

2023 Accessibility Status Report



Region of Waterloo

Accessibility at the Region of Waterloo

The Region of Waterloo is committed to making our services, programs, workplace and public spaces more accessible so we can better meet the needs of people with disabilities in our community. By actively removing accessibility barriers to Regional services, programs and spaces, we recognize the broader, positive impact this can have on how all members of the community experience our services.

We will demonstrate this commitment to improve our services and programs through collaboration with residents and by designing our services based on a foundation of accessibility. What we do now to improve the accessibility of our services and programs allows us to prepare for the future as our community continues to grow. Enhancing service experiences and making our services more accessible improves the quality of life for people with disabilities in our community and helps to increase trust and confidence with the Region and in the work that we do every day.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Legislation Requirements

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), 2005*, is a law that sets out a process for developing and enforcing accessibility standards and applies to every person or organization in the public and private sectors in the Province of Ontario. We will highlight the legislated requirements and components of the AODA that apply to this report for background and context:

- The five Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations in the AODA.
- Accessibility advisory committees.
- Multi-year accessibility plans.
- Annual accessibility status reports.

Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations of the AODA

There are five Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations (Standards) of the AODA. The Standards are laws that government, businesses, non-profits and public sector organizations must follow to become more accessible by January 1, 2025. The Standards help organizations identify and remove barriers to improve accessibility for people with disabilities in five areas of daily life. The Standards are:

- Design of Public Spaces
- Customer Service
- Information and Communications
- Employment
- Transportation

Accessibility Advisory Committees

All municipalities that have a population of 10,000 or more residents must have an accessibility advisory committee (AAC), where the majority of committee members must be persons with disabilities. Two or more municipalities may establish a joint committee instead of having separate committees. AACs provide advice on how to implement the five Standards of the AODA to improve accessibility. The AODA legislation has a list of requirements that AACs must be consulted on to improve the accessibility of services and public spaces. For the purposes of this report and what is under the municipal responsibilities of the Region of Waterloo, examples of where AACs must be consulted are as follows (this list is not exhaustive):

- Developing, reviewing and updating multi-year accessibility plans.
- Developing accessible design criteria in construction, renovation or placement of bus stops and shelters.
- Determining the proportion of on-demand accessible taxis needed in our community.
- The need, location and design of accessible on-street parking spaces when building new or making major changes to existing on-street parking spaces.
- Building new or making major changes to existing recreational trails to help determine particular trail features.
- The design and placement of rest areas along exterior paths of travel when building new or making major changes to existing exterior paths of travel.
- Advice on accessibility for people with disabilities on buildings that Council constructs, purchases, significantly renovates or leases or declares a municipal capital facility.
- Advice on site plans for municipal offices and on elements of a site plan that impact accessibility such as buildings, driveways, entrance curbs or ramping, parking areas, sidewalks, landscaping, fences, exterior lighting and municipal services.
- Other areas and initiatives where it is appropriate to seek advice on how to remove barriers for people with disabilities.

Multi-Year Accessibility Plans (MYAP)

Designated public sector organizations, which includes municipalities and public transportation organizations, must develop a written multi-year accessibility plan (MYAP) that is updated at least once every five years and is posted on the organization's website. The accessibility plan outlines what steps the organization will take to prevent and remove barriers to accessibility, how it will meet AODA requirements and when the steps will be taken. Municipalities can consult with people with disabilities in their community and must consult with their established AAC, as described in the previous section, in the development of their accessibility plans. The Region organizes its MYAP goals on the five Standards of the AODA and describes

what we will do to meet those Standards and how we will remove barriers for people with disabilities in our community.

Annual Accessibility Status Reports

Designated public sector organizations, such as municipalities and public transportation organizations, must prepare an annual status report on the progress of the measures taken to implement what is described in their multi-year accessibility plans. Accessibility status reports are reviewed by a municipality's established AAC. The report must be posted on the organization's website and made publicly available. The Region organizes its annual accessibility status reports on the five Standards of the AODA and describes the actions we have taken to achieve the goals of our MYAP.

