

# Accessibility Planning Engagement Summary



# Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	2
Accessibility Plan.....	3
Timeline .....	3
This Summary .....	3
<i>What We Did</i> .....	4
Purpose .....	4
Promotions .....	4
Participants .....	4
Compensation & Accommodations .....	5
Limitations .....	5
<i>Themes</i> .....	5
Key Takeaways.....	6
Awareness & Education .....	6
Goods & Services .....	8
Information & Communications .....	10
Transportation .....	11
Employment.....	13
The Built Environment .....	14
Next Steps.....	17

## Introduction

### Accessibility Plan

UPLAND Planning + Design and RHAD Architects are working with the Town of Antigonish and the Town's Accessibility Committee to develop a Municipal Accessibility Plan for our community. In line with Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act, this process is intended to remove and prevent barriers that restrict people with disabilities from fully participating in society. The Plan will recognize the diversity among people with disabilities and aim to improve the independence and wellbeing of residents, community members, and visitors with disabilities.

Accessibility is a human right, as well as an important part of diversity and inclusion work. The aim of the Town of Antigonish's upcoming Accessibility Plan is to create a Town that is safe for community members and visitors living with disabilities, prioritizing a dignified and comfortable experience for everyone.

This process derives its principles for social justice from Nova Scotia's Access by Design, which include:

- Respect for difference
- Dignity
- Independence & autonomy
- Equitable access & opportunity
- Non-discrimination
- Full participation & inclusion in society.

To learn more about the Accessibility Plan and the legal and legislative context of accessibility, visit <https://www.townofantigonish.ca/accessibility-plan.html>.

### Timeline

The planning process for this Accessibility Plan began in November, 2020, and the first round of stakeholder engagement took place in January, 2021. Through these conversations, community members offered feedback which prompted the us to revise the process, including additional community engagement and promotions, resources for engaging individuals with lived experience of disability, and a longer project timeline. The updated process was approved by Council at a February 2021 meeting. The activities completed to-date include:

- November: Start-up meeting with the Accessibility Committee and Town staff
- December: Review of local policies and plans
- January: First round of stakeholder interviews and focus groups
- April: Engagement Strategy finalized, with input from key informants
- April: Site visit and downtown walkabout with the Accessibility Committee
- May & June: Second round of stakeholder interviews and focus groups

### This Summary

This Engagement Summary outlines the input that was collected throughout all stakeholder interviews and focus groups, as well as supplemental input provided by some stakeholders. The engagement results and discussion within this Summary will guide the recommendations in the upcoming Municipal Accessibility Plan for the Town of Antigonish, and results relevant to other regional partners will be shared with representatives of these organizations.

## What We Did

### Purpose

The stakeholder engagement reflected in this Summary helped us understand community members' priorities for accessibility within the Town of Antigonish, and where the current conditions limit the full participation and inclusion of people with disabilities. We recognize that people with disabilities have diverse needs related to their unique individual identities. Therefore, our engagement also explored where people with disabilities face additional barriers or discrimination on the basis of age, class, race, gender identity, or otherwise.

### Promotions

Stakeholders were initially selected in consultation with the Antigonish Accessibility Committee, and through this engagement additional stakeholders were identified. Information about the planning process and stakeholder engagement was promoted through the Town's website and social media, posters, and stakeholder social media and networks, and some community members requested interviews in response to these promotions.

### Participants

Stakeholder interviews were conducted with a range of participants including community members with lived experience of disability, service providers working directly with people with disabilities, professionals working in accessibility, and more. This engagement resulted in contact with 58 individuals representing 43 individuals or groups. These participants included:

- Seven residents identifying as people with disabilities
- Two residents advocating for family members with disabilities
- Two residents with a personal interest in accessibility
- L'Arche Antigonish
- Canadian Association of Community Living Antigonish (CACL)
- Antigonish County Adult Learning Association (ACALA)
- Antigonish Town and County Library
- WKG Education Consulting
- RK MacDonald Nursing Home
- The Maples Supportive Living
- Victorian Order of Nurses Antigonish (VON)
- Antigonish & Area Homemakers
- Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (including the Antigonish Guysborough Immigrant Support Program & the Circles of Support and Change Project)
- Heatherton Activity Centre
- Friendship Corner
- St. James United Church & hot meal program
- NS Works
- Early Childhood Development Intervention
- Kids First
- Schools Plus, Antigonish County
- Alzheimer's Nova Scotia
- Antigonish Aging Well Coalition

- Syrian Antigonish Families Embrace (SAFE)
- Challenger Baseball Antigonish
- Antigonish Community Transit Society
- Antigonish Seniors CARE Van
- Antigonish Affordable Housing
- A Roof Over Your Head
- Eastern Mainland Housing Authority
- The COADY Institute
- St Francis Xavier University (StFX) Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning
- St Francis Xavier University (StFX) Finance & Administration
- St Francis Xavier University (StFX) Department of Sociology
- St Francis Xavier University (StFX) Department of Human Kinetics
- St Francis Xavier University (StFX) Department of Nursing
- Nova Scotia Health
- Antigonish Chamber of Commerce
- Paq'tnkek First Nation Community

## Compensation & Accommodations

Participants with lived experience of disability were offered compensation for their time, recognizing that many of these individuals participated outside of any paid employment, and often shared intimate matters including personal experiences of discrimination and threats to their safety. Many of these participants had shared input with the Town or community before, but have felt that there was limited follow-up. We would like to thank all participants for trusting us with their stories and offering their time and expertise.

Stakeholder engagements conducted through video calls had live captioning and transcription, and engagement was also completed over the phone and through email, according to the participant's preference. Participants were informed that additional accommodations were available on request.

## Limitations

This engagement process was not without limitations. The work took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout this stakeholder engagement the province experienced two lockdowns. These lockdowns impacted the schedules of all participants as many service providers and professionals scrambled to move activities online and address the urgent needs of clients. Many dealt with added difficulties of working from home and assisting children with remote learning. Some people with disabilities throughout Antigonish were isolated and left without access to basic needs like home care and other supports. These barriers created complications in reaching stakeholders, and while engagement was extended past the spring lockdown to accommodate, the ongoing effects of COVID-19 likely impacted the number of community members we were able to reach.

People with disabilities were underrepresented overall in this engagement, and the majority of participants with lived experience of disability and their advocates identified as having experience with mobility limitations. Participants with direct experience of intellectual and sensory disabilities in particular were underrepresented in this engagement. The next phase of engagement will further attempt to reach individuals with these experiences, and the Accessibility Plan will include recommendations for ongoing engagement and relationship building as part of the Town's activities.

## Themes

### Key Takeaways

Many stakeholders noted that Antigonish is a hub for the disability community because of the presence of the Canadian Association of Community Living Antigonish, L'Arche Antigonish, and StFX University's Tramble Centre for Accessible Learning. Despite this, many stakeholders felt that the Town is generally not a welcoming space for community members with disabilities.

Through stakeholder engagement, it was clear that there is a general distrust of the Town's processes among some community members. It will be crucial for the Town to establish foundations of accountability and transparency to rebuild trust moving forward. Some stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities, as well as service providers working with people with disabilities, indicated that requests to the Town for accessibility improvements are often ignored or forgotten, and many residents feel tired of fighting for these changes. While stakeholders were happy to see an Accessibility Plan happening, some felt that the Town's previous lack of action was discouraging, and wondered why past input to the Town had not been addressed before beginning this process.

Some stakeholders highlighted the sacrifices made by people with disabilities and seniors throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and stressed the need to recognize and celebrate these community members for their endurance.

Another common concern throughout engagement was the degree of collaboration taking place among regional partners. Many stakeholders questioned the decision for the Town, County, university, and local library to complete separate Accessibility Plans, and one worried about engagement fatigue for people with disabilities being asked to serve on multiple Accessibility Committees. Another stakeholder suggested that moving forward, a joint Accessibility Committee and Coordinator could be established with regional partners, with implementation coordinated among the institutions.

