory Committee for engaging thoughtfully with us on this framework and have included their feedback as we work to support access and inclusion alongside the Indigenous community.



## Acknowledgements

The accessibility framework project team would like to acknowledge the many individuals, departments, and community organizations who contributed to this work. The internal working group, made up of representatives from across the organization, was energetic and optimistic about enhancing and promoting accessibility in Strathcona County. This group's thoughtful feedback and willingness to engage with their departments was foundational to creating this framework.

In addition to department-level support, Strathcona County's Accessibility Advisory Committee, Seniors Advisory Committee, Next Gen Leadership Team, and Indigenous Advisory Committee were engaged over 2023-2024 to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of youth, seniors, people with disabilities and caregivers, and Indigenous Peoples were heard, respected, and included in this framework and the vision of an accessible and inclusive Strathcona County.

We would like to thank the local disability sector organizations who shared with candor the things Strathcona County is doing well, and where we need to improve.

And finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank the disability community and individuals who shared openly and honestly with us through interviews and focus groups. These perspectives are centred in this framework and the accompanying journey map, and we appreciate learning from their feedback and vision for an accessible and inclusive Strathcona County.





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## Introduction

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“Accessibility is not a problem to be solved.

It is a culture to be built.”

– Sheri Byrne-Haber, *global disability and accessibility expert*

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Strathcona County aspires to become Canada’s most livable community. We recognize the need for improvements and we continue to seek opportunities to ensure our community is inclusive to all people. An accessible and inclusive community is welcoming and safe for people of all abilities who live, work and play here.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”<sup>1</sup> The rate of disability among all Canadians is significant and growing. In fact, in 2022, the number of Canadians with at least one disability has doubled since 2012.

Advancing accessibility is about creating barrier-free communities, workplaces and services for all community members. When we improve access for people with disabilities, the entire community benefits. For example, automatic doors minimize or remove barriers to access for people in wheelchairs, pushing a stroller, walker, or cart, or with limited mobility or strength. Removing obstacles aims to create equal opportunities for all.

<sup>1</sup> [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

## 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability<sup>2</sup> data:

**27% of Canadian's aged 15+ (8 million people) had one or more disabilities that limited them in their daily activities, an increase of 5% since 2017.**

**Youth (15 to 24 years) experienced the largest increase in the disability rate since 2017, and most commonly reported mental health (68%), learning (46%) and pain-related (34%) disabilities.**

**Nearly half (42%) of seniors with a disability had four or more co-occurring disabilities.**

For reference, in Strathcona County, approximately 28.5% of the population is over 65 and seniors are the fastest-growing demographic within the County.<sup>3</sup>

**Women of all ages are more likely to have a disability than men.**

<sup>2</sup> [Canadian Survey on Disability \(2022\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Data provided via StatsCan data request 2023

## Background

As part of its commitment to create an accessible and inclusive community, Strathcona County created the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) in September 2018.

The AAC is made up of public members appointed by Council and has a mandate to provide advice and recommendations to Council on improving accessibility for all people in Strathcona County.

In July 2022, the AAC recommended that Strathcona County implement a comprehensive approach to accessibility across department business and operational plans. The AAC also recommended that the County employ universal design principles to create seamless user journeys for community members accessing County buildings, services and programs. Following this recommendation, administration began developing the accessibility framework to guide the County.

In June 2023, an internal working group, comprised of department champions from across the organization, was launched to help co-develop the framework. This internal working group has been a great example of cross-organizational collaboration and has demonstrated the possibilities that arise when different departments come together to achieve a shared goal.



### The accessibility framework supports Strathcona County's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan goals including:



**Healthy and safe community** and its priority of being a diverse, welcoming, inclusive, and accessible community for all.



**Responsible development** and its priority of investment in our infrastructure that supports development and complete communities.



**Municipal excellence** and its priority of optimal use of resources that meets the community's needs.





**The accessibility framework also aligns with Strathcona County's existing strategies and policies including:**

- Community Safety and Well-being Strategy
- Recreation and Culture Strategy
- Municipal Development Plan

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**“People should be able to access services and spaces without having to worry about whether or not they can actually access them”**  
*– Working group member*

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## Policy context

Prior to developing this framework, a review of policy and practices was conducted at the federal, provincial and municipal level. This review has enabled us to situate our work within the broader policy context and to understand what other municipalities are doing to improve access for their communities. Some key highlights from the review include:

- At a federal level, the Accessible Canada Act aims to make Canada barrier-free by January 1, 2040. This 2019 legislation mandates identifying, removing and preventing barriers in federally regulated entities including banking, telecommunications and transportation sectors, Government of Canada departments and agencies, Crown corporations, First Nations band councils, the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.
- At a provincial level, Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba and Nova Scotia all have legislation targeting improved accessibility in public spaces. The common themes of the provincial Acts are broad applicability, phased-in standards, enforcement mechanisms, required organizational planning, and engagement with the disability communities.

