

# Can I Get There? Can I Play? Can I Stay? Creating an Inclusive Playspace Guide in Australia

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**Abstract.** Playspaces bring children and adults together for fun and social interaction but are rarely designed for the inclusion of all community members. In Australia, local government authorities (councils) are responsible for parks and playspaces. The New South Wales state government launched their inclusive playspaces policy in 2017. A guideline document was proposed but a guideline does not guarantee implementation. Consequently, an inclusive design process for developing the guide became the strategy. The task was to develop a guide that explained the concepts of inclusion and universal design within the playspace context. The project took an iterative and collaborative approach to the design of the guide. Intended users were those involved in creating playspaces, not playspace users *per se*. The participatory governance structure involved three levels of collaboration: a small steering group of experts, a larger group with key stakeholders, and a wider group of stakeholders and interested persons. This collegial and participative process consisted of a series of meetings and workshops which fostered learning and ideation for all participants. Through this process three underpinning concepts emerged: Can I get there? Can I play? Can I stay? The process educated and informed stakeholders, encouraged participants to contribute to the outcomes and provided community-led guidance for those contracted to design the guideline. The result was an inclusive playspace guide that recognized the design guidance required by council personnel in the context of universal design. The process and governance structure provides a good working model to build on. The success of the guideline was recognized with a national award from the Institute of Landscape Architects for Community Contribution. The purpose of this paper is not to comment on or evaluate the outcome of the guidelines. Rather, it is to document the inclusive and participatory governance structure and iterative process from a professional participant perspective.

**Keywords.** Playspaces, universal design, participatory action research, local government, guideline

## 1. Introduction

Play is widely recognized as an important part of a child's physical and social development [1]. Play is also fun, and designated playspaces at a local level offer children and adults an opportunity to interact informally. Ensuring that everyone can

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participate in play activities is therefore important for all children, their parents and care-givers. However, children and adults with disability are often excluded from the benefits of play and related social interaction because playspace designs are not accessible or inclusive. Playspaces in New South Wales (NSW) range from a swing and slide set in a pocket park in a residential area to large scale regional playspaces in parklands that offer a wide selection of activities.

Existing guidelines and frameworks for councils, practitioners and the broader community on the design and development of inclusive playspaces [2, 3] contain useful information and are set out in logical formats. However, a document alone does not encourage implementation or understanding of why and how a playspace should be inclusive. Educating stakeholders about the “why” as well as the “how” were considered an essential factor for the success of the project.

## **2. Background**

In NSW, local government authorities (councils) are responsible for the design and upkeep of playgrounds and playspaces. Many councils refer to catalogues of modular playground equipment, which by default, become the playspace design especially in small parks. Larger regional playspaces are usually designed by landscape architects and contain a greater choice of activities. Historically, few parks or playspaces were accessible for people with disability. Advocacy on this issue led to a movement in specialised playspaces for children with disability. These were typically fenced and accessed only with a special key.

The next wave of playspaces were known as “All Abilities Playspaces”. Whilst unintentional, this terminology signals that these playspaces are somehow “different” and “special” because they are designed for children with disability rather than everyone. Consequently, it does not meet the aim of being inclusive for social and communal interaction. The aim of the project therefore was to make all playspaces inclusive for anyone and everyone of any age.

In November 2017, the NSW Minister for Planning announced state-wide funding to create inclusive playspaces based on universal design principles. In a media release [4], the Minister said, “I want all playgrounds in NSW to be reviewed as part of an in-depth audit that will see them assessed and rated against universal design principles. To make it happen, we are introducing a clear set of playground and park design guidelines for councils and developers to follow...”

The NSW Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Environment (NSW Planning) became responsible for the project and the allocated budget of A\$20m over five years which was to be awarded to councils through a grant application process. This budget allocation encouraged councils to participate because there was a government commitment to action. The Office of Open Space and Parklands within NSW Planning was given carriage of this initiative.

The production of a guideline document was the overarching task. The document-making process was used to educate stakeholders about inclusion and universal design to increase the likelihood of successful implementation. Communicating the design guidance in straightforward and engaging ways was also an important part of the project. Hence the project took a universal design approach using iterative co-design methods. The literature refers to this method as participatory action research and has been applied across a range of public policy settings [5].

### 3. Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to community development that involves researcher, practitioners and participants working together to examine a problem and change it for the better [6]. This approach is usually associated with solving a social problem. The aim is to find ways to take action to ameliorate or remedy the situation using the input and experience of those experiencing the problem. An iterative process provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to share understanding and knowledge and consequently, this method is sometimes known as Action Learning [7].

PAR also involves actors who have a stake in the outcome of the process. It is typically used where service providers and governments want to deliver high quality and responsive services such as health and education to vulnerable populations. Importantly, the process itself, through participating, contributing, and learning, encourages the community in question to own and accept responsibility for the decisions and outcomes, and if appropriate, act on them. It is therefore more than a simple community consultation. Rather it is an iterative process [8] that is well-documented and where the ideas and solutions are evaluated through a continuous feedback loop. It was during the succession of meetings and workshops that it became evident that this process most closely matched the elements of the PAR methodology.

