

Niagara Region 2024 - 2029 Accessibility Plan Engagement Summary

Prepared by LURA Consulting for the Regional Municipality of Niagara
June 2024

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Introduction

Niagara Region is committed to reviewing its practices, processes, and the built environment for barriers to access for persons with disabilities.

Currently, Niagara Region is updating its Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP) in accordance with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) and Regional Council’s Strategic Priority of ensuring that Niagara Region is an Equitable Region for all. The 2024-2029 Accessibility Plan will describe how the Region will work toward removing barriers to Regional services for people with disabilities. It focuses on the five key areas of living that are outlined in the AODA, including Information and Communication, Employment, Customer Service, the Design of Public Spaces and Transportation. These standards are also known as the Integrated Accessibility Standards (IASR).

Engagement and Communication

LURA Consulting assisted the Region in designing and executing the engagement process to inform the accessibility plan update. Participation from people in the community with accessibility needs was crucial. Their feedback would help Niagara Region to identify existing barriers to regional services and facilities. It would also help to identify ways to remove and prevent future barriers for people with disabilities.

The public engagement program included three in-person drop-in-style consultation sessions, an online survey (with paper copies available on request), a virtual meeting with all of Niagara’s Accessibility Advisory Committees and a broader virtual community meeting open to all. Residents also had the option of providing feedback directly to the Niagara Region project team via email, telephone, mail, or in-person at Niagara’s Regional headquarters in Thorold.

587 people provided feedback and engaged in the process between February and June 2024.

The table below summarizes the various activities of the engagement program and communication tactics. It is followed by more detailed descriptions of each, and an overview of how barriers to engagement were addressed.

Engagement Activity	Date	Location or Format	Approximate Attendance or Response Count
Drop-In Session	March 4, 2024 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Heartland Forest Nature Experience, Niagara Falls	5
Drop-In Session	March 4, 2024 5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.	Meridian Community Centre, Pelham (Fonthill)	63
Drop-In Session	March 5, 2024 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.	50+ Active Living and Information Fair at Dunlop Drive Older Adults Centre, St Catherines	218
Survey	February 26 - March 22, 2024	Online and paper forms	261
Accessibility Advisory Committees Meeting	April 23, 2024 1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.	Online	25
Virtual Community Meeting	May 29, 2024 6:30 p.m. -8:00p.m	Online	15
TOTAL			587

In-Person Drop-In Sessions

Three in-person drop-in sessions were hosted across Niagara (Niagara Falls, Pelham/Fonthill, and St. Catharines). These sessions provided an opportunity for people in Niagara to learn about the Region’s Accessibility Plan and to share their feedback and experiences to help shape it. The drop-in sessions featured panel boards with project background information, QR codes linking to the project webpage and online survey, contact information, and feedback boards with space to post written comments on sticky

notes. LURA and Niagara Region project team members were present to speak directly with participants, answering their questions and writing down their comments.

At each session, individual and small group conversations facilitated by LURA staff sometimes took place, providing an opportunity for deeper understanding and reflections from participants.

Project postcards with the survey QR code were available for participants to take with them and share within their networks, and copies of the 2018 - 2023 Niagara Region Accessibility Plan were available for reference. Paper survey copies were also available.

A total of approximately 286 people were tallied across all three drop-in engagement sessions.

Online and Paper Survey

A survey was also developed to seek feedback and to help build a picture of where accessibility needs and gaps exist. The survey was available to be completed online, on paper or over the telephone. 254 people completed the online survey, and seven copies of the paper survey were returned. The survey was open for responses from February 26, 2024, through March 22, 2024, and was hosted on LURA's Canada-based account on the SurveyMonkey platform.

Accessibility Advisory Committee Meeting

An overview of “what we heard” from the community through the drop-in sessions and survey was provided to Niagara Region's Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC). All Accessibility Advisory Committee members from local municipalities in Niagara were invited to participate in this meeting on April 23, 2024. Twenty-five members from across Niagara participated and provided additional feedback about barriers to regional services.

Virtual Community Meeting

On May 29, 2024, the project team presented an overview of feedback received to-date through the engagement activities, including the drop-in sessions, Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) Meeting, and the survey. This meeting represented an opportunity for the community to validate the insights and to provide additional feedback for Niagara Region to consider when developing the updated MYAP. Fifteen community members attended this meeting. Niagara Region Councillor and AAC Chair Haley Bateman also attended and gave opening remarks.

Communication and Outreach Tactics

A range of communication and outreach tactics were employed by the Niagara Region to raise awareness about the Accessibility Plan engagement activities. Communication and outreach tactics included:

- Email blasts to social and community organizations with encouragement to further share with their networks.
- Emails to local area municipalities and Accessibility Advisory Committees
- Hard copy project postcards were left at libraries, community centres, Regional facilities, and other organizations across Niagara.
- Niagara Region’s social media channels.
- New project webpage on Niagara Region’s website.
- Memos to Regional Council through Council Weekly Correspondence for broader distribution to the general public.
- Emails and postcards distributed internally at the Region.