### Awareness & Education

#### Defining Accessibility

Many stakeholders pointed out that there is a misconception around the meaning of accessibility, with the term often used interchangeably with "wheelchair access". While meaningful accessibility requires more than just physical access, some stakeholders felt that other aspects are often left out of the conversation, particularly access for people with sensory disabilities. A few stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities suggested that there is a need for more public education around disability, as many community members appear to not recognize the characteristics of various disabilities. These stakeholders added that this has led to community members making incorrect assumptions about theirs and others' disabilities, and one mentioned as an example that residents who have trouble speaking are often assumed to have an intellectual disability.

#### Stigmas & Discrimination

Most stakeholders felt there are deep stigmas around disability that need to be addressed. Some pointed out the ways that institutional racism and other discriminatory systems play into these stigmas. While a couple of stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities thought Antigonish was more welcoming and inclusive than other communities, all recounted experiences of ableism (defined as discrimination against people with disabilities) or prejudice in their interactions within the Town.

Some stakeholders suggested that many older residents who developed disabilities later in life don't identify with the label of "disability" and, due to stigmas, avoid using assistive devices which could improve their independence. One resident who began using a wheelchair later in life noted that they could see the difference in the way they are treated now, sometimes feeling like a second-class citizen due to their age and disability. Stakeholders noted that this stigma often comes in the form of patronizing behaviour, and that community members must be careful not to take away the voice of people with disabilities, including advocating on their behalf without their permission.

One stakeholder noted that Indigenous definitions of disability are very distinct from western colonial ideas, and lack the contrast between able and disabled bodies. Because of this, the stakeholder added, many Indigenous communities do not have the same stigmas around disability, and take a collective approach to caring for neighbours.

Stakeholders pointed out some of the ways that assumptions placed on the disability community affect people with families. One brought attention to judgments faced by parents with disabilities who often have their abilities as parents questioned, and pointed out the lack of accessible units being built for couples and families. This stakeholder suggested that it can be more difficult to access disability supports as a parent, and that these assumptions come from the ableist idea of regulating or controlling disabled bodies.

Some stakeholders felt that recent events in Canada and the United States have made discrimination more visible in Nova Scotia, and addressed the ways this has further marginalized some residents. They highlighted the ways this has effected people with disabilities, as well as African Nova Scotian, Black, and Indigenous residents, and newcomers to Canada. Some stakeholders added that the stigmas around mental illness and poverty have been apparent in Antigonish through a lack of public spaces, evident in the recent removal of many benches outside Main Street businesses. These stakeholders felt that stigmas around "loitering" are intended to keep some residents out of public view, excluding these community members by removing spaces sit and rest or socialize.

### **Opportunities for Education**

Some recommendations for the Town identified in stakeholder engagements included:

- An accessibility point-person on staff focused on education and coordination
- Accessibility training for public-facing staff and Council to learn effective and respectful communication
- An awareness campaign & workshops focused on accessibility
- Communications around the purpose of new accessibility improvements, as they are completed
- Education for residents on the importance of checking in on neighbours, particularly throughout major events like COVID-19
- Accessibility principles included within all Town policies and regulations
- Collaboration with the County, StFX, and other local groups and service providers
- Using small-town connections to find champions for accessibility
- Continuing to have Town leadership participate in local events focused on inclusion & accessibility, such as Friendship Corner and public lectures
- Public transparency and accountability of the Accessibility Committee
- Representation of people with disabilities throughout Town leadership, committees, and staff

One recommendation about which stakeholders had varying opinions was the issue of experiential learning. Some stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities felt that the Town should host more disability simulating events, such as walk and rolls through Town, which allow participants to try getting around the community in a wheelchair or walker for a day. On the other hand, there are conflicting opinions about these activities within the disability community, and some stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities felt that these events can make a mockery of people who use these assistive devices, and often reinforce negative stereotypes. While some stakeholders felt that these experiential learning activities can have positive outcomes, most stakeholders suggested that the best way to identify improvements is simply to listen to residents with disabilities.

