

The background of the page is a grayscale photograph. It shows a dense forest of tall, thin trees, likely birches, with bare branches. In the lower portion of the image, there is a wooden structure, possibly a sign or a small building, with a gabled roof. The word "SMITHERS" is written in large, white, capital letters on the side of the structure. Above the word is a small circular logo featuring a gear or a similar design. The structure is built with stone or concrete blocks at its base.

Town of Smithers Accessibility Plan

Baseline Report



Submitted on: March 3, 2023

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We acknowledge that the Town of Smithers Accessibility Plan is being conducted on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Witsuwit'en Nation.

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1. What's this Project About?

The Town of Smithers is working with the Smithers Accessibility Advisory Committee and local consultants to develop an Accessibility Plan by September 1, 2023. The information contained in this Baseline Report provides a background summary and foundation for the Smithers Accessibility Plan to build upon.

Project Overview

The Town of Smithers is working towards improving the quality of life for residents of all ages and abilities by completing an Accessibility Plan.

The purpose of the Smithers Accessibility Plan is to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to individuals participating in community life or employed by the Town of Smithers.

The plan will provide a roadmap of ways the Town can move towards being a more inclusive and accessible place to live and work. It will strive to build on the ongoing efforts by the Town and support community partners in finding creative ways to decrease barriers and increase accessibility in the community.

In a more accessible Smithers...



All people can take part in community life



Everyone benefits, especially people with disabling conditions



Community inclusion & independence improves

Understanding Key Words

When we think and plan for accessibility there are a few key words to understand. These words help to better “frame” the discussion and understand what is meant when we talk about accessibility.

Accessibility

- Everyone can take part in community life through work, play and other daily activities.
- Is important for everyone, especially people with disabling conditions.
- Is about removing barriers, increasing inclusion, and independence for everyone.

Barrier

Anything that hinders the full and equal participation in society of a person with an impairment. Barriers can be caused by environments, attitudes, practices, policies, information, communications, or technologies and affected by intersecting forms of discrimination.

Disabling Conditions

Any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation — whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.

Impairment

Includes a physical, sensory, mental, intellectual, or cognitive impairment, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic.

Meaningful Access

- Meeting the real accessibility needs of all users of a site.
- Provides a holistic experience, not just the individual access features.
- Goes beyond building codes’ minimum requirements.
- Considers how people of all abilities interact with the environment.

Legislative Context

Accessibility is a human right recognized by the *Accessible Canada Act*, *Canadian Human Rights Act*, Canadian Charter of Rights & Freedom, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In BC, the *Accessible BC Act* is a new provincial law, passed in 2021, that establishes a legal framework to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in BC by enabling the development of accessibility standards and introducing new accessibility requirements for government and prescribed organizations.

Part 3 of the *Accessible BC Act* requires local governments, in addition to over 750 Prescribed Organizations listed in the regulation, to meet certain requirements by September 1, 2023. These requirements are to establish a committee, develop a plan, and create a feedback mechanism.

Requirements for the Smithers Accessibility Plan:

- ☒ Outline how the Town of Smithers will identify, remove, and prevent barriers to people in the organization or interacting with it.
- ☒ Be reviewed and updated at least once every 3 years.
- ☒ Consider principles of inclusion, adaptability, diversity, collaboration, self-determination, and universal design.
- ☒ Consult with its accessibility committee in developing the plan.
- ☒ Establish a process for receiving feedback from the public on the Town's accessibility and barriers. In updating their plan, the Town must also consider comments received through its public feedback mechanism.

2. Why Plan for Accessibility?

Planning for accessibility is an essential step to better understanding the different barriers people may experience in community life and identifying actions towards being a more inclusive community.

Statistics available at the national and community level helps create an appreciation of the many people who have a disability, the family and friends who provide care and support and anticipated community needs associated with an aging population.

