GET THE GO AHEAD

Accessibility Toolkit

This work was created on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. We affirm that their sovereignty was never ceded and recognise that effects of colonisation are ongoing. We express our commitment to working alongside First Nations people for truth, treaty, and reconciliation.

WORDS

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SPECIAL THANKS

This resource draws on findings from Disabled young people who participated in focus groups. Disabled young people from the codesign group contributed their analysis, feedback, and writing. Get the Go-Ahead was supported by the Victorian Government.

FIND US

WomensHealthEast
WomensHealthEast
WomensHealthEast
www.whe.org.au

WWW.GTGA.ORG.AU

VICTORIA State Government

YACVIC ydas Youth Disability Advocacy Service

Women's Health East

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Get the Go-Ahead has been driven by a codesign group of Disabled young people.

WWW.GTGA.ORG.AU

Introduction

Disabled people are part of our communities. We exist here, and we deserve a community that welcomes, includes, and celebrates us.

All too often, Disabled young people are excluded from events and community spaces that other young people get to be part of.

Those barriers exist in the built environment, in policies, and in attitudes, assumptions, and biases. We can and must do better.

Get the Go-Ahead started as an affirmative consent education project codesigned with Disabled young people in 2024.

We developed three videos and three zines about affirmative consent, prevention of gendered violence, and sexual and reproductive rights for Disabled young people and allies.

In 2025 the project was extended for one year. We took this opportunity to look more broadly at systemic factors that contribute to gendered and ableist violence and barriers in accessing accurate information.

When Disabled young people are excluded from community spaces, they miss out on opportunities to form connections, develop a safety net, and learn from peers and other trusted people. Those protective factors are vital.

This toolkit has been created to share those key messages with anyone who works with or supports Disabled people, and to give workers and organisations more tools for creating accessible, welcoming services, events, and resources.

The Focus Groups

Get the Go-Ahead included a series of focus groups with Disabled young people across Victoria, with 59 participants. All focus groups were facilitated by a Disabled worker from Women's Health East and a Disabled young person. We ran these focus groups to hear directly from a wider range of Disabled young people on two main themes: what barriers stop you from accessing community support? What can organisations do better?

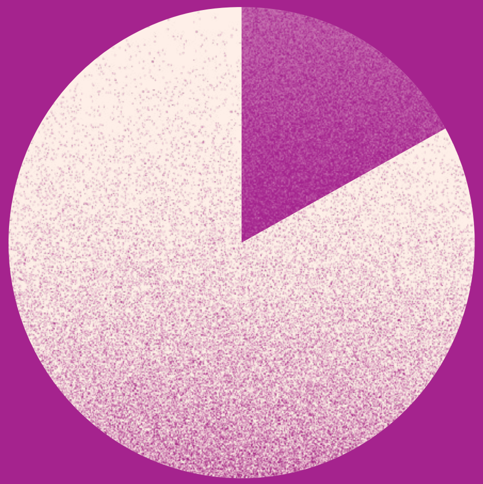
The focus group questions were co-written by a group of Disabled Young Experts, who also shared their analysis and reflections after the focus group to contribute to identifying the key messages.

We ran focus groups in-person in different geographic areas, and online. We ran focus groups centred around different methods of communication.

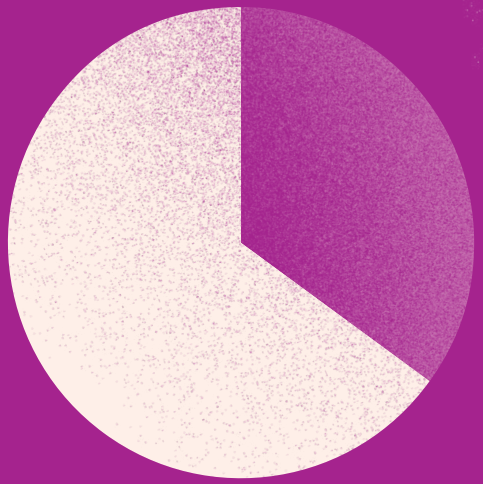
ONLINE STATEWIDE

Two Online via Zoom Audio/Video Conference
Online Auslan interpreted
Online via Discord Text Based Communication

Importance of Sharing information



83% of respondents said that the amount of information an organisation shares up front is a major factor in how comfortable they feel and how willing they are to reach out to that organisation.