At a municipal level, many communities have developed action plans focused on removing barriers for their residents. More details can be found in Appendix A.

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“The accessibility and support of this community means I can age in place here... you couldn't do that before.”  
– *Community member*

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## Framework purpose

This framework is a high-level strategic document intended to support a broad range of decisions and actions across the organization. The vision, principles, and outcomes defined in this framework are designed to guide departments as they lead accessibility and inclusion efforts and empower all staff to be leaders and champions of accessibility.

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This framework aims to *facilitate* action across all departments through a shared vision and set of principles rather than to *direct* action for individuals and departments.

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The outcomes focus on supporting action across the focus areas and the cross-organizational collaboration and cultural shifts required to sustain long-term change.

### The accessibility framework aims to:

- Identify collective principles and outcomes to increase accessibility to the built environment, programs, services, information, transportation, employment and procurement through the active removal or minimization of physical, attitudinal, informational, systemic and technological barriers.
- Guide departments with accessibility planning and decision-making.
- Establish a coordinated and sustainable approach to accessibility across Strathcona County departments through the collective vision, principles and outcomes.

More details on specific actions can be found in the recommendations provided by Meaningful Access Consulting in Appendix C.

# Defining accessibility and inclusion

**Accessibility** involves designing systems, products, and environments to optimize access for everyone, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. It ensures that people with disabilities can use services, products, and facilities without encountering unnecessary barriers. Accessibility aims to remove obstacles and create equitable opportunities for all.

### Examples of accessibility actions include:



**Physical accessibility:** Creating ramps, elevators, and wider doorways for wheelchair users.



**Digital accessibility:** Designing websites, apps, and software to be usable by people with visual, auditory, or motor impairments.



**Communication accessibility:** Providing sign language interpreters, captioning, or alternative formats for information.

**Inclusivity** goes beyond access—it's about fostering a sense of belonging and community. It ensures that everyone feels welcomed, valued, and respected, regardless of their background, abilities, or identities. In short, inclusivity is about celebrating differences, promoting empathy, and building a more compassionate world.

### Examples of inclusivity actions include:



**Diverse representation:** Ensuring that people from various backgrounds are included in decision-making processes, media, and cultural narratives.



**Language and communication:** Using inclusive language that avoids stereotypes and embraces diversity.



**Social inclusion:** Creating spaces where everyone feels accepted, regardless of their race, gender, age, or disability.

Both accessibility and inclusivity contribute to a society where everyone can participate fully and thrive.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rickhansen.com/news-stories/blog/accessibility-and-inclusivity-canada-closer-look>



## Barriers and obstacles

Identifying, removing, and preventing barriers is a key component of creating an accessible and inclusive community. Interactions with barriers and obstacles<sup>5</sup> creates environments that exclude people with disabilities and limit access to the built environment, services and information.

### Types of barriers include:

- **Physical:** For example, no curb cuts or ramps to access a building.
- **Organizational/systemic:** For example, policies or processes that deny reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with a disability.
- **Attitudinal:** For example, talking to an individual with a disability's support person instead of talking directly to them.
- **Information and communication:** For example, videos or meetings that are not closed captioned.
- **Technological:** For example, websites that do not support screen reader software.







When someone with a disability encounters these barriers, they are prevented from participating fully in the community. When we identify, minimize and remove these barriers, we improve access for people with disabilities, which benefits the entire community.



<sup>5</sup> Thoughtful feedback was shared through engagement on the use of the word barriers, and the image it represented being one of exclusion. Obstacles or hurdles was proposed to be used in place of barriers. Given that barriers is used in the guiding accessibility legislation and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Strathcona County has opted to keep the use throughout this document but has made efforts to distinguish that it is a person's interaction with barriers that creates exclusion, not having a disability based on this feedback.

## Key areas of focus

The Accessible Canada Act identifies six accessibility areas of focus which have guided development of the framework and organizational outcomes. Within each focus area, attitudinal, informational, communication, technological, physical, and organizational/systemic barriers can be addressed to realize a barrier-free community.

