



OMBUDSPERSON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

ACCESSIBILITY PLAN

2023 - 2026



Our office is located on the traditional lands of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) People and ancestors and our work extends across the homelands of the First Nations within what we now call British Columbia. We honour the many territorial keepers of the lands and waters where we work.



CONTENTS

Message from the Ombudsperson . . .	2
Legislative Framework	3
Accessibility Statement	4
Our Accessibility Story	5
Our Guiding Principles	8
Our Engagement Process	10
Our Goals and Priorities	12
Evaluation and Monitoring	14

About the Office of the Ombudsperson

The Office of the Ombudsperson is an independent oversight office of the Legislature. It has a statutory mandate to receive and investigate complaints from the public when they believe they have been treated unfairly when receiving provincial and local public services. The office has jurisdiction over more than 1,000 provincial and local public bodies in British Columbia including provincial government ministries, local governments, health authorities and hospitals, schools and universities, ICBC, BC Hydro and WorkSafeBC. The office also has a statutory mandate to receive and investigate disclosures of wrongdoing in the workplace from current and former employees of specific public bodies including government ministries, Crown corporations and health authorities.



MESSAGE FROM THE OMBUDSPERSON

The creation of my office's first Accessibility Plan is a critically important step in our 40-year plus history of serving British Columbians who believe they have been treated unfairly when accessing provincial and local public services. The people who have come to us over these decades have been as diverse as the issues they raise. And while organizationally we welcome all those who come to us with empathy, respect, integrity and fairness – this is the first time we have explicitly articulated our commitments to accessibility. We take our responsibility to ensure we are serving the needs of people with disabilities very seriously. This plan sets out some clear actions in regard to our internal operations and our service to the public. And an important step in ensuring our office is a safe and welcoming place for both our staff and the public.

In our work, we know that people experience government services differently and there are a range of accessibility barriers that may be challenging to understand or recognize. Challenges getting information about government benefits, trying to access the physical spaces of public buildings or experiencing improperly discriminatory treatment, are some types of unfairness that we hear about from people with disabilities in our day to day work. This plan reminds us that our investigative work must continue to be attuned to the unique needs of individuals. Similarly, we must continue to hold public bodies to account for their own obligations to address barriers to accessibility.

This plan is a living document that will evolve as we gather feedback about where we're doing well in terms of accessibility and where we can do better. It builds on an interim plan we completed previously.

This plan will be an important piece of our planning framework for the office and the priorities and key actions we have identified are linked to our Strategic Plan, and are an important part of our work on diversity, equity and inclusion.

I'd like to thank our office's Accessibility Committee and our internal working group who continue to put so much thought and care into this critically important planning process. I am confident that British Columbians will be treated more fairly and equitably as a result.

Sincerely,

Jay Chalke
Ombudsperson
Province of British Columbia

This plan reminds us that our investigative work must continue to be attuned to the unique needs of individuals

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The *Accessible BC Act* came into force in June, 2021 with the goal of making BC a more accessible province for people with disabilities. The Office of the Ombudsperson is a “prescribed organization” under the Act as of September, 2023. As a result, we are required to take the following steps towards becoming an accessible organization:

1. Establishing a committee to assist us in identifying barriers to individuals in or interacting with our organization
2. Developing a plan to identify, remove and prevent barriers to individuals in or interacting with our organization, and reviewing and updating that plan at least once every three years
3. Establishing a process for receiving comments from the public on our accessibility plan and on barriers to individuals in or interacting with our organization

This first version of our Accessibility Plan is an initial step toward fulfilling our obligations under the Act.

The *Accessible BC Act* defines **disability** as “an inability to participate fully and equally in society as a result of the interaction of an impairment and a barrier.”

A **barrier** is, “anything that hinders the full and equal participation in society of a person with an impairment.”

An **impairment** is “a physical, sensory, mental, intellectual or cognitive impairment[s], whether permanent, temporary or episodic.”



ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The Office of the Ombudsperson envisions a barrier-free society that upholds the right of all community members to equitably access and benefit from public services. Our values of accountability, impartiality, and fairness commit us to being an organization that upholds the rights of people with disabilities while promoting accessibility, equity and inclusion in the delivery of public services. We recognize that barriers may arise in many different ways and peoples' experiences of barriers are affected by intersecting forms of discrimination. We strive to diminish the impact of organizational obstacles to equity and inclusion.

