

ADNSW Disability Discrimination in Goods and Services Project: Consultation Report

September 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

Anti-Discrimination NSW acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that contributed to the development of this document.

ADNSW Disability Discrimination in Goods and Services Project: Consultation Report

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Executive summary

Disability discrimination in the provision of goods and services has emerged as a priority area of concern for Anti-Discrimination NSW (ADNSW) due to the number of enquiries and complaints we receive. We wanted to understand more about the issues and possible ways to address them.

We consulted with organisations in the NSW disability sector to codesign a survey about people's experiences accessing goods and services in the retail sector. This was promoted widely to individuals with disability, carers of people with disability, and disability service and support organisations. We also ran some in-person focus groups.

A total of 114 participants responded to the survey including 42 people with disability (37%), 33 carers (29%) and 39 disability sector organisation representatives (34%).

The most common problems identified in the research were:

- Difficulty in using self-checkout registers
- Accessible checkout lanes being closed
- Difficulty in finding staff to help
- Hard to read prices and product information.

Priority areas identified for improving the shopping experience of people with disability were:

- Providing education/awareness raising programs on disability discrimination for store employees, managers and owners
- Keeping entrances and aisles clear for easy movement
- Using large fonts and good colour contrast on prices and product information
- Keeping accessible toilets unlocked
- Stopping negative attitudes towards people with disability.

If you are interested in learning more about this project, please contact Morlai Kamara on morlai.kamara@justice.nsw.gov.au or 02 9268 5531.

To learn more about ADNSW, please visit www.antidiscrimination.nsw.gov.au.

About the project

Background

In NSW, it is against the law to treat someone less favourably than someone else because of their disability (including diseases and illnesses) at work, in education, where goods and services are provided, where accommodation is provided and within registered clubs (*Anti-Discrimination Act 1977*).

Disability discrimination has been the most common type of discrimination raised in enquiries and complaints to Anti-Discrimination NSW (ADNSW) for many years.

In 2023-24, ADNSW responded to 3,193 enquiries, including 818 (25.6%) about disability discrimination. Of these disability discrimination enquiries, 40.8% were in relation to the provision of goods and services while employment accounted for 29.8%, education for 9.9% and accommodation for 9.0%.

Disability also continues to be the most common ground for discrimination complaints. In 2023-24, ADNSW received 1,536 complaints, with disability discrimination accounting for 493 (32.1%). Of these disability discrimination complaints, 226 (45.8%) were in the provision of goods and services.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) similarly reports that disability-based discrimination is the most common concern of those who enquire and lodge complaints about breaches of human rights. In 2022-23, AHRC received 2,562 complaints. Of these, 46% were lodged under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, with goods and services and employment the main areas of public life involved¹.

ADNSW identified disability discrimination in the provision of goods and services as a priority area for research and consultation.

Aims and methodology

ADNSW developed this research project to get a better understanding of the problems faced by people with disability in accessing goods and services in the retail sector and identify ways to improve equality of access.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022-23 Complaints Statistics, viewed 4 September 2024 at <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/publications/annual-report-2022-23-0>

The project findings will help us raise awareness among providers of goods and services in the retail sector.

To complete this project, ADNSW consulted extensively with people with disability, their carers, and various disability sector organisations in NSW.

ADNSW held discussions with people with disability and disability sector organisations, including peak bodies in NSW to gauge their interest in the project. A recurring theme that emerged was the importance of centering the voices and experiences of people with disability in this initiative.

ADNSW worked with relevant organisations to codesign an online survey with a slightly different version to be completed by:

1. People with disability
2. Carers of people with disability
3. Disability sector organisations.

The online survey was complemented by focus group sessions with people with different types of disabilities.

About the survey

The survey was one of the methods used by ADNSW to consult with people with disability, their carers, and disability sector organisations in NSW on the issue of disability discrimination in goods and services in the retail sector. It was complemented by discussions with disability sector organisations, and two focus groups with people with disability.