Mitigating Barriers to Engagement

The project team worked to ensure that all those who wanted to provide their input to help shape the Accessibility Plan were able to do so. The following measures helped remove and prevent barriers to the engagement process:

- The three drop-in session locations were designated barrier-free with regard to physical accessibility.
- The online survey was created to be digitally accessible and was hosted on SurveyMonkey, a platform compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0).
- A paper version of the survey was available to all upon request (in-person at drop-in sessions or mailed), in case a participant did not have internet access, experienced challenges using technology, or preferred using pen and paper. A telephone option was also available.
- At the drop-in sessions, project team members offered to write comments on sticky notes or fill out survey responses on behalf of those participants for whom writing posed a challenge.
- Planning and delivery of the virtual meeting included accessibility considerations for all aspects of the meeting.

- This Engagement Summary Report document has been designed with accessibility in mind.

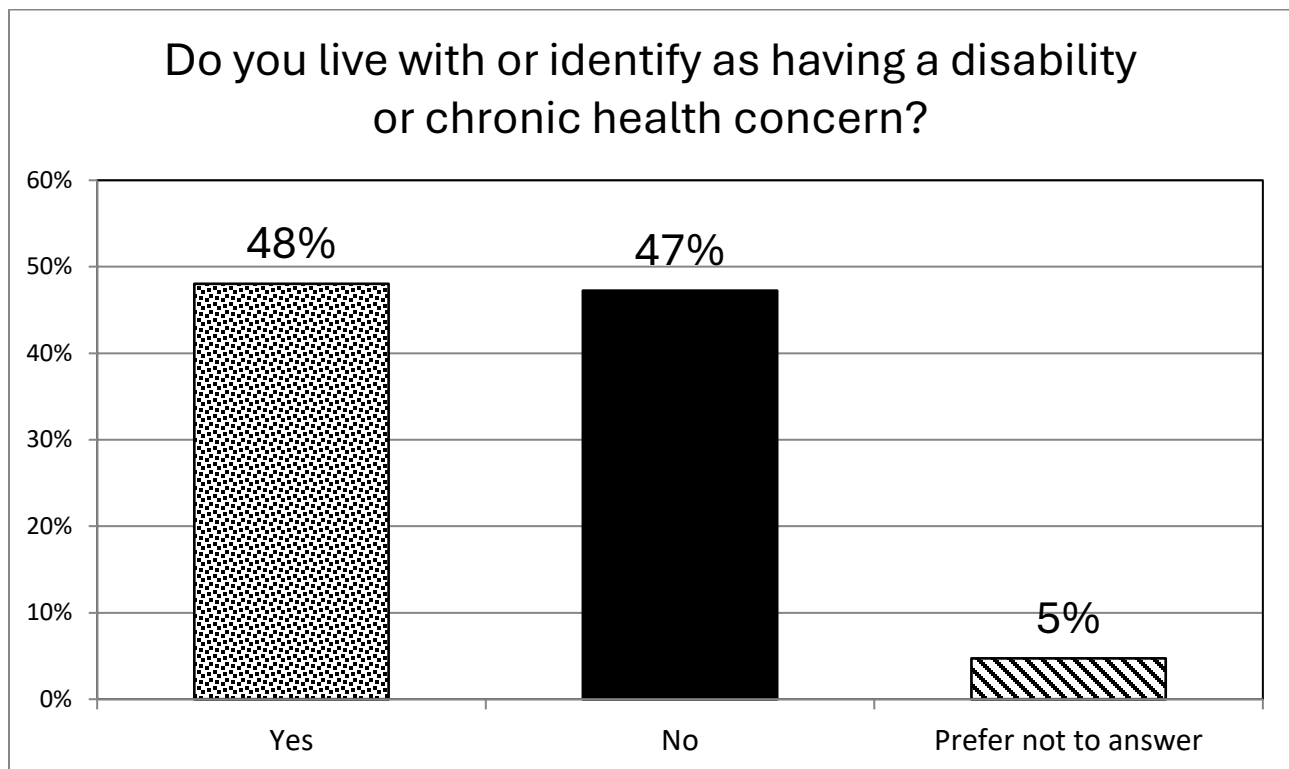
Who We Heard From

In-Person Participants

The three drop-in session locations represent a geographic cross-section of Niagara region (covering east/south, north, and west Niagara, respectively). They were also locations that provided the opportunity to connect with people with diverse abilities, with families and with both younger and older adults. The project team’s observations and the people with whom they interacted at the drop-in sessions confirmed this understanding.

