Guide Dogs.

Pathways to Inclusion.

Summary Report.


TEPPANYAKI
943

Contents

> “Accessible pathways are more than just a convenience for me and my Guide Dog. They are the foundation of my independence. When my daily commute to work involves blocked footpaths or unexpected obstacles, it turns a straightforward trip into a stressful and sometimes dangerous ordeal. These paths are essential for participating fully in family life allowing me to safely navigate parks and neighbourhood streets with my children. When the environment isn’t accessible it doesn’t just slow us down, it limits my ability to be an active, contributing member of my community and family.”
>
> Andrew Christou

Introduction.

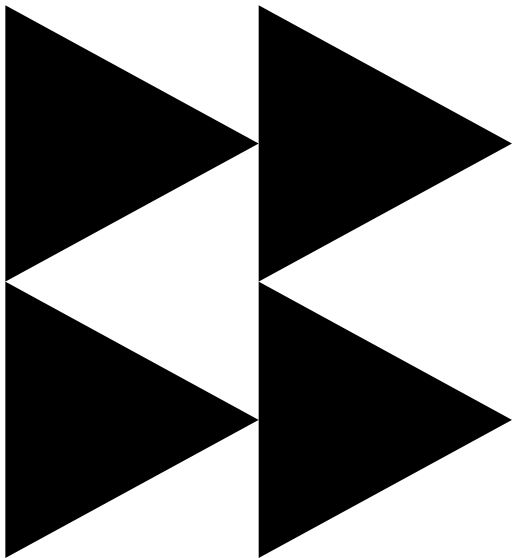
First developed in 2015, ‘Pathways to Inclusion’ supports councils to plan for more accessible and inclusive communities. Ten years later, the 2025 report builds on that foundation by bringing together the latest evidence, examples of good practice, and changes in urban design, digital systems, transport and governance. It also establishes a benchmark for measuring progress consistently over time.

The report provides an evidence base for action by Australian, state and territory governments, local councils, community advocates, and people with low vision or blindness working to make society more accessible.

Drawing on more than 308 survey responses from metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW and the ACT, the findings show that access remains inconsistent and, in many places, is getting harder.

- Only 46 percent of respondents rated their community as accessible.
- Currently 42 percent felt less confident getting around their community, compared to two years ago.
- Average confidence navigating local areas was 6.3 out of 10, pointing to unreliable access rather than isolated problem spots.

It shows us how inclusion is being experienced in everyday life for people with low vision or blindness and highlights practical changes that can strengthen Disability Inclusion Action Plans, infrastructure programs, and everyday environments.



How access enables inclusion.

‘Pathways to Inclusion’ is a system for understanding how access enables inclusion across NSW and the ACT. It helps identify whether people with disability can consistently take part in community life and access essential services and identify where systems need to change.

At its core, this report asks: To what extent do people with disability experience consistent access to, and participation in, community life?

To answer this, the framework focuses on two connected conditions:

- **Access.** Whether environments, services and information can be used safely, independently, and reliably.
- **Participation.** Whether people can meaningfully take part in everyday life once access is in place.

Access enables participation. Participation drives inclusion. Without consistent access, participation is limited and without participation, inclusion cannot be achieved.

Domains of community life.

The research considers community life across key domains of everyday participation, the areas that most influence whether people can move through their community, take part in daily life and feel confident doing so. These domains are:

- Movement and navigation.
- Footpaths and streets.
- Crossings and road safety.
- Transport and urban design.
- Governance, information and being heard.

Inclusion in everyday life.

For people with low vision or blindness, inclusion is experienced through everyday mobility; being able to orientate and move through their local communities, including accessing services, walking along streets, crossing roads and using public transport.

When environments are predictable, well maintained and clearly communicated, people can move independently and participate in community life on equal terms. When they are not, mobility is reduced and they can become more dependent on external support.

The findings show that accessibility is uneven across local areas. Basic infrastructure issues, inconsistent design, and limited access to clear information continue to affect independent participation.

Inclusion, in practice, is defined by whether people can move through their communities safely, access services, and engage in daily life without needing to constantly adapt to societal and environmental barriers.

Movement and navigation.

Movement and navigation are shaped by how infrastructure, information, and transport systems work together.

Across responses, independence was strongly supported by Guide Dogs, canes, Orientation and Mobility sessions, and navigation apps. However, these supports are often used within inconsistent environments where physical and informational barriers can limit confident participation. The main system-level issues include:

- Inconsistent physical infrastructure across locations.
- Limited accessibility of information in real time, including auditory and wayfinding cues.
- Variable design standards across councils and transport systems.
- Unpredictable interactions between pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles, and shared spaces.

Confidence in movement is therefore not fixed but shaped by context. Familiar environments and predictable layouts support independence, while unfamiliar or changing environments reduce the reliability of navigation.

The findings show that mobility is shaped less by individual capability, and more by the consistency of system design.

This points to a broader pattern: planning, transport, infrastructure and customer service systems operate together in practice. Mobility outcomes are influenced not only by isolated local decisions, but by how these systems align and function together as a whole.

Footpaths and streets.