Survey aim

The main aim of the survey was to find out:

- the problems people with disability experience when shopping in person or online, and
- ideas for improving their experiences.

Survey method

The survey questions were drawn from key issues raised in ADNSW data and discussions with people with disability and disability sector stakeholders across NSW. It was conducted online.

The survey was open to people with disability, their carers, and disability sector organisations in NSW for about four weeks in July-August 2024.

The survey was promoted through several channels including:

- Social media (Facebook and LinkedIn)
- Interagency forums
- ADNSW's monthly e-newsletter
- Local councils
- Disability sector organisations
- Community leaders.

Respondents

A total of 114 participants responded to the survey. Of these, 42 (37%) identified as people with disability, 39 (34%) as completing the survey for their disability sector organisation, and 33 (29%) as carer of person with disability.

Table 1: Summary of survey respondents

| Category | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Person with disability | 42 | 37% |
| Disability sector professional | 39 | 34% |
| Carer of person with disability | 33 | 29% |
| Total | 114 | 100% |

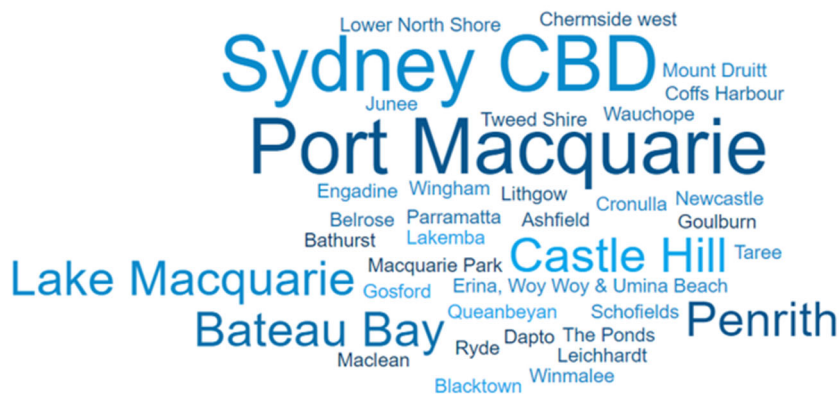
Results

Results of the survey for people with disability

Demographics

Forty-two survey respondents (37%) identified as people with disability.

People with disability who responded to our survey told us they do their in-person shopping in more than 40 towns and suburbs in metropolitan, regional and rural NSW.



The majority of respondents (62%) identified as having more than one disability type.

The most common types of disability were:

- problems with moving their body (55% of respondents)
- mental illness (such as anxiety and depression) (45% of respondents)
- neurodiversity (such as autism) (36% of respondents)
- diseases affecting their body or brain (26% of respondents)
- deaf/hard of hearing (19% of respondents).

Table 2: Frequency and distribution of disability types among survey respondents

| Type of disability | Total selections | Percentage of respondents |
|---|------------------|---------------------------|
| Problems with moving their body | 23 | 55% |
| Mental illness (e.g. anxiety and depression) | 19 | 45% |
| Neurodiversity (e.g. autism) | 15 | 36% |
| Diseases/illnesses that affect their body or brain | 11 | 26% |
| Deaf/Hard of hearing | 8 | 19% |
| Changes to body or brain after an accident or surgery | 6 | 14% |
| Learning or cognitive problems | 5 | 12% |
| Body parts that are formed differently | 3 | 7% |
| Behavioural disorders | 2 | 5% |
| Blind or vision impaired | 2 | 5% |
| Intellectual disability | 1 | 2% |
| Disease or illness caused by a bacteria or virus | 1 | 2% |
| Other | 1 | 2% |
| Total selections | 105 | - |

The survey results show 48% of respondents with disability do their shopping in-person and online; 40% do their shopping in-person; and 12% shop only online.