1 in 5 Canadians identify as having a disability

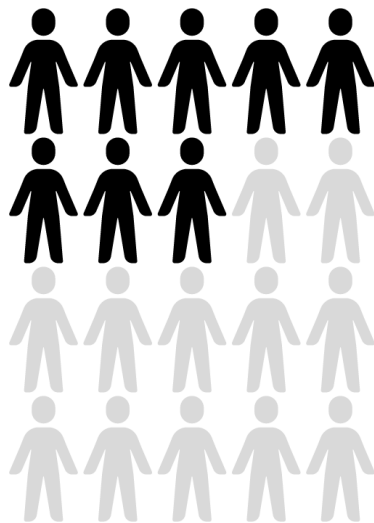
According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability, 22% or one in five Canadians aged 15 years and over identify as having a disability, and it expected actual numbers are likely higher¹. Key findings from this study include

- Over two-thirds of people with disabilities have at **least two or more disability** types. Disabilities related to pain, flexibility, mobility, and mental health are the most common types.
- Among youth (aged 15 to 24 years) with disabilities, 60% have a **mental health-related** disability.
- People with disabilities were **less likely to be employed** (59%) than those without disabilities (80%). Among those with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years who were not employed and not currently in school, two in five (39%) had **potential to work**.
- People with more severe disabilities (28%) aged 25 to 64 years were more likely to be **living in poverty** than those without disabilities or with milder disabilities.

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>

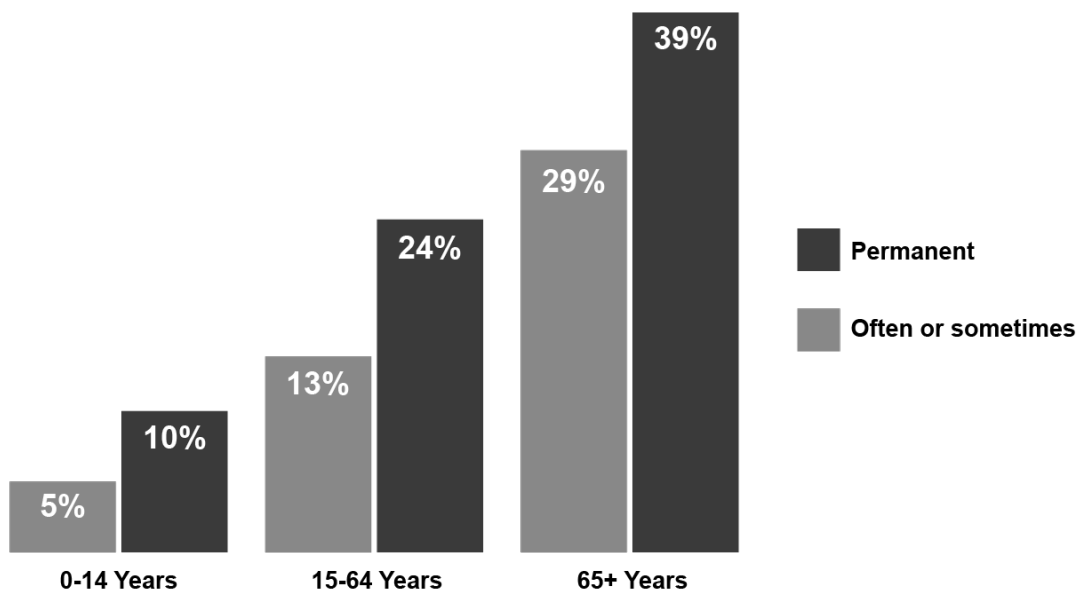
14% of Smithers residents report having a permanent disability

Custom data from the 2016 Census showed there were 750 residents (14% of the total population) living in Smithers who reported a permanent disability and 1,235 residents (23% of the total population) who reported episodic challenges. Custom census data is not yet available for 2021.



37% of Smithers residents have a disability, whether permanent or often/sometimes.

Figure 2. Smithers Residents with a Disability or Health/Activity Limitations by Age