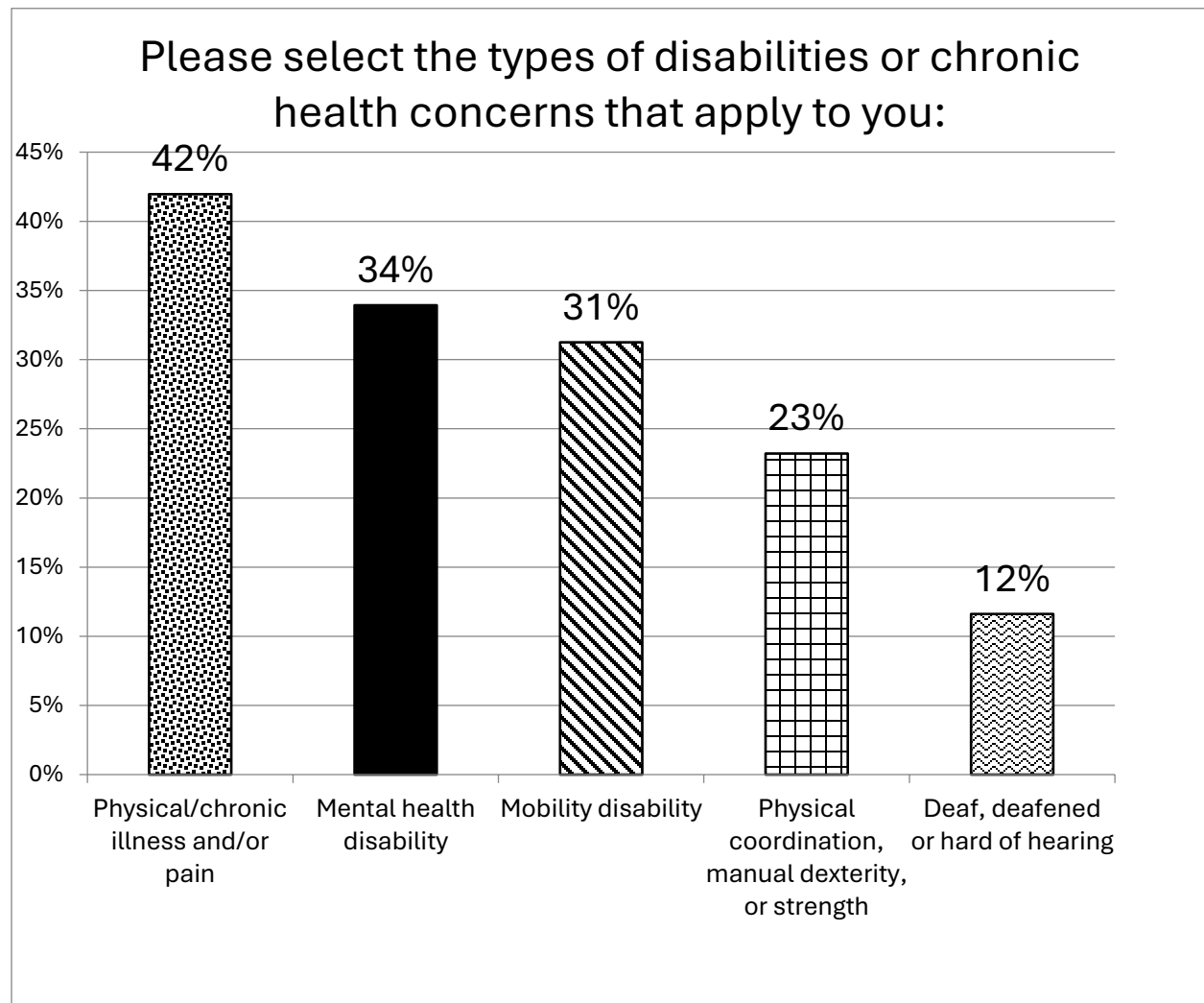
Survey Respondents

Self-Identification of Disability or Chronic Health Concern



Just as many survey respondents (48 percent, or almost half) stated that they identify as having a disability or chronic health condition as those who do not (47 percent). 5 percent preferred not to answer this question.