Region of Waterloo Accessibility Plan Status Update

The AODA requires designated public sector organizations, such as municipalities, to provide an annual accessibility status report on what actions were taken to meet the legislative requirements and describe their progress on their multi-year accessibility plans. This Accessibility Status Report describes what the Region did in 2023 to meet the requirements of the five Standards in the AODA legislation and what we did to achieve the goals of our multi-year accessibility plan (MYAP). The five Standards of the AODA are:

- Design of Public Spaces
- Customer Service
- Information and Communications
- Employment
- Transportation

2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP)

The Region's [2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan \(MYAP\)](#) identifies and describes how we will remove barriers to and improve the accessibility of our services, programs and public spaces for people with disabilities in our community. The MYAP was approved by Regional Council in May 2023. The Region's MYAP outlines the goals we have set for the organization to meet the five Standards of the AODA and what we will do to improve the accessibility of our services, programs and public spaces for people with disabilities. The MYAP was created in consultation with Regional staff and the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC).

The Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee

Public engagement and consultation is an important feature of the work we do at the Region of Waterloo. Regional staff rely on feedback and input from the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC) to ensure we are working towards our vision of providing inclusive services. GRAAC is the Region's accessibility advisory committee (AAC) that we are required to have as per the AODA legislation and it is a shared, Committee of Council with the Cities of Kitchener and Waterloo, and the Townships of North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich. The City of Cambridge manages its own advisory committee.

A key role of GRAAC is to advise Council and staff members on how to meet the five Standards of the AODA and on the accessibility of Regional services, programs, and public spaces. Members of GRAAC are appointed by Regional Council and by the Councils for the Cities of Kitchener and Waterloo, and the area townships, all of whom seek the advice of GRAAC in matters of accessibility. GRAAC consists of 15 community members who have disabilities or are part of the disability community, Regional and area municipality staff and Councillors.

The Region has previously consulted with GRAAC on many services and initiatives that are required under the AODA legislation. In 2023, the Region consulted with GRAAC on the following:

- 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan
- Space Optimization Project and the design of the public spaces at 20 Weber
- GRT accessibility status updates on the plan
- Region of Waterloo Breslau Library expansion
- Neuron Adaptive Vehicles
- 2023 Accessibility Status Report
- GRT MobilityPLUS application process
- GRT Bus stop design guidelines

Accessibility Status Report

The 2023 Accessibility Status Report includes the Region's commitment to removing barriers to our services, programs and public spaces and describes what we have done to achieve the goals in the 2023-2027 MYAP to meet the five Standards of the AODA. The actions the Region took in 2023 to improve the accessibility of our services, programs and public spaces are organized around the five Standards of the AODA. These updates and information on the actions can be found in Appendix B.

In the AODA legislation, there are additional reporting requirements under the Transportation Standard and Design of Public Spaces Standard. The Transportation Standard requires transit organizations, Grand River Transit (GRT), to annually report on actions that were taken to meet requirements and what was done to improve the accessibility of services as it relates to the MYAP.

Under the Design of Public Spaces Standard, organizations are required to have procedures for preventative and emergency maintenance on accessible elements in public spaces and procedures for dealing with temporary disruptions when the accessible elements are not in working order. The updates and information for both of these requirements can also be found in [Appendix A](#) under each of the respective Standards.

Reviewing and Monitoring the MYAP

The Region of Waterloo's multi-year accessibility plans are reviewed and updated at least once every five years. An annual status report is completed to document the progress and measures taken to achieve the goals in the Region's 2023-2027 MYAP and meet the requirements of the five Standards of the AODA.

Feedback

We welcome feedback on the 2023 Accessibility Status Report, and on the accessibility of our services, programs and public spaces. If you have any ideas or suggestions, please contact us.

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The 2023 Accessibility Status Report is available online (www.regionofwaterloo.ca/accessibility) in accessible PDF. Alternate formats, including full-text Word and paper copies of the 2023 Accessibility Status Report and the 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan are available upon request at no charge from:

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Appendix A: Overview of Accessibility Actions in 2023

This section details the actions the Region took in 2023 to achieve the goals in the 2023-2027 Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (MYAP) and what we did to improve the accessibility of our services, programs and public spaces to meet the needs of people with disabilities in our community.

Standard 1: Design of Public Spaces

The Region strives to remove barriers to accessing our public spaces to ensure that residents and staff feel welcomed and safe in Regional facilities. In this section, we identify what we did this year to achieve the goals we set for the organization under the Design of Public Spaces Standard in our 2023-2027 MYAP.