## Goods & Services

### Basic Needs

One key takeaway from the stakeholder engagement was that the most pressing accessibility need is to ensure people with disabilities have access to their basic needs. Many stakeholders noted that while this need was present long before the pandemic hit, COVID-19 has created additional challenges for people with disabilities. Stakeholders added that many people with disabilities have been isolated throughout the pandemic as service providers were shut down or working with reduced hours and limited in-person programming, and most group homes and long-term care homes across the province were forced to lockdown for a significant portion of the pandemic. Stakeholders added that some people with disabilities are more likely to be high-risk for infection, and have avoided venturing out for non-essential trips.

Stakeholders explained that some residents with disabilities rely on home care and other in-home supports for assistance with tasks such as transferring in and out of their wheelchair, dressing, bathing, cooking, eating, and cleaning. These tasks are crucial for everyone's health and safety, and stakeholders added that some of those who need assistance have been left with limited to no support during COVID. One stakeholder noted that for some residents, the local emergency room has been one of the only healthcare supports available throughout COVID. Many stakeholders added that in addition to accessing basic human rights, the pause on in-person supports and activities has been very difficult for many residents, creating further challenges for mental and physical health.

Some stakeholders noted that lessons can be drawn from other cultures such as Indigenous communities across the country, where community members collectively care for those who need assistance or support. Stakeholders added that sometimes this is accomplished through an informal cultural structure. They added that in contrast, COVID-19 has demanded the creation of more formal systems, with local institutions like universities and SAFE setting up check-ins as well as mental health care access for self-isolating students.

Affordability emerged as another key barrier. One stakeholder suggested that some residents need financial supports to ensure they are equipped with the cleaning supplies, furniture, food, and other items necessary to receive in-home supports, as well as support in addressing health and safety hazards which could prevent home care. This stakeholder noted that some residents may need help with transportation, house repairs, organization, trash removal, yard work, and other services. Another stakeholder reported that some areas of the Antigonish community are considered food deserts (defined as an area or neighbourhood with limited access to affordable groceries) because of the distance to grocery stores and other food retailers, and one pointed out that some residents who receive affordable hot meals as part of a local program have trouble paying for this service.



One stakeholder highlighted their experiences with how institutional racism affects access to financial supports, medical care, housing, and other necessities. Stakeholders added that this can be especially hard to overcome for vulnerable residents without advocates.

Recommendations identified by stakeholders included:

- Advocating to other levels of government on behalf of residents with disabilities
- Collaborating with local stakeholders to ensure vulnerable residents have access to their basic needs
- Supports for low-income residents available year-round (not only at holiday season)
- Establishing a staff position for a coordinator who can connect residents with service providers and programs
- Working with the County and other partners to establish a sustainable funding source for residents to purchase adaptive equipment and technologies
- Offering more free and low-cost programs and services, wherever possible

### **Programming**

One participant suggested that while many recreation programs within the Town are inclusive and accessible on paper, they often don't offer the necessary supports. Some stakeholders added that this could include hosting check-ins and orientation with participants before the program begins, making additional staff available, providing clear and simple directions for participants with intellectual disabilities, offering additional encouragement, repeating instructions as necessary, and using visual cues. Stakeholders noted that large groups can be a challenge for some people with disabilities such as Alzheimers, dementia, autism, and various mental illnesses, as well as people who are learning English.

Some stakeholders highlighted the need to ensure that culturally appropriate programming is available for people with disabilities who are members of the Indigenous, Black and African Nova Scotian communities, as well as newcomers to Canada. Some stakeholders added that another aspect of culturally appropriate programming is ensuring that people with disabilities are connected with their communities and able to fully participate in cultural and traditional activities, such as church programming and sweat-lodge ceremonies.