Accessibility area of focus	Strathcona County focus
 <b>Built environment</b>	<p>Civic facilities, amenities and open spaces. For example: parks, trails, playgrounds, spray parks, community halls, culture and seniors' centres, and recreation complexes.</p>
 <b>Transportation</b>	<p>Strathcona County transit and transportation infrastructure and maintenance. For example: buses, sidewalks, parking, residential and facility snow removal.</p>
 <b>Information and communication</b>	<p>Communication tools, platforms, services, experiences and accommodations. For example: print material, webpages and digital media, videos, in-person interactions, and alternative methods of communication.</p>
 <b>Employment</b>	<p>Recruitment and retention processes, policies and procedures, including for provision of accommodations.</p>
 <b>Programs and services</b>	<p>All programs and services offered by Strathcona County across departments. For example: recreation programs and events, culture programs and events, permitting, taxation and payment processes.</p>
 <b>Procurement</b>	<p>The purchasing of goods and services, financial procedures, payment systems, and financial reporting.</p>

## Nothing about us without us: key themes and recommendations

This framework has been shaped by the experiences of Strathcona County community members, the local disability sector, Council and community advisory committees, and individuals with disabilities in Strathcona County who spoke with us between June 2023 and January 2024. Through interviews and a focus group, individuals with a wide range of disabilities, identities and backgrounds shared their experiences navigating the County's built environment, programs, services, information, transportation, employment, and procurement processes. The Accessibility Advisory Committee, Seniors Advisory Committee, Indigenous Advisory Committee and Next Gen group each shared their perspectives related to accessibility and inclusion, in addition to local disability organizations who provided feedback through one-on-one conversations.

These conversations were viewed through an intersectional lens, which recognizes that people's lives and their experiences are shaped by their multiple identities, relationships, and social factors.<sup>6</sup> The engagement showed that a young person with a physical disability may experience the built environment or transportation differently from a newcomer to Strathcona County living with vision loss. Intersectionality can support our understanding of accessibility by leading us to ask, "who is left behind, why, and under what circumstances?"<sup>7</sup> By attending to the diverse voices of people with disabilities, we can move toward an accessible Strathcona County where everyone is valued, welcomed and included.

The feedback provided was comprehensive and covered all key project focus areas: the built environment, information and communication, transportation, programs and services, employment and procurement. Below is a short summary of the feedback and recommendations from the engagement; the full feedback summary can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>6</sup> [United Nations Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit, pg. 8](#)

<sup>7</sup> [INTERSECTIONALITY RESOURCE GUIDE AND TOOLKIT \(unwomen.org\)](#)





**The engagement identified the following themes and recommendations for Strathcona County as we move forward:**

**1 Promote a cohesive approach to accessibility and inclusion across the organization.**

- Provide a clear definition of accessibility across the organization for planning and implementation purposes.
- Provide accessibility training to support the identification and minimization or removal of the attitudinal, physical, informational, technological, and systemic barriers to access across all key focus areas.

**2 Recognize the benefits of a complete community model.**

- Promote a complete community model to support complete accessibility at all points of planning, including information, transportation, the built environment and the program and service accessed.
- Intentionally use physical representation, art and imagery to signal inclusion for diverse groups in the built environment.
- Continue to support the implementation of the Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit to ensure people of all abilities, identities and backgrounds are represented in public spaces and as employees.
- Ensure that public information is communicated in a way that is accessible using both digital and traditional mediums (like newspaper advertisements and radio).
- Utilize universal design planning and implementation in the built environment with a particular focus on wayfinding and universal washrooms.

### **3 Support the independence, dignity and respect of people with disabilities.**

- Increase the number of premeditated adaptations such as benches on walkways, adult change tables, or tactile walking surface indicators to support the greater independence and dignity of people with disabilities.
- Increase the number of adaptive and inclusive programs.
- Promote a pedestrian-friendly community to support greater access for all community members.

### **4 Reduce systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion in Strathcona County's employment and procurement processes.**

- Reduce the red tape in the procurement process to better support opportunities for small businesses and companies representing people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups.
- Support disability hiring by leveraging community partnerships and working directly with the disability community to create appropriate paid positions for them.
- Ensure human elements are available and shared throughout the procurement and employment processes (e.g. not relying strictly on technology and fixed structures and requirements).
- Share information on employment, volunteering and procurement processes directly with disability and other equity-deserving organizations and on non-digital platforms.
- Improve accessibility in the procurement process by asking potential contractors to consider accessibility, universal design and disability perspectives in their proposals.



# Accessibility framework



Built environment



Employment



Transportation



Programs and services



Information and communication



Procurement

## Vision

Strathcona County is an inclusive, accessible community where everyone can access our built environment, programs, services, and information in a way that respects their dignity and autonomy.



# Principles

## Inclusion

We embrace, respect, accept and value differences. We operate from an understanding that when we minimize and remove barriers to access for people with disabilities, we create an accessible and inclusive community for everyone.

