Inclusive engagement with Disabled people

A supplementary resource to accompany the climate and disability local authority resources

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This document is part of a set of local authority resources developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's Climate and Disability project and the Sensing Climate research project. The Climate and Disability programme is part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.
The resources are designed to support local authorities to understand the impact that climate and nature projects can have on their local communities of Disabled people. This is a supplementary resource on co-production. There is also one on inclusive engagement. We welcome any local authority to use the resources to support their work.

Introduction

The climate crisis poses major risks to human life and livelihoods, in ways that are compounding and creating new forms of social inequality. Disabled people – including 16% of the global population (WHO, 2023) and 24% of the UK population (Kirk-Wade et al., 2024) – are particularly at risk of adverse climate impacts. In part, such risks are due to the damaging impacts of extreme weather events and air

pollution on existing health conditions. However, they are also due to eco-ableism; whereby a lack of meaningful engagement with Disabled people in climate decision-making is leading to the design and implementation of climate solutions that are creating new challenges for disabled people (Inclusion Scotland, 2021).

The climate crisis is also asking many of us to cope with and adapt to increasingly unpredictable, harmful everyday environments. Disabled people often have to develop the resourcefulness, skills, creativity and communities of care to navigate such uncertainty in a world that has not been built with Disabled people in mind. Such expertise is much needed in response to the climate crisis.

Climate action occurs through multiple decisions made by varied actors across many different arenas of engagement; from opportunities to respond to policy consultations, to being part of advisory panels, citizens assemblies, co-production initiatives, climate protests, artivism or craftivism (the use of art or crafts, respectively, to advocate for social and/or political change) or through micro-activism (everyday actions taken to challenge power structures). Creating inclusive and enabling environments for climate action, and embedding Disabled people into climate decision-making processes, are essential for ensuring the success of transitions to a low carbon, climate resilient society.

This guide shares insights into the dimensions of access that need to be considered to support enabling and accessible engagement with Disabled people in climate action:

- Physical access,
- Temporal access,
- Affirmative access,
- Safe and empathetic access,
- Intersectional access and leadership.

It complements the guidance provided in the associated 'Co-production' resource note, as well as the more detailed advice

shared in the 'Crip up Climate Conversations' guidance, which can be found online: https://sensing-climate.com/news/crip-up-climate-conversations

Physical access

Physical access is the most commonly considered dimension of access within climate action and policy to-date (albeit not guaranteed). This dimension includes efforts to ensure meetings are held in venues that are accessible for people with varied mobility aids (including wheelchairs, hearing loops, sticks, canes, crutches etc) and sensory priorities (with care taken to attend to intrusive lighting, sound, scents, etc).

Core access features to check in any venue include:

- Ramps for wheelchair users (and lifts if the meeting room and bathroom facilities are not on the ground floor),
- Wheelchair accessible parking,
- Wide entrances, doorways and routes around the venue,
- Hearing loops and use of microphones when speaking where possible,
- Clear colour contrasts and large print in signage,
- Accessible and supportive seating, including a range of seating types to meet different needs,
- A central venue with good public transport links for those who do not have access to a car or taxi budget,
- Access to a quiet space for sensory and social refuge. It should have no strong lighting or smells. It is also worth making extra support available, such as noise-cancelling headphones, fidget spinners, eye masks etc to help people make further adjustments to the sensory environment as needed.

Care is also needed to assess:

- Lighting conditions (ensuring adequate lighting for people with sight impairment but being mindful of the risks of fluorescent and strip lighting for people who experience migraines and certain vestibular conditions),

- Ventilation (especially for people who are immunocompromised),
- Presence of tactile navigation information e.g. at the top and bottom of staircases to give warning of their presence to sight impaired participants.

Where refreshments are provided, attention must be paid to people's dietary needs, and boxes provided should people be unable to eat at the event itself but wish to take food home to eat safely later.

Where meetings occur online or in a hybrid format, care must be taken to ensure that people online can also participate fully, recognising that some people may need help to use the technology, that not everyone will be able to use the chat function or feel comfortable with their video on, and that some people may need captions, sign language interpretation and recordings.

Access needs should be asked about in advance, with time taken to work with Disabled people to identify how best to address them. That said, it is also important to recognise the practical and emotional cost of having to educate people about one's access needs on a regular basis, and to learn through the process to reduce this burden for subsequent events.

These physical access priorities overlap with wider access dimensions. Yet, they are often as far as people get when considering how best to enable the participation of Disabled people in this work.


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Temporal access

The need for urgent action on climate change is reflected in the growing number of climate emergency declarations. However, such declarations imply a pace and intensity of response that may be elusive to Disabled people living in 'crip time'. Crip time is a concept developed to recognise the time and energy required to contend with daily barriers imposed upon disabled lives, and to affirm the valuable knowledge gained in pacing life to minimise pain or exhaustion.

The pace of climate action and decision-making can exclude Disabled people's participation, for example through short and clustered formal consultation response deadlines, being given material to read before meetings at very short notice (or during a meeting itself), shortening or skipping breaks during meetings when time is tight, and the challenge of keeping up with and contributing to group discussions (especially for people who use sign language). The pace of such interactions is also significant when considering the participation of learning disabled people, where more time may be needed (both before and during an event) to explain the complicated language (jargon) around climate change and climate policy.

Time is particularly important to consider when working with people who do not use words to communicate. For example, in the Disability and Climate Change Public Archive, Marina Heron Tsaplina reflects on her collaboration with a disabled artist who communicates through non-verbal gestures, a communication board and eye-tracking technology. Marina describes how listening to each other is necessarily "a slow, attentive process" that should not be rushed or constrained by ableist understandings of time.

