

ACCESSIBILITY ACTION PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

Who we are

The Municipality of North Cowichan sits on the traditional territories of the Quw'utsun First Nation, which includes the Cowichan Tribes, the Halalt First Nation, the Lyackson First Nation, the Penelakut Tribe and the Stz'uminus First Nation. The Municipality also sits on the traditional unceded territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation.



Established in 1873 and the oldest District Municipality in British Columbia, North Cowichan spans 195 square kilometers, with 40 kilometers of oceanfront on the east side of Vancouver Island.

We are a community of communities including Crofton, Chemainus, Maple Bay, Quamichan, Bell McKinnon, Berkey's Corner and South End Centre/University Village.

Delivering a wide range of diverse programs and services for our citizens, North Cowichan employs approximately 450 staff (including around 150 paid on-call fire fighters) across multiple worksites including the Cowichan Aquatic Centre, Fuller Lake Arena, RCMP detachment, four fire halls, Municipal Hall and the Operations and Public Works Yard.

Commitment to accessibility

Through the recently adopted Official Community Plan (OCP), Council articulated a vision to provide supports for a thriving local economy and to foster resilient, welcoming and inclusive communities. The OCP is based on principles directly related to accessibility:



Healthy and Safe Community

A healthy, inclusive, safe community is one where access to community social services, attainable housing, parks, trails and open space, clean air and water, locally grown food promotes positive interaction and healthy (physical and mental) outcomes amongst all its citizens.



Economic Opportunity

Means ensuring that a positive setting is in place to foster great talent, promote local, sustainable jobs and businesses that lead to the prosperity of all our community members, reducing social and economic inequality.



Social Justice and Equity

Through the OCP, we acknowledge the challenges and disadvantages facing citizens living on the margins of society and act against chronic inequities in the system.

This **Accessibility Action Plan** will help achieve several of the goals in the OCP specifically addressing the target of increasing the number of social infrastructure facilities including quality, affordable child care, recreation centers, and increasing the amount of accessible public realm and park space.

Definitions

Accessibility:

Accessibility involves removing the barriers faced by individuals. These can include, but are not limited to, physical, sensory, cognitive, learning and mental health, and the various barriers, including attitudinal and systemic, that impede an individual's ability to participate in social, cultural, political, and economic life. Disabilities can be temporary or permanent. As we age, our abilities change and therefore an accessible society is one designed to include everybody, at all stages of life.

Equity:

Refers to both the fair and just distribution of benefits and burdens to all affected parties and communities (distributional equity) along with the fair and inclusive access to decision-making processes that impact community outcomes (process equity). In practice, taking an equitable approach means understanding and deliberately addressing current and historic underrepresentation and disadvantages.

Inclusion:

Acknowledging and valuing people's differences to enrich social planning, decision-making, and quality of life for everyone. In an inclusive municipality, we each have a sense of belonging and acceptance, and are recognized as valued and contributing citizens. Real inclusion takes place when those already included learn from those who are excluded and initiate change.

Intersectionality:

The intersection, or crossover, of our many identities affects how each of us experiences the region and its communities. These intersections occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, senior governments, other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media).

Privilege:

The experience of freedoms, rights, benefits, advantages, access and/or opportunities afforded to members of a dominant group in a society or in each context.

Systemic barriers:

Obstacles that exclude groups or communities of people from full participation in, and the benefits of, social, economic and political life. They may be hidden or unintentional but are built into the way society operates. Existing policies, practices, and procedures, as well as assumptions and stereotypes may reinforce these barriers.

SECTION 2

Legislative framework

The *Accessible British Columbia Act* received royal assent on June 17, 2021. It provides a framework to identify, remove and prevent barriers to accessibility and represents an important step to make BC a more accessible province.

Under the Accessible British Columbia Regulation, by September 1, 2023, local governments and other prescribed organizations must establish an accessibility committee, develop an accessibility plan, and create a tool to receive public feedback on accessibility.