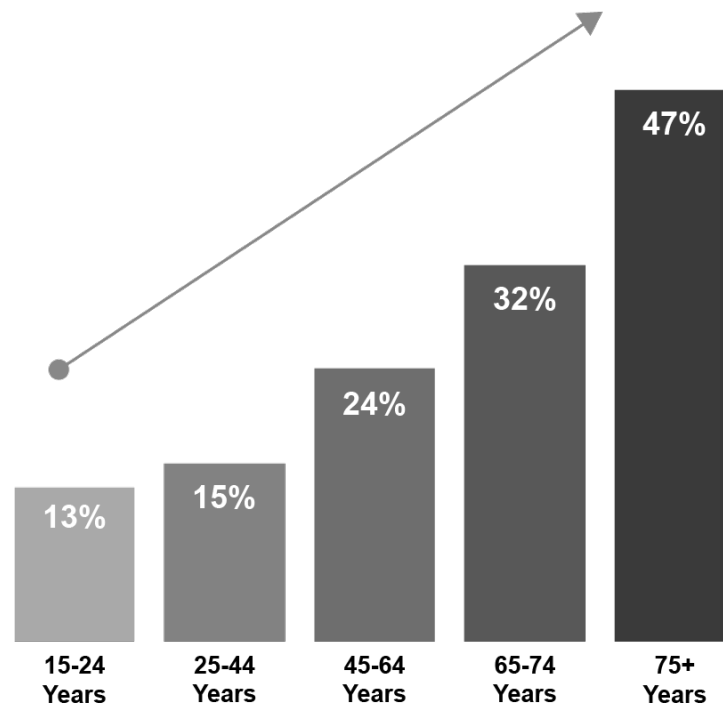


Source: Smithers 2016 Custom Census Data

Disability increases with age

From the 2017 Canada Survey on Disability, disability rates rise as older adults age, in addition to the likelihood of having multiple disability types. Figure 2 illustrates this increase.

Figure 2. Canada Disability Rates by Age Groups



Source: 2017 Canada Survey on Disability

1 in 4 Canadians provide support or care

According to the 2018 General Social Survey - Caregiving and Receiving, many people provide care or help care for family members or friends with a disability. Key findings from this study include²:

² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2020001/article/00001-eng.pdf?st=wYK33cQa>

- 25% of Canadians aged 15 and older said that, in the past year, they had cared for or helped someone who had a long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability, or problems related to aging.
- Almost half (45%) of caregivers received help from a spouse or partner who modified their life or work arrangements to help, 43% received help from their children, and 39% received help from extended family members.
- Unmet caregiving support needs were highest for those providing care to their children, as approximately 50% of caregivers in this situation reported that they had unmet support needs, compared with 38% for those caring for their partners or spouses, and less than 20% for those providing care to grandparents, or to friends, neighbours, or co-workers.
- Unmet caregiving support needs are associated with lower life satisfaction, more daily stress, and poorer self-reported mental health.

The number of older Smithers residents has almost doubled in the last 20 years

Over the last 20 years, the population of Smithers residents aged 65 years and older increased by 88% from 525 people (2001) to 985 people (2021). The Smithers Housing Needs Report projects this trend to continue, by an additional 286 individuals aged 65 years and older between 2021 and 2026.

A larger percentage of the Smithers population are now over 65 years of age. In the last 20 years the percentage of residents aged 65 years and older almost doubled, increasing from 9.6% in 2001 to 18.3% in 2021. Over the same period (01'-21'), the Smithers total population has decreased by -0.4%. The median age of Smithers residents continues to rise from 33.3 years in 2001 to 39.6 years in 2021.

Because older adults are more likely to have disabilities than younger people, the number of Smithers residents with disabilities, and family and friends who support them, are likely to increase.

3. What Achievements Have Been Made?

Over the last 10 years the Town of Smithers has taken steps to improve accessibility and overall community inclusion through planning, policy, and upgrades to facilities and infrastructure. This section summarizes these achievements.

Town Policy, Plans & Procedures

1. Updated **Town of Smithers Official Community Plan (2022)**. The OCP is the overarching policy document used to guide Town decisions related to growth and development. Accessibility is identified within the plan's guiding principles related to social equity and in numerous policies. See Appendix A for OCP excerpts.
2. The **Smithers Age-Friendly Assessment and Action Plan (2016)** includes a detailed accessibility audit, recommendations, and priorities to guide the Town towards becoming more inclusive and barrier free. The assessment and action plan focuses on outdoors spaces, sidewalks, trails, municipal buildings, recreation infrastructure as well as Town policy, planning, marketing, and the Town's website. The plan continues to be referenced by the Town of Smithers and community organizations.
3. The **Smithers Active Transportation Plan (2019)** is a visionary document that includes a suite of strategies that integrate accessible, multiuse, pedestrian, and cycling improvements to increase active transportation for Smithers residents of all ages and abilities. Accessibility is a core theme throughout the document, referenced in the vision, goals, strategic areas, and actions. Examples of actions include:

Enhance winter maintenance for active transportation by amending the Town's Snow & Ice Control Policy to clarify priority routes and schedule as well as to improve transparency of snow and ice control process.