65% said that not having enough information has been a barrier that prevented them from interacting with an organisation

“If there’s one thing workers remember, it should be this: tell us more! When you think it’s too much information, it might nearly be enough”

“For me, having context is an access need. I can’t act until I understand.”

Reviewing a Venue for Physical and Sensory Access

Claire (she/her)

For me, accessing a health service can be challenging when I don’t know if the venue can accommodate my sensory needs.

In many cases, I don’t end up booking or contacting that health service at all. I am anxious that if my sensory needs are not able to be accommodated, I won’t be able to contribute or get the most out of the experience — or even be able to participate at all.

When an organisation provides clear and up-to-date information on their website/marketing about physical and sensory access needs, I feel like a weight is taken off my shoulders and I can move ahead with ease.

To have that information straight-up removes a huge barrier and also demonstrates that the organisation has actively considered how to make their services inclusive and accessible.

For example, I went to an appointment at the hospital where the room was noisy, the practitioner spoke quickly without space for me to process information, and there were lots of bright and flashing lights.

I found it difficult to concentrate, actively listen, and have the ability to think clearly and ask questions.

Another example is an indoor craft market event I attended where I could easily obtain sensory accessibility information beforehand.

By knowing what to expect and the systems in place to accommodate me, I could confidently attend and be as involved as everyone else.

This event had quiet rooms, soft lighting, and stated they were a noise-cancelling/earplug friendly space.

> **“Every time I go somewhere I have to ask, was this place built with people like me in mind? Are there stairs? And if there is a ramp, will my wheelchair fit through the hallways?**
>
> **Is there a way to get there without a car? Will the lights be too bright? I spend so much time looking at Google Maps, looking for photos on the organisation’s website and social media, and just scouring everything for basic information that by the time I’ve figured out if I can go, I don’t have the energy for it anymore.**
>
> **Or I try contacting whoever’s running it, and just have to hope that they’ll get back to me in time, which they don’t always.”**
>
> ***- Disabled Young Person, Focus Group Participant***

Social Stories

A social story describes how to interact with a situation, place, or activity. Social stories explain what will happen, and make implicit social norms and cultural expectations explicit.

A social story can help someone prepare for an interaction, feel more confident, bridge cultural gaps by spelling out implicit assumptions about how things will go, and give people enough information to work out what other support they might need.

Writing a Social Story

1. Go through your event, intake process, activity, or whatever scenario you're describing.
2. Write down what happens: think about it from the perspective of a participant.
3. Think about gaps: where are things unclear? Where could other people make different decisions?

   Add this information; it might include who is usually there, how long it goes for, the purpose, timing, how it will begin and end, etc.

Some social stories use **first person** perspective

- For example *"I will go in"*

some use **second person** perspective

- For example: *"you will go in"*

and some use **third person** perspective

- For example *"people will go in"*

80% of participants in our focus groups preferred **second person.**

They described the first person social stories as "*condescending*", "*talking down to me*", and "*feels like they're aimed at little kids*".

First person social stories might still work well for young children, but Disabled young adults deserve to be treated and spoken to as adults.

Second and third person social stories are the way to go.

Power, Autonomy, and Ethics

The point of a social story is to empower people by informing them. Social stories should describe what will and can happen, not what we wish would happen. For example:

"You will walk slowly"

This phrasing make an assumption about what the visitor will do.

Try ***"most people will walk slowly"***,

or ***"we will ask people to walk slowly"***

Avoid language like:

"You will see many interesting animals."

"You will have a good time"

This phrasing makes an assumption about how the visitor will feel or view their experience and should be removed.

Age and Audience

Social stories are most commonly used to support Autistic children, but they benefit many groups: neurodivergent people of all ages, parents, people trying to plan for what they'll need to bring, people coming from a different cultural context than the event organisers, and more.

