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To Auckland Council

Please find attached DPA’s submission on Annual Budget 2023/24

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# Introducing Disabled Persons Assembly NZ

**We work on systemic change for the equity of disabled people**

Disabled Persons Assembly NZ (DPA) is a not-for-profit pan-impairment Disabled People’s Organisation run by and for disabled people.

**We recognise:**

* Māori as Tangata Whenua and [Te Tiriti o Waitangi](https://www.archives.govt.nz/discover-our-stories/the-treaty-of-waitangi) as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand;
* disabled people as experts on their own lives;
* the [Social Model of Disability](https://www.odi.govt.nz/guidance-and-resources/guidance-for-policy-makes/) as the guiding principle for interpreting disability and impairment;
* the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html) as the basis for disabled people’s relationship with the State;
* the [New Zealand Disability Strategy](https://www.odi.govt.nz/nz-disability-strategy/) as Government agencies’ guide on disability issues; and
* the [Enabling Good Lives Principles](https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/egl-approach/principles/), [Whāia Te Ao Mārama: Māori Disability Action Plan](https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/whaia-te-ao-marama-2018-2022-maori-disability-action-plan), and [Faiva Ora: National Pasifika Disability Disability Plan](https://www.moh.govt.nz/notebook/nbbooks.nsf/0/5E544A3A23BEAECDCC2580FE007F7518/%24file/faiva-ora-2016-2021-national-pasifika-disability-plan-feb17.pdf) as avenues to disabled people gaining greater choice and control over their lives and supports.

**We drive systemic change through:**

* **Leadership:** reflecting the collective voice of disabled people, locally, nationally and internationally.
* **Information and advice:** informing and advising on policies impacting on the lives of disabled people.
* **Advocacy:** supporting disabled people to have a voice, including a collective voice, in society.
* **Monitoring:** monitoring and giving feedback on existing laws, policies and practices about and relevant to disabled people.

## United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

DPA was influential in creating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD),[[1]](#footnote-2) a foundational document for disabled people which New Zealand has signed and ratified, confirming that disabled people must have the same human rights as everyone else. All state bodies in New Zealand, including local and regional government, have a responsibility to uphold the principles and articles of this convention. These are the UNCRPD articles particularly relevant to this submission:

* **Article 3: General principles**
* **Article 9: Accessibility**
* **Article 19: Living independently and being included in the community**
* **Article 20: Personal mobility**
* **Article 24: Education**
* **Article 27: Work and employment**
* **Article 30: Participation in cultural life, recreation and sport**

## New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016-2026

Since ratifying the UNCRPD, the New Zealand Government has established a Disability Strategy[[2]](#footnote-3) to guide the work of government agencies on disability issues. The vision is that New Zealand be a non-disabling society, where disabled people have equal opportunity to achieve their goals and aspirations, and that all of New Zealand works together to make this happen. It identifies eight outcome areas contributing to achieving this vision. There are a number of Strategy outcomes particularly relevant to this submission, including:

* **Outcome 1 – Education**
* **Outcome 2 – Employment and economic security**
* **Outcome 3 – Health and wellbeing**
* **Outcome 5 – Accessibility**
* **Outcome 7 – Choice and Control**
* **Outcome 8 - Leadership**

# The Submission

## Introduction

Fiscal cuts must not be at the expense of community services and funding which are so vital to disabled people and other members of the Auckland community.

Auckland Council’s proposed cuts will adversely impact on disabled people who are one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalised communities in this country.

DPA Auckland members have raised with us several concerns about the proposed budget including participation and inclusion within the community and exacerbation of existing inequities between disabled and non-disabled people.

DPA believes that if Auckland Council chooses to move forward with these cuts, then it will violate the key principles of the Local Government (Community Well-being) Amendment Act 2019 which requires all local authorities: *“to promote the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future.”*[[3]](#footnote-4)

If these cuts progress, Auckland Council will also be contravening several articles of the UNCRPD (see above), especially those relating to its general principles, living independently and being included in the community, personal mobility, education, access to information, work and employment, and participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport.

We outline the impact this proposed budget will have on disabled people using each of the above-mentioned community wellbeing principles of the Local Government Act as a guide.

