

Advising on Accessibility at a Conference

Prepared by:

Neil Wallace, Arts in Corrections Advisor, Arts Access Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Date: 4th June 2025

1. Introduction

This report provides an extended and in-depth overview of how to plan, design, and deliver an accessible and inclusive conference. It is based primarily on the Ministry of Social Development's (MSD) official resource *Accessible Meetings and Events* (available at <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/information-and-support/accessible-meetings-and-events.html>). Additional insights and recommendations were generously provided by Stace Robertson, who serves as the Lead Accessibility Advisor | Kaiārahi a Toi Ōritetanga at Arts Access Aotearoa.

Stace Robertson works across the arts and cultural sector to promote accessibility, inclusion, and disability leadership. His role includes providing strategic advice on inclusive practice, helping organisations become more welcoming for disabled people, and advocating for greater access to the arts. The practical suggestions offered by Stace reflect lived experience, current best practice, and his professional expertise in enabling access within public events.

This document aims to ensure that people with disabilities are meaningfully included in all aspects of a conference – as speakers, facilitators, audience members, organisers, and support staff.

Accessibility is a principle rooted in equity. In a conference context, this means enabling every individual to participate fully, with dignity and autonomy, and without encountering systemic or environmental barriers. This

report also offers practical strategies for embedding accessibility into planning frameworks and includes comprehensive weblinks to support implementation.

2. Rationale for Accessibility in Conferences

Accessibility is not simply about ramps and toilets. It is a fundamental principle of equity that acknowledges and values diversity of experience and capacity. In the context of a conference, accessibility ensures that disabled speakers, facilitators, attendees, and support staff are not only present but can participate with dignity, independence and equal opportunity. Creating such conditions requires thoughtful planning, informed policy, financial commitment, and community input.

A truly accessible event is one where information is clear, support is available, physical and sensory environments are manageable, and participation is not limited by ability. Doing this well requires engaging with people who experience access barriers and implementing best-practice frameworks throughout every stage of planning.

3. Principles of Inclusive Event Planning

3.1 Begin Early

Accessibility must be built into the earliest stages of planning. Waiting until later to address access needs can create barriers, reinforce exclusion, and result in reactive (rather than proactive) inclusion.

3.2 Budget for Accessibility

Include costs for New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) interpreters, live captioning, accessible transport subsidies, printed materials in alternative formats, quiet rooms, and support personnel.

3.3 Ask, Don't Assume

Do not guess what someone might need. Create an optional access section on registration forms that allows delegates to state their specific requirements, such as seating, dietary needs, or communication preferences.

3.4 Use Plain Language

From abstract calls to post-event evaluation forms, information should be delivered in plain English and available in formats like Easy Read, braille, NZSL, and large print.

4. Venue Selection and Environment Design

Choosing an appropriate venue is pivotal. Not all buildings marketed as accessible actually meet best-practice standards. An access audit should be conducted by an accessibility expert. MSD provides a thorough venue checklist to guide this process:

- Step-free entrance and automatic doors
- Accessible bathrooms on the same floor as event spaces
- Lifts with braille, auditory cues, and wheelchair access
- Power outlets for assistive devices
- Clearly marked accessible car parks near entrances
- Rest spaces with low lighting and soft furnishings

Resource: MSD Guide to Accessible Meetings and Events

<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/information-and-support/accessible-meetings-and-events.html>

5. Communication and Information Accessibility

Accessibility extends to how information is communicated. Provide all documents in multiple accessible formats, including:

- Plain English

- NZSL
- Easy Read (short sentences, images, no jargon)
- Audio format or podcast
- Braille (using services like Blind Low Vision NZ:
<https://blindlowvision.org.nz/accessible-formats-service>)

PowerPoint and Slide Presentations:

- Use high-contrast colour schemes
- Sans-serif fonts, minimum 24pt size
- Avoid overloading slides with text
- Describe images and transitions aloud

Videos:

- Caption all video content
- Provide audio descriptions if possible
- Announce when a video is starting and describe its content

Handouts:

- Provide in accessible formats (digital large print, Easy Read, braille)
- Use clear structure and sans-serif fonts for headings

For image accessibility:

- AltText.ai – <https://alttext.ai>
- Ahrefs Image Alt Text Generator –
<https://ahrefs.com/writing-tools/img-alt-text-generator>

6. Conference Programme and Scheduling

When developing the event schedule, allow generous time for:

- Moving between rooms or venues
- Accessing bathrooms (wharepaku)

- Resting in quiet zones
- Delays caused by support needs (e.g. mobility taxis)

Avoid back-to-back sessions. Provide extended breaks to support mental and physical wellbeing. Publish the full programme in accessible formats and ensure session times are clearly stated.