Table 3: Format of shopping by survey respondents

| Type | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Both in person and online | 20 | 48% |
| In person | 17 | 40% |
| Online only | 5 | 12% |

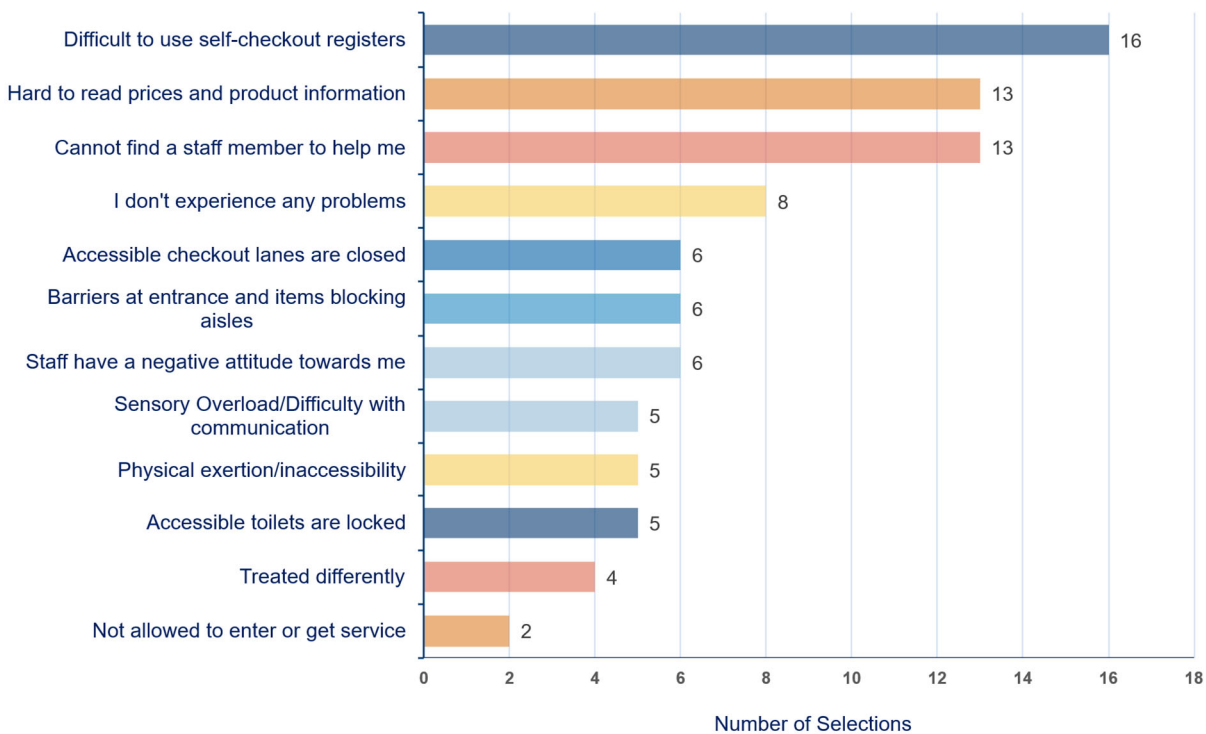
Problems faced by people with disability in shopping

According to our survey results, the most common problems faced in shopping were:

- Difficulty in using checkout registers (selected by 38% of respondents)
- Cannot find staff member to help (selected by 31% of respondents)
- Hard to read prices and product information (selected by 31% of respondents)
- Accessible lanes are closed (selected by 14% of respondents)
- Barriers at entrances and items blocking aisles (selected by 14% of respondents).

Fourteen per cent of respondents with disabilities reported staff had a negative attitude towards them, and 19% of respondents indicated they had not experienced problems shopping.

Figure 1: Types of problems people with disability reported they faced when shopping



Twenty-four per cent of respondents identified additional problems, including:

- Sensory overload due to bright lighting and difficulty with communications
- Physical exertion due to the lack of sitting or rest areas, and inaccessibility such as difficulty in reaching the back of shelves and refrigerators/freezers whilst using a mobility aid.