One in four New Zealanders have a disability or long-term health condition. Māori and Pacific peoples have an even higher-than-average rate of disability. There were approximately 271,000 disabled people residing in Auckland in 2013 (the latest data available), a number which rises to over 300,000 when accounting for current population increase.[[4]](#footnote-5) Around public transport, DPA and Waka Kotahi undertook joint research during 2021 which noted the lack of progress on making our transport system more accessible around the country, including in Auckland.[[5]](#footnote-6) Our recent hui on this budget with Auckland members also highlighted the continuing issues with transport accessibility and usability for disabled people in the region.

Furthermore, disabled people in Auckland face an increased risk of living in poverty largely due to lower incomes and extra resource requirements compared to non-disabled people.[[6]](#footnote-7) Statistics also show that disabled New Zealanders are grossly overrepresented in unemployment rates; two-thirds of disabled people earn less than $30,000 per annum, increasing the likelihood of poor socio-economic outcomes.[[7]](#footnote-8)

## Impact of the proposed budget cuts on disabled people

### 1. Social and cultural wellbeing of disabled people

The social wellbeing of disabled people will be severely impacted in numerous ways by the proposed budget cuts.

DPA believes that the cuts will have negative ramifications on the ability of Auckland’s disabled community to participate in community activities and programmes.

DPA also believes that the cuts will contravene the principles of Enabling Good Lives where disabled people are supported to live the good lives they choose in the community utilising every day spaces, places and natural supports.[[8]](#footnote-9)

#### 1.1 Cuts to libraries

Libraries act as important community hubs as they are places where community events are held, free access to services are provided including sessions with local councillors and Justices of the Peace, and where people can just simply go and relax with a good book or digital resource.

Given that disabled people are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed, retired and/or on low incomes, often a trip to the local library can be a real lifeline in terms of not only borrowing books and other resources but also as a means of social connection for many within the disabled community who experience social isolation and marginalisation more greatly than non-disabled people do.

Cuts to library services through reducing both staff numbers and opening hours will deprive many disabled people of the ability to borrow and/or browse books and other resources for free from public libraries.

Members of the blind and low vision community are regular borrowers of audio resources and have access to free screen readers at Auckland’s many public libraries. If library staff are cut and replaced by – as Mayor Brown has suggested - volunteers, then the institutional knowledge that librarians have about the availability of these, and other resources will likely go with them.

Disabled people also access public libraries as they provide access to digital and information resources that would otherwise not be accessible to them at home. This is the case as disabled people are more likely to experience barriers to digital access, particularly when it comes to the internet and other technologies.

These barriers include the inability to afford internet connections or purchase computers due to cost. Another factor is the disabling nature of the internet given that many websites are inaccessible, especially for blind and low vision people and people with learning disabilities.

Having access to the internet and other digital resources at libraries is very important for disabled people as in those spaces staff are available to train, support and guide disabled and non-disabled people in accessing the internet if needed.

#### 1.2 Cuts to regional and local board regional and community grants

DPA believes that cuts to community funding for other programmes will have serious negative consequences, including for disabled people.

DPA is concerned by the proposal to cease delivery of Community and Social Initiative (CSI) Department programmes (except those aimed at Māori) including The Southern Initiative and The Western Initiative, Youth Connections, and Youth Empowerment.

These initiatives, blending programmes designed to reduce economic, social and environmental inequities in the West and South Auckland areas are innovative, unique and have delivered results that, in many instances, cannot be measured just in monetary terms alone for the people they benefit, and this includes for the disabled people of those areas.

DPA believes that cuts to community contestable grants in the form of regional grants for arts, events, sport and recreation, environment, waste minimisation as well as grants by local boards to support community organisations and activities will be devastating for disabled people and other marginalised communities.

Programmes run and led by disabled people, disability service providers and other community agencies aimed at disabled people and their families/whanau will either not be fully supported to the extent they currently are or will fold altogether.

In the arts, events, sporting and recreational spaces, disabled people will have either reduced or no access to things like audio description and NZSL interpreting at arts, cultural and sporting events, and accessible information about environmental issues including waste and recycling.

DPA is concerned about the proposal to stop support for the development of groups working with Māori, Pasifika, youth, refugee, new migrant, and rainbow communities. Disabled people are members of each of these communities due to the natural intersectionality which exists in our society. We believe that cutting funding for such groups would withdraw much needed support for things like peer support groups which are needed as a means of maintaining community connectedness and wellbeing.

#### 1.3 Cuts to homelessness programmes

Another programme that we are disappointed to see being considered for elimination is the Council’s coordination and funding of homelessness initiatives. It is astonishing to believe that during an ongoing housing crisis that Council is considering abdicating its responsibilities towards one of the most marginalised groups in our society – homeless people and their families/whanau.