Goal 1A: Continue auditing Regional facilities for accessibility, prioritizing facilities with the highest occupancy and public visitors.

Actions 1A:

- Accessibility audits, in conformance with the Region's Accessible Design Standards, were completed at 22 Regional buildings in 2023. Over 80 Regional buildings have been audited in the past five years. Accessibility upgrades continue to be implemented based on inspection results and significant upgrades are incorporated into renovation and capital renewal projects.

Goal 1B: Update the Region of Waterloo Accessible Design Standards and inform applicable program areas of changes made to the design standards.

Actions 1B:

- The Region periodically modifies and improves the Accessible Design Standards document on an ongoing basis as new information becomes available. The impacted program areas are informed of any changes, when applicable.

Goal 1C: Incorporate accessibility practices and principles into the optimization and redesign of our Regional buildings for office and public spaces.

Actions 1C:

- Accessibility design standards continue to be incorporated into Regional renovation and new construction projects.
- In addition, accessibility improvements are implemented within existing spaces based on accessibility audit findings.

Goal 1D: Continue to ensure the Region complies with having procedures for preventative and emergency maintenance on accessible elements in our public spaces and appropriately addresses temporary disruptions, should they occur.

Actions 1D:

- The Region has preventative and emergency maintenance procedures for accessible elements in the following public spaces:
 - Recreational trails and beach access routes
 - Outdoor public use eating areas
 - Outdoor play spaces (if applicable; area municipalities are typically responsible for outdoor place spaces)
 - Sidewalks or walkways
 - Ramps, stairs, curb ramps and depressed curbs
 - Accessible pedestrian signals
 - Rest areas
 - Off-street and on-street accessible parking
 - Service counters, fixed queuing guides and waiting areas
- The Region has ensured compliance through integrating AODA requirements into relevant standard specifications, updated standard operating procedures, and in consultation with guiding stakeholders such as the Transportation Association of Canada and the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC).
- The Region periodically reviews and updates its standard specifications and standard operating procedures to ensure updated AODA legislation requirements are incorporated, as well as, new products and supports that are integrated into those documents with the goal of continuously improving accessibility in all areas.

Standard 2: Customer Service

The Region strives to deliver services that meet the needs of our residents. The Region plans to rethink and redesign our services using human-centred and equity-based principles, and by leveraging digital capabilities to better meet the community's service expectations and needs. We describe what we did in 2023 to deliver better services to meet the needs of our residents and what achievements we made on the goals under the Customer Service Standard in the 2023-2027 MYAP.

Goal 2A: Evolve the existing Client Experience Program based on human-centred and equity based design principles for a consistent approach for service delivery across the organization and to better meet the needs of residents in our community.

Actions 2A:

- Released the digital service transformation report to residents and staff on the Region's website and developed draft service standards.

- Assessed selected services across the organization, such as the MobilityPLUS application process, the Welcome Spaces and the Public Health New Births Package, to identify possible gaps in accessibility to inform the Client Experience Framework and service standards.
- Conducted service design and redesign initiatives of selected services, such as the MobilityPLUS application process and the Public Health New Births Package, using human centred-design principles to improve accessibility and equitable access of service.

Goal 2B: Continue supporting Community Services clients by improving employment opportunities through distribution of refurbished computers, referrals to community agencies for technology literacy, and increasing access to chiropractic care for musculoskeletal illness in the Health2Work project.

Actions 2B:

- Within the last year, 759 participants have accessed re-furbished laptop computers.
- Within the past year, 53 participants have received chiropractic care for musculoskeletal illness through the Health2Work project.

Goal 2C: Increase the number of accessible housing units available for people with disabilities through the Waterloo Region Housing (WRH) Master Plan that goes beyond the minimum Ontario Building Code requirements.

Actions 2C:

- The Waterloo Regional Housing (WRH) Master Plan projects achieve results above the minimum accessibility requirements. WRH continues to exceed the Ontario Building Code requirement, that 15 percent of units must be accessible within each building. For example:
 - The WRH Kingscourt Drive building has made 25 percent of its units accessible. Accessibility features within the site further surpass the Building Code design requirements by utilizing stricter opening and path-of-travel widths, specific hardware types and heights, slip resistant surfaces, knee and toe space at countertops, and many other components.
 - The WRH Wilson Street senior's building has 23 percent of its units designed as accessible with enhanced barrier-free options. In addition, the entire building meets Accessible Design standards
 - Additional ongoing and planned housing projects are designed with similar accessibility principles.