A common theme in the focus groups was that organisations should write age-appropriate social stories across age groups, and not assume that only young children need social stories. When social stories are treated as just a tool to help parents or other adults tell a child how the adult wants the child to act, we lose the best parts of a social story.

"I want to know what I need to bring. I want to know what I can do if I get lost or something confusing happens. I don't want to be treated like a six year old"

- Disabled Young Person, Focus Group Participant

COST

27% of focus group participants brought up not being sure how much a support service would cost as a barrier to accessing support.

Putting fees up on your website and being as transparent as possible can help build trust in the longer term, and it can make getting support less stressful for Disabled people right now.

"Since I got sick I haven't been able to work. It took two years to get on DSP [Disability Support Pension]. Like lots of disabled young people I can't afford much, and having to stress about that can easily make it feel too hard to contact."

- Disabled Young Person, Focus Group Participant

ACCESS KEYS

An access key describes the venue and nearby areas in detail. It highlights accessibility features and potential barriers, and lets people understand what the space will be like before they come.

> ***“New places can be overwhelming. There’s a lot to process, and I need time. Seeing photos and descriptions gives me time to get used to a place, so I can focus on other things when I’m there.”***
>
> ***- Disabled Young Person Focus Group Participant***

Creating an access key

GETTING THERE

How will people get here? Look at the transport options, including train stations, tram stops, bus stops, car parks, and car drop off spaces.

Include all options:

- list the nearest stop for each type of public transport in your area, check whether public transport stops are accessible, and include those details;
- where to park for people driving in;
- and where a taxi or other car could drop someone off.

You can use street names (e.g., “there’s street parking along Main St”), descriptions (e.g., “the parking lot to the left when facing the building”), and links to a location on Maps for online access keys.

THE ENTRANCE

How wide is the door?

How will people know they’ve found the right entrance? Tell them!

If there’s multiple entrances, describe them, and let people know where to go

e.g., “the two entrances are both open whenever we’re open”, “the main entrance is open all day, and the side entrance is open for larger events”, etc.

DESCRIPTIONS AND IMAGES

- Include photos of each space. Photos should show as much of the space as possible. You can use multiple photos, or add more zoomed-in photos to highlight details
- Use clear, direct language
- Consider the kind of information you’re including: is it all visual, or are there tactile details too?
- Include a note saying when the Access Key was last updated, so visitors have an idea of how likely it is that the space has changed

RIGHT OUTSIDE

What’s the area outside your venue like? Are you on a busy street? Is there an outdoor area that’s part of your venue? Is the parking lot out the front? Think about the availability of seating, shade, and typical noise level.

Describe how people get to the entrance of your venue: that might be a simple description if the front door is right on the street, or a longer description if the entrance is further away. Include a wide range of information, including visual and non-visual features. You might mention:

- The colour of the building or door
- Any signs visible outside
- What the ground feels like (e.g., smooth concrete, a gravel path, etc.)
- Distance (e.g., “starting at the corner of Main St and Second St, we’re 450m down Main St”, or “there’s a short path of rough concrete from the street to the entrance, it’s about 30m long”)

EACH SPACE INSIDE

Go room by room and describe each space in your venue. Include Sensory information (what are people likely to see, hear, and smell in each room, typical light and temperature levels and if they’re adjustable)

- Widths (doorways, hallways, paths through rooms)
- Furniture, including the size and type of seats available and anything else visitors can use
- Tools, toys, equipment and any other objects people can interact with
- Locations of significant features within a room
- Any stairs, lifts, or ramps

Communication

We all communicate in different ways, and no one way of communicating is 'The Accessible One'. Accessible communication is about considering your audience, the speakers, and the purpose - and being willing to adjust.

Captioning

Captions are an accurate written version of what's said out loud, shown on the screen as part of a video or live event. Captions can be created for pre-recorded video content (like movies or online videos) or typed live.

Automatic captions are generated by machine. While they're often cheaper they're also less accurate, and don't provide full access.

Closed captions are captions that the viewer can control, turning them on or off, whichever is more accessible for them.

Open captions are part of the video, and the text will be there no matter what.