Respondents stated the following:

“I can’t reach items at the back of the shelves.”

“I can’t reach items, the fridges/freezers cannot open and manage electric wheelchair.”

“Shopping trolleys are too large or are locked in place and baskets are too heavy to lift. Most shops do not have enough places to sit and rest.”

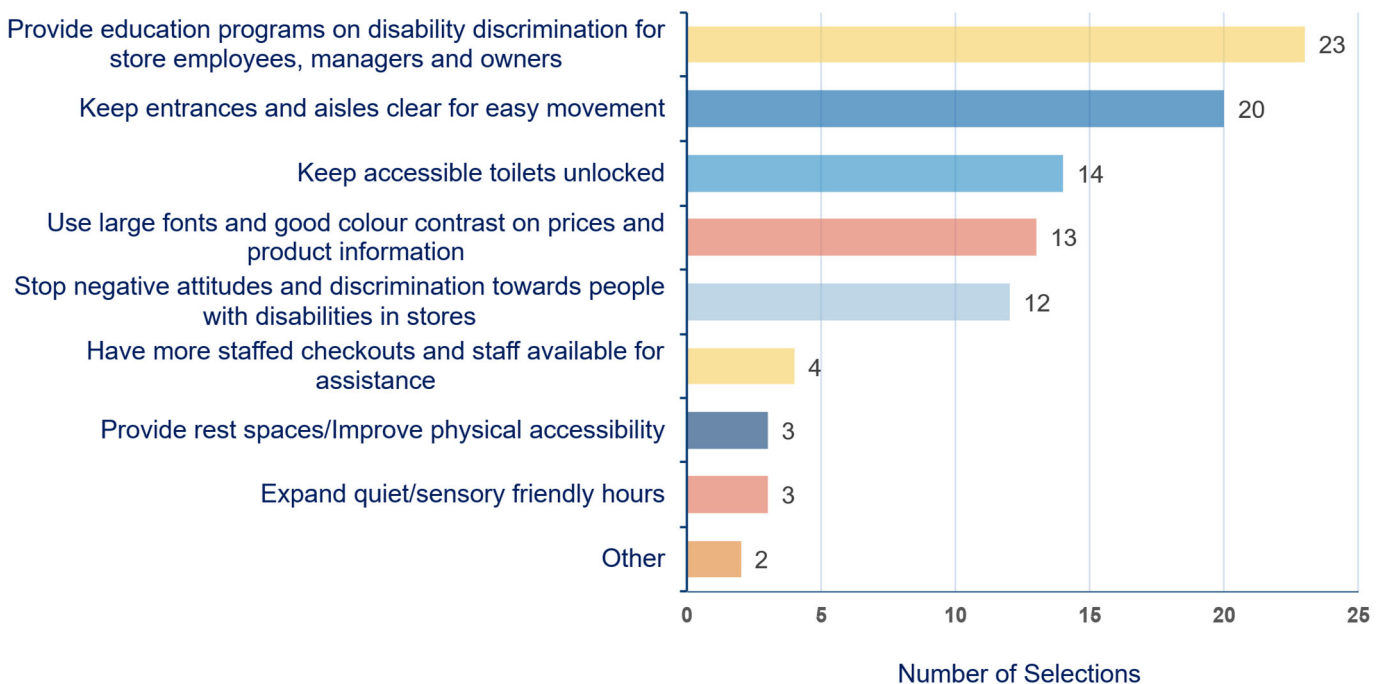
“Sensory overload due to so many products and bright lights.”

Improving the shopping experience of people with disability

Respondents with disability indicated their ideas for improving their shopping experience:

- Providing education programs to increase awareness of disability discrimination for store employees, managers and owners (selected by 55% of respondents)
- Keeping entrances and aisles clear for easy movement (selected by 48% of respondents)
- Using large fonts and good colour contrasts on prices and product information (selected by 33% of respondents)
- Keeping accessible toilets unlocked (selected by 31% of respondents)
- Stopping negative attitudes and discrimination towards people with disabilities (selected by 29% of respondents).

