

# Guidelines on library and information services for people with disabilities

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## PURPOSE

The aim of these guidelines is to provide all libraries, regardless of type, size or resourcing, with minimum standards for the provision of accessible and inclusive services for people with disabilities. These guidelines can be used to:

- analyse the present level of service,
- facilitate forward-planning,
- develop strategies for more effective services.

## INTRODUCTION

Disability is a complex and multidimensional experience and can occur at any stage of a person's life. Disability may be temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired, visible or invisible.

There is no single definition appropriate for all people with disabilities. Definitions are only useful in that they indicate how different disabilities might affect the use of facilities such as libraries. There is no 'average' experience of disability. In 2018, almost one in five Australians reported having a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018), with almost half those with a disability aged 65 years or older.

At a national level, overarching legislation around disability discrimination and access is recorded in the [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) and the [Disability Services Act 1986](#). Australian states and territories may also legislate around disability access or services through individual Acts. While this legislation may not directly refer to libraries, all libraries have a responsibility to fully serve everyone in their community.

These guidelines provide a benchmark to ensure that a standard minimum level of service is provided across the entirety of the library and information services sector.

## 1. POLICY AND PLANNING

### 1.1 Policy

#### Guideline:

Every library policy should incorporate the fundamental principles outlined in the [Disability Services Act 1986](#), the [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#), and any requirements under individual states or territories.

Further, every library should operate under a written affirmative action (equal opportunity) policy which indicates a commitment to equal access and employment opportunity for all employees and applicants. Refer to the relevant [equal employment opportunity and anti-discrimination](#) publications for your state or territory (Australian Government, 2019).

## 1.2 Planning

### Guideline:

Every library and information service should develop organisation-wide disability access and inclusion plans. The plans should include short and long-term objectives, strategies for their achievement and sustainability and mechanisms for evaluation and review. While not compulsory, libraries are encouraged to lodge formal disability access and inclusion plans with the [Australian Human Rights Commission Register of Disability Discrimination Act Action Plans](#).

Access and inclusion plans should be designed to guide the library in providing services and programs to inclusively meet the needs of all users. The plans should include mechanisms to identify people with disabilities in the community. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) recommends that the plans should be reviewed every two to three years to reflect changes to service, resource, and technology standards.

## 1.3 Universal Design Principles

### Guideline:

In addition to meeting legislative requirements, ALIA encourages the observation of [universal design principles](#) (Woodard, 2006), guidelines and standards. This means the design of products, environments, programs and services are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. This ensures that library and information services, collections, equipment and facilities meet the identified needs of users with a disability. These apply to the:

- production of collection material and equipment for people with a disability, whether produced by commercial, government or voluntary agencies,
- design of catalogues, databases and guides to resources,
- development and application of hardware and software,
- construction of buildings and signage,
- building safety and emergency procedure,
- E-resource compatibility and website content (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014),
- development and implementation of library programs and services.

## 2. PHYSICAL ACCESS

### Guideline:

It is against the law to discriminate against people with disability in relation to access and use of public premises (Australian Government, 2016). There are national, legally binding standards which set out technical requirements for those building or upgrading premises to ensure people with disability can access and use buildings, as required by the Act. The Australian Human Rights Commission has published a [Guideline on the application of the premises standards](#) (2013) to assist people to implement them.

Library access starts prior to entering the building. Libraries should ensure that areas outside the library facilitate safe access and exit from the library regardless of disability restriction.

Users will often have different expectations of the library space. Libraries should clearly communicate to all users how library space supports equal access in order to facilitate independent use of libraries by all members of the community. This can be through promoting the physical accessibility of the library space, access to services and access to information.

### **3. SERVICES**

#### **3.1 Identifying community needs**

**Guideline:**

Success in delivering accessible library services and programs involves understanding community needs and providing options. Libraries should routinely and actively seek the involvement of their community in identifying needs and should be aware of any potential limitations to information access or participation in programs. This can be through community consultation groups, by regular open community engagement or forums, or via feedback forms or surveys.

Evaluation measures (see *Guideline 3.5*) should be designed to routinely assess the effectiveness of services in meeting current user and non-user needs and to determine what services and programs might be instituted to ensure inclusivity.

#### **3.2 Service provision**

**Guideline:**

Libraries should provide equity of access and inclusion to all members of their community. Service should be based on the principles of inclusion, equal access, and respecting the needs of the individual. It is imperative that the same level of service is available to all users.

Environments can magnify or even create disability by preventing someone from doing what they want or need to do. Physical features that people without physical disability take for granted can present serious problems for people with different abilities. Similarly, diverse sensory needs should be considered.

Supportive services, areas, and equipment which are separate can create feelings of difference and exclusion often experienced by people with disabilities and may deter the use of these services. Special services, trained staff and flexible arrangements may be required to cater to users with disabilities, however, as far as possible, these arrangements should be part of the general facilities available to all users.

Alterations made with inclusivity in mind, such as large-print screens, ramps and sound amplification, often benefit a wide range of people both with and without a disability; and ensure equal access for all.

#### **3.3 Technology**

**Guideline:**

Assistive devices and technologies enable access to library services, information, and resources and should reflect community needs. Libraries should provide and promote the

availability of assistive technology, including information and communication technologies, mobility aids, and devices.

Library staff should be familiar with and able to assist users in accessing and utilising assistive technology and devices. Library staff should also be able to provide accessible information to persons with disabilities about mobility aids, devices and assistive technologies, including new technologies, as well as other forms of assistance, support services and facilities (see *Guideline 6*).

