

THE ACCESS ALLIANCE

Access Matters

Briefing Note

THE PROBLEM

Around one in four New Zealanders have a disability, meaning a quarter of the population is forced to deal with barriers to access on a daily basis. This includes people with physical, mental, cognitive and/or sensory impairments. In addition, the aged and the young, pregnant women, and parents with young children, and people who are injured or in poor health, all find it harder to get around the community.

Nearly all of us will have permanent or temporary access needs sometime in our lives, especially as we get older.

Access barriers make it more difficult for people to:

- get into or move around public buildings, for example if there are no ramps
- get around the community, for example if pedestrian crossings don't have audio signals
- use public transport if there is no space for wheelchairs or strollers, or easy ways to get onto or off buses and trains
- understand information (forms from government agencies, communications to ratepayers, library books etc.) that is not provided in accessible formats
- use websites or other digital facilities such as booking sites, online banking, ATMs, or EFTPOS facilities
- access health services, for instance where there are a lack of NZ Sign Language interpreters
- enjoy movies, television or cultural activities, for example if there is no audio-description or closed captioning

Although New Zealand has ratified the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), we must work to honour it in practice. Specifically, the Convention requires us to take “appropriate measures” to “develop, promulgate and monitor the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public, including those provided by private entities.”

At present, we rely primarily on the:

- Human Rights Act 1993 which provides a mechanism for dealing with individual complaints about discrimination against people with disabilities. However, it lacks clear guidance to employers, service providers or others to ensure that they actively make their services and buildings accessible
- The NZ Disability Strategy 2016-2026 and Disability Action Plan 2014-18, which though useful, does not cover the private sector, nor focus on mainstreaming accessible practices. The Strategy and Action Plan are not enforceable through legislation

SOLUTION

We all want to live in a country where everyone has the same opportunity to participate and contribute to society. Improving accessibility will make it easier for tens of thousands of kiwis with disabilities to earn a living and have a good life. Accessibility legislation is the most strategic way to enable this.

We know from other countries such as Canada, that legislation makes a significant difference to whether a society is planned and designed for accessibility.

A group of organisations from across the disability community have united to form the Access Alliance. The Access Alliance, along with individuals with access needs, local government and business representatives, jointly call on all political parties to introduce robust and enforceable accessibility legislation. We call this legislation the Accessibility for New Zealanders Act.

We want the Accessibility for New Zealanders Act to:

- Cover people with any form of disability, as defined by the UNCRPD;
- Apply to both the public sector and larger privately owned corporates;
- Set sector and industry-specific minimum accessibility standards, including timeframes for their implementation;
- Influence future disability policies and regulations;
- Ensure that government educate affected parties on the changes; and
- Contain mechanisms to ensure compliance is independently reviewed and that enforcement really incentivises compliance.

Accessibility legislation would unlock the potential of people with disabilities who are currently excluded from education, employment and participation in society by:

- making it easier for people to complete primary and secondary education, and participate in higher education
- making it more likely that people can secure jobs, and be able to easily travel to work, and move around within the workplace
- making it easier for people to participate in the economy by buying products and using goods and services
- enabling them to participate as volunteers, members of community groups, and in recreational activities
- increasing the ability of people with disabilities to use public transport rather than being dependent on private or specialised transport

In addition to the benefits to people with disabilities, society as a whole would prosper from greater inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. Locking people out of jobs reduces the talent pool for employers, making it hard for people with disabilities to move around the community. Inaccessible online services and products means businesses have few clients and customers. Making it harder for people to study means society is denying itself the talents of potential professionals.

Economic modelling has estimated that removing the barriers to employment for people with disability could mean around 14, 000 people with disabilities would be able to move from welfare into employment.¹ This scenario would also add \$1.45 billion to real gross domestic product.

Public opinion polling in July 2017 found that 80% of New Zealanders agree that the law should specify minimum standards for accessibility². These polling results suggest that New Zealanders understand that at some point in our lives, we will all be affected by accessibility.

ACTIONS

In the lead up to the election, all parties indicated acceptance of the need to do more to include people with disabilities and remove barriers to participation, but now we need firm commitments to introducing legislation.

We call on you to urge your party to commit to passing robust and enforceable accessibility legislation before 2020. We also encourage you to emphasise to your party that the best results come from developing this legislation in close consultation with government, business and people with disabilities.

CURRENT POLICY POSITIONS OF PARTIES³

National

Willing to work on standards and regulations. No public announcement or policy.

Labour

The Labour Party's Disability Policy commits to "enforceable and mandatory standards for essential areas of life such as social housing and transport", states that "Labour will also bring New Zealand in line with countries such as the United States and Canada which have legislation to protect the rights of people with disabilities" and "Consider sponsoring the Accessibility for New Zealanders Act, draft legislation developed by the Access Alliance, with a view to passing it into New Zealand law."

ACT

The ACT Party's Disability Policy states that "ACT is committed to working with businesses and the disability sector to make it easier for disabled New Zealanders to join the workforce and that "ACT will fully support accessibility provisions for all public buildings and public transport".

New Zealand First

Has indicated "support for accessibility legislation and mandatory and enforceable accessibility standards". No public announcement or policy.

Greens

Public announcement soon after the launch of Access Matters, confirming commitment to introducing accessibility legislation.

1 Access Alliance: Valuing Access to Work by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER), 2017, commissioned by the Blind Foundation for The Access Alliance

2 Poll conducted by UMR, commissioned by the Access Alliance, July 2017

3 As at the election