Footpaths are a core part of independent mobility and were consistently identified as a major barrier where design and maintenance are inconsistent. The most difficult conditions included:

- Uneven or damaged surfaces.
- Missing or incomplete footpaths.
- Vegetation and overgrowth.
- Obstructions such as bins, signage, and street furniture.
- Parked cars blocking access.
- Poor lighting and inconsistent maintenance.
- Temporary works and construction barriers.

These conditions reflect both design and maintenance failures. They are not isolated hazards. Together, they create cumulative barriers that make everyday routes less safe and less usable.

In some areas, particularly in outer suburban and regional locations, the absence of footpaths removes safe pedestrian access altogether.

State and territory road and planning frameworks also shape local standards and funding, influencing how consistently safe and accessible paths are delivered.

Ultimately, footpath conditions determine whether everyday walking is possible, safe and predictable.

Crossing and road safety.

Road crossings are critical transition points between pedestrian areas and traffic systems. Respondents consistently rated them as difficult when the design lacked clarity and consistency. The most challenging features included:

- Flush or poorly designed kerb edges that reduce detectability.
- Misaligned kerb ramps.
- Poor or absent audio signals.
- Inconsistent tactile definition.
- Wide or poorly oriented crossings.
- Inadequate transitions between ramps, roads, and footpaths.

More conventional signalised crossings and zebra crossings were rated slightly easier but still presented challenges when signals, alignment, or audio feedback were inconsistent. Key system issues include:

- Reduced tactile definition of safe crossing points.
- Unreliable or inaudible audio cues.
- Inconsistent alignment between ramps and crossings.
- Variability in driver behaviour and response to pedestrians.

Crossing safety depends on clear boundaries, predictable signals, and consistent design standards across locations.

Transport and urban design.

Public transport remains essential for independent mobility, but accessibility is affected by inconsistencies in stop design, information systems, and service delivery.

Key barriers include:

- Difficulty locating stops and boarding points.
- Inconsistent kerb alignment and platform height.
- Limited or inaccessible real-time information.
- Variability in driver awareness and assistance.
- Gaps in accessible alternative transport options.

These issues affect the entire journey, not just boarding or travel. Public transport and major road corridors are often managed by state or territory agencies, while paths of travel and local centres are largely managed by councils, meaning accessibility depends on coordinated decisions across jurisdictions.

Newer urban design approaches also present accessibility challenges where traditional separation and tactile cues are reduced. Lower safety ratings were associated with:

- Floating bus stops.
- Shared pedestrian and cycling spaces.
- Flush or continuous footpaths and intersections.
- E-scooters and e-bikes in pedestrian areas.

These designs reduce physical separation between movement types and rely more on visual cues and shared space assumptions.

Raised crossings were rated as relatively safer due to clearer physical definition and reduced vehicle speed.

Overall, emerging designs require stronger attention to legibility, tactile cues, and separation to ensure safe, independent navigation.

Governance, information and being heard.

Local government plays a central role in accessibility, but performance varies significantly across areas.

Participants reported difficulty accessing clear, timely, and usable information about works, disruptions, and accessibility upgrades. Key issues included:

- Inaccessible website content and documents.
- Inconsistent formatting of information, for example PDFs not screen-reader accessible.
- Difficulty locating relevant updates.
- Limited proactive communication.
- Information that is available but not consistently usable or easy to find.

Reporting systems were described as inconsistent and difficult to navigate. Key issues included:

- Unclear reporting pathways.
- Inaccessible online forms.
- Limited follow-up or feedback.
- Lack of visibility on issue progress.

This reduces confidence that reported issues lead to action.

Only around one-third of respondents consistently accessed information in their preferred format.

Many participants described self-advocacy as something developed through repeated experience navigating inaccessible systems rather than as a supported process. This indicates that engagement with councils often depends on individual effort rather than consistent system design.

Across responses, three governance gaps were identified:

- Inconsistent access to information.
- Unclear and inaccessible reporting systems.
- Limited feedback and accountability loops.

Where councils provide clear communication, accessible formats, and responsive follow-up, trust and participation are significantly improved.

Key findings by domain.

Movement and navigation.

- Independent movement is shaped by the consistency of the environment rather than individual capability.
- Confidence varies depending on how predictable infrastructure, information, and transport systems are.
- Supports such as Guide Dogs and navigation tools are used to compensate for system gaps rather than enhance independence in well-designed environments.

Footpaths and streets.

- Footpath safety is determined by maintenance, continuity, and obstruction management.
- Uneven surfaces, vegetation, clutter, and parking create cumulative barriers rather than isolated risks.
- Incomplete footpath networks remove safe pedestrian access in some areas entirely.

Crossings and road safety.

- Safe crossing depends on clear physical definition, reliable audio cues, and consistent alignment.
- Flush or misaligned crossings reduce spatial orientation and increase reliance on guesswork.
- Variability in design and signal quality creates inconsistent safety outcomes.

Transport and urban design.

- Accessibility depends on the integration of stop design, information systems, and service delivery.
- Floating bus stops, shared spaces, and reduced separation introduce ambiguity in movement priority.
- Emerging design approaches require stronger tactile and auditory definition to support independent use.

