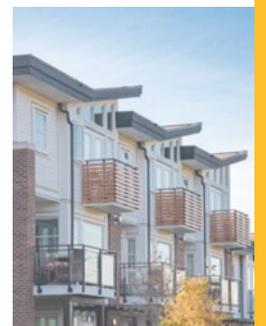


# Summary Report

## BC Building Code Accessibility Engagement

### 2021/2022



## Indigenous land acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect and gratitude that this report was produced on the territory of the Coast Salish, Lək̓ʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ peoples, Songhees and Esquimalt (Xwsepsum) Nations, and the Métis Nation of Greater Victoria.



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## Section 1: Introduction

The *Building Act* provides the Minister of Housing with the authority to establish the British Columbia Building Code (BC Building Code). The BC Building Code provides rules about how new buildings are built in B.C., except the City of Vancouver and some federal lands. Local governments enforce the BC Building Code. This helps buildings be safe and healthy places to visit, work, live, and learn in.

Current accessibility requirements apply to schools and recreation centres, hospitals, clinics, and detention centres, offices, stores, hotels and motels. Currently, single-detached residential homes, row homes or townhomes, or individual dwelling units in apartments and condominiums do not have to be accessible, under the 2018 BC Building Code.

The BC Building Code is updated about every five years. Buildings must meet the BC Building Code that is in force when it is constructed. The BC Building Code does not apply retroactively to existing buildings unless they undergo a renovation or an extension. A building already in use does not have to be renewed each time the BC Building Code is updated unless the building is being changed.

Public engagements sought feedback about opportunities to increase accessibility in new buildings to help inform the development of proposed code changes. This report intends to summarize the feedback received through the online public survey, written submissions, phone calls, and discussions.

Although the engagements sought feedback to help enhance building code accessibility requirements, some responses touched on items that the BC Building Code does not regulate. The B.C. Government acknowledges the challenges related to where application of the BC Building Code begins and ends – and the need for adequate maintenance and building operation that considers and responds to diverse accessibility needs. While direct references to input may not be provided, please be assured, we have received, reviewed, and shared the feedback to inform the development of other accessibility codes and standards.



## Section 2: Engagement approach

As the B.C. Government develops and considers future changes to the BC Building Code, it is important that decisions are guided by public and industry input to address British Columbians' differing needs.

### Public engagement

Between October 28, 2021, and January 13, 2022, the Building and Safety Standards Branch conducted the first phase of engagement, which was an online public survey. The survey was available in simplified and traditional Chinese, Punjabi, French, and English. The goal of the survey was to receive early input on the barriers and opportunities that people living with disabilities face in buildings, as well as feedback on what changes should be actioned first.

The survey was open to the public, accessibility advocates, industry partners, code users, modern Treaty Nations and self-governing Nations, and Indigenous groups, as well as local governments. In response to the online survey, the B.C. Government heard from a range of individuals; with approximately 52 per cent of respondents identifying as homeowners or occupants, and approximately 60 per cent identifying as people living with a disability or as family members of those with living with a disability. Additional respondents included care providers, students, and industry professionals.

The survey asked respondents a variety of questions to understand the diverse accessibility needs throughout the province.

Over the course of 11 weeks, government received over 1,500 survey responses.

### Focus groups

To deepen the understanding of the survey feedback, four virtual focus group sessions were held between June and October 2022. The B.C. Government engaged a consultant to facilitate the discussions.

Through a combination of virtual focus groups and written submissions, the B.C. Government sought feedback on four topic areas that emerged as key themes through the public survey feedback: accessibility features, adaptable buildings, safe evacuation, and visitable buildings.

Focus group participants included people from local governments, organizations supporting individuals living with disabilities, the construction industry, and Indigenous groups.



The facilitation encouraged an open discussion with varying viewpoints. As such, participant feedback and opinions are solely their own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the B.C. Government. The B.C. Government understands that all accessibility needs are important, and also recognizes that not all changes can be made at once.

## Section 3: Key themes

This section summarizes the collective feedback about opportunities to make new buildings more accessible going forward. To respect privacy, exact comments have been omitted, and key discussion themes are provided.

The engagement objectives were to listen and learn about the impacts of accessibility requirements and which parts of building design present challenges. Some responses were out of scope, as they focused on existing buildings, building operation and management, transit, exterior parking, and infrastructure outside the building (for example sidewalks and parks). A summary of related key findings will be shared with provincial ministries and Canadian standards development organizations, where appropriate.

### Building design

Many people noted more focus needs to be put on accessibility planning from the beginning to allow for better design options and avoid costs associated with retrofitting accessible features when residents' needs change.

Participants noted the importance of representing diverse disabilities when considering design. Further, nearly 30 per cent of open text field survey responses stated the importance of accounting for invisible disabilities (e.g., dementia, autism, hearing, vision, cognition, sensory, and others) in the development of accessible building design and construction requirements.