The Ombudsperson serves all people who may be impacted by public body actions and decisions in BC. In keeping with this wide-reaching mandate, our mission includes responding to the unique fairness concerns raised by people with disabilities and incorporating the perspective of people with disabilities throughout our decision-making processes. We strive for our workforce to reflect the public we serve and for our work to fairly represent the concerns of community members with disabilities.

OUR ACCESSIBILITY STORY

Since its creation in 1979, the Office of the Ombudsperson has helped to ensure the fair treatment of people across the province in the delivery of public services. A history of our office's work provides some clear examples of investigations in which our office has sought to uphold the rights of people with disabilities. In 1993, we reported on our investigation into the abuse of students who were deaf at [Jericho Hill School](#). In our 1994 report, *Listening*, we highlighted the importance of a people-centred mechanism for responding to complaints from people receiving services at Riverview Hospital. More recently, in 2019, we reported on the [failure of mental health facilities](#) to comply with procedural requirements for those who are being involuntarily admitted under the *Mental Health Act* and in 2022, we made recommendations in our report *Short-Changed* to address a gap in funding for caregivers of children with disabilities.*

While these are just a few examples of investigations that resulted in public reports, our individual complaint investigations regularly intersect with a range of accessibility issues from difficulty obtaining benefits and services to challenges receiving or understanding reasons for decisions and information. Accessibility is a central standard when we educate and train public bodies in how to be more fair.

We have begun work on accessibility in our workspace, as well, including conducting an accessibility audit of our building, updating our website to comply with accessibility guidelines and considering accessibility in our policy development.



* All of our reports can be found on our website at <https://bcombudsperson.ca/investigative-reports/>



Nearly 1 in 4 British Columbians over the age of 15 live with a disability.

Many more will experience a disabling condition at some stage in life. These conditions can be visible or invisible and involve impairments to a broad range of capacities, including those related to mobility, sensation, and cognition. Impairments can be physical, intellectual, or mental, and are accompanied a range of experiences on individual lives.

Throughout this report we use the term “people with disabilities” to refer to people whose ability to participate in society is affected by the interaction of an impairment and a barrier. We acknowledge that some individuals may use different language to describe their identity and lived experience. We have used this language as it aligns with the terminology used in the *Accessible BC Act*. At the same time, we recognize that the disability community is diverse and that peoples’ experience of disability is affected by intersecting forms of discrimination. We follow the Act in taking an inclusive approach to defining disability, acknowledging this diversity as the starting point for developing a plan that seeks to improve accessibility for all people with disabilities.

As an organization, we further acknowledge how institutional design constructs the experience of individual barriers. A speech or hearing impairment becomes a barrier to service when few opportunities for communication are provided. By contrast, a mobility impairment may have a negligible impact on accessibility if a space has been designed to accommodate. We acknowledge that there are many other barriers to accessing our organization – environmental, attitudinal, those resulting from policies or practices, communications or technological.

We are committed to identifying the ways our organization can reduce or eliminate the impact of barriers experienced by prospective employees, employees, the public and others who are connected with our office. This commitment involves examining how our physical and digital space is constructed, how we communicate with the public, how opportunities for employment are made available, how we train employees, and many other aspects of our organization.



OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Our plan is guided by the principles in the *Accessible BC Act*. We have considered what these principles mean in relation to our mandate.



INCLUSION:

In carrying out our mandate, we aim to promote full participation of people with disabilities in society, including in their interactions with our office.

Internally, we aim to remove barriers for all people with disabilities who interact with our office in a professional capacity, including staff and contractors.



ADAPTABILITY:

We will continue to change and adapt our services and our workplace to meet the needs of people with disabilities. We will regularly review new technology and services that may become available and update our policies and practices to support accessibility of our office.

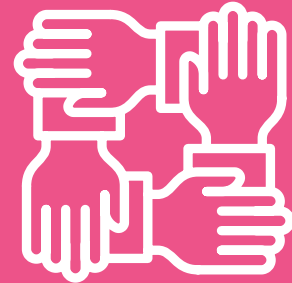


DIVERSITY:

We recognize the diversity of disabilities experienced by staff and individuals who access our office and we commit to applying an intersectional lens to understand the barriers people may face. There is no “one size fits all approach” to accessibility. We will consider the individual needs of people in delivering our services and in supporting those who interact with us in a professional capacity, including staff.

COLLABORATION:

We will work with people with disabilities, including staff, community members, and other organizations to identify, prevent and remove barriers to accessibility and to achieve the goals set out in this plan. We will look for opportunities to share and leverage resources to achieve better outcomes.