Standard 3: Information and Communications

The Region strives to meaningfully engage diverse members of the community for feedback and advice on Regional programs, services and public spaces, and ensures that information provided by the Region to residents is accessible. In order to do this, we set goals in the 2023-2027 MYAP and this section identifies what we have done, and continue to do, to make our information accessible for our residents.

Goal 3A: Review, evaluate and update guidelines on creating accessible social media content (e.g. text, images, videos) on an ongoing basis to stay current on best practices.

Actions 3A:

- Developed social media best practice guidelines based on the most current requirements for all communications staff.

Goal 3B: Continue auditing communication distribution channels (e.g. Canva, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) and documents for accessibility and plain language.

Actions 3B:

- Modifications were made this year to the placement of name keys within corporate videos so they would not interfere with captioning.

Goal 3C: Review, update and continue training communications staff on accessible social media content, writing in plain language and creating accessible PDF documents (e.g. Adobe) to stay current on best practices.

Actions 3C:

- All new communications staff receive the most current AODA training on how to create accessible documents, such as Word and PDF.
- All Regional staff have access to updated resources on the employee portal that offer guidance around creating accessible social media content, writing in plain language and creating accessible PDF documents.
- Corporate communications provided a workshop to all social media communications staff on how to create accessible social media posts.

Standard 4: Employment

The Region strives to recruit and retain diverse staff who feel that their knowledge and skills are valued. Our goals for the Employment Standards in the 2023-2027 MYAP demonstrate what we want to accomplish to make our workplace more accessible, and this section discusses what we have done to achieve those goals.

Goal 4A: Review, evaluate and update Human Resources policies to embed accessibility into the policies for each stage of the employee lifecycle.

Actions 4A:

- A review of Human Resources policies is in progress.
- Explored opportunities for candidates to self-identify and provide demographic information to assess the effectiveness of the Region's recruitment strategies and if we are attracting diverse talent into our hiring process.

Goal 4B: Conduct a comprehensive review of existing Abilities Management processes, including short and long term abilities management protocols and work accommodation program to provide a seamless employee centric service when disability management support is required.

Actions 4B:

- A comprehensive review of the existing Abilities Management process was completed. The corresponding work accommodation program is currently under review.

Goal 4C: Review and expand Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) training, including accessibility, for Regional staff to increase DEIB knowledge, awareness and practical application of concepts.

- Provide disability, neurodiversity and accessibility training, which includes introductory concepts, a review of the AODA, and frameworks for disabilities, neurodiversity and enhancing accessibility in the workplace.

Actions 4C:

- Over 2,000 Regional employees have attended our five-part essential literacy training series training on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.
- Over 200 Regional employees have attended our five-part Disability, Neurodiversity and Accessibility training program.

Goal 4D: Continue to implement a comprehensive mental health strategy for employees, which includes:

- Delivering the Working Minds Training through the Mental Health Commission of Canada to create a supportive work environment.
- Continuous assessment and implementation of mental health benefits.
- Access to resilience and coping sessions, skill-building sessions focused on mental health and a wellbeing app.
- Implementing the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace for employees.

Actions 4D:

- The Working Mind Training has been offered since 2018 to Regional staff and leaders. To date, 118 staff sessions and 43 leader sessions have been held. About two-thirds (66%) of leaders have completed the training.
- Employee mental health benefits have increased to provide a minimum of \$1,250 in mental health coverage per calendar year. Mental health benefits were

expanded to provide access to many different mental health professionals including, psychologists, social workers (MSW), psychotherapists, clinical counsellors and family therapists. The People Connect program was introduced, offering discounted mental health services to employees.

- A total of 63 Resilience and Coping training sessions were hosted for employees. Approximately 300 employees participated in sessions targeted towards the needs of different groups, leaders, caregivers, employees experiencing grief and bereavement, and all staff. Employees also received access to additional resilience and coping resources through the mental health and wellbeing app.
- Approximately 500 employees participated in 20 skill-building sessions hosted by Homewood Health (offered January 2022-September 2023). Recordings of the training are made available to employees on the Region's internal portal to review and access for a month following the session.
- The Wellbeats Holistic Health and Wellbeing platform was launched in 2022 and continues to provide employees with access to fitness, nutrition and mindfulness content 24/7 from any device. The platform offers opportunities to engage in a wide variety of health and wellbeing content. Almost 900 employees have registered for the platform.
- Work is underway to evolve the workplace mental health programming to include a peer support team within Paramedic Services and a network of institutional trainers.