Overall, responses suggested that the B.C. Government consider principles to make buildings and environments accessible to all people regardless of age, disability, or other factors.

Eighty-two per cent of respondents indicated a preference for consistent building code requirements throughout B.C.



Additional feedback highlighted the tension between consistency and the need for flexibility. Respondents noted that any proposed accessibility code requirements need to align with other provincial priorities, like climate change resilience (e.g., flood resistance), energy efficiency initiatives, and housing affordability and availability, to avoid unforeseen barriers and conflicts.

Some respondents said that education is needed to let people know about the positive financial impacts of accessibility, for example, more revenue for businesses and industries. Others referred to the helpfulness of the Building Accessibility Handbook and the need for plain language code summaries to help people better understand the rules and their responsibilities.

Respondents identified the need for tools and actions to support building code compliance for new buildings. Stronger code enforcement, even including penalties for non-compliance, was raised.

### Building types

To help the B.C. Government identify opportunities to improve accessibility design and construction requirements, the online survey asked individuals to select, from a pre-determined list, what new buildings need to be more accessible.

Individuals clearly supported that all buildings that provide human needs, such as housing, health care, as well as services provided in private and public buildings, need to be accessible for all people.

Some respondents noted that the B.C. Government has an opportunity to increase the affordable and accessible housing supply for people living with disabilities.

### Building features

Both survey and public engagement respondents were asked to indicate what parts of new buildings they thought could be made more accessible. Important features that respondents identified are listed below.

#### Automatic doors

Fifty-five per cent of public survey respondents selected automatic door openers as a priority. Respondents validated the importance that main entrances be approachable and provide safe and equitable entry for all users.

Forty-nine per cent of respondents stated that doors and doorway widths could be made more accessible in new buildings. Many participants noted the need for doors to remain open long enough to move through.



### Access between floors

Fifty-three per cent of public survey respondents selected access between floors (including elevators and lifts) as a priority. In addition, feedback suggested that access between floors be easy to locate, near the main entrance, and provide adequate lighting.

### Ramps

Accessible ramps were selected as a priority by 40 per cent of survey respondents. People communicated about the importance of ramps that are designed and constructed to conform with code requirements or better, as this is critical to safety.

### Emergency exits

Thirty-five per cent of respondents stated that emergency exits need to be more accessible. Additionally, they shared concerns about heavy fire doors, inadequate exits, and how power outages present barriers to safe evacuation.

### Signage

General comments on wayfinding confirm that building signage needs to be clear and placed in visible, standardized places in a format that supports people living with differing disabilities.

### Washrooms

Overall, participants view access to washrooms as a basic human right and accessible washrooms are needed on the ground floor for family, commercial, and/or institutional buildings to support diverse users.

### Adaptable buildings

The BC Building Code currently provides voluntary requirements for the design and construction of one storey adaptable dwelling units<sup>1</sup> in condominiums and apartments. Requirements provide specific features such as accessible paths of travel, wider doorways, clear maneuvering space in bathrooms, wall space to accommodate future installation of grab bars, continuous kitchen counters, and reachable controls, switches, and outlets.

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<sup>1</sup> Adaptable dwelling units are designed and constructed to enable future changes to meet people's specific needs, thereby providing greater accessibility.



The online public engagement survey asked respondents about building design. Sixty-one per cent of respondents supported the idea that all homes should be designed and built to be more easily and cost-effectively changed as residents' accessibility needs change.

The adaptable buildings focus group sought to deepen understanding of opportunities for multi-unit dwellings as well as single family residential homes.

#### Multi-residential units

Participants expressed an interest in seeing the B.C. Government incorporate new requirements to enable more considerate design requirements to allow future installation of various features to provide a more sustainable housing supply.

#### Single family residential housing

The focus group sessions asked participants about what considerations the B.C. Government should keep in mind if new housing was required to be built adaptable. Respondents noted that a phased approach supported by education around the requirements' rationale would help to shift the culture and build knowledge and awareness.

Industry communicated that housing affordability needs to be an overarching principle. In addition, some participants noted that limiting code changes to adaptable design would allow features to be added more easily and inexpensively after construction.

Other key points expressed include, industry capacity, product availability, and life cycle costs, such as capital costs, maintenance costs, and operating costs. Balancing affordability with accessibility is a significant priority given the cost of housing, the housing shortfall, and the lower incomes of many who need housing.



## Section 5: Next steps

Feedback received through engagement will inform the development of new BC Building Code accessibility requirements. The focus group sessions concluded the early public engagement phase. The next phase will involve the ministry working with technical industry experts to develop people-centred, evidence-informed building code changes.

Proposed code changes will be made available for public review in Spring 2023.

The B.C. Government recognizes that ongoing collaboration is critical to informing future changes and further enhancements to make new buildings even safer and more accessible.

