



Development of an Inclusive Toolkit for Tourism Accommodation



A co-designed project facilitated by
Autism Queensland with the support of
Queensland Government's Accessible Tourism
Enablers Grant.

July 2023 - June 2024

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Acknowledgement of Country

Autism Queensland acknowledges the importance and value of the reconciliation journey with Traditional Custodians and Owners of all the lands and waters on which we live and work.

We acknowledge the wisdom of Elders past and extend our respect for the valuable contributions of Elders present and those emerging leaders who willingly share cultural knowledge.

Our teams recognise the significance of connections between country and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as we walk together toward participation, opportunity, and choice.



Artist: Yvonne O'Neill

This artwork represents the way cultural conversations interact between Autism Queensland and the wider Australian community.

About Autism Queensland

Autism Queensland is Australia's longest serving provider of Autism specific services. As Queensland state's peak body, we draw on experience gained over 56 years of operation and seek, welcome and value the many different voices of autism each with their own unique set of experiences. AQ celebrates the autistic voices who speak on their own behalf and for the autistic community. AQ welcomes, values, respects and has a responsibility to represent all voices of autism: autistic people (those who speak on their own behalf and those who cannot), their families and service providers and researchers dedicated to improving the lives of autistic people. Our strengths-focused, evidence-informed and personalised services and supports include individual supports aimed at empowering autistic people to recognise their strengths and engage meaningfully; and community focused supports, working with organisations, businesses and community groups to increase knowledge, build community capacity, and advocate for social change to create a genuinely inclusive community. We are committed to excellence in service delivery and strive to support the development of every person's potential. www.autismqld.com.au

Our vision is a life of participation, opportunity and choice, and we partner with families and communities to remove barriers and realise potential. AQ's dedicated Inclusion Supports team develop inclusive, co-created design solutions to ensure all people can access, participate, and feel welcomed in their spaces. As one of Australia's oldest and most experienced providers of person-centred, evidence-informed services for autistic people, and with a deep understanding of diversity, inclusion and universal design for all, AQ was well positioned to co-design and deliver this project.

AQ's strong representation in reference groups and research councils, including Australian Advisory Board on Autism; Australian Autism Alliance; Queensland Disability Advisory Council; Autism Cooperative Research Council, CRC National Autism Guidelines Reference Group and our own Advisory Committee ensures we are aware of issues important to neurodivergent people and their families. Knowledge, experiences and networks from these forums was extended to the accommodation industry within this project to increase awareness of the needs of autistic and neurodivergent people and to set the industry up to be a strong ally and advocate for this community, enabling social change.

Use of Language

The following terms are used throughout this report.

Co-design:	A collaborative, participatory approach to design. Implementing a genuine co-design process means that stakeholders and end-users share power in all aspects of design and creation, from the beginning and integrated throughout all stages of the project.
Collaborator	Refers to all stakeholders involved in the co-design process. In the context of co-design, collaborators share power in working towards a shared vision and inclusive outcomes.
Experience Gathering:	A purposefully chosen term to acknowledge and respect the experiences shared by people, ensuring that the informants' voice is central to all discussions.
Informant:	The important role that a diverse range of people contributed throughout the project, to help inform a deep understanding of the topic.
Neurodivergent/ Neurodivergence:	An umbrella terms that refers to people who think, learn, process information, or experience the world in different ways (i.e., ways that diverge from the societal majority). Autism is one example of neurodivergence.
Neurodivergent-affirming	Refers to practices or approaches that seek to validate, understand and respect neurodivergent experiences, creating safe and empowering spaces for neurodivergent people to be themselves and to participate authentically.
Provider:	In the context of this project, <i>provider</i> refers to those who work in or represent accommodation venues.
Respondent:	People (or informants) who responded and participated in the project.

Project Overview

Project Aim



Accommodate Us was an inclusion initiative and project facilitated by Autism Queensland (AQ) with the support of the Queensland Government's Accessible Tourism Enablers Grant as part of the Year of Accessible Tourism.



The aim of this project was to develop a co-designed toolkit of resources and strategies that support accommodation providers to:

- ✓ enhance their knowledge and capacity.
- ✓ identify and remove barriers to inclusion.
- ✓ implement universal design into their facilities.
- ✓ create informed, welcoming, and inclusive experiences for neurodivergent patrons.

Project Design

The activities outlined below represent the key phases in the development of the Accommodate Us Toolkit. This project embraced a co-design approach, which was embedded in and throughout all project activities. Co-design ensured that all stakeholders (i.e., the project team, accommodation providers and neurodivergent travellers) were involved as equal collaborators throughout all phases of the project.