Recommendations included:

- Expanding the use of existing Town facilities
- Promoting the Town's equipment loan program and expand adaptive equipment offerings
- Offering programming in smaller groups and one-on-one settings
- Offering more sensory-friendly programs and hours
- Ensuring events and programs are family-friendly and consider the schedules of parents
- Providing promotions for programming and events in multiple formats
- Programming catered to newcomers to Canada
- Detox and rehabilitation programs accessible to local residents
- Supports for people with mental health concerns and their families
- Support for parents of children with disabilities
- Programming for long-term care residents and seniors within the community

## **Winter Maintenance**

Many stakeholders highlighted winter maintenance as a priority for accessibility. They added that snow and ice clearing should prioritize active transportation routes and accessible facilities, which means clearing sidewalks, ramps, and accessible parking spaces first, and removing snow banks when sidewalks begin to narrow. One suggested that it will be important to coordinate this schedule with road clearing and communicate with residents so that driveway clearing does not block sidewalks.

All residents who identified as people with disabilities reported that their mobility is limited throughout the winter, and some largely remain indoors when snow is on the ground, due to these barriers.

## **Information & Communications**

### **Promotions & Information**

Some stakeholders felt that there is a need for better information about local activities and offerings.

Suggestions from stakeholders included:

- A webpage with links to local events and services
- Communications and services provided in a range of online and offline formats
- Working with the library and other local service providers to ensure all residents have access to online resources and transportation to in-person events
- Identifying residents who do not have access to the internet or phone
- Public-facing staff who can assist residents in navigating Town processes such as taxation, program enrollment, funding applications, and more
- Hiring multi-lingual Town staff

### **Engagement & Direct Communications**

Most stakeholders who identified as people with disabilities mentioned that they have submitted accessibility concerns to the Town, or shared their concerns at local forums, with little to no follow-up. This shows that there is already an abundance of input and expertise to draw on when creating solutions. One stakeholder who identified as a person with disabilities felt that the Town was only responsive when it was convenient or politically strategic, and many stakeholders also suggested improvements which could establish accountability in responding to concerns.

Most stakeholders noted the importance of engaging and involving diverse people with disabilities consistently throughout the whole process of accessibility planning. Some stakeholders added that to do this, the Town needs to build relationships within the local disability community. One stakeholder suggested that more ongoing, inclusive and creative engagement efforts are needed, not only during key projects. Recommendations included:

- Accessibility details provided in advance of events
- Agendas, minutes, updates, published for all Municipal Council and Committee meetings
- Expanded internet access
- Working with local service providers to ensure access to devices
- A system for accessibility complaints and staff responsibilities

## Communication Methods

Stakeholders felt that one priority for the Town should be the implementation of alternative communication technologies. Stakeholders added that this could include methods which improve communication for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and people who are blind or have low-vision:

- Looping and FM systems
- Flashing intercoms and doorbells within Town facilities
- Braille and raised lettering
- Improved acoustics within meeting spaces
- Accessible COVID-19 signage
- ASL interpretation and closed captioning
- Plain language and clear print in written materials
- Signage at all Town facilities providing directions to key spaces and resources for anyone who is new to the community or anyone who has memory issues

## Transportation

### Transit

Many stakeholders reported transportation as a key challenge for community members, and identified this as the number one barrier to employment, especially for groups who are less likely to own a vehicle including people with disabilities, low-income households, and newcomers.

Most stakeholders felt that the transit services provided by Antigonish Community Transit and the Seniors CARE Van are very appreciated within the community, and one service provider noted that they saw some clients for the first time when transit first came to Antigonish. Despite the benefits, stakeholders highlighted gaps in existing services which limit the uptake of local transit. Stakeholders added that these gaps have been worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to declining funding and ridership. In particular, stakeholders noted that through the pandemic hours of operation have been further limited and advance booking requirements lengthened, contributing in part to the lower ridership. Gaps identified by stakeholders include:

- Limited hours of operation & frequency
- Limited access to residential areas outside the Town & urban centres like Halifax
- Advance booking requirements
- Limited advertising to the public

While both transit services offer wheelchair accessible vehicles, stakeholders and transit operators identified many accessibility concerns in the fleets. These included:

- Limited availability of accessible vehicles
- Ramps in the back of vehicles which segregate people who use wheelchairs
- Issues with securing wheelchairs on ramps and buses, leading to second-hand reports of injuries
- A lack of kneeling buses which creates a barrier for transit users with mobility concerns who do not use a wheelchair

Transit operators indicated that addressing some of these gaps is necessary to increase ridership, while an increase in ridership is necessary to access additional funding. They added that most rural transit operators purchase second-hand accessible vehicles which come with constant mechanical issues, compounded by a lack of mechanics who can repair accessible features.