## Leadership and accountability

We recognize that everyone has a role to play in advancing accessibility and organizational leaders carry an additional level of accountability to support an inclusive County. We understand that addressing accessibility challenges requires leadership and commitment to try new ways of working together.

## Coordination and integration

We work together to collectively identify, minimize and remove barriers to access. We align our diverse perspectives, ideas, and knowledge by focusing on a shared purpose to get the best results.

## Growth mindset

We work together across the organization to achieve equitable access to services by having meaningful conversations, learning together and challenging the status quo.

## Adaptability and continuous improvement

We commit to making changes, putting ideas into practice and adjusting as needed. We support innovation and aim for the highest level of accessibility in our built environment, programs, services, information, transportation, procurement and employment.

## Dignity and agency

We adhere to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which declares all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. We adhere to the value of “nothing about us without us” by being informed of the perspectives of people directly impacted by policies, programs, and services when developing them.

## Organizational accessibility outcomes

The accessibility framework outcomes were developed to support long-term, sustainable action toward accessibility and inclusion in the six key focus areas: built environment, transportation, information and communication, employment, programs and services, and procurement. The following outcomes guide the actions required to achieve our vision.



### **There is an accessible and inclusive organizational culture in Strathcona County.**

- a. Staff and departments demonstrate increased confidence, knowledge and understanding while identifying and addressing accessibility and inclusion topics.
- b. Employee recruitment and retention processes are accessible and inclusive for individuals of all abilities.
- c. Individuals of diverse abilities, backgrounds and identities have equitable opportunity for all positions in the organization.



### **Strathcona County departments work together to advance accessibility across the organization.**

- a. Departments maintain awareness of accessibility issues and concerns.
- b. Departments collaborate to develop solutions to address accessibility and inclusion challenges across the organization.
- c. Departments share learnings related to accessibility issues, concerns and solutions with each other.



**Strathcona County departments enhance the accessibility of programs, services and policies.**

- a. Departments identify and implement accessibility standards and goals to support plans to identify, minimize and remove barriers to access the built environment, programs and services, procurement, and transportation.
- b. Strathcona County dedicates resources to implement existing and forthcoming accessibility standards and processes.
- c. Community members are engaged in the development and evaluation of programs and services that affect them.
- d. Policy renewal processes are undertaken with an accessibility lens.



**Strathcona County communication and information platforms, products and processes are accessible to staff and the community.**

- a. Departments identify and implement standards related to accessible information and digital platforms.
- b. Strathcona County information is shared in formats accessible to a broad range of community members.
- c. Legal, policy and legislative documents, platforms, products and public processes are accessible to residents and community members.

## Next steps and implementation

The accessibility framework brings together information and guidance to support Strathcona County staff in planning and implementing accessibility initiatives in the years to come. The vision, principles and outcomes shared reflect Strathcona County's drive to become a leader in accessibility, support direct actions the County can take and provide a framework to monitor the County's progress.

Through the community engagement process for this framework, some initial immediate actions were identified. These actions include promoting a cohesive approach to accessibility and inclusion across the organization, recognizing the benefits of a complete community model, better supporting the independence, dignity and respect of people with disabilities through thoughtful interventions and programming, and paying particular attention to the systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion in Strathcona County's employment and procurement processes. More detailed recommendations and opportunities can be found in Appendix C.

Thanks to Strathcona County's existing commitment to accessibility and inclusion, many departments are already engaged in this important work. Examples of this work in action include:

- Implementation of the Inclusive Hiring Audit recommendations
- Completion and actioning of Aimfree facility audits
- Municipal Development Plan with its focus on complete communities
- Strathcona County's Mobility Bus
- Web accessibility initiatives
- Incorporation of universal design principles in new facilities
- Accessible event planning and promotion
- Staff promoting inclusion and accessibility in their daily interactions with community members





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“My vision of an accessible Strathcona County is one where everyone can participate fully without having to put in a ton of extra effort just to show up.” – *Next Gen youth*

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Using this framework as a guide, each department will continue to play a leadership role in implementing actions to achieve the outcomes identified, in alignment with their departmental goals. Implementation tools and formalized evaluation will be developed to facilitate departments in planning and prioritizing actions to support and measure this work on an ongoing basis.

The success of the accessibility framework and its implementation will be reliant on having appropriate staff support and capacity, strong leadership and championing, a dedicated budget, and a systems-level approach. This framework is the first step toward cohesive and sustainable action to achieve our goal of ensuring Strathcona County is accessible and inclusive to all.