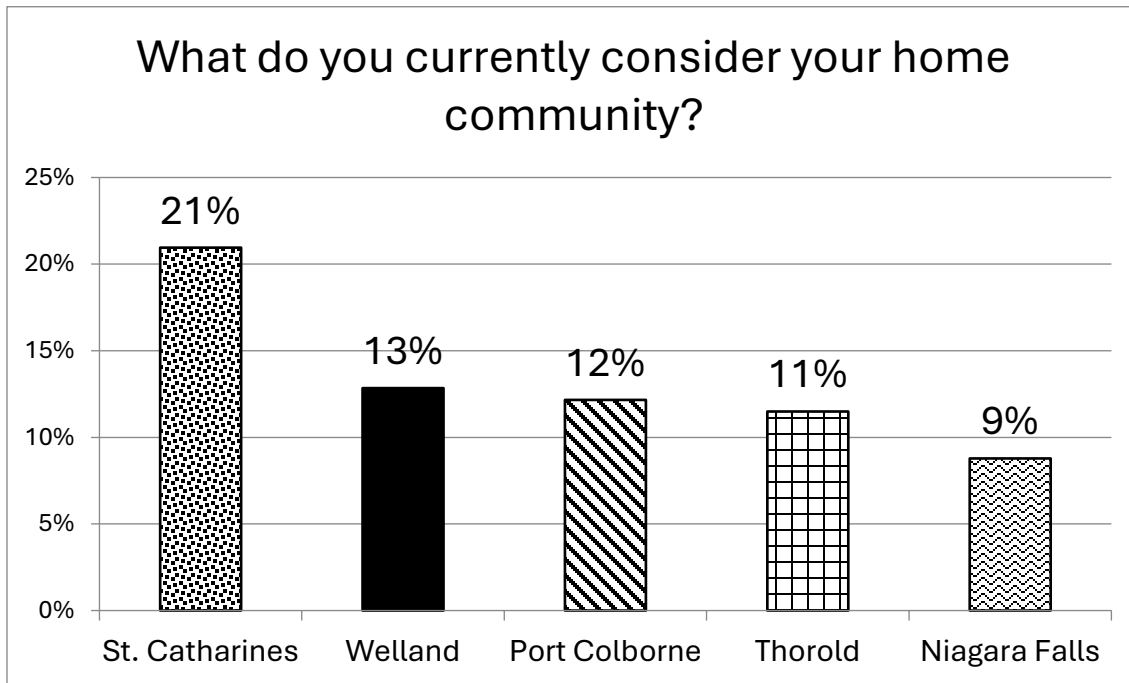
Types of Disability



42 percent of respondents indicated that they live with a chronic physical illness and/or pain. 34 percent have a mental health disability. 31 percent have a mobility disability. 23 percent experience challenges with physical coordination, manual dexterity, or strength. 12 percent are deaf, deafened, or heard of hearing. 11 percent have environmental sensitivities. 10 percent have a learning disability. 5 percent live with addiction. 5 percent have a developmental or cognitive disability. 4 percent have blindness or low vision. 2 percent have a speech or language disability. 1 percent report a substance (over)use or dependence. 12 percent of respondents have a disability or chronic health concern not listed, and 5 percent preferred not to answer this question.

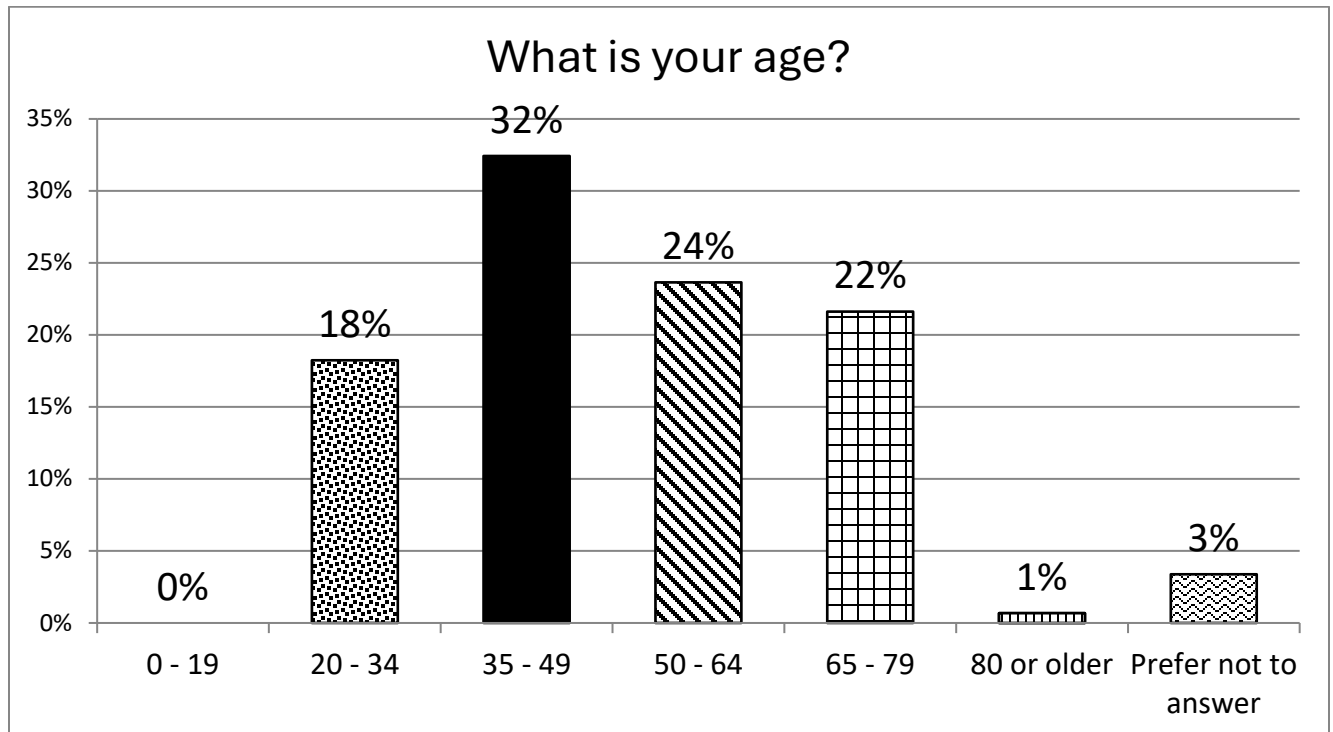
Note: Each of the following demographic questions for home community, age, race, and gender were answered by around 60 percent of survey respondents, and skipped entirely (without responding “Prefer not to answer”) by approximately 40 percent of them (plus or minus a few percentage points on individual questions).