All project resources and communications (i.e., recruitment material, online consent forms, surveys, welcome packs, etc.) were designed to be clear, respectful in their language choices and intuitive to navigate.

Connection with Providers

The Accommodate Us project commenced by connecting with accommodation providers across Queensland. The following providers represent different regions and diverse types of accommodation, from camping to five-star hotels:

- Cedar Creek Lodges at Mt. Tamborine
- Crystalbrook Vincent at Howard Smith Wharves
- Daydream Island Resort
- Paradise Resort Gold Coast
- Pullman Brisbane King George Square
- Novotel Cairns Oasis Resort

Walk and Talk Explorations



Following the initial connections, a Senior Inclusion Consultant completed walk and talk explorations with providers. During these site visits, the project team engaged with key staff members and explored:

- site specific barriers and challenges to inclusion.
- provider priorities and their vision for inclusion.
- opportunities to implement inclusive design solutions.

Site visits and connections with providers facilitated a deeper understanding of the provider perspective, their unique contexts and daily operations, and the complexities of the hospitality and tourism sector. These connections highlighted many of the contextual barriers faced by accommodation providers as well as opportunities to foster greater inclusion.

Surveys



To capture insights from the broader community, the project team conducted surveys with both accommodation providers and neurodivergent travellers.

Surveys were promoted on the AQ website, internal participant networks, and various social media platforms.

We heard from:

- 27 Neurodivergent Travellers, including neurodivergent adults, families with neurodivergent children, neurodivergent parents, and carers.
- 23 Accommodation Providers, including representation from various departments (e.g., housekeeping, hospitality, marketing, management, reception, etc.)

Engagement Sessions



Neurodivergent travellers who completed the survey were offered the opportunity to participate in an engagement session to further share their experiences, the barriers and challenges they have faced as well as positive experiences and ideas to make travel more inclusive.

For people interested in participating in an engagement session (individual, group, online and face-to-face) a 'Welcome Pack' was provided. This pack contained information about the project, example discussion questions, instructions on how to use Teams (if online), location maps (if face-to-face) and payment information. Payment of a nominal stipend was made to all neurodivergent travellers who participated in this

project. This was in reflection of the lived expertise and insights they provided and in recognition of their time and commitment to the outcomes.

Engagement sessions were participant-led and neurodivergent-affirming, which fostered a safe space for people to openly express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Engagement sessions were completed with 15 informants, including neurodivergent travellers, their families, and carers.



Provider Reports and Feedback

Following the walk-and-talk explorations, detailed reports were completed outlining potential barriers for neurodivergent users, considerations for action, and recommendations for inclusively designed solutions. Recommendations and considerations focused on the experiences of neurodivergent travellers, while taking an inclusive design approach to ensure positive outcomes for everyone.

Feedback sessions provided an opportunity to further explore findings from the walk and talk explorations, consider recommendations within the report, and workshop immediate, short-term and long-term actions to foster greater inclusion. Post project provider surveys indicated an overall increase in confidence to identify barriers and challenges faced by the neurodivergent community as well as inclusive solutions.

“This project has brought much more awareness to the team of things that were not previously considered that would benefit not only our neurodivergent guests but all our visitors.”

“This project has completely changed my knowledge and outlook on the barriers and challenges others face on a daily basis.”

“This project has helped identify many problems which can easily be transformed into solutions that will create a more inclusive experience across our whole park.”

- Provider Feedback, Final Survey

Review and Analysis of Experiences Gathered



To ensure our findings and next steps were as unbiased as possible and accurately reflected the input from informants, experiences gathered from the surveys and engagement sessions were collated and synthesised.

A high-level thematic analysis was completed and three key, overarching themes were identified. Co-design remained integral throughout this review process. The project team engaged in an iterative process of co-reflection, checking and confirming findings, and refining with informants.

The following key themes have formed the basis for the Accommodate Us Toolkit, a go-to resource for accommodation providers, offering support, strategies, resources and educational material to support them along their journey to inclusion:

1. Increase Understanding of Neurodivergence
2. Make the Guest Journey More Predictable at Every Stage
3. Create and Foster Inclusive Environments

Toolkit Development



The online *Accommodate Us Toolkit* was designed specifically for accommodation providers as a go-to resource for creating more inclusive venues, services and travel experiences. The Toolkit includes a range of resources including tip sheets, how to guides, practical examples, educational videos, case studies, and audit tools.