## Appendix A: Policy background

Authors: Meaningful Access Consulting and Strathcona County<sup>8</sup>

A substantial review and research of best practices from other governmental agencies was conducted by Meaningful Access Consulting to situate Strathcona within the world of accessibility, disability services and universal design best practices. Research was conducted to better understand what nearby municipalities are doing by way of improving access for their citizens as well what other regions have published Accessibility Plans or Frameworks to lead this work.

### Federal

Federally, Canada has enacted the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) which came into force in 2019 and has a goal of realizing a barrier-free Canada by 2040. The Act is intended to support Canadians with disabilities through the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to accessibility in the following areas:

- Employment
- Built environment
- Information and communication technologies (ICT)
- Communication other than ICT
- Design and delivery of programs and services
- Procurement of goods, services and facilities and
- Transportation

Accessibility Standards Canada, a departmental corporation created under the ACA, develops mandatory standards in areas like employment, built environment, and information/communication technologies. “Nothing without us” is the principle that drives their work and is upheld by acknowledging the knowledge and experience of people with disabilities and consulting and working closely with people with disabilities, diverse disability communities and other experts.

<sup>8</sup> Meaningful Access Consulting was engaged by Strathcona County in November 2023 to support Strathcona County’s understanding of best practices and to understand the unique needs of community members with disabilities. They undertook an environmental scan, policy review and community engagement between November 2023 and January 2024. The appendices are pulled from their summary report and edited by Strathcona County for clarity.

The Accessibility Commissioner handles complaints, conducts inspections and audits, issues orders for compliance, and can impose financial penalties. The Commissioner can order organizations to pay compensation to individuals discriminated against under the act with fines up to \$250,000, and make remediation plans.

## Provincial

The provincial accessibility landscape is varied. Ontario (The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act “AODA”), British Columbia (Accessible BC Act), Manitoba (The Accessibility for Manitobans Act) and Nova Scotia (Act Respecting Accessibility in Nova Scotia) all have accessibility legislation. Saskatchewan, Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador are actively developing Acts and regulations.

Though Alberta has conducted at least two rounds of engagement (2018 is published, 2023 is unpublished to date), Alberta does not currently have accessibility legislation.

The common themes between the provincial Acts are broad applicability, phased-in standards, enforcement mechanisms, required organizational planning, and engagement with the disability communities.

## Counties and Municipalities

Despite it not being a legislative requirement, many cities and counties in Alberta have some version of an Accessibility Plan or Framework. Some counties and municipalities within Alberta have developed actionable plans that guide their work in removing barriers for their citizens.

- City of St. Albert developed a Universal Access Plan in 2018 which includes best practices created by the Canadian Standards Association and themes around the built environment, transportation, communications & technology, procurement, grants and recreation, leaving out employment and program delivery.
- City of Edmonton launched their 3-year Corporate Accessibility Plan to support implementation of the Accessibility for People with Disabilities Policy in 2021. As of November 2023, 32 of 70 actions have been completed with 33 in progress. The City of Edmonton also has an Access Design Guide and Accessibility for People with Disabilities Policy which commits to continuous improvement across all City services and programs.

- The City of Calgary’s Corporate Accessibility Policy focuses on transportation, recreation, seniors, waste and recycling, emergency preparedness, resources, accommodation requests and a feedback mechanism. This short document commits to reducing barriers to City-provided services for persons with disabilities with respect to physical access to City services, access to transportation services and communication access. The City of Calgary also has an Access Design Standard to guide designing accessible buildings and going beyond the Alberta Building Code minimum requirements.



## Appendix B: Engagement summary

Authors: Meaningful Access Consulting and Strathcona County

Meaningful Access Consulting (MAC) conducted a series of interviews with County residents and held a focus group discussion at Robin Hood Association.

Six individuals were interviewed and an additional nine individuals participated in the focus group. The participants represented a wide range of disabilities including mobility, cognitive, visual, learning, auditory and mental health disabilities as well as a range of disability experience with both acquired disabilities and developmental disabilities represented.

While the number of individuals participating in the interviews and focus groups was small, the range of perspectives was quite vast. The perspectives of the participants included: families, single people, people with children who have a disability, seniors, people living independently, people who have a support attendant, new residents to the area, long-time residents, individuals who chose to move back to Strathcona County, individuals who support people with disabilities, people who use the mobility bus as well as conventional transit users. The participants also had a range of interaction with the County including participants who readily use the facilities and those who only use the facilities or services when part of a partnered program.

Participants were asked a series of questions to better understand the current state of accessibility in Strathcona County as well as their individual lived experience in navigating and receiving services from the County. The purpose of these questions was to prompt discussion and encourage participants to share their experiences with accessibility in the County, including both positive and negative experiences. The conversations were facilitated and guided while MAC encouraged constructive and respectful dialogue.

