# Creating an inclusive playspace guideline in Australia: A participant perspective

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## Abstract

Playspaces bring children and adults together for fun and social interaction. They help create a sense of neighbourly belonging. However, they are rarely designed for the inclusion of all community members. Late in 2017 the New South Wales state government launched their inclusive playspaces policy. In Australia, local government authorities (councils) are responsible for parks and playspaces. Consequently, the aim became one of educating and encouraging councils to upgrade current playspaces and create new playspaces using universal design principles. The task was to move council staff from the modular equipment found in catalogues to designs that are more inclusive, accessible and engaging.  It was recognised early in the project that a guideline document would be necessary but insufficient to effect this kind of change in design thinking. Hence a universal design process for designing the guideline was required. That meant collaboration and co-design with councils and other stakeholders. The result was a guideline that was itself universally designed. The participative and collaborative process educated and informed the stakeholders as well as those designing the guideline. The success of the guideline was recognised 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 *per se*. Rather, it is to document the inclusive isnd participatory approach from a participant perspective.

**Keywords:** *Playspaces, universal design, local government, guideline*

## Introduction

Play is widely recognised as an important part of a child's physical and social development. Play is also fun, and designated playspaces at a local level offer children and adults an opportunity to interact informally. Ensuring that everyone can participate in play activities is therefore important for all children and their parents and care-givers. However, children with disability as well as parents with disability are often excluded from the benefits of play and related social interaction because playspace designs are not accessible and 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.

There are several guidelines and frameworks for councils, practitioners and the broader community on the design and development of inclusive playspaces. For example, Touched by Olivia Inclusive Playspace Guidelines, and the IDNR Accessible Playground Toolkit.

These guidelines 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.

What follows is an account of the guideline development process from a participant perspective.

## 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. However, few parks and playspaces are accessible. This caused a movement in specialised playspaces for children with disability which are fenced and accessed only with a special key. While these are accessible for wheelchair users, they are not inclusive.

The next wave of playspaces was given the name of "All Abilities Playspaces". This terminology also signals that these playspaces are somehow "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 the Minister, Mr Roberts, 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 was important, not just to encourage councils to participate, but also to show that this policy statement had a commitment to action.

The project involved a three-fold undertaking. The production of a guideline document was the headline task. A less obvious, but essential task, was to use the document-making process to educate stakeholders about inclusion and universal design. This was to increase the likelihood of successful implementation. A second less obvious task was to find ways to communicate the design guidance in a straightforward and engaging way. A universal design approach encapsulates all three tasks. Hence the project took a universal design approach to the process, the design guidance, and the design of the document itself.

The Office of Open Space and Parklands within NSW Planning was given carriage of this initiative. The first task was to devise an inclusive process for developing inclusive playspace guidelines.

## 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. This approach is usually associated with solving a social problem with the people who are affected by the problem. The process attempts to find ways to take action to ameliorate or remedy the situation using the input and experience of those experiencing the problem. Through an iterative process it provides

an opportunity for all stakeholders to share understanding and knowledge and consequently this method is sometimes known as Action Learning.

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** 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.

The PAR method is mostly used directly with community members, that is those most affected by the decisions. In this case it was those who would be using the guideline, that is, council staff 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.

## 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. Also

included in the group were Office of Open Space and Parklands staff, and a representative from a consulting landscape architecture firm as observers. The landscape architecture firm were 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. This is conceptualised in Figure 1.

The group that first met for the exploratory process became the core reference group with the name "Advocacy Group". The Advisory Group consisted of a larger group of stakeholders, and the Key Stakeholder group included a broader representation. Community and Industry Representatives were included towards the end of the project.
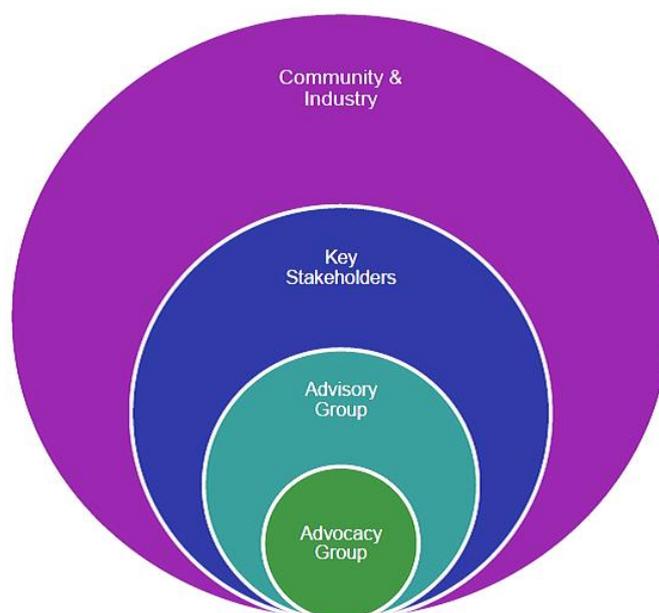


*Figure 1: Four tiered iterative approach to participatory and inclusive development of the Inclusive Playspace Guidelines (source: NSW Planning)*

The Advocacy Group was a small working party of champions for universal design and inclusive playspaces, together with representatives from councils that had 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.

The firm of landscape architects consulting on the project attended all meetings and workshops. They provided technical design guidance and worked with the **8 Goals of Universal Design** by Steinfeld & Maisel, 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 the 6 Design Principles: Find, Fit, Choose, Join In, Thrive, and Belong.

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. An iterative and participative approach – a universal design approach – would assist with the acceptance of the project at a local level.