Improve safety and accessibility of all highway intersections, including Main Street / Highway 16. Safety improvements at all Highway 16 crossings (one of the plan's Five Big Moves).

4. The **Smithers Community Strategy and Plan on Poverty (2022)** sets a strategic roadmap for the Town to consider when making decisions on areas

linked to poverty within the community. The plan identifies the accessibility of the physical environment as a critical consideration both in terms of equity and inclusion. Key actions items related to accessibility identified in the plan are:

Need to address issues of language accessibility, including potential barriers to access for individuals who face literacy challenges as well as those who are non-English speakers.

Focus on the physical accessibility of community spaces including incorporating principles of universal design and in adopting a “whole journey approach” when designing neighbourhoods or planning community spaces and facilities.

Create opportunities for passive recreation including the provision of benches and seating for seniors and people with disabilities as well as the provision of designated accessible parking for those with mobility related challenges.

Work with neighbouring jurisdictions and other levels of government to expand the range of alternative transportation choices available to low-income families and individuals who can no longer afford to drive as well as low-income seniors and people with disabilities who do not drive and/or who do not own a vehicle.

5. Plans for a **new library and art gallery** were created in 2018 for a new facility that exceeds current building code and meets accessibility standards as the current library has been at its location since 1967. The library/gallery project was dissolved in 2022 and new Library funding options are currently being looked at.
6. “Accessibility Considerations” has been added to all **Reports to Council** in efforts to add an accessibility lens and to keep accessibility on the forefront of decision-making.
7. The active **Advisory Planning Commission** (Bylaw No. 1777) includes senior representation on the Commission.
8. The Town works in partnership with **Access Smithers**, a local volunteer group whose purpose is to create a livable, age-friendly, universally designed, inclusive

community that benefits all residents and visitors. One Smithers Council representative participate in Access Smithers regular monthly meetings.

9. Incorporated recommendations from the 2016 Age-Friendly Assessment and Action Plan into the **Facilities Maintenance Plan** and the **Sidewalk Capital Upgrades Program**.
10. Town held Respectful Workplace Training in October of 2021.
11. Budget for a new **Town Parks and Recreation Master Plan** is included in the Town's 2023 Financial Plan. This is an opportunity to incorporate an accessibility lens into planning.
12. As recommended by the Advisory Planning Commission, in 2020 the Town modified the **evaluation process** for identifying winners under the Awards of Excellence Program, by adding 'accessibility' as the sixth criteria.
13. Adopted **Multi-Unit Rental Housing Policy**, which established 'accessibility' as one of the several scoring criteria.

Town Buildings

14. Installed accessibility ramps at the **Old Church** and a LOOP system in Smithers **Council Chambers**.
15. **Smithers Public Library** installed bright exit signage, updated signage, tilted bathroom mirror, and added one designated parking space.
16. New **arena** features an accessible washroom with a wide entrance, insulated pipes under the sink to protect the legs/laps of people using the sink. Also has an indoor walking surface for public use (free of charge) during normal hours. 2018 additions were made to make Public Skate Programs more accessible for skaters and spectators, such as upgrades to the skate equipment room, wood seating secured to the metal bleachers and a water fountain installed in the lobby.
17. New **airport** expansion completed that included many accessible upgrades.

Outdoor Spaces

18. New accessible **washrooms** at the fall fairgrounds, installed seasonal accessible portable washroom at Bovill Square, and installed a permanent, accessible public washroom (the Portland Loo) in downtown Smithers.
19. Improvements to the front of **Central Park Building** (plaza) with a level park area, additional benches, and the removed trees for visible sight lines. The project was led by the Central Park Building Society and supported by the Town of Smithers.
20. In partnership with Access Smithers, Ambleside developer, BV Naturalists, improved **Willowvale Marsh trail** system with slopes and grades to help persons with mobility challenges. Also provided an accessible picnic table and five benches, and access to Naturalist “bat” and “bird identification” signs.
21. In response to Access Smithers, the Town developed an **accessible small public park area** in the Ambleside development on top of the hillside that overlooks the marsh. It is the only publicly accessible way to view the marsh from the subdivision. Town developed a sidewalk curb cut, short trail, and concrete pad to place an accessible bench in the near future.
22. Accessibility improvements to the **Riverside Park** trail portion of the Perimeter Trail (2022).
23. 2022 Downtown **Landscaping Revitalization** project completed along Main Street, including placement of new benches and garbage receptacles.