The feedback collected during these sessions provided valuable insights on how the community views their access to services.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> While many of the participants did not have experience in some of the focus areas, primarily procurement and employment, this is common. The consultant relied on the current policies and best practices for recommendations in these areas, while others who were engaged focused on these pieces in-depth. Strathcona County staff were able to incorporate committee feedback which spoke to both the procurement and employment focus areas.

The Accessibility Framework project team also received valuable feedback on accessibility and inclusion from the local disability sector organizations and from Strathcona County's Accessibility, Seniors, Indigenous, and Next Gen committees over 2023-2024. This feedback has been summarized below alongside the consultant's to support the Frameworks outcomes and recommendations.

## What we heard

The majority of interviewees felt very strongly and positively about Strathcona County's current level of accessibility. Participants were encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences to inform the Accessibility Framework and future implementation.

Participants expressed considerable use of Strathcona County facilities, with Millennium Place, Broadmoor Arena and the Library being particularly highlighted as accessible and welcoming places. The Mobility Bus and conventional transit were also highly used and discussed.

Participants shared their vision of what an accessible Strathcona County means to them:

- A County that is accessible and inclusive for all, regardless of age or ability.
- A County where I can live the life I want to live, without attitudinal or physical barriers.
- A place with activities that match people's interests and offers inclusive and integrated opportunities (rather than separate).
- A County where I feel welcome and accepted.
- A County where I can navigate the community safely and efficiently.
- A County without attitudinal barriers, where I am accepted for who I am.
- A County that prioritizes accessibility.

The engagement identified the following themes and recommendations for Strathcona County as we move forward:

## **1. Promote a cohesive approach to accessibility and inclusion across the organization.**

Participants highlighted the inconsistencies of what “accessible” means in the County. Participants shared examples of arriving at destinations that were described as “accessible” online, only to find that the washroom features weren’t accessible, even in the accessible stall, for example. Or that physical accessibility was taken into consideration but adequate wayfinding, contrast or maintenance created barriers for them.

It is a common perception from the general public is to think accessibility as physical accessibility, such as ramps and automated doors, when considering whether a space is accessible; however, invisible disabilities and barriers faced by neurodiverse members of the community are largely neglected. Participants spoke of lighting and sound as barriers to access.

While many participants expressed that they are well supported by County staff, there was a general consensus that additional training for staff would be beneficial to support the community feeling included with respect and dignity. Some participants indicated that they have experienced stigmas and attitudinal barriers when receiving services and support from the County’s staff. One youth noted that having to ask for an accommodation can be difficult, particularly for young people who might already carry a stigma of being ‘lazy’ for taking the elevator or sitting down on a bus. Seniors highlighted that ageism is an attitudinal barrier.

- Provide a clear definition of accessibility across the organization for planning and implementation purposes.
- Provide accessibility training to support the identification and minimization or removal of the attitudinal, physical, informational, technological, and systemic barriers to access across all key focus areas.

## 2. Recognize the benefits of a complete community model.

Participants felt strongly about offering complete accessibility from the point of entrance or registration to using the programs and services directly. In a complete community, the moment someone decides to participate in a program, the route of travel, information available, the space itself and the program meet their needs. As one committee member shared: “People should be able to access services and spaces without having to worry about whether or not they can actually access them.” Wayfinding was also a particular focus in many of the participant conversations.

Though it was noted that the County has made good progress in planning new facilities, participants emphasized the lack of availability of integrated and adaptive programs, the opportunities for greater access in facilities and parks as well as the limited availability of spaces and times for facility rentals. It was also expressed that accessibility could be expanded by providing more information to the public about accessible offerings and staff training to increase their knowledge and comfort with the available accessible services and programs.

It was noted that Strathcona County is a community that is “car-forward” vs. pedestrian-friendly. One community partner posed the question: “What would it need to take to make it easier to walk to a pharmacy than drive?” It was stressed that creating a more pedestrian-friendly community supports all members of the community, including families, seniors, and people with disabilities.

Given that Strathcona County is a winter community, there are added considerations when the community sees heavy snow or repeated freeze-thaw cycles that create issues for pedestrians or wheel-chair users. Street ploughs might block curb cuts that are not cleared quickly, or the ice may become dangerous for someone requiring a mobility aid like a cane.

When participants spoke of inclusion, they referenced the signs in a community that signal safety to them, from designated gathering spaces to the art on the walls: “Are there gathering spaces for Indigenous, queer, and disability communities? ... Do we see people of colour here? Or paintings that have people of colour here... [these can] give me a safe feeling.”