Home Community



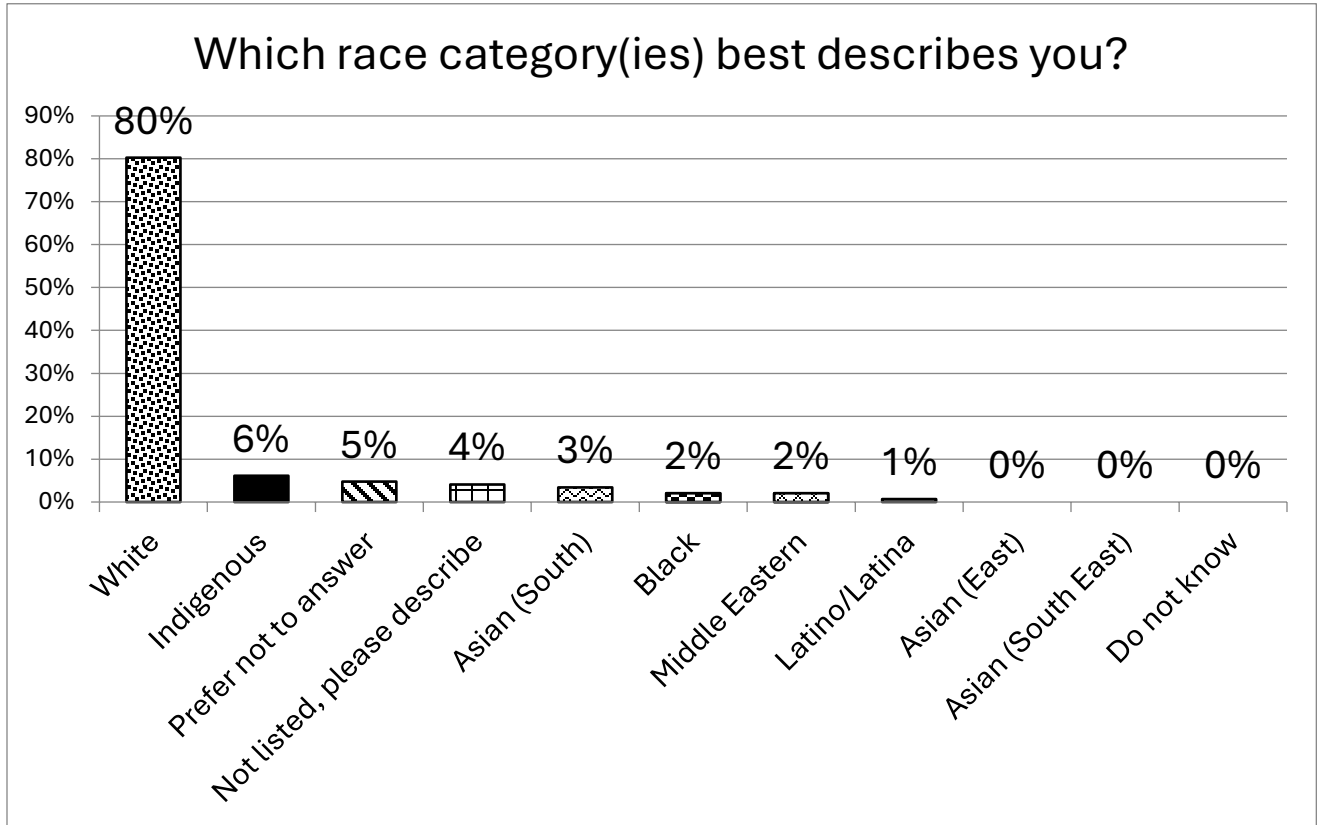
The geographic representation among respondents was quite diverse. 21 percent of respondents reported St. Catharines as their home community. 13 percent live in Welland. 12 percent live in Port Colborne. 11 percent live in Thorold. 9 percent live in Niagara Falls. 7 percent live in Fort Erie. 7 percent live in Pelham. 5 percent live in Grimsby. 5 percent live in Niagara-on-the-Lake. 3 percent live in Wainfleet. 2 percent live in West Lincoln. 1 percent live in Lincoln. 3 percent of respondents indicated that their home community is outside of Niagara Region, and 1 percent preferred not to answer this question.

Age



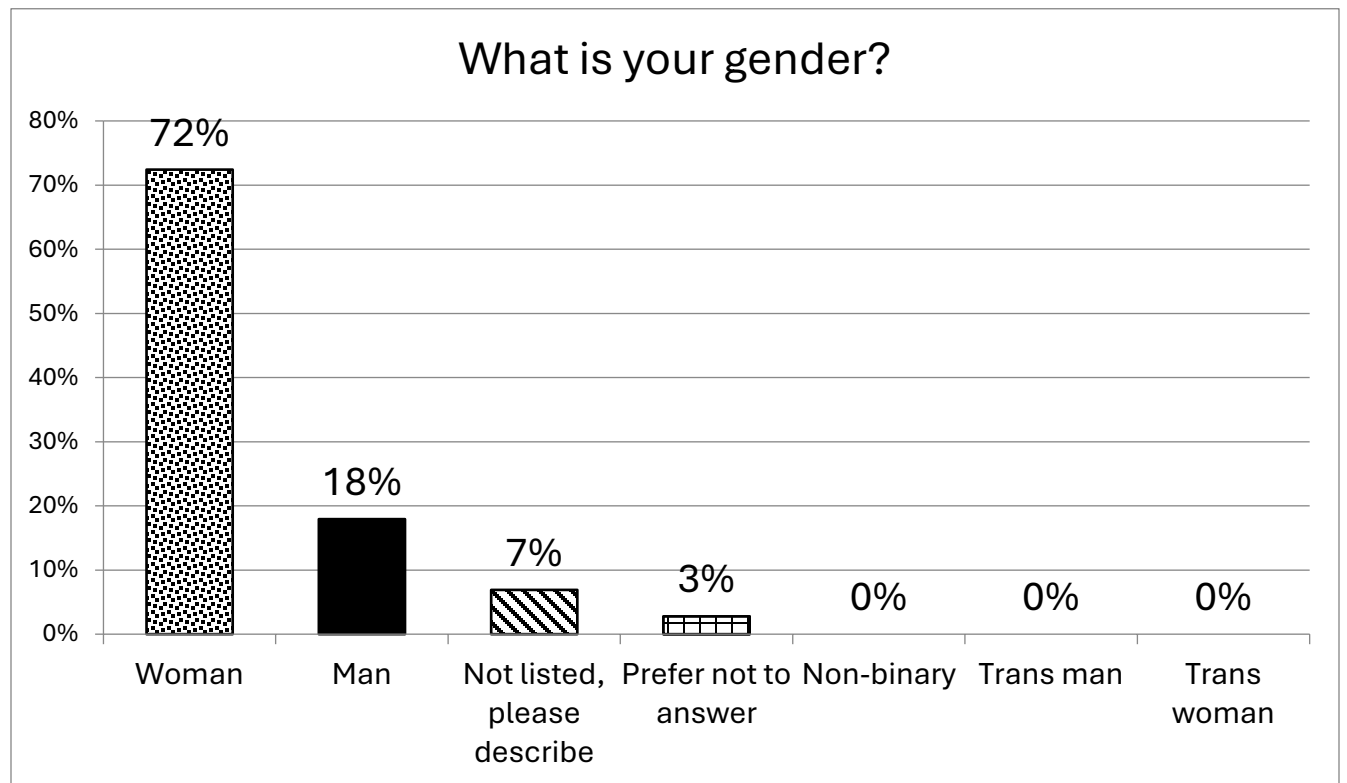
No respondents were between the ages of 0 and 19. 18 percent of respondents were between 20 and 34 years old. 32 percent of respondents were between 35 and 49 years old. 24 percent of respondents were between 50 and 64 years old. 22 percent of respondents were between 65 and 79 years old. 1 percent of respondents were 80 years of age or older. 3 percent of respondents preferred not to answer this question.