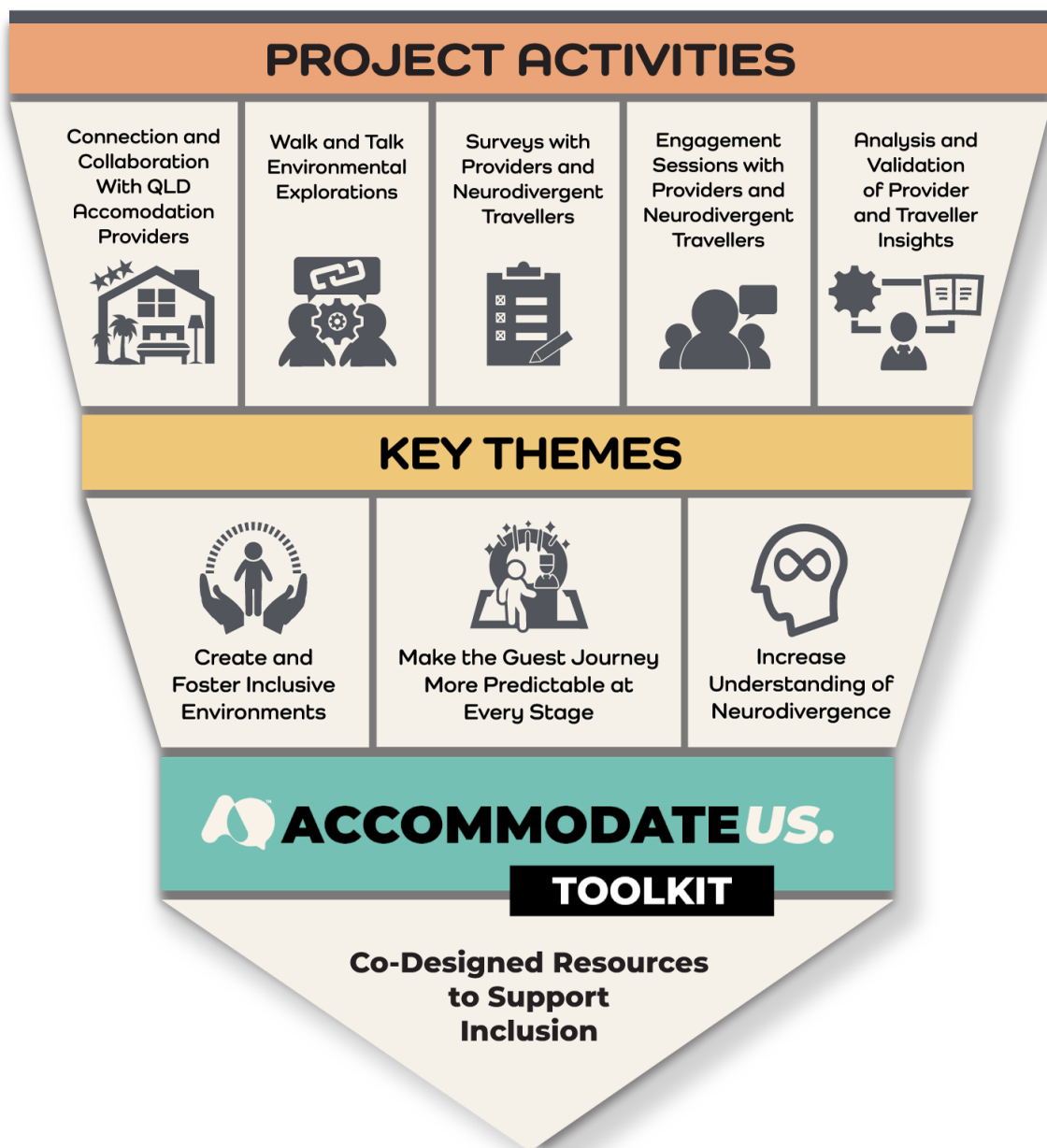
Resources within the Toolkit were developed and designed to align with the three key themes that emerged throughout the project. Co-design remained a critical component throughout this phase to ensure that all aspects of the Toolkit were reflective of the experiences shared, relevant to the provider context and authentically designed.

The Toolkit was officially launched mid-June 2024 along with a strategic marketing effort to share the Toolkit broadly across the tourism sector, increasing its reach and impact.

The *Accommodate Us Toolkit* can be found online within the Autism Queensland website: [Accommodate Us - Autism Queensland \(autismqld.com.au\)](https://autismqld.com.au).



A Snapshot of the Accommodate Us Project:



All People - All Places - All Spaces



Key Themes

Theme 1: Increase Understanding of Neurodivergence



"Provide training on inclusive communication strategies and understanding of neurodivergent individuals who may engage in the spaces."