Interpreters

Interpreters take in a message in one language, and share it in another. Auslan interpreters enable communication between people who communicate in Australian Sign Language and people who communicate in spoken English.

To book an interpreter

- Plan ahead! If you leave it to the last minute, you may not find anyone available. Include funding for interpreters in your budget from the start.
- If you know or can contact the Auslan users who'll be coming, check if they have preferred interpreters
- Book qualified interpreters. Interpreting is a skill, and you can't just have anyone who knows both Auslan and spoken English fill that role
- Remember that the interpreter has one job: to interpret. They aren't here to provide any other support, and shouldn't be asked to do extra tasks.
- When delivering a program or message, speak directly to the Auslan user, and they'll sign directly back to you. The interpreter will sign as you speak.

Don't say [to the interpreter];
*"Can you ask them what **they** want?"*

Do say [to the Auslan user];
*"What do **you** want?"*

Precise Language, Plain Language

Plain language is a style of writing that uses shorter sentences, and common words.

It can be more accessible for some people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, and can be easier for people who speak English as an additional language or who have lower literacy levels too.

Some Disabled people find plain language resources more accessible, and some Disabled people find it more accessible to include more details and precise terminology even if that's longer or includes words that some people view as jargon.

Writing multiple versions of a resource, policy, or guide and letting people choose is the most accessible approach.

Focus Group Participants Said:

"When I had questions about sexuality it was a struggle to find anything relevant to me. So much focused on non-disabled bodies, and my questions were never addressed. But when I found videos and posts that were actually aimed at disabled people, they weren't enough either.

They were written in simplified words, so while my non-disabled friends were learning the terminology to describe their experiences and the key words they could use to look up more information later, I was missing all that.

They were short, so while my non-disabled friends were finding in-depth, nuanced descriptions of relationships I got a handful of sentences, and missed out on the depth."

"I struggle to 'fill in the gaps' as people say. I'll happily read twice as many pages if it means I get a full explanation, but when people leave so much unsaid or assume I'll realise what they're implying or that they didn't literally mean what they said, then that conversation takes too much cognitive work, and I miss things."

"Long documents can really tire me out. I want the information I need in a page or two!"

"Between meds and fatigue I get a lot of brainfog, but I'm also autistic. Sometimes I don't have the energy to read more than a few sentences, but I still need a lot of context to understand things. I love having a plain language version, but I don't want it to just replace the standard English version. Give me both so I can meet all my access needs; please don't make me choose just one."

JAY'S STORY

“When I left an unsafe home, living in a youth shelter as a Deaf person was incredibly difficult.

No one there could communicate easily with me.

Over and over I had to beg staff to write down what they wanted to say, because they didn’t have an interpreter.

Years later I learnt that I hadn’t known about half the supports other people there heard about, because staff had brought them up to the group out loud and no one remembered to check if I’d noticed.

It took a lot longer to find support, even inside an organisation that was supposedly ‘helping’ me, than it should have.”

Facilitating a Meeting with Respect for Multiple Communication Styles and Methods

Ali (he/him)

I’m neurodivergent, and diabetic.

Sometimes I can’t pay attention because my brain doesn’t let me, and sometimes it’s because my diabetes doesn’t let me.

I retain information visually, rarely audibly. Others are the opposite.

For me, the presentation being:

- **engaging** to keep my attention
- **interactive** so it’s not one-sided
- having relevant, informative, and concise **visual aids** that can help me get back on track if I zone out make a big difference.

This also means I can more easily refer back to relevant sections when revisiting the information.

This goes a long way in delivering a meeting that actually has me **participating meaningfully** and delivers the impact and takeaways to me long-term.

Gender and Disability

Disabled young people share their reflections on how their experiences of gender and disability interact

Dante's Story

It feels like I have too many identities, too many access needs, like only one identity can be supported at a time.

When I am provided an interpreter and they ask me for my pronouns, I am relieved. It is always a worry about how I will be portrayed by a person who has a lot of power in that interaction.

I want to know that they respect my identity and understand how it is important for me as a deaf person to be represented in a way that does not feminise or masculinise my speech.