7. Presenters and Facilitation

Presenters must be briefed on accessibility practices:

- Speak clearly and at a steady pace
- Describe visuals and acronyms
- Wait until NZSL interpreters are visible before starting
- Avoid jargon or explain it when used

Encourage presenters to submit materials in advance so support workers and interpreters can prepare. Facilitate inclusive interactions and icebreakers.

Useful guidelines can be found via:

<https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/disability-inclusive-meetings>

8. Accessibility Supports and Personnel

NZSL Interpreters

Book in advance and ensure breaks. Interpreters should be seated close to presenters with clear lines of sight.

Services:

- iSign – <https://www.deaf.org.nz/what-we-do/isign>
- Connect Interpreting – <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/cross-government-functions/language-assistance-services/face-to-face-interpreting-service/providers/connect-interpreting-limited>
- WordsWorth Interpreting – <https://www.wordsworth.nz>

- SLIANZ – <https://slianz.org.nz>

Meeting Assistants

For people with intellectual disabilities, trained assistants can support comprehension, interaction, and communication throughout the event. This is a recognised and reasonable accommodation.

9. Hybrid and Online Conferences

Hybrid events raise specific accessibility challenges:

- Caption all livestreams
- Ensure interpreters are visible on screen
- Avoid fast transitions between breakout rooms
- Offer recordings with transcripts post-event
- Use platforms compatible with screen readers

Prepare for technical troubleshooting and clearly communicate platform guidance ahead of time.

10. Inclusive Room Layouts

U-shape and hollow-circle arrangements support interaction. Always:

- Leave wide aisles for mobility aids
- Offer a variety of seats (with arms, cushions)
- Tape down power cords
- Avoid placing wheelchairs only at the back or ends

Ensure all speakers can physically access the stage or podium. Ramps should have rails and non-slip surfaces.

11. Meals, Breaks, and Refreshments

Meals should be inclusive:

- Clearly label food (including allergens)
- Offer seating with table access for wheelchair users
- Provide straws and varied cup types
- Ensure buffet stations are accessible
- Assign volunteers to assist if needed

Allow sufficient time and calm areas for eating and decompressing.

12. Post-Event Follow-Up and Evaluation

Post-event materials (summaries, presentations, recordings) must also be made accessible. Evaluation forms should:

- Be available in Easy Read, NZSL, large print and online
- Include questions about the effectiveness of accessibility measures
- Identify where improvements could be made

13. Recommendations Summary

1. Appoint a dedicated Accessibility Coordinator
2. Involve disabled people in planning and feedback loops
3. Conduct a full venue access audit
4. Provide multiple information formats
5. Build accessibility into every session
6. Provide staff and volunteer training on access needs
7. Ensure budget allocation for accessibility measures
8. Use accessible online platforms

14. Key Resources and Tools

- MSD Accessible Meetings and Events Guide:
<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/information-and-support/accessible-meetings-and-events.html>
- Blind Citizens NZ:
<https://abcnz.org.nz/category/issues/information-access>
- Blind Low Vision NZ Accessible Formats Service:
<https://blindlowvision.org.nz/accessible-formats-service>
- Be. Lab Aotearoa:
<https://creativespacesnetwork.org.nz/Useful-support-organisations>
- iSign (Deaf Aotearoa):
<https://www.deaf.org.nz/what-we-do/isign>
- Connect Interpreting:
<https://www.mbie.govt.nz/cross-government-functions/language-assistance-services/face-to-face-interpreting-service/providers/connect-interpreting-limited>
- WordsWorth Interpreting:
<https://www.wordsworth.nz>
- SLIANZ (Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand):
<https://slianz.org.nz>
- AltText.ai (Image Description Generator):
<https://alttext.ai>
- Ahrefs Alt Text Generator:
<https://ahrefs.com/writing-tools/img-alt-text-generator>