Race



80 percent of respondents described themselves as White. 6 percent described themselves as Indigenous. 3 percent described themselves as South Asian. 2 percent described themselves as Black. 2 percent described themselves as Middle Eastern. 1 percent described themselves as Latino or Latina. No respondents identified as East Asian or Southeast Asian. 4 percent of respondents described their race category(ies) as not listed. 5 percent of respondents preferred not to answer this question.

Gender



72 percent of respondents identified as women. 18 percent of respondents identified as men. 7 percent of respondents identified with a gender not listed. No respondents identified as trans men, trans women, or non-binary. 3 percent of respondents preferred not to answer this question.

What We Heard

In the drop-in engagement sessions, the survey, and the Accessibility Advisory Committee and virtual community meetings, participants shared rich feedback relating to accessibility and regional services. Feedback from all sources is presented below and grouped according to the AODA Integrated Accessibility Standards. Some suggestions do not fall within the jurisdiction of Niagara Region to implement but are included below because the feedback provides a more comprehensive picture of what was heard through the engagement process.

Note: The terms “participants” and “respondents” are used interchangeably, regardless of whether one attended a drop-in engagement session, the Accessibility Advisory Committee meeting, completed the survey, or attended the virtual community meeting.

Customer Service

Staff Training and Disposition

Multiple comments touched upon how Niagara Region staff are trained and their approach to interacting with residents, customers, and clients. Some participants perceived that there is currently not enough training for receptionists and customer service representatives around the needs of people with disabilities or who are neurodivergent (including needing to be patient and communicate clearly), and not enough staff who speak languages other than English. Participants requested that staff receive training about AODA and how to engage with members of the disability community with dignity and respect. Training should also include how to accommodate service animals as required by law.

It was recommended that staff strive to maintain a helpful, friendly, and empathetic attitude during interactions, and employ active listening techniques to ensure open and meaningful two-way communication.

Going Beyond AODA

Participants expressed that accessibility is multi-dimensional, as people have different disabilities, and that some disabilities are invisible. The burden to champion disability should not fall on the shoulders of disabled people, they said. There is a desire for Regional staff to go beyond just minimum compliance with AODA and other legal accessibility requirements. Accessibility should be a lens through which Niagara Region views all its customer service activities.

Logistical and Technical Accessibility

Participants proposed several steps Niagara Region could take to streamline customer service and minimize accessibility barriers. One suggestion is to ensure that all Regional programs and services are available online and in other fully accessible formats that are inclusive of a broad range of disabilities.

Some participants commented that there is a perceived lack of service capacity that can result in long wait times. Another suggestion is to ensure that there is a designated in-person point-of-contact for all service-oriented or public-facing departments that can guide residents (e.g., a “service concierge”), and that they are made known to residents who could benefit from such a liaison resource. Finally, some participants suggested that personal support workers (PSWs) or similar staff be available at Niagara Region in-person service points to assist those with accessibility needs and help advocate for them and ease barriers when navigating Regional services.

Information & Communications

Communicating for Awareness and Transparency

Participants stressed the importance of Niagara Region maintaining transparent, two-way communication with those whom it serves. Suggestions were provided about proactive and frequent outreach to disabled communities (including on the Region’s website), promotion of Niagara Region-hosted activities through increased social media posts, newsletters, and advertising, and efforts to make clear to residents what each local governmental jurisdiction is responsible for with regard to accessibility and service provision. Respondents requested easy access to information about resources and programs provided by the Region specifically.