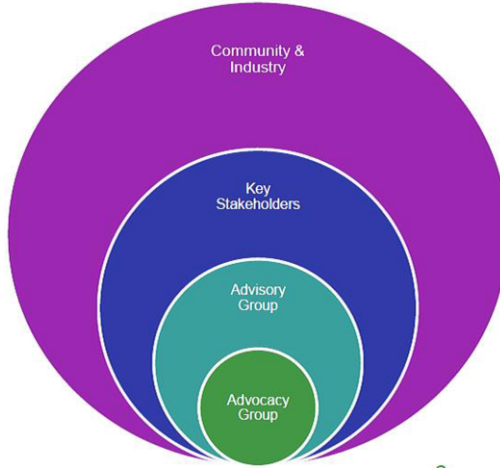
In this case those most affected by decisions were council staff who would be using the guideline and who were then expected to use an inclusive process to consult with their communities in the development of new playspaces. Members of advocacy organisations and universal design champions were taken as *de facto* representatives of those who use playspaces.

### 4. Method

A small group of people who had experience in inclusive playspaces, universal design, and local government processes were invited to the first exploratory meeting and workshop. Office of Open Space and Parklands staff, and a representative from a consulting landscape architecture firm were present as observers. The landscape architecture firm was commissioned to provide technical design expertise. Terms of Reference were developed and agreed by all parties. On the basis that it was not possible or desirable to have all relevant stakeholders at all discussions and workshops, an iterative approach was devised in four parts, each building on the one before.

The Advocacy Group was formed from the initial small working party of champions for universal design and inclusive playspaces, together with representatives from councils that had previously established inclusive playspaces. A small group allowed for roundtable in-depth discussion, analysis of ideas, and knowledge sharing. NSW Planning staff gathered the knowledge shared, reflected on the information and planned the next iteration in the process. This is conceptualised in Figure 1.

The firm of landscape architects consulting on the project attended all meetings and workshops. They provided technical design guidance and worked with Steinfeld and Mailsel's 8 Goals of Universal Design [9] to contextualise them into playspace terminology at the commencement of the process. This was an important step because it framed the work going forward. The 8 Goals were transitioned to 6 Design Principles: Find, Fit, Choose, Join In, Thrive, and Belong [10].



**Figure 1:** Four tiered iterative approach to inclusive development of the Inclusive Playspace Guidelines (source: NSW Planning)

It was acknowledged that not all councils would be willing participants in this new initiative, many having reservations about cost and ability to comply. Council areas in NSW vary considerably in size, staffing levels and budgets. Consequently, the financial and staffing abilities of all councils were considered in the process. The guideline, therefore, needed to be persuasive, educative and easy to apply. A participative approach – a universal design approach – assisted with the acceptance of the project at a local level.

**5. The process in detail**

The small Advocacy Group used the 8 Goals of Universal Design as a starting point for discussion [8] Briefly, the 8 Goals are: Body Fit, Comfort, Awareness, Understanding, Wellness, Social Integration, Personalisation, and Cultural Appropriateness. To assist with conceptualising and operationalising the Goals in the playspace context, six principles were identified: being able to find things easily; being able to physically access equipment and places; being able to choose activities; the ability to join in with others, being able to develop motor skills, and to have a sense of belonging. Table 1 shows how the 6 elements link to 6 of the 8 Goals of Universal Design.

**Table 1.** 6 Key play principles linked to the 8 Goals of Universal Design

Playspace elements	6 of the 8 Goals of Universal Design
Find	Awareness and Understanding
Fit	Body Fit and Comfort
Choose	Personalisation and Understanding
Join In	Social Integration and Cultural Appropriateness
Thrive	Wellness, Comfort, and Understanding
Belong	Social Integration

Further discussion of the 6 principles resulted in a distillation of words to plain language expressed as: Can I Get There? Can I Play? and Can I Stay? The Advocacy Group also discussed the most appropriate use of language and terminology to ensure the concepts of inclusion were emphasised. This meant ensuring language did not default to terms that represent disability. For example, it was agreed that “all-abilities” and “accessible” were not to be used anywhere in discussions or in written drafts. To support the concept of universal design, the terms “checklist” and “compliance” were also avoided. A document based on the three Can I’s and six principles was taken to the first Advisory Group (second tier group) workshop to seek feedback. The title of the guideline was affirmed as “Everyone Can Play”.

The second tier Advisory Group was formed by inviting all councils in NSW and other stakeholders to participate in the first workshop. The Advisory Group eventually comprised approximately 50 participants: council representatives, professional stakeholders, community group representatives, play equipment suppliers, childhood educators and academics. The Minister for Planning opened the workshop with a short encouraging address to reinforce his commitment to “Everyone Can Play”.

The workshop process began with a video of personal stories from families who related their experiences of playspace design and how it can exclude and include. This set the scene for the small group work that followed in the workshop. The thoughts and ideas generated in the workshop were followed by a feedback session and an open forum for questions, discussion and comment. A professional facilitator was engaged to lead and guide the process. Members of the Advocacy Group, staff from the Office of Open Space and Parklands, and the consulting landscape architects were also present at the workshop to monitor and record feedback.