Figure 2: The ideas of people with disability for improving their shopping experience



Fourteen (or 33%) selected 'Other' and highlighted several key areas for improving the shopping experience of people with disability. These broadly included:

- Rearranging supermarkets and stores to improve access to small volume essential items for people in wheelchairs
- Ensuring shopping centres are assistance animal friendly
- Creating designated spaces in shopping centres for people with mobility issues to rest during their shopping.

Respondents stated the following:

“In supermarkets, keep small volume staples like 1L milk and ready-made meals accessible for wheelchair users.”

“The fridge and doors are impossible to open from an electric wheelchair – need to redesign or staff member assistance. There is no help.”

Results of the survey for carers of people with disability

Demographics

Carers who responded to our survey told us that the people they care for do their in-person shopping in more than 30 locations across NSW.



Seventeen (or 52%) of carers said the person with disability they care for had more than one disability type.

The most common types of disability identified in this survey were:

- People with diseases/illnesses that affect their body and brain (selected by 30% of respondents)
- People with mental illness (such as depression or anxiety) (selected by 30% of respondents)
- People with problems moving their body (physical disability) (selected by 27% of respondents)
- People with neurodiverse conditions (such as autism) (selected by 27% of respondents).

Table 4: Frequency and distribution of disability types among people cared for by survey respondents

| Type of disability | Total selections | Percentage of respondents |
|---|------------------|---------------------------|
| Diseases/illnesses that affect their body or brain | 10 | 30% |
| Mental illness (e.g. anxiety and depression) | 10 | 30% |
| Neurodiversity (e.g. autism) | 9 | 27% |
| Problems with moving their body | 9 | 27% |
| Learning or cognitive problems | 7 | 21% |
| Blind or vision impaired | 5 | 15% |
| Intellectual disability | 5 | 15% |
| Changes to body or brain after an accident or surgery | 4 | 12% |
| Behavioural disorders | 2 | 6% |
| Deaf/Hard of hearing | 3 | 9% |
| Disease or illness caused by a bacteria or virus | 1 | 3% |
| Body parts that are formed differently | 0 | 0% |
| Other | 5 | 15% |
| Total selections | 70 | - |

The majority (90%) of carer respondents said the person with disability who they care for does at least part of their shopping in person. Only 3 (9%) indicated that the person with disability who they care for did solely online shopping.