As required under the Act, the following seven (7) principles were considered when developing this plan:

Inclusion	Under the Accessible British Columbia Regulation, by September 1, 2023, local governments and other prescribed organizations must establish an accessibility committee, develop an accessibility plan, and create a tool to receive public feedback on accessibility.
Adaptability	Accessibility plans should reflect that disability and accessibility are evolving concepts that change as services, technology, and attitudes change.
Diversity	Every person is unique. People with disabilities are individuals with varied backgrounds. Individual characteristics including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and lived experience greatly inform the experiences of individuals. Accessibility plans should acknowledge the principle of intersectionality and the diversity within the disability community.
Collaboration	Promoting accessible communities is a shared responsibility and everyone has a role to play. Accessibility plans should create opportunities for organizations and communities to work together to promote access and inclusion.
Self-determination	Accessibility plans should seek to empower people with disabilities to make their own choices and pursue the lives they wish to live.
Universal design	The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design defines universal design as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” An accessibility plan should be designed to meet the needs of all people who wish to interact with the organization.

Accessibility Advisory Committee

On April 5, 2023, Council approved the Terms of Reference for the North Cowichan Accessibility Advisory Committee and began recruitment. The committee consists of a representative from Council plus six members of the public.

As described under the *Terms of Reference*, the committee exists to provide support to Council by:

- a. Identifying barriers for persons with disabilities in North Cowichan,
- b. Raising awareness about accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities,
- c. Identifying and liaising with local stakeholders, including other levels of government, to establish partnerships and collaboration related to improving access and inclusion for people with disabilities,
- d. Advising staff on strategies to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of municipal services, programs, facilities, and other infrastructure, including the identification and removal of barriers that hinder full participation in the community by some North Cowichan residents,
- e. Responding to referrals from Council related to accessibility issues for persons with disabilities,
- f. Responding to staff requests for input on new projects to identify and address accessibility concerns,
- g. Providing feedback to staff in the development of an accessibility plan for North Cowichan, including future updates to the plan, and,
- h. Providing advice on public awareness campaigns to promote North Cowichan's efforts to make its services, facilities, and infrastructure accessible and barrier-free.

Planning methodology

Initial research

Staff began with a review of the legislation, standards, policies, and best practices in Canada and within British Columbia. This included exploration of plans and progress already undertaken by other local governments in British Columbia.

Staff also reviewed existing business plans and departmental work plans for initiatives that may already be underway or recently completed. A list of key facilities was compiled along with existing information about those facilities and their level of accessibility.

Staff analyzed the information gathered, looking for common themes that could aid development of key action items. A cross-departmental working group was engaged to review the common themes, provide comment on relevance and completeness, and to assist with the development of preliminary action items.

Action items were shared with the Accessibility Advisory Committee, with feedback used to help refine and prioritize the actions.

Overall framework

The framework was developed as part of the initial research phase. As this is North Cowichan's first formal Accessibility Action Plan, and there are many potential areas of focus, initial actions were established based on their ability to help establish the processes and knowledge base necessary to allow for accessibility improvements that can be accomplished in the short term and with limited budget in this initial year. Longer term actions were grouped based on information currently available.

Council's commitment to accessibility is ongoing. It is anticipated that this action plan will be regularly reviewed and updated, and that staff will report regularly on progress towards meeting the goals of the plan.

It is acknowledged that the physical environment is of interest to many people who use services of the municipality. Changes to the physical environment generally take both time and money, thus will be prioritized based on feedback from the public and in conjunction with the Asset Management Plans of the municipality.



Engagement

Feedback was sought on the themes and action items. Staff were engaged through polls as well as presentations to different work groups. Feedback was accepted from the poll, directly through discussion and anonymously through a survey.

Amendments were made to the themes and actions based on feedback from staff. This initial plan was presented to the Accessibility Advisory Committee for feedback and comment. Committee members' feedback was also incorporated into the plan.



Public feedback

North Cowichan's digital engagement space, ConnectNorthCowichan.ca was used as the primary means of involving the public in the plan and inviting feedback.

The Connect page offers opportunities for providing feedback through a survey and a mapping tool, by asking questions, and directly to named staff by email or by telephone. Additionally, comment cards are available at municipal facilities.

A draft of the public engagement plan was shared with the Committee. Their feedback was incorporated, and additional suggestions were provided for obtaining public feedback.

OUR SHORT TERM PLAN

Actions to date

North Cowichan has taken several actions to reduce barriers and make it easier for everyone to interact with and use municipal services. These action items were grouped into key themes of Service and Built Environment.