The Advocacy Group met again to review the feedback from the workshop and made amendments to the draft document accordingly. A second and final Advisory Group workshop was organised to present the latest iteration of the document for analysis and comment. Specific workshop questions that encouraged detailed interrogation of the document were used. The Advocacy Group met immediately afterwards to review the feedback and discuss next steps. The initial three elements, Can I get there? Can I Play? Can I Stay? were reaffirmed. Minor re-adjustments to the document were agreed.

## **6. Document design**

The design of the document was a critical factor in communicating the information to the target group – council staff, landscape architects, and play equipment designers. The content of the guideline was drawn from participant feedback and NSW Planning policy. The challenge was to take a universal design approach to language and to visual presentation within the document. Images, headings, graphics, colour, size and type of font were all carefully considered. Fun and play were the key elements of the design style which was a major shift for a government document which usually has set standards for official publications. Figure 2 shows the design theme for both printed and virtual versions of the guide.

The document uses photographs, case studies, and personal stories from children, parents and grandparents to explain the importance of inclusive playspaces. The final pages of the document have a checklist based on the 6 principles devised at the beginning of the process. Hard copies of this draft were printed and distributed and used to elicit further feedback. With the document in hand, staff from the Office of Open Space and

Parklands visited regional councils in NSW with the purpose of explaining the guideline and to gain further feedback. The penultimate draft document was then used as the basis of a final one hour workshop at the annual Parks and Leisure Australia Conference to gain further feedback.



**Figure 2.** Example of document style

The guideline was also provided in digital format on a designated website with more examples, videos of family stories, and comments from Advocacy Group members. The style of the webpages included the same principles as the printed document. The online resource includes several short videos [11] featuring the experiences of participants in the process, and the three Can I's are expressed in the words of adults and children.

The project was undertaken within 15 month period, and the guideline was launched in early 2019. The process for developing the content took eight months. The final months included two months for the statutory public exhibition time, and time for the last fine tuning before the Minister signed off the project.

## **7. Advocacy Group feedback and analysis**

Following the conclusion of the cycle of meetings and workshops, a two-part question was asked in a survey questionnaire seeking the reflections and comments of Advocacy Group members on the guideline development process.

*Question:* Considering your role in the Advocacy Group and attendance across the subsequent meetings and workshops in the development of the Everyone Can Play guideline,

- a) What do you feel worked well as a part of the inclusive process? For example, who was present, how people engaged, the nature of knowledge sharing and gathering, what you liked most; and
- b) What could be done differently next time?

The responses were tabulated and analysed according to content. These responses provide insight into how a participatory and inclusive approach to developing universal design guidelines can be replicated or improved for future applications.

Five features were observed as significant definers of the guideline development:

- Innovative thinking beyond a “checklist” of universal design features
- Understanding the possibilities of multiple platforms to educate and inform universal design practice
- Use of language in an inclusive context
- Effect of participatory process at multiple stakeholder levels
- Process of translating universal design principles and goals to an industry relevant guide
- Having the three Can I’s... (Can I get there, Can I play, Can I Stay) makes it easy to remember

While the three Can I’s were developed in the playspace context, it was soon realised that these three basic concepts could be applied in other settings: Can I get there, Can I do what I went there to do, and Can I stay for as long as I need or want to, and feel welcome and comfortable.

## 8. Conclusion

The aim of the initiative was to devise a guideline document that would be both appealing and useable by council staff responsible for playspaces with the information they need and in a format they can understand and use. The intention was to encourage creative inclusive design outcomes. Contextualising the 8 Goals of Universal Design into the 6 principles for playspace design was an important first step. Maintaining the universal design approach with the document style was also a key factor in making the document useable and accessible to a range of stakeholders.

The process of developing the guideline from first exploratory ideas through to the style of the document was universally designed. It served to educate stakeholders, overcome resistance, and is now an exemplar for others to follow. Can I get there? Can I play? and Can I stay? remain the key memorable phrases. The simplicity of these statements can be applied in any context with “play” being replaced by any action. Such simplicity is the essence of universal design.

## 9. Epilogue

The Everyone Can Play guideline won the 2019 National Landscape Architecture Award for Community Contribution [12]. The Jury citation was:

*“Everyone Can Play provides a comprehensive suite of principles, case studies and “toolkit” examples that support more inclusive play spaces in New South Wales. The well-presented and easily accessible document advocates for three core considerations – Can I Get There? Can I Play? and Can I Stay? – informed by detailed research, design thinking and extensive engagement. The guidelines*

empower councils, community leaders and design professionals to design and deliver more inclusive, safe and attractive play spaces and settings.”

The guideline content was developed throughout 2018. In 2021 the Office of Open Space and Parklands called the Advocacy Group together to review the guideline and update the content. The content will be based on further feedback from stakeholders and shifts in community expectations. The key elements to be added are acknowledgement of First Nations people and connection to country; nature and water play; and connection to place and play. The work continues in 2022.

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