Multiple stakeholders noted that it can be very difficult to find drivers for transit and shuttles. They added that some users who require assistance getting on and off vehicles and attending appointments do not have access to a support person, leaving the responsibility to drivers who are not equipped to assist with this. One stakeholder also noted that male drivers of transit and taxis can be a cultural barrier for some women who have immigrated to Canada.

### **Parking & Private Vehicles**

Accessible parking concerns were one of the first issues identified by many stakeholders, and many highlighted Main Street as a problem area. Accessible parking concerns mentioned by stakeholders included:

- Limited spaces
- Spaces placed far from accessible entrances
- Spaces placed on slopes
- Lack of curb cuts
- Lack of transfer aisles for people who use wheelchairs
- Lack of plowing and salting in winter
- Parking metres and pay stations designed at inaccessible heights
- Lack of drop-off zones at key destinations
- Lack of park and ride areas

In addition to a lack of accessible parking, one stakeholder who uses a wheelchair noted that the cost of converting a car to meet accessibility requirements is a barrier which can prevent people from driving.

### **Active Transportation**

Active transportation such as walking and wheeling, cycling, and other human-powered forms of transportation is an overlap between transportation and the built environment. Stakeholders provided input on how to improve infrastructure, and identified specific areas which pose safety threats. Some stakeholders added that people who use wheelchairs are often forced to travel in the street where sidewalks are inadequate. Others added that bumps or slopes can be very painful for some people who use wheelchairs, and cracks and uneven surfaces create a barrier for many people who have mobility concerns or are blind or low-vision. Having a safe path with clear space is important for people who are blind or low-vision, people who use mobility devices, and people who use sign language to communicate.

Stakeholders expressed the ways that inadequate infrastructure limits the mobility of people with disabilities. One stakeholder felt that areas within and around the Town of Antigonish which do not have sidewalks form separated districts within the community, further isolating residents. Another stakeholder who identified as a parent of children with disabilities noted that speeding traffic is a danger in residential areas, particularly for children who are blind or have low-vision, or kids with intellectual or developmental disabilities who may tend to wander. To address this, some stakeholders suggested caution signs or traffic slowing methods, as well as more public play spaces which are fenced in or set back from the street.

Other recommendations identified by stakeholders included:

- Regular maintenance of sidewalks and crosswalks
- Clearing the path on sidewalks so that street furniture, utilities, and trees are out of the way
- Widening narrow sidewalks so that all wheelchairs and scooters can use them
- Levelling the gradient of sidewalks and the pavers next to them

- Establishing a new policy for patio design which does not disrupt the sidewalk
- Partnering with developers to fund sidewalks in new subdivisions
- Repainting crosswalk lines
- Creating marked crosswalks at more intersections
- Extending crossing times
- Leveling the threshold at all curb cuts
- Lowering crosswalk buttons to an accessible height
- Installing audible signals at crosswalks
- Improving sightlines at all crosswalks
- Paving some local trails
- Improving connectivity to local trails
- More seating along public streets

## Employment

### Supports for Employees

Multiple stakeholders highlighted the lower employment outcomes among people with disabilities. Newcomers to Canada are another group in the community who stakeholders identified as experiencing lower employment outcomes, and stakeholders added that newcomers who have disabilities are facing particularly severe barriers to employment. Some stakeholders suggested that barriers for newcomers may include mismatched credentials and education, limited work experience, limited English skills, and discrimination among employers. One stakeholder suggested that while change has been happening slowly across Nova Scotia, many employers still prefer to hire people who look like them, and there is a false mentality among some residents that immigrants are taking jobs from long-time residents.