Programs

24. Accessible **recreation** programming, such as registering participants in Choose to Move (2018), a free activity coaching program designed for seniors in the community. Choose to Move is a program in partnership with BC Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA) and BC Institute of Technology (BCIT) and is funded completely by BCRPA for those aged 60+.
25. **Registered** participants in Supporting Individuals with Autism in Sport & Recreation Workshop (2017).

26. Worked with Access Smithers, successfully **lobbied** Northern Development Initiative Trust to change its façade improvement grant to include accessibility in 2018.

Transportation & Mobility

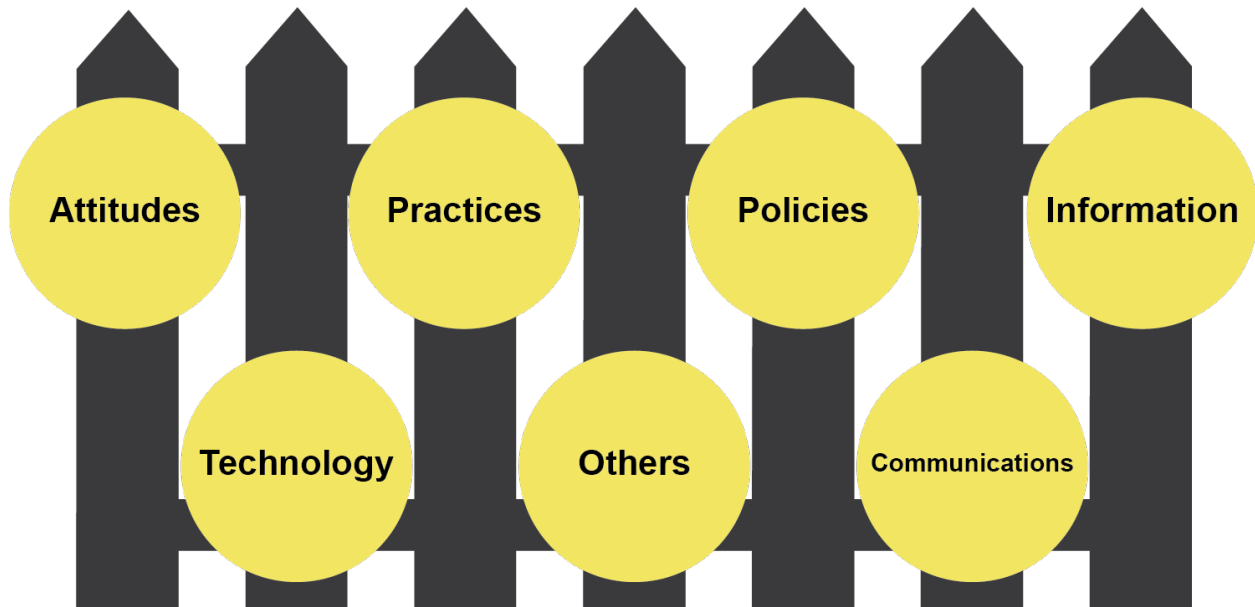
27. New 47-stall public **parking lots** developed on Second Avenue, including accessible spaces.
28. Worked with the Ministry of Transportation & Infrastructure and Access Smithers on Main Street & King Street **Highway 16 crossing improvements** for longer crossing time and scooter/bike activated buttons.
29. Increase the **budgets** for sidewalk construction by doubling the Town's budget over the last 5 years. There is an ongoing accessible sidewalk letdown program (\$50,000 annual budget) and sidewalk capital upgrade program (\$75,000 annual budget).
30. Funding **partner** of the Smithers and District Transit Service, operated by Smithers Community Services Association (since 1992). This is both a fixed route and door-to-door service.
31. Became a **member** of the new Regional Transit Committee for Highway 16 service in 2017.

4. Are There Knowledge Gaps?

The Town has made progress with policy, planning, identifying, and addressing barriers associated with environmental (physical) accessibility. This is important, as many of the recommendations, including findings from the accessibility audit completed as part of the Smithers Age-Friendly Assessment & Action Plan, are still relevant today.

The Smithers Accessibility Plan will seek to build on this work by broadening the scope from environmental barriers to include other types of accessibility barriers, both visible and non-visible.