Governance, information and being heard.

- Access to information is inconsistent and often not provided in accessible formats.
- Reporting systems lack clarity, feedback loops, and transparency.
- Participation in local decision-making is shaped by system accessibility rather than willingness to engage.

Methodology.

This research used a mix of desktop review and stakeholder engagement to inform the 'Stakeholder Insights Report for Pathways to Inclusion: 2025'. Two workshops were held to guide and validate the findings. The approach combined evidence with lived experience, drawing on input from people with low vision or blindness, local government and disability advocacy organisations.

All research followed University of Technology Sydney's ethics guidelines and national standards.

Community Inclusion Index.

Inclusion is shaped by streets, services, systems, attitudes, behaviours and expectations. Using the 'Pathways to Inclusion' data, an overall measure of inclusion was developed, describing how easily people can move, participate, and feel confident in their communities. This is referred to as the Community Inclusion Index (CII).

By averaging scores across all questions for each domain, an overall score can be calculated. Because the Community Inclusion Index aggregates experiences across NSW and the ACT, it can be used to track progress at **state and territory level**, and to inform whole of government disability inclusion planning as well as local DIAPs.

Domain	Score (/100)
1. Movement & navigation	58.6
2. Footpaths & streets	33.7
3. Crossings & road safety	36.0
4. Emerging urban design & transport	30.8
5. Governance, information & being heard	50.0
Overall CII score	**42.1**

Taken together, these domains show how people move through, access and participate in public spaces across NSW and the ACT.

A Community Inclusion Index score of 42.1 shows that inclusion is emerging but inconsistent. It is not yet something people can rely on consistently. Rather, it remains something people must actively navigate.

Some areas are working reasonably well, while others remain significant barriers. Inclusion is not yet built into everyday environments; it depends on where people are and what systems they encounter.

For full methodology, domain scores and detailed analysis, see the 'Pathways to Inclusion Stakeholder Insights Technical Report' prepared by UTS IPPG.

Moving from evidence to action.

The findings highlight practical changes that governments, local councils and transport agencies can make now to improve accessibility, strengthen inclusion, and support independent participation for people with low vision or blindness.

Many of the barriers identified in this report are not caused by a lack of policy intent, but by inconsistent implementation, maintenance, communication, and accountability across local systems.

A practical framework for governments.

Accessible infrastructure and maintenance.

- Maintain continuous, obstruction-free paths of travel.
- Prioritise repairs to uneven surfaces, missing footpaths, lighting, vegetation, and temporary works.
- Ensure construction detours and temporary traffic management remain accessible.
- Government funding programs and standards for roads and public domain upgrades should incentivise obstruction free paths of travel and accessible detours.

Inclusive design and urban planning.

- Embed tactile cues, audible information, clear delineation between footpaths and roads, and predictable layouts into streets, crossings, transport stops, and public spaces.
- Review shared zones, floating bus stops, flush intersections, and similar designs to ensure safe pedestrian separation and non-visual navigation.
- Apply inclusive design consistently across upgrades, not only in new projects.
- Government planning policies and design guides can embed universal design and tactile definition as baseline requirements for streets, crossings and stations, not optional extras.

Accessible transport systems.

- Improve consistency of boarding points, stop layouts, and audio information.
- Ensure transport staff receive training on supporting passengers with low vision or blindness.
- Strengthen coordination between government and transport providers on accessible paths of travel.
- Government transport agencies should set clear accessibility expectations for operators, including audio announcements, driver training and alignment between stops and paths of travel.

Communication and governance.

- Create a dedicated accessibility and inclusion page on council websites that includes:
    - The Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP).
    - Progress updates and reporting.
    - Accessibility contacts.
    - Disability reference group information.
    - Upcoming works and disruptions.
    - An accessible feedback and issue reporting form.

- Provide information in accessible and plain-language formats.
- Establish clear reporting pathways and communicate outcomes back to the community.
- Government can support consistent disability governance by encouraging or requiring councils to maintain dedicated accessibility and inclusion pages, with DIAPs, progress updates and reference group information in accessible formats.

Participation and accountability.

- Establish disability reference groups with lived experience representation to inform planning, infrastructure, transport, and digital projects.
- Involve people with disability in planning, testing, implementation, and review processes.
- Measure success through lived outcomes, including safe movement, access to services, and participation in community life.

Summary.

The 2025 ‘Pathways to Inclusion’ findings show that access to community life remains uneven for people with low vision or blindness. While intentions are often positive, gaps in design, maintenance and communication continue to limit participation.

By using ‘Pathways to Inclusion’ as a shared system for measurement and improvement, decision-makers can move beyond isolated fixes towards communities where access is consistent and inclusion is possible for everyone.

About Guide Dogs NSW/ACT.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is a not-for-profit organisation that has supported people with low vision or blindness to live independently and with confidence for over 70 years. Alongside service delivery, we work to drive social and systemic change towards communities that are accessible, equitable and welcoming for everyone.

We're here whenever you need us.

7-9 Albany Street,
St Leonards NSW 2065

1800 436 364

nsw.guidedogs.com.au

Guide Dogs.

ACN 000 399 744