Service:

- Diversity and Inclusion workshop provided to Senior Leadership Team
- Physical Records Digitization allows for records to be accessed from anywhere, improves search capabilities and allows for viewing enhancements as necessary
- Work from Home Policy accommodates staff who want/need to work from home providing additional opportunities for employment
- New website will incorporate incorporates at a minimum Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2 Level AA accessibility features
- Council and Committee of the Whole meetings are now held electronically and in person, allowing as many people as possible to participate in a way they are comfortable with
- Electronic Council and Committee meetings have closed captioning capabilities
- Mail-in ballots and special voting opportunities for seniors' care facilities and hospitals were introduced to encourage wider participation in municipal elections
- Continued to provide curbside voting at polling stations where a voter was unable to get inside polling stations on their own
- Use of Gender-Neutral Language and Pronouns Policy was approved by Council on May 17, 2023
- Lower income residents can access basic recreation programs and services free of charge.
- Sensory friendly times are scheduled at the fitness centre at the Cowichan Aquatic Centre, with no music and lowered lighting



Built Environment:

- Accessibility audits were conducted at the Cowichan Aquatic Centre and Fuller Lake Arena
- Curbside collection automation initiative removes barriers to physical requirements needed for municipal staff position
- Worked with Cowichan Trail Stewardship Society to create accessible mountain biking trails in the Municipal Forest Reserve
- Applied accessibility lens to the Sportsplex Fieldhouse design, including universal washrooms and accessibility features.
- Automatic sliding doors installed at Fuller Lake Arena

Action Plan

An initial short term action plan was developed. Action items were grouped into three categories:



Internal

Actions impacting
North Cowichan staff



External

Actions reflecting how
North Cowichan interacts
with the public




Physical


Actions that impact the
built environment

Short-term further actions (in the next few years)

Topic	Actions	Timeline
Internal		
Staff training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Diversity and Inclusion training to all staff • Review onboarding training resources for accessibility related options 	2024 2023
Ergonomics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue ergonomic assessments of staff workspaces to enable staff to work without injury or have workspaces that meet any special needs, including the use of universal workspaces where appropriate 	Ongoing
Work from Home Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalize work from home policies to provide additional opportunities for employment 	2023
Postings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add accessibility/inclusion information to all job postings • Conduct job demand analyses to determine the actual requirements for various positions 	2023 2024
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider reviewing the accessibility and inclusivity practices of potential supplier organizations. 	2024
Personal Protective Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source and purchase appropriate personal protective equipment (i.e. gloves, coveralls, turn-out gear) 	2023/2024



Topic	Actions	Timeline
External		
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise the draft Communications and Engagement Strategy to include accessibility and inclusivity as a guiding principle, alongside diversity and equity. Include this lens as part of Engagement Excellence goals. 	2023
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an engagement plan that includes an opportunity for public input through an online mapping tool in order to collect suggestions for accessibility improvements (by pinning a particular location) 	2024
Physical		
Cowichan Aquatic Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review results of accessibility audit creating list of actions, developing budgets, and prioritizing in the five-year financial plan 	2023 – with work as in 5-year plan
Fuller Lake Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review results of accessibility audit creating list of actions, developing budgets, and prioritizing in the five-year financial plan 	2023 – with work as in 5-year plan
All Buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop the forms/procedures (with the input from persons with lived experience) to enable staff to conduct comprehensive and consistent assessments of municipal and public facilities, spaces, services, communications, and events, and to consider application of accessibility best practices 	2023/2024



Topic	Actions	Timeline
Physical continued		
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop list of additional Municipally owned buildings to be audited, prioritize list 	2023
Parks and Trails	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit of park facilities including playgrounds, washroom facilities, benches, tables Review trails and establish rating scale that includes accessibility, i.e., suitable for strollers, wheelchairs etc. 	2024 2024
Sidewalks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review Master Transportation Plan to see if criteria for sidewalks or multi-use pathways; establish design criteria for new builds; exploring universal design 	2024/2025
Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide universal voting machines (ES&S Express Vote XL) with touch screen technology, in multiple languages and with Braille legends and potentially with the ability to read the choices to people, to produce a voter-verifiable ballot. Explore additional locations for special voting opportunities such as at Community Living locations 	2026 2026

NEXT STEPS

Action items will be shared with the public for feedback. Feedback on this initial plan will be used to update or amend the plan and assist in prioritizing action items.

Updates on progress towards action items will be shared with the Accessibility Action Committee, Council, and the public on a quarterly basis.

Council's commitment to accessibility is ongoing. It is anticipated that action plans will be regularly reviewed and updated, and that staff will report regularly on progress towards meeting the goals of the plan.

Additional public feedback will be obtained using a mapping tool. This feedback will help inform future plans and budgets.