Key takeaways:

- Promote a complete community model to support complete accessibility at all points of planning, including information, transportation, the built environment and the program and service accessed.
- Intentionally use physical representation, art and imagery to signal inclusion for diverse groups in the built environment.
- Continue to support the implementation of the Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit to ensure people of all abilities, identities and backgrounds are represented in public spaces and as employees.
- Ensure that public information is communicated in a way that is accessible using both digital and traditional mediums (like newspaper advertisements and radio).
- Utilize universal design planning and implementation in the built environment with a particular focus on wayfinding and universal washrooms.

### **3. Better support the independence, dignity, and respect of people with disabilities.**

Independence and dignity also were expressed as a theme through the lens of being able to independently access the community, regardless of ability. Whether it is having additional safety measures in place such as Tactile Walking Surface Indicators or Audible Pedestrian Signals or additional supports such as an adult change table or a bench along a pathway. These elements enable community members to feel a sense of dignity and independence in their ability to access the full breadth of community offerings.

Key takeaways:

- Increase the number of premeditated adaptations such as benches on walkways, adult change tables, or tactile walking surface indicators to support the greater independence and dignity of people with disabilities.
- Increase the number of adaptive and inclusive programs.
- Promote a pedestrian-friendly community to support greater access for all community members.

#### 4. Pay particular attention to the systemic barriers to accessibility and inclusion in Strathcona County's employment and procurement processes.

The advisory committees offered particular insight into Strathcona County's organizational or systemic barriers, with particular attention paid to employment and procurement practices.

It was noted that procurement processes biases large business over small business. Small businesses may not have the capacity to search for and respond to Request For Proposals, or know an opportunity is available and the process itself is lengthy and time-consuming. The Indigenous Advisory Committee shared that the procurement processes contradict Indigenous ways of doing business. For example, one participant noted: "'We need three quotes to buy a tee-pee' does not align with an Indigenous process of knowing the seller." They also shared a strong preference for speaking to people directly or by telephone versus emails. A procurement process that is accessible and inclusive offers equitable access to business opportunities.

In alignment with feedback captured through the Inclusive Hiring Audit, participants shared there is a need to examine the County's employment recruitment and retention practices to support greater inclusivity.

Participants also shared about their volunteer experiences with Strathcona County. Volunteers spoke highly of their experiences with Strathcona County and shared how positive the experiences were. The local disability sector organizations and participants both shared that opportunities are highly valued and more opportunities are needed.

Key points:

- Reduce the red tape in the procurement process to better support opportunities for small businesses and companies representing people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups.
- Support disability hiring by leveraging community partnerships and working directly with the disability community to create appropriate paid positions for them.
- Ensure human elements are available and shared throughout the procurement and employment processes (e.g. not relying strictly on technology and fixed structures and requirements).

- Share information on employment, volunteering and procurement processes directly with disability and other equity-deserving organizations and on non-digital platforms.
- Improve accessibility in the procurement process by asking potential contractors to consider accessibility, universal design and disability perspectives in their proposals.

## Summary

Interviews and focus groups supported our understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities in Strathcona County as they navigated our buildings, program, services, information, employment, and procurement processes. The participants represented a wide range of disabilities including mobility, cognitive, visual, learning, auditory and mental health disabilities as well as a range of disability experience with both acquired disabilities and developmental disabilities represented.

They shared a vision for a County that is accessible and inclusive for all regardless of age or ability, where they feel welcome and accepted, can navigate safely, and where they are accepted for who they are.

# Appendix C: Consultant recommendations for Strathcona County

Authors: Meaningful Access Consulting<sup>10</sup>

## Cross-organizational

1. **Define ‘accessibility’:** Use ‘accessible’ consistently across County documents. Include phrases like ‘including for people with disabilities’ or ‘of all abilities’.
2. **Reporting structure for accessibility:** Create a clear reporting structure for accessibility issues. This will ensure transparency and accountability.
3. **Budget for accessibility:** Develop a budget to integrate accessibility across departments, removing and preventing access barriers.

## Built environment

4. **Prioritize accessibility improvements:** Review building audits and prioritize improvements. Aim for complete accessibility in a number of spaces rather than patchwork projects.
5. **Enhanced Accessibility Design Guidelines:** Create or adopt enhanced design guidelines to ensure civic facilities meet and exceed accessibility best practices.
6. **Beyond Alberta Building Code:** Consider areas where standards may need to exceed the Alberta Building Code, such as the number of accessible parking stalls at a senior’s centre.
7. **Update facility wayfinding:** Improve wayfinding in facilities using techniques like braille, tactile letters, and icons.
8. **Increase seating along walking paths:** Identify paths with limited seating and set a target for an annual increase in seating and rest areas.