Standard 5: Transportation

The Region strives to prevent and remove barriers to transportation services for residents and visitors. Accessible transportation is an important service for residents in our community and this is reflected in the goals we have outlined in the 2023-2027 MYAP under the Transportation Standard. The actions taken throughout 2023 to improve the accessibility of our transportation services and to achieve the goals are described in this section.

Goal 5A: Develop and implement a plan for accessible taxi vans provided by local taxi services for the community, including assessing the number of accessible vans required in the bylaw to meet local needs, conducting a safety audit of accessible vans and evaluating and updating driver training.

Actions 5A:

- Licensing and Enforcement services presented a report to the Licensing and Hearings Committee on the program's intention to assess the number of accessible taxis required in the bylaw, the dispersal formula for the fund to assist accessible cab owners, service requirements with MobilityPLUS and to meet bylaw compliance.

- The approved addition of two bylaw officers will allow for a return to a complete inspection schedule for safety audits of accessible taxis, including the equipment used to secure mobility devices and a planned assessment of current drivers.

Goal 5B: Assess the wheelchair curbside to airport terminal entrance gate service at the Region of Waterloo International Airport and transfer responsibility from the airline providers (e.g. West Jet) to the airport authority (the Region) when there are at least 200,000 passengers at the airport per year for two years.

Actions 5B:

- The Region of Waterloo International Airport is expected to meet the criteria set out in legislation on December 31, 2023. Implementation of established requirements will take place throughout 2024, with a goal of being fully compliant in 2024. This will involve changes to signage, pet relief stations, visual paging, wheelchair operations and call buttons for passengers to request assistance. An update on progress will be provided to GRAAC.

Goal 5C: Implement the Grand River Transit (GRT) Business Plan recommendations to determine service levels, expansion plans and update the bus stop design guidelines to improve accessibility features across all GRT business lines (MobilityPLUS, conventional bus and light rail transit).

Actions 5C:

- In 2023, an initial scope for the 2025-2030 business plan was developed. It includes plans for all service lines, but also has a paradigm shift focus for MobilityPLUS services. This shift will focus on increasing the overall capacity of service, improving the eligibility process and considering all other policies from a customer-centred perspective so it is easy for people with disabilities to use the service.
- The initial inputs from GRT's business plan will be sought from the public in early 2024, with the anticipation of finalizing the business plan by the Fall of 2024.

Goal 5D: Improve GRT system accessibility by upgrading transit stops, shelters, and landing pads.

Actions 5D:

- In 2023, 56 landing pads were constructed and/or upgraded. Of the current 2,500 stops, 72% are deemed accessible, as they have concrete or asphalt landing pads. GRT coordinates and aligns upgrades with other road infrastructure projects because landing pads require adjoining access infrastructure, such as sidewalk connections, removal of natural obstructions and the smoothing of steep grades.

Goal 5E: Improve the transit journey by co-designing with customers and GRT staff the elements of MobilityPLUS transit vehicles that can be adjusted based on the manufacturers specification, to ensure passenger comfort and the best overall experience.

Actions 5E:

- In 2023, GRT and the Specialized Transit Committee undertook a project to review the seating layout of the current “ramp style” MobilityPLUS buses. With a focus on comfort and how customers move while in the bus, the seating layout was adjusted to bring more ambulatory seats (for those who are able to sit in a bus-style seat) ahead of the back axle. This adjustment ensures there are both ambulatory and wheelchair seating positions (for those who use a wheelchair as their seating) across the bus layout.

Goal 5F: Increase community participation by reducing barriers to transit services and positioning Grand River Transit as a major transportation enabler of employment, social and other life activities.

Actions 5F:

- In 2023, GRT collaborated with the Client Experience team in Human Resources and Citizen Service to review the MobilityPLUS eligibility process and application form to improve the experience and accessibility of the application process for customers as part of the Client Experience Framework.
- The results of this review will begin to be implemented in 2024, including an update to the MobilityPLUS application form and strengthening customer information supports in the program to improve the on-boarding experience.