Stakeholders suggested that while many people with disabilities, and other residents, would like to participate in the workforce, they require employment which fits their lifestyle and provides a sustainable income. One stakeholder mentioned that some residents earn more on income assistance or disability benefits than they would in some available jobs. Stakeholders identified key needs for employees, including:

- Livable wages
- Accessibility supports
- Translation supports
- Childcare
- Transportation options
- Flexible hours
- Health benefits and paid sick leave

Some recommendations from the stakeholder engagement included:

- Offering mentorship opportunities for employees
- Encouraging diversity and representation in leadership and mentorship
- Expanded employment supports for people with disabilities and newcomers

### Supports for Employers

Some stakeholders mentioned that employers are often defensive when asked about the accessibility of their workplace, and more education is needed to inform employers about how to improve accessibility within their workplace, and the social and financial benefits of inclusion. Adding to this, one stakeholder

noted that 80% of the time, there is no additional cost to diverse hiring—and where additional costs exist, they are typically no more than \$500. Another stakeholder suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many employers to allow more flexibility for employees, which improves the resilience of employees.

One stakeholder reported that major employers in Antigonish have had trouble filling casual and low-wage positions, and there is a need to pair potential employees while ensuring they are not taken advantage, which requires dedication from employers.

Stakeholders suggested some things for all employers to consider, such as:

- Creating offline job postings and application options
- Extending time limits for application process
- Understanding differences in social cues among potential candidates (for example, some people with intellectual disabilities may make less eye contact or need more time to process information)
- Informing candidates ahead of time when job interviews will be conducted in a panel format
- Working with new and current employees to accommodate their needs
- Working together with owners or tenants to improve the accessibility of the built environment

Recommendations for supporting employers included:

- Education on assets and needs of the disability community
- A starter checklist for accessibility and inclusion considerations
- Town hall events with major employers to facilitate information sharing
- Leading by example through improved workplace accessibility for Town staff
- Financial support for employers to implement supports for people with disabilities and people with limited English skills
- Subsidies for employees with disabilities
- Support for partnerships which connect employers and employees with disabilities

## The Built Environment

### General Accessibility

An emerging concern throughout stakeholder engagement was the limited number of locations where marginalized community members can go. This is particularly true for community members with disabilities, as well as low-income residents and families with small children.

Stakeholders felt that the Town needs to prioritize safety issues, and ongoing maintenance of the built environment was identified as a key part of this. Many stakeholders mentioned that infrastructure such as sidewalks are often in desperate need of repairs. One stakeholder added that features such as automatic door openers require regular repairs and maintenance, while there is only one professional available in the region to complete this work, and funding is often limited and complicated, particularly for First Nations Communities.

Many stakeholders highlighted the importance of considering accessibility from the beginning of any new design or renovation, and this must involve a consideration of the space as a whole. Stakeholders added that this means thinking about the accessibility of connecting sidewalks, pathways, and parking, when designing an accessible building or facility. One stakeholder added that a space is not accessible if people still need assistance to access it or participate.

Stakeholders also mentioned the need to enforce accessibility requirements and building code, while others acknowledged the limitations of such codes, adding that people with disabilities and the users of a space must always be consulted in the design process.

### **Businesses & Institutions**

Many stakeholders noted that key amenities in the Town are inaccessible. Almost all stakeholders identified Town Hall as one of the least accessible places, and highlighted issues with the new entrance, which provides a more wheelchair accessible access to Council Chambers but not to the remainder of Town Hall or the Parks and Recreation Department. Other areas commonly identified as barriers were the hospital, StFX campus, the farmers market, arena, and mall. Some locations which stakeholders identified as strong examples of accessibility were the local library, All Wheels Skatepark, and Pomquet Beach.

Stakeholders noted that old buildings pose a particular challenge to accessibility, while many new businesses are not considering accessibility in their design. Stakeholders noted that the main entrances along Main Street are one of the most glaring failures of accessibility—while a few businesses have ramps to their main entrance, some of these are too steep, too narrow, or include turns which are too tight to allow a wheelchair user to access them. Stakeholders added that once inside, very few buildings have elevators.