Examples of Accessibility Barriers to be Explored



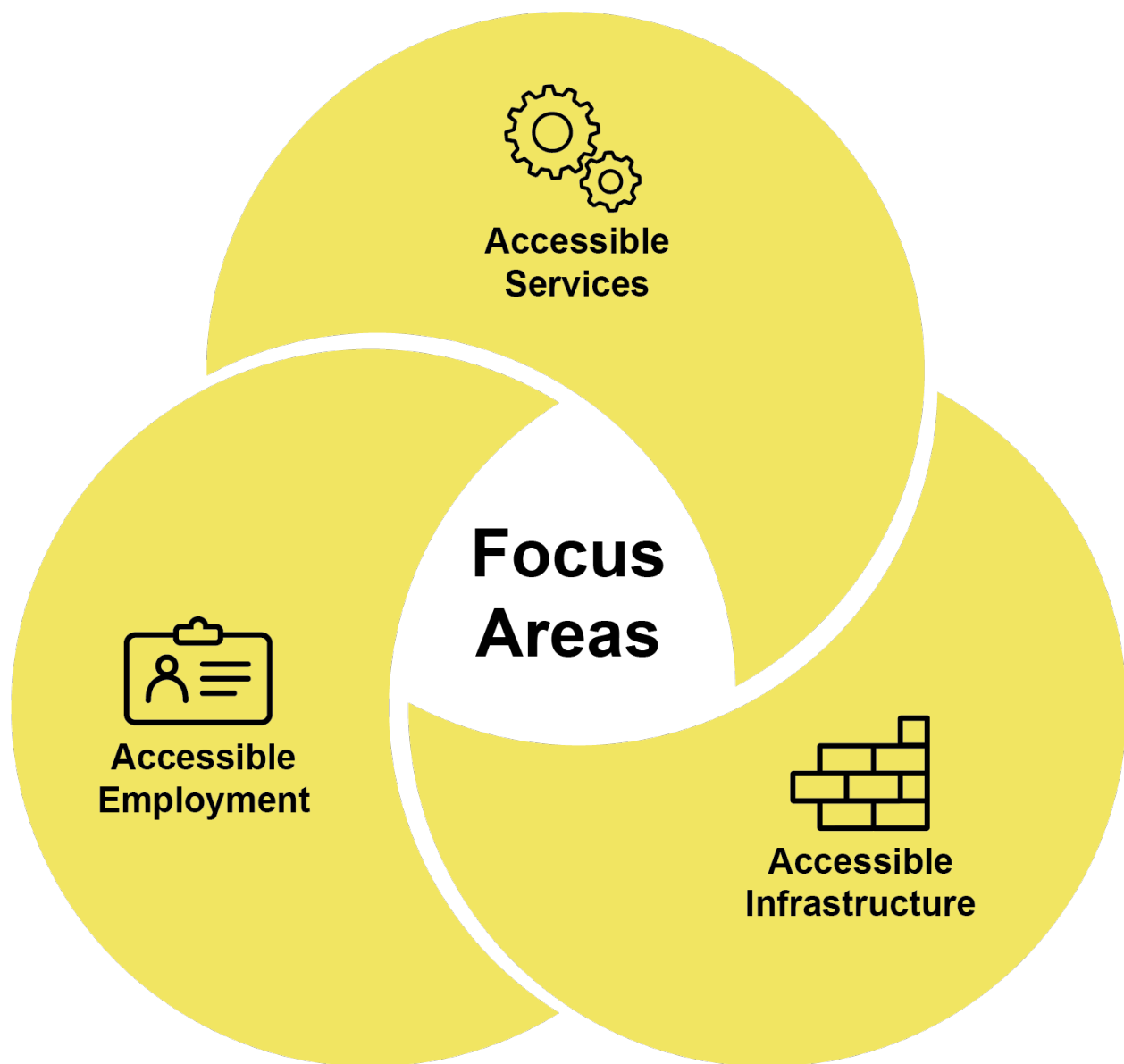
Attitudes	How we think, act, and accept a person with a disabling condition, including inherited culture and belief systems.
Practices	What can be done to support and allow all people, regardless of their limitations, equal opportunities to be involved.
Policies	Establishing clear guidelines and definition on the Towns' commitment to implement access and provide inclusive environments (built, natural) in all areas of its' infrastructure including

transportation, housing, employment, recreation, and education.