The rare times when I have had a non binary interpreter made me feel safe and was so assuring. I want interpreters to correct people if they misgender me or let me know, because I can't hear it but they can.

A social worker who was assisting me to escape gender based violence insisted several times that my last name was fake.

It is a name that reflects my Italian background, but she assumed that because I am non-binary I must have changed my surname.

I insisted it was not only my legal name but my family name from birth, but it took several times for her to believe me.

If you meet someone with a mix of intersectionalities that is new or surprising to you, you should assume that they are telling the truth.

Follow the normal processes, but don't interrogate us, and don't pry for information.

Names are very important to our identity. For trans and gender diverse folk it can be a very sensitive topic.

In the gender based violence context, a family name could also be a very sensitive topic.

It's something we might feel a lack of control over, so don't make a fuss. Be clear about what information you need, be clear about why you need it, and believe us when we tell you our names.

Elliot's Story

I've had staff talk to my girlfriend rather than me for years.

They see my wheelchair and assume she's my carer, and take the excuse to ignore me.

A couple of years ago I started taking testosterone, and now sometimes things switch: sometimes people will talk to her because she's able-bodied and ignore me, and sometimes people will talk to me because now they see me as a man and ignore her.

Finding anywhere that treats us both with respect is way harder than it should be.

John's Story

Growing up as a Disabled boy it was hard to fit in.

Guys in my class played footy every lunch-
I couldn't.

They'd shove each other around-
I couldn't.

They'd race down the hallways-
I couldn't.

I was taught that guys were supposed to be strong and tough, and my body wasn't.

In high school and TAFE I felt like I had to prove I was a real man, I couldn't be sensitive in any other way because my body already meant I wasn't strong enough.

The way I talked to women in my class, it wasn't good. I insulted people all the time, I said things just to make my mates laugh, and it didn't even work.

Coming to terms with being a Disabled man and what that means was hard, but seeing more ways to be a man, to be a decent guy, changed my life.

Aspen's Story

I feel de-gendered.

I know my gender identity, and it matters to me, but people see me as autistic and that eclipses everything else.

I'm tired of the ignorance.

I'm tired of the assumptions that we don't know ourselves.

I know me better than anyone else will ever know me, so listen to me.

Autonomy and Respect

Lived expertise

When we asked Disabled young people what makes an organisation trustworthy the most common answer was **Disabled people in positions of leadership.**

Privacy

34% **of focus group participants said they hesitated to seek support for fear of not having a say in who their information was shared with.**

Disabled Young People Said

"I had a support worker gossip about me, about what my body looked like. I had to rely on her in some of the most intimate parts of my life, and she betrayed that trust.

She even tried to brush it off, saying everyone talks about work to their colleagues.

But her work is my life, and I was nervous to work with a new support worker for a long time."

"There was a youth group I went to for a while, and I built some trust with one of the youth workers there. When things started getting worrying with my boyfriend, I thought about asking that youth worker for advice.

But she was a mandated reporter, and my boyfriend and I were both Black.

I worried about what would happen if she involved the police, and I wasn't ready for that. I found that, in a lot of places, I could get no help at all, or I could trust the entire system that I didn't understand yet: there's no middle ground when workers can't use their discretion to respect privacy."

"I think people imagine that if you say 'everyone who works near young people and Disabled people has to report all these bad things' then it stops anything from being missed.

And it works some of the time! Workers can't just brush it off, they have to report it.

But it pushes some of us further away, it stops some conversations from even happening, and we get missed completely."

To build trust and safety, Disabled young people emphasised the importance of:

- Clear information about who can access their details
- The ability to choose how to be contacted
- Space to talk to a safe, trusted person, while still getting to choose when to tell anyone else.

A Reflection on Covid Safety

Leo (they/them)

I think as disabled people we are used to having to put in all the work to try and access spaces, but it doesn't necessarily make it any easier. One of my biggest access needs is covid-safety.

Often this means doing everything I can do to reduce my risk of exposure, including wearing a mask. Ironically, this often competes with other access needs, resulting in headaches, foggy glasses and sensory issues.

