

Inclusive Towns Project

Nikki Williams

Following a successful pilot in 2017, the Inclusive Towns Project worked across the City of Greater Bendigo, Loddon Shire Council and Mount Alexander Shire in 2018 to increase the participation of people with disability. This was done by raising awareness and readiness of businesses to employ people with disability and improving the accessibility of local businesses for people with disability.

An impact analysis showed there were initial challenges getting businesses to take part in the project. This was due to various factors including previous poor relationships with council, lack of understanding of disability, not seeing people with disability as customers, and the fear of expensive changes to their business. However, they found solutions were easier to implement than first thought, and that they were able to make small improvements for a great outcome, and received positive feedback from customers and people with disabilities.

The City of Greater Bendigo actively employed six Support Officers with lived experience of disability to work with businesses to show that inclusion goes beyond addressing physical access. This was a conscious decision because Support Officers were the individuals interacting with the businesses about the benefits for the community, rather than a council employee telling the businesses how to be more inclusive. Having Support Officer roles within council also gave other staff a wider understanding of disability and the value of people with disability as staff members.

This program saw great change both in the community and within council. The project highlighted the need to look internally and build capacity of staff to have a greater understanding of disability. It also showed, how to advocate for internal policy changes for employing people with disability.

For other organisations looking to make their community more inclusive, small business are a great place to start as everybody uses them to shop, for social interactions and be part of the community.