- Neurodivergent Survey Respondent

The importance of understanding neurodivergence and the experiences of neurodivergent travellers was highlighted as a key strategy to support inclusive travel experiences. Project informants (i.e., providers and neurodivergent travellers) identified this as both a barrier and a solution.

Providers recognised the importance of more comprehensive staff training but reported challenges in identifying the right types of training and the logistics involved to ensure that all current and new staff complete appropriate training.

"Funding is a barrier, however access to disability providers, where to find them, who to go to, the right training materials, access to training materials are all things that need to improve, bringing the information [and] providers forward so we can engage with them more effectively."

- Provider Survey Respondent

Many neurodivergent informants reported feeling misunderstood or being fearful of judgment when planning, booking and staying in accommodation venues. Some described feeling pressured to disclose a diagnosis or disability to get the support they needed, and others reported sharing their neurodivergence but still feeling like they were not understood.

When neurodivergent travellers were asked how accommodation venues could be more inclusive, a majority of respondents emphasised the importance of staff training in neurodivergence. They shared stories of both positive and negative experiences often based on staff encounters. Specifically, understanding different types of communication and different sensory preferences were seen as key areas of importance for staff training.

"Provide training on inclusive communication strategies and understanding of neurodivergent individuals who may engage in the spaces."

- Neurodivergent Survey Respondent

Training and empowering staff to understand neurodivergence, to recognise and honour different communication preferences, and to accommodate different sensory experiences is key to fostering greater inclusion and ensuring that all travellers feel welcomed and supported.

"Having difficulties doesn't mean we're difficult, it means we have more challenges, [it] doesn't necessarily mean we're more challenging. It means a little more empathy, support and care [is needed], so we achieve equally and fairly."

- Neurodivergent Survey Respondent

Theme 2: Make the Guest Journey More Predictable at Every Stage



“It is important that a venue is accessible from the very first point of contact, often the website. This allows a guest to do thorough research and deem how suitable a venue is for themselves. No one knows their abilities better than they do, so by equipping them with as much information possible they can plan their stay for the best experience possible.”

- Provider Survey Respondent

Travelling, navigating new places and experiences, and staying away from the comfort and routines of home can be stressful and overwhelming. When we asked neurodivergent travellers what advice they would give to accommodation providers to improve their stays and travel experiences, increasing predictability was a central theme across responses.

“We really need more photos of the space we will be in.”

“For the booking process, clearly spell out what is required so I can pre-process and be prepared.”

“Having information online that we can click through and see, like a FAQ, photos or a social story would help.”

“An easy to navigate website with clear descriptions and photos.”

- Neurodivergent Respondents

Adding predictability to accommodation venues, services, activities and amenities fosters inclusion by:

- ✓ reducing stress and anxiety.
- ✓ equipping and empowering guests with information to make informed decisions, in line with their needs and preferences.
- ✓ increasing confidence in booking and planning decisions.
- ✓ building trust with providers.

Neurodivergent travellers reported that they were seeking explicit, easy to access information about what to expect at every stage of the guest journey. When this information is not readily available, travel experiences can be incredibly stressful or inaccessible. Some neurodivergent travellers shared stories of avoiding travel all together if they could not access adequate information about what to expect.

Key Stages in the Guest Journey:



Making the guest journey more predictable begins long before arrival or check-in. Inclusive accommodation venues provide resources and supports to enhance predictability before, during and after the guest's stay.

Theme 3: Create and Foster Inclusive Environments



“Overall, an inclusive accommodation venue should strive to go beyond the basics of accessibility, aiming to create an atmosphere that promotes comfort, understanding, and a sense of belonging.”

- Neurodivergent Survey Respondent

Inclusive environments go beyond compliance and accessibility. Inclusion ensures that all users of the space feel safe, welcomed and included and extends to both physical and digital spaces. Creating and fostering inclusive environments is a journey that requires a shared vision and an ongoing commitment to improvement. This theme speaks to the importance of embedding a culture of inclusion within the business, the venue and the community.

Creating and fostering inclusive environments is a nuanced and iterative process. It does not follow a specific formula or checklist. However, there are several key components, particularly in the context of travel and accommodation venues, including:

- Consideration of the physical, sensory and cognitive aspects of all spaces.
- Ensuring effective wayfinding systems are in place.
 - Wayfinding refers to how people orientate themselves to a space or place and how they navigate throughout that space.
 - Wayfinding is supported by infrastructure and physical design, landscaping, graphic design, maps, and signage.
- Providing retreat spaces.
 - Creating environments and break out spaces that feel comfortable and supportive with thoughtful placement of furniture, use of colour, and attention to spatial dimensions contribute to a sense of well-being, making occupants feel at ease in their surroundings.
- Offering options and flexibility.
- A universal/inclusive design approach.
 - Consideration of the diverse abilities and preferences of all people aiming to create products, services and environments that are useful, marketable, inclusive and adaptable.