### **3.4 Copyright**

#### **Guideline:**

All library staff should be aware that [copyright legislation](#) supports equal access to information from all libraries and information providers, including copies of materials in alternative formats for people with a disability.

### **3.5 Evaluating Services**

#### **Guideline:**

Every library and information service should establish mechanisms for evaluating their services and programs for people with disabilities. Evaluation measures should be designed to assess how effectively services are meeting current user and non-user needs and to determine what might be implemented to increase responsiveness to user and non-user needs.

User feedback can be sought in the following ways:

- periodic surveys of active and potential users,
- records of communications from users,
- regularly scheduled meetings with organised advisory groups / individuals,
- reviews and comments from staff.

Non-user feedback can be sought through interaction with community agencies, professionals and individuals in the community.

Any evaluation of services should be measured against appropriate [disability and equal opportunity legislation](#).

## **4. COMMUNICATIONS, MARKETING AND OUTREACH**

### **4.1 Communications**

#### **Guideline:**

Where libraries provide written information to their users, this information should use 'plain language' that is clear, concise, and easy to understand at first reading. 'Plain language' does not require specialised knowledge. 'Plain language' is not simplified English although library services may choose to also provide material in this format along with community languages.

Where online or email communication is used, libraries should employ the standards that comply with the [World Wide Web Consortium](#) (W3C) guidelines or any subsequent updates. This includes utilising alternative text for images and ensuring that information is screen

readable. Where video promotion is used online, libraries should provide a written transcript for download.

Libraries should employ several communication options for inward communication to meet user preferences. This may include, but is not limited to, online chat or forms; phone; email; or other services as relevant.

## **4.2 Marketing**

### **Guideline:**

Library marketing strategy should include close engagement with relevant agencies and aim to demonstrate an increasing awareness of the value of the library to the agency. Libraries should consider their branding within the community and how social media can be leveraged to alert users and non-users to new data sources and trends that support people with disabilities.

Libraries should explore a variety of marketing options for events and services. This includes standard services on-site, or off-site services such as home delivery, interlibrary loans, or electronic resources. Libraries may need to market and promote the same service across multiple channels. Marketing strategies should consider the format used for marketing and communication and whether this is accessible for all.

## **4.3 Communication of accessibility for events**

### **Guideline:**

Libraries should endeavour to ensure that their events are accessible to all attendees regardless of disability need and consider how disability services are marketed or communicated in relation to library-hosted events or activities. Where specific resources or equipment that support accessibility are available, this information should be communicated to all library users registered for library events.

Information on opening times and busy/quiet periods should be made available to users. This may be online through the library webpage or catalogue; or through printed information in the library.

## **4.4 Outreach**

### **Guideline:**

Under the principles of universal access, the library should have a policy on eligibility for home library services. Eligibility should be based on physical need without age restriction. Services should also be available to carers. Staff involved in these outreach services must undergo appropriate personal/police checks for working with vulnerable people in accordance with government requirements.

## 5. BUDGETING

### Guideline:

Accessible services need to be part of library financial planning and collection development processes. Areas for consideration should include:

- purchase of collections,
- library equipment,
- library systems,
- furniture,
- contracts with vendors,
- staff training.

The purchase of alternative formats should be part of the budget process. Where accessible formats are not readily available, decisions should be documented, and contingency plans developed as to how accessible formats can be secured to accommodate a patron request.

Budgeting processes should identify steps to create and maintain accessible physical facilities, services, and to acquire adaptive technologies. Improvements can then be made as part of a carefully planned, phased program. Ongoing maintenance costs and technology upgrades need to be budgeted for.

Library staff will negotiate agreements with content suppliers to provide the best access arrangements for their users within the terms of the licence and copyright legislation.

Continued professional development of staff around disability awareness, assistive technologies and alternative formats should be a part of the budget.

## 6. COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

### Guideline:

Collections will differ across libraries and types however a diverse range of formats applies to all.

A library's collection development policy should include procurement of alternative formats (see *Guideline 5.*) that meet diverse needs wherever possible. These alternative formats should be regularly reviewed to ensure that new formats, or outdated formats, are sourced or deselected.

Collection management processes should include the acquisition and description of resources in specialised formats where necessary, for example, for people with print disabilities, and include input from consumers and specialists in the field as well as user input to test access, accessibility, and usability of vendor platforms and content.

## 7. HUMAN RESOURCES AND TRAINING

### Guideline:

Libraries should provide accessible services in an integrated way by ensuring that all library staff have up-to-date knowledge and skills about the diverse needs of patrons, alternative formats and assistive technologies.

Staff professional development plans (see *Guideline 1.2*) should be informed by community need and in line with the changing needs and experiences of library users and non-users. Input into the development of the plan from members of the target group is essential and support from these users should be actively sought.

At all times, specialist organisations should be consulted, and staff should be encouraged to attend seminars and workshops facilitated by these expert groups.

Staff should be aware of relevant sections of the *Disability Discrimination Act*, *Disability Services Act* and the *Equal Opportunity Act* as they relate to the provision of equitable library service.

Training programs should aim to provide a reasonable level of knowledge which will enable staff to engage with library patrons appropriately and with confidence by:

- assisting staff in the development of appropriate communication skills,
- dispelling misconceptions and cultural biases through an educated understanding of user needs.
- assisting staff in the assessment of accommodations and facilities to enable recommendations for improvement.

Libraries should continue to open career opportunities for people living with disability (ALIA, 2019).

## 8. ADVOCACY

### Guideline:

Libraries should provide and promote access and equity through services, training, resources and engagement with the community and disability sector.

All library staff have an advocacy role in promoting Australian library services. This includes advocating for access and equity in library services for people with disabilities.

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