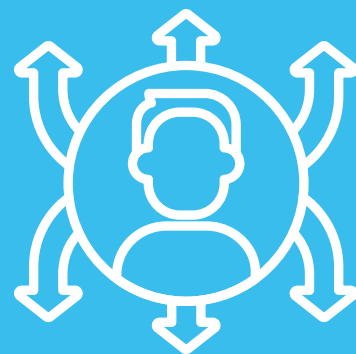
SELF-DETERMINATION:

We recognize the right of people with disabilities to make their own decisions about their lives. We also recognize that states have a particular obligation to address the rights of Indigenous people with disabilities, as set out in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, and that this is grounded in self-determination. We strive for all our office's interactions with people with disabilities to be informed by respect for self-determination.



UNIVERSAL DESIGN:

We aim to make evidence-informed decisions, supported by subject matter expertise where required, to improve the accessibility of our office and the services we provide for as many people as possible by identifying, preventing and removing barriers.



OUR ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The *Accessible BC Act* requires that we seek feedback on our Accessibility Plan from our Accessibility Committee. It also requires that we create a way for the public to provide feedback. We also intend to gather input and feedback from staff and other key partners.

Public feedback

We will receive feedback from the public on the barriers individuals experience within or when interacting with our office as well as on this plan. We intend to do this through existing feedback mechanisms, such as our website, our complaints process, our survey-based approaches to performance measurement and reporting, and ongoing consultations on our Indigenous Communities Services Plan (ICSP).

In 2021/22, we surveyed the public with the intent of establishing baseline data on awareness and perceptions to inform the development of targets for future years. In 2022/23, we surveyed the public authorities under our jurisdiction, and in 2023/24, we intend to survey people who have brought complaints to our office.

As we continue with this approach, we will integrate opportunities for the public to provide feedback on our accessibility plan and barriers to accessibility in service delivery. As part of our outreach plan, we will engage with people with disabilities and community-serving organizations. In addition, we will work to engage key Indigenous partners through our ICSP process and through direct outreach to Indigenous partners working on accessibility. We will take

steps to ensure that this consultation is itself accessible so as to maximize the involvement of people with lived experience in future versions of our plan.

Personal information collected through the engagement processes described above will be maintained confidentially and used only for the purposes set out in the *Accessible BC Act*, including identifying accessibility barriers and updating this accessibility plan. Any feedback received will not negatively impact a person's access to services provided by our office.

Staff consultation

In addition to the Accessibility Committee, we convened an internal staff working group to collaborate on the development, of our office's accessibility plan, including staff engagement.

Our intention is to ensure that staff engagement on accessibility aligns with other engagement opportunities within the office. We also intend to provide a range of options for staff input to increase accessibility and safety and to resist a one-size-fits-all approach.

As an initial step, we have communicated with staff about the accessibility plan, and invited staff to engage on topics relating to the plan, to seek input on priorities. We will prioritize alignment with the ongoing development of our diversity, equity and inclusion work and seek to integrate accessibility and bring that forward in future staff consultations on our DEI approach. Staff input from these early consultations will help identify next steps including training resources and support.



Our Accessibility Committee

Our office has created a joint Accessibility Committee with membership from our office and other independent offices of the Legislature – the Office of the Auditor General, Representative for Children and Youth, Police Complaint Commissioner, Merit Commissioner, Human Rights Commissioner and Information and Privacy Commissioner. The committee will advise us on how to identify, prevent and remove accessibility barriers for the public, employees and others who work with our office

We received and incorporated feedback from our Accessibility Committee into our plan. We will consult with the Committee on an ongoing basis as the goals in the plan are implemented and as the plan continues to develop.



OUR GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Our strategic goals into 2026 are the framework within which we will embed our accessibility priorities and key actions. The Accessibility Plan is also a key component of our office's approach to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Our accessibility goals and activities will be continually refined via public feedback we receive. As a starting point we will focus on key activities that have been identified through our day to day work.

Accessibility goal 1 – Deepen our connections with a diverse public

Our office aims to deepen our connections with British Columbians with disabilities. People with disabilities who may need our services – to make a complaint of unfairness, or a disclosure of wrongdoing – can experience a range of barriers in accessing our office, including barriers related to our communications practices and technologies. We aim to use clear, inclusive and accessible language, formats and approaches in our communications, outreach and reporting, so that people with disabilities know about and are able to access our services when needed.

Accessibility Priorities:

1.1 Outreach and engagement to develop a more robust understanding: Through implementation of our outreach plan, we will engage with members of the disability community and community-

serving organizations to understand where barriers to accessing our services exist. We will combine this feedback with input from people who have used our services, public authorities and our staff to identify opportunities for improvement.