“An accessible and inclusive accommodation venue [...] should prioritise creating a welcoming and supportive environment. This includes having clear signage, well-trained staff, and accessible communication channels. The physical layout should be designed with ease of navigation in mind, providing comfortable and quiet spaces. [...] Staff members should be trained to understand and accommodate diverse needs, and there should be a commitment to fostering a stigma-free atmosphere. Overall, an inclusive accommodation venue should strive to go beyond the basics of accessibility, aiming to create an atmosphere that promotes comfort, understanding, and a sense of belonging.”

- Provider Survey Respondent

When planning and booking a trip, neurodivergent travellers reported that they are often looking for cues of inclusivity. They want to know if they will be welcomed, supported, understood and comfortable in the space. While there is not currently a universal symbol of inclusion, there are many ways providers can make inclusion more visible:

- Inclusion statements and commitments prominently displayed online and onsite.
- Expand ‘Accessibility’ sections online to include information about inclusion more broadly (i.e., beyond just physical access).
- Provide inclusive resources online and onsite (e.g., welcome stories, visual supports, interactive maps, sensory maps, etc.).
- Use of inclusive language in all communications (i.e., written, phone, face-to-face, etc.).
- Inclusive practices embedded at each step in the guest journey (e.g., highlighting options for different communication preferences, asking all guests/visitors if they require any additional support, offering flexible options to all guests/visitors, etc.).

Making inclusion visible is not about being fully inclusive or always getting it ‘right.’ It’s about transparency with the current supports and initiatives in place, highlighting your commitment to the journey and an openness to feedback and improvement.

Project Summary and Next Steps

The Accommodate Us project highlighted many of the barriers faced by neurodivergent travellers when planning and booking a trip and staying in different types of accommodation. Connection with accommodation providers throughout the project provided an in depth understanding of the tourism and hospitality sector, the unique barriers within this context as well as opportunities to foster greater inclusion. The co-design process embedded throughout the project resulted in the Accommodate Us Toolkit, a solutions-focused set of resources specifically tailored for accommodation providers and informed by neurodivergent travellers, to facilitate, guide and support the implementation of inclusive practices.

The Accommodate Us Toolkit includes resources relevant for providers at all stages of the journey to inclusion. AQ and the project team recognise that everyone's journey to inclusion is nuanced and complex – the process requires time, resources, commitment and collaboration. However, the themes that emerged through this project and the associated resources within the Toolkit demonstrate how small steps can have an immense impact in fostering greater inclusion.

Many of the inclusive design solutions outlined in the Toolkit are low cost and can be actioned and implemented straight away. Others may require more intentional and strategic planning with allocated resources but being transparent in the journey shows a commitment to inclusion and an understanding of its importance.

“This project has brought much more awareness to the team of things that were not previously considered that would benefit not only our neurodivergent guests but all our visitors.”

“This project has helped identify many problems which can easily be transformed into solutions that will create a more inclusive experience across our whole park.”

– Post-Project Provider Survey Respondents

As Queensland prepares to host the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, with an Elevate 2042 Legacy vision to establish an inclusive, sustainable and connected society, with more opportunities in life for everyone, Queensland has opportunity to become a destination of choice for visitors across the world seeking the best experiences. In line with the Towards Tourism 2032 strategy, the need for greater inclusion across the sector is imperative.

Creating and facilitating inclusive settings and services is key for businesses to become or remain providers of choice. Inclusion is good business. It is how the tourism industry will remain at the forefront of innovation. Organisations that commit to genuine inclusion will have greater profits, productivity and community engagement.

Genuine inclusion requires a collaborative culture shift and the removal of systemic barriers. It requires thought and action that goes beyond compliance and accessibility. It entails creating a culture of respect, understanding and acknowledgment. Creating inclusive spaces where everyone can feel welcomed, valued and included isn't just the right thing to do, it is a basic human right. Inclusion is for all people, in all places and all spaces.

Acknowledgements

The AQ Community Inclusion team would like to thank the Queensland Government and Department of Tourism and Sport for enabling this project and for their ongoing commitment to accessible and inclusive tourism.

We are grateful to the neurodivergent travellers who generously shared their time, stories, and experiences throughout the project. And finally, we extend thanks to the accommodation providers who committed to this project and the journey to genuine inclusion.

Contact Us

For questions or to speak to someone from the project team or for customised inclusive supports, please contact our Community Inclusion team:



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