Information	Integrating accessible formats and designs in all ways of information sharing and to be reflected in all Town and community communications.
Communications	As above – including through technological, digital/electronic and hard copy formats.
Technologies	Adapted to allow screen readers and audio formats, both for customers contacting the Town and to accommodate potential employees/consultants who require technological modifications to be able to participate equally.
Other Barriers	As identified through the planning process and through integrating knowledge gleaned by the community response process.

5. What Will the Plan Focus On?

The Smithers Accessibility Plan will be a flexible and evolving document that responds to barriers identified by the Smithers Accessibility Advisory Committee, broader community, and current Town priorities. As a starting point for discussion, the following broad categories or focus areas will be used to help guide discussions on barriers and opportunities.





ACCESSIBLE SERVICES

This focus area explores Town and Library services, such as:

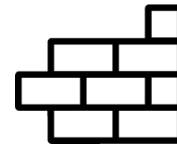
- Service delivery (i.e., submitting a service request, enrolling in recreation programs)
- Communications (i.e., Town news, notices, and social media)
- Information (i.e., agendas, report, studies, bylaw information)
- Engagement (i.e., Participating in public engagement meetings)



ACCESSIBLE EMPLOYMENT

This focus area explores Town and Library employment, such as:

- Town and Smithers Public Library workspaces
- Hiring and training
- Procurement processes



ACCESSIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE

This focus area will explore Town infrastructure, such as:

- Town buildings (i.e., Town Hall, Smithers Public Library)
- Public spaces (i.e., parks, playgrounds, trails, gathering areas)
- Transportation infrastructure (i.e., sidewalks, transportation options, parking)

Appendix A: OCP Excerpts

Section 4.2.1 (OCP Guiding Principles) as follows:

3) Foster a Safe and Healthy Community. Smithers is committed to creating a community that is accessible to all. The Town will work to provide opportunity for active lifestyle through access to parks, recreational facilities, and the natural environment.

4) Create an Accessible Smithers. As a town for all seasons, Smithers considers and plans to maximize accessibility for people of all ages and abilities throughout the seasons. The Town works to effectively address the impacts of weather and encourages development, health, and transportation systems that are safe and accessible.

OCP objectives and policies that reference accessibility.

5.3 Transportation:

Policy 3: Continue to invest in safe and accessible active transportation infrastructure on key community routes.

Policy 4: Work with the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako to explore increased Transit services and schedules.

7.2 Housing Diversity & Flexibility:

Objective: To increase the mix of housing types, tenures, and densities to meet the diverse community housing needs of existing and future residents.

Policy 4: Support proposals for a wide range of supportive housing, including the co-location for on-site supports.

Policy 11: Encourage residential design to meet Universal Design standards and best practices.

9.5 Inclusion & Accessibility:

Objective: Strive to be a more inclusive & accessible community for all ages & abilities.

Policy 2: Support age-friendly and inclusive participation in all aspects of civic life, including communications, diversity of programming and accessible indoor and outdoor spaces.

Policy 3: Work to ensure that public spaces in the Town are accessible and safe for all.

Policy 4: Continue to work on implementing the Town of Smithers Age-Friendly Action Plan and engage with community groups like Access Smithers on Town initiatives.

Policy 5: Encourage development and redevelopment to incorporate principals of Universal Design.

Policy 6: Support land uses, transportation routes, community facilities, public spaces, and parks to meet the needs of all ages and abilities.

10.2 Parks & Open Spaces

Objective: To provide a system of accessible, safe, and connected parks and natural open space areas.

Policy 1: Consider users of all abilities and ages when planning or upgrading new parks and open space areas to maximize accessibility.

10.3 Recreation

Objective: To provide recreation opportunities for residents and visitors of all ages, abilities, and income levels.

Policy 6: All new or upgraded facilities in Smithers shall be designed to encourage active participation, accessible recreation, and inclusive programming for a diverse population. Opportunities for adaptive and flexible design of recreation facilities should be explored.

Policy 7: Locate new recreation opportunities so they are easily and safely accessible from surrounding neighbourhoods by walking, cycling and transit (where possible).

12.4 Parking

Objective: To ensure there is adequate and accessible parking for residents and visitors.

Policy 3: Designate accessible on-street parking spaces and end of trip biking facilities in key locations around Smithers.

15.4 Public Engagement & Consultation

Policy 5: Ensure that engagement opportunities are accessible to different populations in the community, including those that are not connected digitally.