Stakeholders who use wheelchairs mentioned that even where there is an accessible entrance, many businesses are impossible to navigate in a wheelchair due to narrow aisles and cramped layouts. However, these stakeholders added that social distancing requirements have improved accessibility by widening pathways and spacing out seating. Multiple stakeholders and service providers reported that while even community members in the smallest manual wheelchairs often have trouble navigating, no spaces are designed for larger power chairs, which are becoming more popular.

### **Housing**

Stakeholders reported that accessible housing is very limited in Antigonish, and there is a particular shortage of accessible housing which is affordable and suited to families. They added that while there is generally a shortage of housing options, the areas that have some vacancies for housing are located too far from amenities. One stakeholder suggested that transitional, supportive, and group housing are also needed to meet the diverse needs of people with disabilities, and added that some people with disabilities are forced to enter the hospital or nursing homes, because it is the only affordable and housing they have access to. The stakeholder added that these facilities have a very high public cost when compared with developing accessible housing which is suited to the individual's needs.

One stakeholder who identified as a person with disabilities explained their experience with housing discrimination, and suggested that some landlords feel that people with disabilities are a liability, or want to avoid any added costs of accessibility improvements. Another stakeholder noted that funding for accessible housing retrofits is very limited, and often involves complex red tape for urgent problems. They added that while most homes are retrofitted as the residents require, housing providers and landlords should consider retrofitting *all* homes to ensure they are adaptable to the changing needs of the aging population. One accessibility barrier identified which was outside the realm of physical accessibility was sound proofing; stakeholders noted that newer housing has been developed with very thin walls, which can be challenging for children with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and may lead to complaints from neighbours which causes stress for families.

Recommendations identified by stakeholders included:

- Diverse housing options
- Tax breaks for affordable and accessible units
- Partnerships between non-profit housing providers and private developers
- Assistance for private developers looking to develop accessible housing
- Resources for home owners looking to make accessibility improvements
- Funding for basic home repairs & accessibility improvements
- Assessment rebates for accessibility retrofits
- Streamlined process for accessibility improvements

## Recreation

The Town recently completed accessibility improvements at Columbus Field, installing a wheelchair accessible swing set, as well as the Sandlot, though stakeholders identified major barriers still present in both these spaces. While the sandlot is accessed down steep pathways along a hill, Columbus field's new swing set is surrounded by wood chips which are difficult for people who use wheelchairs to navigate, and features a high curb around the remainder of the play space. Some stakeholders mentioned that many residential areas are far from recreation facilities, and there is a need for more play spaces in the Town.

Stakeholders felt that public washrooms are a key component of accessibility, and one added that these facilities are particularly important given the rise in homelessness. Stakeholders added that public washrooms should be fully accessible, with space for a support person and proper support bars.

Challenger Baseball recently completed engagement on the accessibility of local recreation facilities, the results of which have many overlaps with our own engagement. Some key needs identified through these processes included:

- Wheelchair accessible picnic tables
- Accessible surfacing at the Landing Trail, Sandlot, and Central Field fishing spot
- Accessible washrooms at Central Field
- Adaptive equipment for playgrounds & expanded equipment loans
- Accessibility improvements and programming at the pool
- General improvements to the arena and Columbus Field



## Next Steps

The findings from this report will be brought into the development of the draft Municipal Accessibility Plan. While some recommendations identified by stakeholders are included within this report, additional recommendations within the draft Plan will reflect this feedback within the areas of awareness & education; goods & services; information & communications; transportation; employment; and the built environment, including an accessibility audit of Antigonish Town Hall. This draft plan is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2021, and further engagement will give stakeholders and the public an opportunity to provide feedback on these recommendations, before the plan is finalized. The final plan will include an Implementation Strategy which will identify timelines, partnerships, a framework for monitoring and evaluation, and a public response process for responding to concerns.