Additionally, respondents recommended that the Region educate and raise awareness about accessibility amongst the wider Niagara community through various informational/educational campaigns. Participants cited the cities of Ottawa, Windsor, and Pickering as leaders in this area. For instance, participants proposed creating pamphlets on AODA or accessibility to promote accessibility education in the Region. Respondents also implored the Region to educate service providers and businesses frequently on maintaining accessibility as their duty to clients and customers.

Accessible and Frequently Updated Information

Some participants reported difficulty connecting with service providers, including challenges with the phone system and receiving timely callbacks. Difficulty with the Region's website/technology and inconsistent accessibility of documents, links, and forms was also reported. It was also noted that Niagara Region’s website may not be updated often enough.

Participants also suggested clear and transparent communication materials are needed to identify what accommodations are available to people with disabilities. Participants expressed that meeting legal accessibility standards is the minimum requirement and barriers may still exist for some people. Businesses and service providers need to communicate more clearly what is ‘fully accessible’. For example, participants noted some scent-free products have masking agents; this remains a barrier for some with chemical sensitivities. It was suggested that ensuring clear and frequent communication about Regional services and spaces would help people better understand options based on their needs.

Inquiry Response and Complaint Resolution

Participants pointed to the need for clear information on whom residents should contact in the event of inaccessible technologies, as well as a point-of-contact for any accessibility-related issues or complaints at the Region. They implored the Region to ensure that such inquiries are responded to in a timely manner via a formal process that features standardized protocols or criteria for handling different complaints or requests. Participants expressed the importance of the Region “closing the loop” when engaging with people about accessibility concerns by properly documenting the issue and providing or offering solutions that address their concerns completely.

Streamlined Processes

Participants proposed implementing automatic renewals for services provided by Niagara Region to streamline administrative processes and reduce any related burden on residents who rely on these services.

It was also raised that any monetary reimbursements from Niagara Region to eligible residents or clients should be processed within a reasonable timeline.

Signage

Respondents said that signage is a key component of accessibility, both being in an accessible format and location itself, but also as a tool to communicate about accessibility matters. For instance, they requested sufficient signage is placed near automatic doors as soon as they are out of order, and signage for accessible detour routes are posted when sidewalks are closed. They also recommended the Region create signage that is clear and easy for everyone to read and that uses consistent branding and messaging to match other channels of communication to prevent confusion.

Buildings, Facilities and Public Spaces

Physical Accessibility

Participants highlighted the importance of equitable access to every part of a space in Niagara Region. Examples included making every floor of a multi-level venue accessible instead of just a single floor. Many comments under this accessibility standard highlighted physical accessibility barriers at private businesses (not specifically Regional facilities). Participants suggested reaching out to municipal and Regional councillors to apply pressure on businesses whose spaces are not accessible. Current physical barriers participants mentioned included inaccessible pathways or poorly maintained or broken sidewalks, inaccessible parking lots, and non-existent or broken audible crosswalk signals and automatic door openers.

Participants noted the following as important features to install and/or maintain for physical accessibility at buildings and facilities: automatic doors and opener buttons that are within reach, elevators, ramps on all sidewalks and curbs, and large washrooms to ensure space for both mobility device users and support persons. If automatic doors are out of order, participants called for a prompt response to fix them as soon as possible. Participants suggested better enforcement against owners of spaces who are slow to address barriers. Requests were made for the Region to prioritize safer entrances to community spaces and private businesses, with smooth and clear sidewalks that are cleared promptly in winter. Accessible parking spaces were requested to be large and placed close to building entrances.

To improve accessibility in buildings and facilities, respondents proposed that Niagara Region encourage businesses to implement accessible features in their spaces through incentives and grants. Participants expressed the need for stricter AODA enforcement. This was also highlighted for stores, offices, and private businesses. It was suggested that the Region or local municipalities advocate for developers to consult with people with disabilities in the design and planning process. It was also suggested that staff monitor and enforce regulations to ensure accountability. A respondent suggested Niagara Region Council pass a by-law as an enforcement mechanism if possible, citing the existence of such legal instruments in American jurisdictions as an example.

Programs & Services

With regard to services provided at Regional facilities, participants requested different types of socially supportive programs that meet the needs of Niagara's diverse population.

Accessible, Safe, and Welcoming Spaces for All

Participants highlighted the need for public spaces across Niagara Region to accommodate everyone. It was requested that spaces be designated as fragrance-free, rest areas be created in public spaces for those who experience overstimulation, and multi-use trails and paths be welcoming and accessible for users of wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

Staffing and Supervision

Some respondents desired more Region staff in and around public spaces to monitor the area and provide support to people as needed.

Transportation

Much of the feedback on transportation received during the engagement process related to transit in Niagara. Niagara Regional Transit will be developing its own multi-year accessibility plan. As such, Niagara Regional Transit (NRT) services will not be included in the Region's multi-year plan.

The information below highlights the feedback received from participants about regional transportation services and about transit. This information will be shared with Niagara Regional Transit to inform their planning.

Niagara Region Transportation Services

Accessible infrastructure is a priority for many respondents. Ensuring sidewalks and curb ramps are well-maintained for people who use mobility devices or who have mobility limitations (especially during winter) was requested. Installing tactile paving and the use of multisensory technology for safety were also suggestions provided. Participants also noted the need for strict enforcement of the use of accessible parking spaces and ensuring accessible parking spaces were large and close to building entrances.