<sup>10</sup> The recommendations were captured over fall 2023 and provided to Strathcona County in January 2024. Many recommendations were or are now in-progress across the organization. The recommendations were edited by Strathcona County for clarity and based on department feedback.

9. **Universally designed equipment:** Develop a strategy to include universally designed equipment when replacing park infrastructure and fitness equipment.
10. **Audit parks and playgrounds:** Conduct audits to assess the accessibility of parks and playgrounds, including equipment, surfaces, shade, and facilities.
11. **Review facility automatic door operators and washrooms:** Check the functionality of automatic door operators and washrooms in County facilities.

### Transit & transportation

12. **Review Audible Pedestrian Signals (APS) process:** Review the APS request process and plan to increase their availability, especially at high traffic intersections.
13. **Raise awareness of transit system's accessibility:** Promote initiatives like the Everybody Rides program to raise awareness of the transit system's accessibility.
14. **Upgrade bus stop pads:** Continue to upgrade bus stop pads and communicate this initiative to the community.
15. **Training for transit operators:** Offer ongoing training for transit operators on securing passengers using mobility aids and on accessibility awareness.

### Information & communication

16. **Language simplification:** Ensure all public materials use simple consistent language. Highlight accessible features and programs in an easy-to-understand manner. Avoid technical language and repetition. For example, refer to an automatic door as just that, not an 'accessible door opener'.
17. **Inclusive language:** Use inclusive language to explain the benefits of adaptive features for all users. For instance, mention that a lowered counter is beneficial not only for wheelchair users, but also for those using walkers, those who prefer to sit, shorter people, and children.
18. **Captions, alt-text, and plain language:** Make a guideline to ensure new or updated pages have video captions, alt-text, and simple language. All new videos should have YouTube closed captions as a temporary measure until hard-coded captions are standard.



19. **Accessibility webpage:** Create a central webpage listing all accessible features, programs, and services in the County, with links for more information. Assign someone to answer accessibility-related queries.
20. **Public engagement:** Make a procedure to ensure public engagement is accessible both online and in-person. This includes accessible spaces, accommodations, asking attendees about accessibility needs, and reaching out to the disability community.
21. **Council meeting accessibility:** Develop a plan to implement Council meeting accessibility improvements. This includes accessible spaces and accommodations, available hearing assistive technology and ASL interpretation, and accessible meeting agenda packages for all Council meetings.
22. **Accessibility audit for strathcona.ca:** Make a plan to implement the recommendations from the 2018 audit or undertake an updated audit.
23. **ASL interpreters:** Develop a policy for hiring ASL interpreters for special events, announcements, and important information from the County.
24. **Communications plan:** Make a plan to highlight the County's accessibility successes, current projects, and achievements to promote accessibility and the disability community.
25. **Emergency communication strategy:** Develop a multi-modal emergency communication strategy that includes the perspectives of persons with disabilities.

## Employment

26. **Self-disclosure of diversity factors:** Encourage employees to self-disclose diversity factors and increase comfort levels for staff sharing this information.
27. **Inclusive employment best practices:** Train HR managers on inclusive employment best practices to increase their comfort level and understanding of candidate differences.
28. **Inclusive hiring statement and accommodation statement:** Develop an inclusive hiring statement and accommodation statement for job postings and the careers page.

29. **Disability awareness training:** Integrate disability awareness training into the onboarding process for all new hires.

### Programs and services

30. **Baseline understanding of accessibility:** Establish a baseline understanding of the County's current state of accessibility. Look for opportunities to expand programs or offer new ones.

31. **Deepen relationships with local service organizations:** Deepen relationships with local service organizations and align grant applications to elevate programs and services provided by the County.

32. **Review County special event accessibility:** Review the accessibility of County special events and develop a plan to integrate best practices.

33. **Formalize the attendant/care provider process:** Formalize the attendant/care provider process and consider allowing a care provider to attend a program free of cost.

34. **Create adaptive programming kits:** Create loanable kits that amplify accessibility for a user, such as inclusive fitness kits, inclusive art kits, and sensory friendly kits.

### Procurement

35. **Review new vendors for accessibility:** Review new vendors for the accessibility of their platforms and services, ensuring they include accessibility best practices.

36. **Include accessible and inclusive language in procurement processes:** Ensure procurement processes include accessible and inclusive language.

37. **Accessible language in RFP and RFQ process:** Include accessible and inclusive language in the Request for Proposal (RFP) and Request for Quotation (RFQ) process. Determine a method to consider accessibility as part of the selection criteria during the bidding and tendering process.

38. **Adaptive or accessible housing in Affordable Housing Strategy:** Consider ways to include adaptive or accessible housing more significantly in the Affordable Housing Strategy.