I often find it difficult to raise my need for covid safety with others. Afterall, I understand that measures of covid safety can bring up painful feelings of the 2020-21 lockdowns. Ironically, people's experiences of the pandemic mean that most have a wealth of understanding about how to reduce exposure.

On the few occasions where organisers of events or gatherings have been covid-conscious it has been a massive relief.

It means I can take my mask off to avoid a headache or alleviate sensory issues which may have previously meant I would have to go home or not be able to return the following day (if event is across multiple days).

It has meant that I don't have to worry about counselling people's reactions to being reminded of their difficulties during lockdowns by a mask.

It has meant I don't have to explain my health to people when they ask why I am wearing a mask.

Making Change

Speak Up Often

Every organisation has work to do: there's policies that were written years ago and no one's looked at since.

There's funding limits.

There's never enough time.

There's a hundred different decisions we make day to day that shape the experiences of the people we interact with, and we can't focus on all of them at once.

We can start somewhere.

Pick one policy, and read through it. Think about the different communities you know access your service, and think through how it could impact as many of them as you can.

Find people from those communities who are already sharing experience, advice, and stories, and listen.

Consult with people. Notice which voices haven't been part of the conversation.

Read through this resource, and see if there's something in here you aren't doing yet.

Think about what it would take to implement it in your own work. Take some notes, and identify the first steps.

Look back over the feedback you've received. Read the complaints. Compare who comes through your doors to the communities around you and ask yourself if this place is representative.

Make that same comparison with your staff, and ask yourself if people from the communities you support are also being hired.

Look up your organisation's name online and see what's being said about you.

Pick something, and bring it up. Raise it at a staff meeting, write up a suggestion, and keep mentioning it.

Talk to a few coworkers, and present your suggestions as a group. As Disabled people, we often give feedback that goes ignored for a long time.

When you speak up, change won't happen immediately either.

But as workers, we're a couple of steps closer to the people making decisions within our organisations.

That makes our voices a little more powerful, and we can use that power to push for change.

Listen To Our Communities On Our Terms

There's immense variety in how people will describe the experiences you need to know about: we may say Disabled, or person with disability, or we might not label it at all.

We might be ready to fully acknowledge our lived experience as Disabled people, or we might be unsure, new to the topic, or have lived a life working around barriers with little support and without a framework to describe it.

We might speak languages that don't treat disability the same way English does, or that uses different categories. We might be isolated, we might have incredible support networks, we might be navigating family members who themselves have not yet come to terms with our disabilities.

"Information about what disability looks like for us mob is rarely communicated both to us and to others in our communities, health services, and to those in positions of power. They don't even understand what disability can mean and look like for us, how are we meant to tell them when we aren't given the language and power in the first place?"
-Kurin (he/him)

"My parents moved us to Australia when I was 11. I wasn't diagnosed with ADHD until I was 22. My parents always supported me as much as they could, but they didn't understand the barriers I was facing. I didn't even understand them! Finally getting diagnosed was a relief, because it came with so much information, but only in English. It's been hard to find anything to help my family understand me, and it's a lot of work to translate it myself."
-Yasmin (ey/eir)

Our experiences of violence and abuse can look a lot like our non-Disabled peers, but some experiences are more unique to us.

Take the time to listen to our whole stories; don't expect the language we use to always match the terminology in your policies or professional development courses.

"My parents took away my HRT (hormone replacement therapy) to try to pressure me into making the decisions they wanted. I was 19, but without any accessible public transport nearby I couldn't get to a doctor on my own to get a new prescription.

I was effectively trapped, relying on them for transport anywhere, and most buildings in my town weren't wheelchair accessible anyway."
-Alex (she/her)

"Often times, when trans people who are medically transitioning ask about things like medications, accommodations, etc., the answer they are met with is 'I don't know'.

'How will this medication interact with my hormones?'

'I don't know',

'Will I be able to access this gendered support service?'

'I don't know',

'How can I advocate for my right that I know what's best for me in my transition, how can I make you believe me?'

'I don't know'.

Time and time again, trans folk are left out of the research, left out of the textbooks, and left out of the discussion when regarding care."
-Kurin (he/him)

SOLIDARITY FOREVER

Notes

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