1.2 Improve the accessibility of our website: we will continue to implement recommendations from a 2022 accessibility audit of our website, with the aim of ensuring compliance with WCAG 2.1 standards. This means that we will embed accessibility considerations throughout our website, including in our reports and webforms.

1.3 Collect and analyse data to inform our service delivery: in consultation with the disability community, we will begin collecting socio-demographic data about people who make complaints to our office to better understand how well our office is serving people with disabilities.

1.4 Apply best practices in accessible communications: we will develop a revised writing and style guide and accessibility guidelines for email communications to support written communications that are clear, accessible and consider the needs of the intended audience.

Accessibility goal 2 – Enhance and modernize our services to people with disabilities

We want to provide fair, high quality and accessible services when people with disabilities seek our assistance. This means working towards low barrier, safe and accessible services.

Accessibility Priorities:

2.1 Provide ongoing training to staff: we will support staff in providing equitable service to people with disabilities by offering ongoing training, information and resources to increase their knowledge and understanding. We will ensure that this includes training on intersectional dimensions of disability so that staff are supported and prepared to take an intersectional approach in their work.

2.2 Apply an accessibility lens to policy development to support equitable service delivery: consistent with our commitment to apply GBA+ to all our policy development, our policy framework will include accessibility as a key principle. We will integrate accessibility into all our policies so that we can better serve a diverse public.

2.3 Ensure accessibility of in-person meetings and events:

- We are available to meet with the public at our offices in Victoria. We will work with the other offices of the legislature with which we share our Victoria office accommodation to implement priority recommendations from a building accessibility audit in the publicly-accessible spaces in our building.
- When conducting community complaints clinics or other public in-person engagement we will ensure those spaces are accessible to all.

Accessibility goal 3 – Connect accessibility and reconciliation through an intersectional and distinctions-based approach

We seek collaborative engagement with Indigenous organizations, leaders, and individuals working on accessibility with a goal of providing

culturally safe and accessible services for Indigenous people with disabilities.

Accessibility Priorities:

3.1 Engage with Indigenous organizations, leaders and individuals: we will initiate outreach to and invite engagement with Indigenous partners working on accessibility to identify accessibility barriers and priorities for improvement.

Accessibility goal 4 – Increase fairness in public administration for people with disabilities

We aim for our work to result in meaningful and demonstrable improvements in government programs and services for people with disabilities.

Accessibility Priorities:

4.1 Identify accessibility and inclusion as components of fairness:

- In our investigations into the actions and decisions of local and provincial public bodies, we will apply an intersectional lens to identify and address systemic inequity and disproportionate impacts for people with disabilities, and make meaningful recommendations for change.
- In our training and consultation work with public bodies, we will work to increase their awareness of accessibility and inclusion as key components of fairness.

4.2 Understand our impact: through improved tracking of settlements and recommendations we make to public bodies, we will better understand the impact of our work for people with disabilities in BC.

Accessibility goal 5 – Be an inclusive, supportive and engaged workplace

We seek to create a culture of accessibility and inclusion for staff with disabilities, through policies and practices that remove barriers to recruiting, training, promoting and retaining employees with disabilities. We also aim to remove barriers to full participation of contractors with disabilities and others working with our office in a professional capacity.

Accessibility Priorities:

5.1 Review our policies and practices: we will apply a GBA+ lens to our existing and future human resources policies, including our work arrangements policy, to ensure that they support recruiting and retaining employees with disabilities.

5.2 Improve the accessibility of our workplace: we will work to implement priority actions from an accessibility audit of our building to improve the accessibility of our workplace for employees and contractors with disabilities. We will also promote the use of accessible technology and software to remove barriers to collaboration and participation experienced by employees with disabilities, whether they are working in-office or remotely.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Accountability for how we are implementing the actions in our plan is critically important. We will report publicly on an annual basis on our progress in meeting the goals in this plan and on our consultation and engagement processes.

Our evaluation of the goals and priorities in our Accessibility Plan will be built into our outcome-based Performance Measurement Framework. This framework relies on ongoing surveys of the public who use our services, the public bodies under our jurisdiction and the general public. Questions directly related to how we are doing at meeting our accessibility goals will be embedded into this process. Qualitative feedback through other mechanisms such as our continuous improvement framework will also be an integral part of identifying where our services need to be strengthened for British Columbians living with disabilities. Finally, we will monitor and evaluate the impact of our actions related to creating an accessible and inclusive workplace through the Workplace Environment Survey and ongoing opportunities for staff engagement.



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