It is also important to understand the challenges of making a regular commitment to climate action when navigating the unpredictability that comes with fluctuating health conditions, and to recognise that

some people may need time and support to process the emotional impacts of discussions around climate risks, inequalities and harm. Time should be included at the outset of any meetings to co-develop ground rules that will enable people to enter the space in a way that ensures everyone can feel comfortable. It can also be helpful to create space for 1:1 listening time with individuals outside of a core meeting space if discussions are challenging. Any emotional and/or mental health support must be provided from the perspective of the social rather than medical model of disability.

Creating flexible and enabling conditions (temporal and otherwise) for Disabled people to bring their expertise to climate action could enhance collective resilience and avoid poorly designed and/or implemented responses under time pressure.

Affirmative access

Beyond being present in a space, it is important for people to feel welcome. At the most basic level, feeling welcome relies on being able to listen, follow and contribute to discussion meaningfully, without being dominated by those who are most vocal or assertive. Such access requires careful facilitation, as well as consideration of the sensory qualities of a space and the presence of appropriate interpreters for the individuals present (sign language, Makaton, translators etc), captions and the provision of audio description (especially if presentations are involved), the use of roving microphones and the presence of functional hearing loops, having a diversity of ways of contributing (spoken, signed, written etc), playful ways of highlighting the use of jargon to remind people to use more accessible language, and providing information in a range of formats (audio, large print, Easy Read etc).

Beyond communication-related considerations, however, affirmative access relies on feeling a sense of agency and belonging. Affirmative learning, peer-support and capacity building opportunities may be useful for people who have lost confidence in their capacity to

contribute to climate action, be it through internalised ableism or experiences of having their knowledge and insights dismissed or ignored.

Affirmative access relies on Disabled people being valued and recognised as integral contributors, with valuable knowledge to share – and ideally being involved in a long-term engagement process where tangible outcomes of people's involvement are communicated. It is important to affirm this knowledge and explain the changes made in response to people's participation, ensuring that the time and effort people dedicate to such processes is rewarding rather than extractive, and results in genuine change. Payment – for example, in the form of vouchers or non-monetary gifts so as not to compromise welfare payments for those who need this – is helpful but not sufficient to convey respect and appreciation.

Being affirmed and valued as fellow human beings with important knowledge to bring to climate action is an essential part of social justice. Disabled people can be excluded by others when the value of their knowledge is repeatedly overlooked or disregarded. They can also lose confidence in themselves, and choose not to take part through a misplaced sense of having nothing to offer and/or through a fear of being undermined. When their insights are not given due regard, it is particularly problematic because eco-ableist decisions create disproportionate harm in their day-to-day lives. When exclusion becomes entrenched, collective understandings of how to respond to climate change will not include the important insights or priorities of Disabled people, or meet their needs. These forms of exclusion are more likely when the social, material and emotional conditions are lacking to support meaningful participation.



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Safe, empathetic access

Linked to affirmative access is the need for safe and empathetic access, not just in terms of minimising the risk of physical discomfort but also in ensuring emotional and social safety. Detrimental social care and welfare 'reforms' alongside the ongoing impacts of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis are compromising the sense of safety and trust amongst many Disabled people that they will be listened to or that their needs will be met, particularly in relation to figures of authority.

Such challenges send distressing signals that devalue Disabled people's lives and undermine the safety and material conditions needed for people to participate and contribute to climate responses. The influence of these signals and material barriers to participation is rarely considered within environmental and climate messages that push for individualised forms of pro-environmental behaviour change as the key response to climate change, including advice, for example, to use the car less, cycle more, reduce energy use, eat more locally sourced/organic food etc. These forms of individualised action are not always accessible to Disabled people who may, for example, rely on energy-intensive equipment to survive and participate in society or be unable to afford organic diets. It is, therefore, essential to move away from individualised messages that perpetuate guilt and towards those that foreground empathy, solidarity and the power of collective action.

Beyond messaging, tangible steps are needed to create the material and social conditions required for Disabled people to feel safe, valued and resourced to play a key role in climate action and decision-making, particularly when facing multiple intersecting forms of social inequality.

Meaningful intersectional access and leadership

Relevant to each of these domains of access is the need for meaningful intersectional access and leadership. To recognise that people's opportunities to take part, to set priorities for and shape climate action, and to co-create the enabling conditions to do so, are shaped by both privilege and precarity. This works across often interlinked axes of inequality such as ableism, racism, sexism, ageism and classism.

When steps are taken to engage with disabled communities, it is important to embed an intersectional approach, and to ensure that the time and energy dedicated to such engagement has the potential to lead to change. Within this work, it is important to appreciate – yet also go beyond – the 'usual suspects' in engagement efforts, especially beyond those whose experiences of disability may be buffered to some extent by other forms of privilege.

Beyond steps to enable intersectional access to existing decision-making spaces, effort is needed to support disability-leadership in this work; be it leading specific forms of climate activity or ensuring Disabled people are included in the paid workforce involved in driving climate action, particularly with the growing interest in green jobs (ILO, 2019). These are jobs that help to protect the environment, including those linked to climate mitigation, adaptation and governance. Supporting such shifts will require disability-inclusive skills training pathways, as well as resourcing to support reasonable adjustments for Disabled people to apply for and flourish within key leadership roles.

In creating a climate-resilient city where everyone feels welcome and heard, it is important to recognise that Disabled people are not 'objects to be changed'; they are key 'agents of change' (O'Brien, 2018) with valuable knowledge to bring to collective efforts to create safe, fair and just societies through climate action.

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Members of the Climate and Disability Forum who refined Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people

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