## The process in detail

The process commenced by working with the small Advocacy Group. Steinfeld and Maisel's 8 Goals of Universal Design were used as a starting point for discussion. Briefly, the 8 Goals are:

Body Fit, Comfort, Awareness, Understanding, Wellness, Social Integration, Personalisation, and Cultural Appropriateness.

To assist with conceptualising and operationalising the 8 Goals in the playspace context, six key elements 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. The chart below shows how the 6 elements link to the 8 Goals. See Table 1.

| 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 |

*Table 1: 6 Key elements linked to the 8 Goals of Universal Design*

Further discussion of the 6 elements resulted in a distillation of words to plain language. They were 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 key elements 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 and Office of Open Space and Parklands staff 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.

## 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 as depicted in Figures 2-4. This was a major shift for a government document which usually has set standards for official publications.



*Figure 2: Front cover of the guideline*

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. Figures 2, 3 and 4 illustrate the design style of the guideline.

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.**
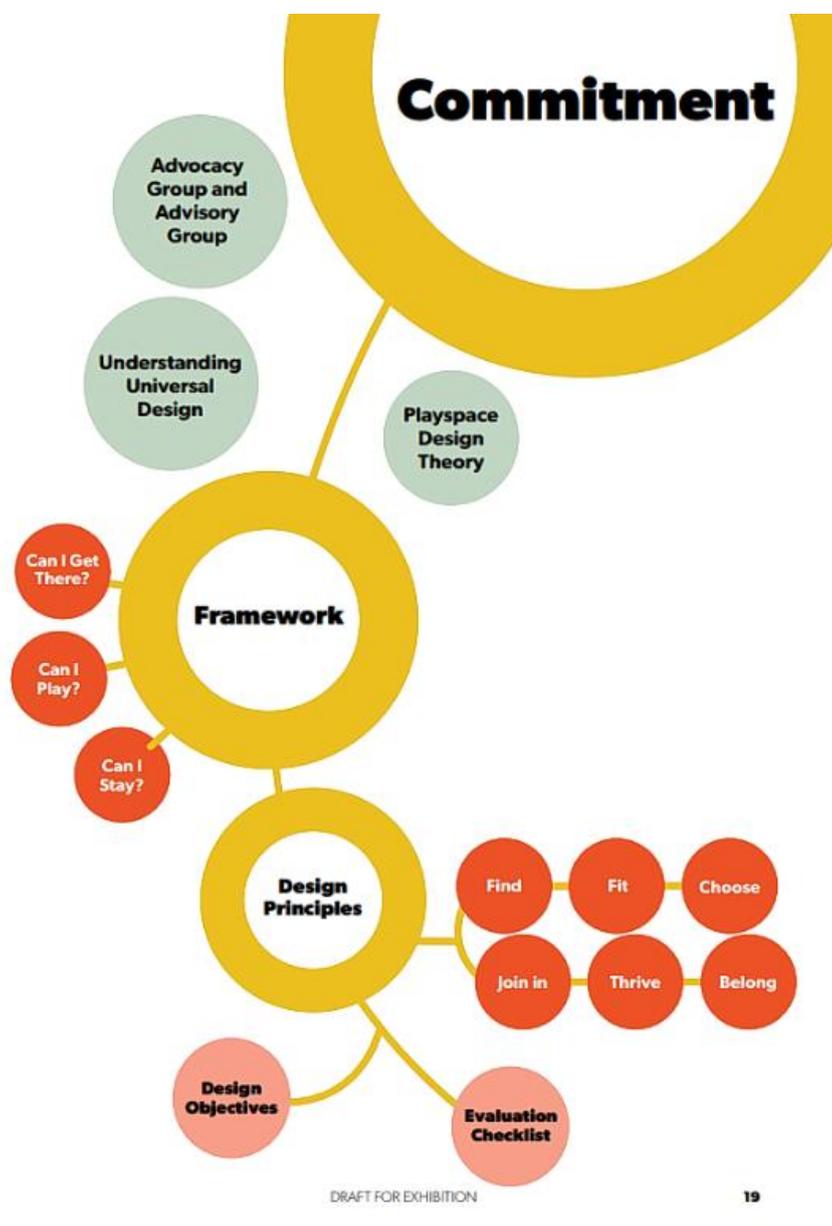


*Figure 3: A page from the guideline showing the key elements*

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**e 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.**

When it comes to determining if a playspace is truly inclusive, it is important to consider the wider context. Look outside, around and through the playspaces and ask: Can I get there? Can I play? Can I stay?

## Can I Get There?

A considered location and layout, adequate signage and wayfinding and accessibility will ensure everyone can find their way to, in and around the playspace.

## Can I Play?

The play experience as a whole, including the equipment and surfacing, should enable everyone to experience a variety of challenging and engaging play opportunities in a way that suits them.

## Can I Stay?

Sufficient consideration of safety, amenities and the wider environment and landscape will ensure everyone can stay at the playspace for as long as they would like.

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*Figure 4: The three Can I's*

**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 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 Everyone Can Play 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 on the project.

Figure 5 following shows the cyclical iterations of knowledge sharing and commentary implemented and who was included in each knowledge sharing cycle.



*Figure 5: Diagram showing the participatory process employed in the development of the guideline. Represents the flow of participatory research and cycles of knowledge sharing and building.*

## Advocacy Group feedback and analysis

Following the conclusion of the cycle of meetings and workshops, the reflections and comments of Advocacy Group members on the guideline development process was sought.

A two part question was asked in a survey questionnaire.

**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 to the two-part question 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.

## 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 in a format they can use and understand, which would 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 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.

## Epilogue

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

*Everyone Can Play* provides a comprehensive suite of principles, case studies and "tool kit" 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.

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