Niagara Regional Transit

Capacity and Coverage

Participants emphasized the need for a well-integrated and reliable transit system in Niagara, one that is widely available and accessible for people with disabilities throughout the region, including more rural areas. Participants identified the need for seamless integration of specialized and conventional transit and expanded hours and coverage areas of both.

Participants also suggested reaching out to other regional transit systems to see how they handle accessibility concerns and what issues they have encountered to learn what works and what does not.

Customer Service, Bookings and Notices

Respondents implored NRT to ensure incoming calls for booking paratransit are answered promptly. They expressed the importance of receiving accurate and timely information (notices) regarding transit schedules, delays, routes, on transit mobile apps, automated calls, texts, emails, and digital displays at transit stops. More equity and flexibility in booking specialized transit was requested. Examples included allowing standing bookings and reducing the amount of time in advance needed to book a ride. The need for staff training on the AODA and disability was also noted.

Participants recommended a more centralized phone system, an accessible website that is updated regularly and that is user-friendly and easy to understand, and real-time notifications.

Physical Accessibility

Clear paths to bus stops, functioning multisensory technology at stops, bus ramps or kneeling buses that can go lower, and collapsible stools in transit vehicles with high floors were further recommendations by participants to improve access.

Affordability and Quality Assurance

Respondents suggested that pricing of conventional and paratransit can be a barrier for people with low incomes. Fare subsidies, a single fare for all trips, and abolishing late fees were proposed. Implementing quality assurance processes to assess functionality was also recommended.

Employment

Comments in this area focused on the need for more accommodation during the recruiting, screening, and hiring process and addressing bias and discrimination during the interview process. Increased accommodation throughout the employment lifecycle for employees in both the physical office and virtual work environments was requested.

Recruitment & Applications

Respondents encouraged Niagara Region to promote inclusion by implementing programs and policies aimed at recruiting and retaining diverse talent. Clearer instructions on the website or job applicant portal to make it easier to understand and apply for a job. They recommended stating clearly who to contact if accommodations or alternate formats for application materials are needed. It was suggested to ensure that job postings are written clearly and avoid using jargon or unnecessary qualifications that may exclude qualified candidates. Adhering to AODA guidelines for accessible web design, including support for assistive technologies such as screen readers or voice recognition software was noted.

Interviewing Candidates

Participants highlighted the need for Niagara Region to ensure that its interview processes offer a simplified and clear way for applicants to request accommodations, such as sign-language interpreters, an accessible physical or virtual interview location, and space for any support persons accompanying them. Requests for accommodation should be processed and responded to promptly. The Region should let candidates know about potential accessibility barriers in the workplace (not just the interviewing environment)

before they apply. Respondents urged the Region to support potential candidates with learning and developmental disabilities or who are neurodivergent by considering different interview styles and allowing for accommodations such as more time to answer questions.

Hiring Decisions

Participants stated that when evaluating applicants, the Region should consider, value, and accept lived experiences equally to conventional educational experiences. More generally, it should follow policies and laws against discrimination when making hiring decisions. Niagara Region should also provide training for its hiring managers to ensure that inclusive hiring practices are integrated, and all candidates are evaluated based on their skills and qualifications.

Career Growth and Employee Support

Some participants suggested that the Region could sponsor or organize opportunities for professional networking amongst the disability and accessibility community. In addition, actively soliciting employee feedback on accessibility and encouraging reflections on accessibility and diversity amongst the Niagara Region workforce could foster a healthier and more inclusive workplace, they noted.

Other Feedback

Various miscellaneous points of feedback not directly related to the AODA accessibility areas of focus were also received. Respondents noted that it is important for the Region to keep in mind that affordable, equitable housing is also a foundational cornerstone of a high quality of life for all Niagara residents, including those with accessibility needs. Some respondents suggested that the Region adopt a new or updated Universal Design Standard framework, such as the Oakville Universal Design Standards (OUDS). Respondents also emphasized that Council members and staff should be made aware of the accessibility policies and processes applicable to the Region. Some respondents suggested advocating to the provincial government to ensure up-to-date standards and funding for the Region and local municipalities to meet their accessibility responsibilities. Respondents representing local groups expressed willingness to support the MYAP when it is complete. Respondents also asked staff to review the Region's internal policy and procedures for accessibility. Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of maintaining strong working relationships with social service and health providers, other governmental jurisdictions, and accessibility and disability-oriented organizations across Niagara.

Recommendations

Based on the input received from the hundreds of people in Niagara during this community engagement process, LURA recommends the following:

- Continue to collaborate and engage with the general public, residents with accessibility needs, Regional employees, disability and accessibility advocates, service providers, and other organizations in the space.
- Proactively provide updates on the final version of the accessibility plan, but also to collaboratively monitor and validate its implementation afterwards, on an ongoing basis.
- Design a plan that is:
 - Compliant with AODA and other legislative requirements.
 - Faithful to feedback from the engagement process.
 - Flexible enough for the Region to be able to respond to changing needs, capacity limits, expansions to service provision, and shifting funding arrangements and budgetary constraints.
- Communicate to the community that all feedback is valued even though it may not be feasible to incorporate all suggestions received during the engagement process.
- Once the plan is implemented, take note of unexpected challenges or opportunities that could be incorporated into the next multi-year plan.

Next Steps

This report will help to inform the development of the Region's 2024-2029 Accessibility Plan during the second half of 2024.

The final engagement report and accessibility plan will be made available to the public and presented to Regional Council in late 2024.