



Response to the Dignified Access Review Report

Background

In November 2021, the Australian Human Rights Commission delivered its *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces* (Set the Standard Report). In transmitting the report to the Attorney General, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins stated the report “makes findings and recommendations to ensure that Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces are safe and respectful and that the nation’s Parliament reflects best practice in the prevention and handling of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault”.

Recommendation 9 of the report provides:

Access and inclusion

The Presiding Officers, together with party leaders and parliamentary departments, should review the physical infrastructure, policies and practices within Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces to increase accessibility and inclusion (p. 21).

The Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) worked with the parliamentary departments, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Finance to consider how to progress the recommendations and assess options for conducting the work. In October 2022, the departments agreed that DPS will lead the review of infrastructure of Australian Parliament House (APH). In November 2022, the DPS engaged with the Australian Network on Disability (AND) to develop terms of reference for a review into the user environment. On 15 December 2023, AND delivered its report titled *Dignified Access and User Experience of Parliament House*.

The report makes over 340 recommendations and identifies a comprehensive range of opportunities to enhance accessibility and the experience of people visiting and working within APH.

The review

The report represents more than a review of the APH compliance with the Access to Premises Standards – which apply to all new buildings or affected parts of existing buildings submitted for building approval after 1 May 2011. Instead, it is a review based on AND’s principles of ‘Dignified Access’. As noted by AND in their report, ‘dignified access’ goes beyond compliance with standards and legal requirements, and takes into consideration the user experience of the environment from the perspective of:

1. Vision – Considers barriers that may affect people being able to see within the environment including colours, brightness, lighting, colour contrast to discriminate

between different surfaces or details. Also considers the size, shape, contrast, colour and placement of the graphical and text elements.

2. Hearing – considers sounds in the environment (e.g. volume, pitch, clarity and location of sounds), including the impact on the sensory experience).
3. Thinking – considers the cognition required to complete a task within the environment, for example how much demand the product places on memory, attention, interpreting information and level or knowledge/experience required.
4. Communication – considers the ability to understand information and people within the environment, as well as the ability to other express oneself to others (this inevitably overlaps with vision, hearing and thinking).
5. Movement – considers the ability to move around the space and support features available to support balance and movement.
6. Reach and Stretch – considers the reach and stretch required to complete a task.
7. Dexterity – considers the fine motor skills required to complete a task for example if tasks require one or both hands, fine finder manipulation, pick up and carry objects or grasp and squeeze objects. (Review, p 4-5).

Towards an accessible parliament

The AND report follows a significant body of works proactively undertaken over the past 10 years to progressively improve accessibility at APH. The range of works include:

- Upgrade to accessible bathrooms – ongoing capital works to upgrade all accessible bathrooms in APH, with 25 bathrooms currently completed.
- Door automation – a number of door automation capital works including at security access points, car park doors, Senate Chamber doors and external courtyards.
- Hearing loops – hearing loops in the Chambers and across Committee Rooms.
- Captioning – live captioning for parliamentary broadcasting.
- Ramps – access ramps have been installed in various parts of APH including 9 ramps in the courtyards.
- Handrails – an ongoing capital works project to upgrade handrails throughout APH to meet current standards.
- Disabled car parking – the width of the disabled car parking spaces has been increased throughout the public and private car parks.
- Adult Changing Places facility – a purpose built adult change facility in the public area constructed with a ceiling suspended hoist.
- Lifts – additional call buttons with braille and lift controls have been installed at a lower height in all passenger lifts.

- Baby change tables – installation of additional baby change tables across the building, with 15 baby change tables now installed.
- Portable mini fridges – for loan for personal and medicinal use.
- Balustrades – ongoing capital works to install balustrades in the public car park and the chamber linkways to meet current standards.
- Chairlifts – a new chairlift has been installed in the Members and Guests Dining Room.
- Accessible events – accessible ramps are available upon request in larger event spaces and a height adjustable lectern will be procured.
- Tactiles and tread nosing – tactiles indicators and stair tread nosing has been installed in the public car park.
- Lighting – a capital works program is underway to replace all fluorescent lighting with LED lighting across APH.
- External lighting - increased lighting to external pathways in the Parliamentary precincts.

These works are complementary to the broader and ongoing commitment to supporting the wellbeing and workplace experiences of people with disability at APH. In February 2023, DPS established an Access and Inclusion Champions Group (AICG) to support the development of Australian Parliamentary Service Access and Inclusion Action Plan. It aims to ensure the workplace is accessible, inclusive, accommodating and dignified for people with disability. The AICG will provide support and guidance as needed to identify and remove barriers that prevent full and equitable participation and engagement. The AICG membership is made up of Senior Executives from DPS, Department of the Senate, Department of the House of Representatives, Parliamentary Budget Office, Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, and the Department of Finance.

The way forward

The DPS delivers a wide range of activities to support the work of the Parliament, parliamentarians and the custodianship of APH. DPS is committed to ensuring our services, practices and policies are accessible and inclusive. To this end, we have an ongoing focus on enhancing the experience for people with disability across all aspects of the services we provide. As the custodians of APH, we are highly cognisant of our role in ensuring the accessibility of all Australians to engage with the parliamentary process.

As observed by Commissioner Jenkins, “Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces are an ecosystem made up of multiple workplaces, each with its own culture. These workplaces are geographically dispersed and populated by people who work under multiple different employment arrangements and who do not report to one central agency or leadership structure.” (page 12)

The operating environment within APH is unique with a diverse range of stakeholders accessing the building including:

- over 800,000 visitors each year that arrive as tourists, attend events or transact business

- is a working parliament accommodating parliamentarians, the Executive Government and members of parliament staff, and
- permanent accommodation for around 2,500 people that span some nine Commonwealth agencies that support the work of Parliament, the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery, retail tenants and contractors.

To this end, the DPS will reconvene with our colleagues in the parliamentary departments, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Finance to partner and actively consider the recommendations through a broad consultative process. The objective will be to make Parliament more accessible to all Australians, whilst ensuring we take into account the operating needs of Parliament and compliance with disability and discrimination legislation.

The implementation of recommendations will require consultation with these stakeholders. The nature of many recommendations will have significant capital cost and also impact on the traditional operation of the parliament. Accordingly, this will necessitate the Parliament to make decisions approving changes through appropriate parliamentary committees.

In parallel, DPS proposes to engage suitably experienced access and architectural consultants who will build on the accessibility work completed by the DPS to date, and further examine how to best apply the recommendations of the review. Design impact statements explaining the possible impact that remediation works may have on the design intent of spaces will be managed in collaboration with the Moral Rights Administrators in the design of APH. As such changes will meet the needs of current and future generations.

Where possible, DPS will assess opportunities to integrate the scope of building work to address recommendations with other capital works and maintenance programs to ensure a timely and efficient delivery.

I thank all who participated in the review, with feedback received from both APH visitors and building occupants.

The review has presented DPS with a number of pathways towards improving accessibility that can be explored further. I am pleased to be leading a department that is committed to improving accessibility, for our building occupants and visitors, to this building of national significance.



Rob Stefanic
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