Table 5: Format of shopping by people cared for by survey respondents

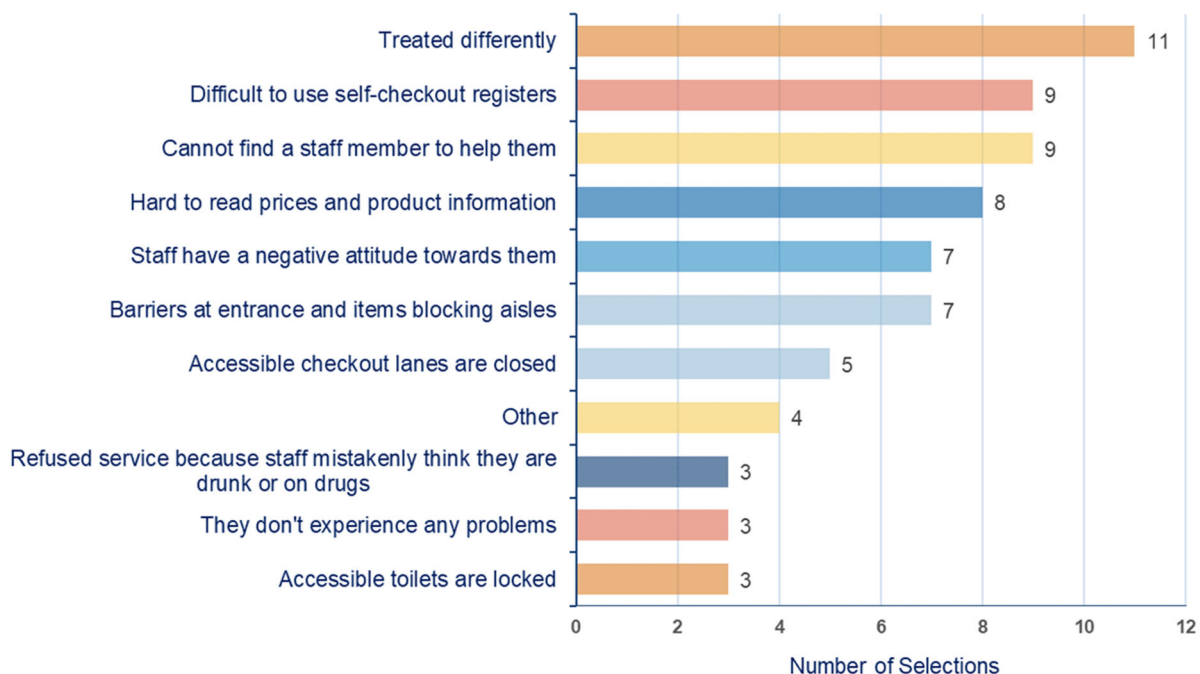
| Type | Number of Respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| In person | 15 | 45% |
| Both in person and online | 15 | 45% |
| Online only | 3 | 9% |

Problems faced by people with disability (carer experience)

Carer respondents identified the following as the most common problems people with disability face when shopping:

- People with disability are treated differently (selected by 33% of respondents)
- Difficulty using self-checkout registers (selected by 27% of respondents)
- Cannot find staff members to help them (selected by 27% of respondents)
- Hard to read prices and product information (selected by 24% of respondents)
- Staff having negative attitude towards them (selected by 21% of respondents)
- Barriers at entrances and items blocking aisles (selected by 21% of respondents).

Figure 3: Types of problems the carers of people with disability reported they faced when shopping



Respondents made additional comments about the experiences of the people with disability they care for:

“My son will be ignored by staff. He will have his request for a refund/exchange refused. I watch on the sideline and see it happen every time. I then go to the counter (with item), and they fall over themselves to serve me. They have a dismissive attitude/don’t care.”

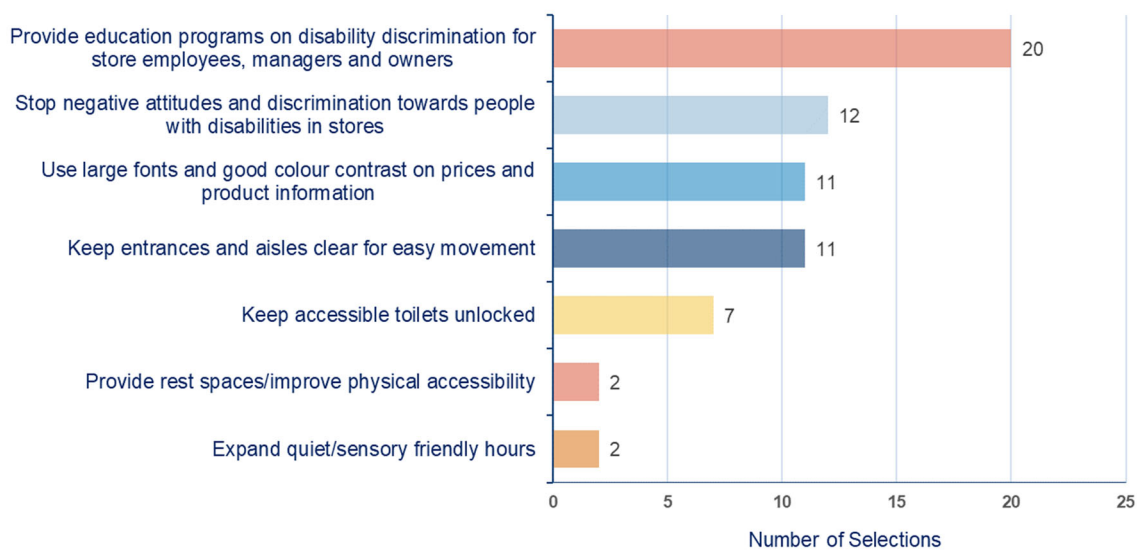
“It is very hard for them [people with disability] to navigate through people and closed aisles that are jammed with sale items, and they are semi-blind, and nobody knows they are limited in sight...bigger signs and bold colours would help.”

Improving the shopping experience of people with disability (carer perspective)

Carers indicated their ideas for improving the shopping experience of people with disability:

- Providing education programs on disability discrimination for store staff, managers and owners (selected by 61% of respondents)
- Stopping negative attitudes and discrimination towards people with disabilities (selected by 36% of respondents)
- Using large fonts and good colour contrasts (selected by 33% of respondents)
- Keeping entrances and aisles clear for easy movement (selected by 33% of respondents)
- Keeping accessible toilets unlocked (selected by 21% of respondents).

Figure 3: The ideas of carers of people with disability for improving their shopping experience



Six respondents (18%) selected ‘Other’, providing additional ideas for improving the shopping experiences of people with disability.

Respondents said shopping centres should:

“Extend quiet times and low lighting, replace fluorescents with LEDs, and have quieter motors in fridges.”

“Make shopping environments less intense [for people with disability].”

Results of the survey for disability sector organisations

Thirty-nine survey respondents (34%) identified as representing disability sector organisations.

Problems faced by people with disability in shopping (disability sector experience)

Respondents representing disability sector organisations identified the following as the most common problems faced by people with disability in shopping:

- Difficulty using self-checkout registers (selected by 51% of respondents)
- Being treated differently (selected by 44% of respondents)
- Cannot find staff member to help them (selected by 44% of respondents)
- Hard to read prices and product information (selected by 33% of respondents)
- Staff have a negative attitude towards people with disability (selected by 26% of respondents).

Figure 4: Types of problems disability sector professionals reported that people with disability face when shopping



Improving the shopping experience of people with disability

Respondents representing disability sector organisations indicated their ideas for improving the shopping experience of people with disability:

- Providing education programs on disability discrimination for store employees, managers and owners (selected by 85% of respondents)
- Keeping entrances and aisles clear for easy movement (selected by 74% of respondents)
- Stopping negative attitudes and discrimination towards people with disabilities (selected by 54% of respondents)
- Using large fonts and good colour contrast on prices and product information (selected by 46% of respondents).

Figure 5: The ideas of disability sector professionals for improving the shopping experiences of people with disability



Results of focus groups

Two focus group sessions were organised in July-August 2024. The sessions, which attracted 20 participants, were hosted by Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association and Council for Intellectual Disability.

Through the responses received during the focus group sessions, we have obtained a good understanding of a range of perspectives including the opinions of individuals with different types of disabilities and that of other stakeholders e.g., carers and support group facilitators.

One of the common themes identified as a significant problem faced by people with disability in shopping was difficulty in finding staff to help them. Even when a staff member is found, people with disability do not always get the help they need.

Focus group participants spoke about stigma and the different treatment they experience in shopping:

“As a wheelchair user I face a lot of problems with accessing some shopping centres making it difficult for me to shop independently. I don’t get the assistance I need from staff when looking for something. Many wheelchair users I know share a similar experience.”

“They don’t assist me, but I see them help others.”

“I am trying to get by like everyone, but I experience many difficulties shopping...they put us down by the way they treat us.”

“We need to feel we are part of the community. We need to experience shopping like everyone, but things are getting worse.”

Focus group participants said many staff at shopping centres lack disability awareness and make assumptions especially about hidden disabilities. They also said many community members lack disability awareness in shopping centres.

A participant with hidden disabilities said staff told them:

“You don’t look like you have a disability.”

Focus group participants raised accessibility issues as part of the problems they face shopping. They spoke about narrow aisles, the lack of accessible toilets, lack of signage around wet and uneven floors, difficulty using self-checkout registers, and difficulty reading prices and product information and the negative impacts these have on their shopping experience and health.

Participants said:

“Some shops are good. They have accessible toilets, but many others were not designed with people with disabilities in mind.”

“The aisle is narrow so I can’t use my walking frame. I sometimes get help from staff but not always.”

“I avoid the self-checkout register because staff are not available to help me, and other customers get impatient.”

Responses on solutions emphasised the importance of shopping independently for people with disability. Drawing from their lived experience, focus group participants discussed several small, yet potentially effective suggestions.

Focus group participants identified awareness raising and education on disability discrimination for store staff and customers more broadly.

Improving accessibility was another recurring theme in the focus groups. This includes making it easier to access toilets, having signs to show location of toilets, and information about the location of products.

The participants suggested:

“Increasing disability awareness for staff should include training for staff, and installation of signage with pictures and messages about disability for customers.”

“Staff should let customers know about the sheets at the end of the aisles listing the location of products.”

Conclusion

This report has identified significant barriers faced by people with disability to accessing goods and services in the retail sector. As outlined by participants, these include:

- **Accessibility of physical environment:** Blocked and/or narrow entrances, exits and aisles impede movement for people with disability. Fluorescent lighting and loud music create an overwhelming sensory experience.
- **Availability of facilities:** Limited or restricted availability of rest and bathroom facilities prevents people with disability from shopping comfortably for extended periods.
- **Accessibility of technology and displays:** Point of sale systems and in-store displays which do not follow visual accessibility guidelines hinder people with disability from making purchases independently.
- **Customer service:** Inconsistent customer service and a lack of staff training on how to assist people with disability exacerbates these challenges.

Participants also highlighted several practical solutions to address these challenges and improve the retail experience for people with disability. These solutions include providing retail and management staff with comprehensive disability awareness activities, employing accessibility guidelines to better design store layouts and signage, expanding quiet/sensory-friendly hours, and providing less restricted access to rest and bathroom facilities.

Based on these insights, ADNSW will have discussion with interested stakeholders in the retail sector to promote the implementation of inclusive retail practices. To help foster equality of access in the retail sector, we propose co-designing educational and awareness-raising resources which would support retailers and their staff in better understanding and meeting the needs of people with disability.

Retailers who adopt inclusive practices are likely to attract and retain a diverse customer base and are less likely to have a complaint of disability discrimination made against them.

ADNSW is committed to working alongside interested stakeholders in the retail sector to help guide the creation of more equitable and inclusive retail environments in which all customers can access goods and services with dignity and respect.

Acknowledgements

ADNSW would like to thank the following organisations for their tremendous support during the pre-consultation phase of this project:

- Community Disability Alliance Hunter
- Council for Intellectual Disability
- Mental Health Coordinating Council
- Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association
- People with Disability Australia
- Self-Advocacy Sydney Inc.

Our thanks also go to Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association and Council for Intellectual Disability for hosting in-person focus group sessions.

Importantly, we owe a debt of gratitude to all people with disability, their carers and disability sector organisations across NSW who participated in our consultation activities.

We look forward to working with all the above-mentioned stakeholders in the next phase of this project.

Further information

If you are interested in learning more about this project, please contact Morlai Kamara on morlai.kamara@justice.nsw.gov.au or 02 9268 5531.

To learn more about Anti-Discrimination NSW, please visit www.antidiscrimination.nsw.gov.au.

We are committed to eliminating discrimination and promoting equality and equal treatment for everyone in New South Wales, including by resolving enquiries and complaints, raising awareness about discrimination and its impacts, and taking action to influence change.

Enquiries and complaints

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