Disabled people are one group who are very disproportionately impacted by homelessness. This is due to disabled people being overrepresented amongst low-income earners while also facing higher living costs due to disability. For this reason, disabled people are more likely to be renters; 2018 data from Statistics New Zealand shows that 47% of disabled people rent compared to 35% of non-disabled people. [[9]](#footnote-10)

Accordingly, disabled people are at greater risk of homelessness due to the lack of security around ongoing tenancy and this is exacerbated by the low number of accessible houses not only in Auckland but throughout the country.

The loss of Council-provided homelessness support services will mean that disabled people and their families/whanau will have one less supportive resource to turn to if they face a housing crisis and one which has good community networks and knowledge at that.

#### 1.4 Cuts to Citizens Advice Bureau network

DPA is especially concerned about the proposed cuts to the Council’s funding of Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) around Auckland.

Disabled people will be one of the population groups most impacted by any reduction or complete loss of service from Auckland’s CAB network.

As we noted earlier, many disabled people are not able to easily access digital information and communications in the same way as non-disabled people and for this reason are mainly reliant on community agencies, including CABs, to provide free, impartial, confidential information about community services, supports and rights.

If, for the sake of just $2 million annually, CABs are cut leading to large scale closures or even a complete halt to operations in Auckland, this will mean that another vital resource to disabled and non-disabled people alike will go with negative ramifications that will become evident within the community as the burden will then shift to other CABs throughout the country and already under-resourced, stretched agencies to do the work that they perform now.

#### 1.5 Cuts to outdoor experience programmes

Council proposals to potentially de-fund or reduce funding for the Outdoor Experience programme which supports young people, including disabled people, to experience outdoor physical activity, leadership development and skill building will be detrimental for Auckland’s disabled youth.

The axing of specialised Outdoor Experience programmes for disabled youth and others must not proceed. Any reductions in funding for these types of programmes which provide recreational and leisure opportunities for disabled people who would otherwise be denied them would mean the loss of social connection and skill development that they represent.

#### 1.6 Ending Early Childhood Education provision

DPA believes that Auckland Council’s proposal to end direct provision of Early Childhood Education (ECE) services will be very detrimental to the wellbeing of tamariki/children and whanau/families who use this service.

Auckland Council has long provided affordable, flexible childcare to many whanau in the region, including to both disabled parents and their children and the non-disabled parents/whanau of disabled children.

This availability of affordable ECE has been invaluable to many disabled whanau - especially where one or both parents/caregivers are disabled people themselves or are the parent/caregiver of a disabled child – enabling them to engage in paid or voluntary employment, community or recreational activities.

Early childhood services are becoming more expensive for families/whanau and the proposed privatisation/contracting out/axing of ECE provision will create anxiety and uncertainty for the many whanau who currently use these services.

#### 1.7 Transport cuts will affect disabled Aucklanders

DPA believes that cuts to the Total Mobility Scheme and a rise in bus fares will restrict disabled people’s movement and ability to socially connect and participate in society.

**Recommendation 1:** that Auckland Council reverse all the above proposed cuts and engage in constructive, open and transparent dialogue with disabled people and disabled people’s organisations, around how best to maintain investment in programmes that promote social and cultural, economic, and environmental wellbeing.

### 2. Economic wellbeing of disabled people

DPA believes that the proposed budget will impact on the economic wellbeing of disabled people in the Auckland region, given the poor socioeconomic statistics we cited at the beginning of this submission.

These statistics will not change and only stand to worsen if programmes vital to the economic wellbeing and participation of disabled people are either reduced or eliminated.

#### 2.1 Cuts to public transport

The provision of public transport services is important for disabled Aucklanders in terms of the ability to undertake social connection, inclusion and participation in their communities. Cuts in this area will hit disabled people hard.

Auckland Transport’s (AT’s) proposal in the Budget to maintain service levels at reduced Covid-19 levels will effectively reduce public transport options for Aucklanders and this includes for disabled people who use buses. Moreover, many disabled Aucklanders are still not able to fully access public transport services due to the inaccessibility of some buses and other transport modes.

The Budget proposals to only maintain existing transport services and not grow them - including the absence of any serious plan to improve their accessibility - will mean that they remain under patronised, including by disabled people. Effectively maintaining the exclusion of considerable numbers of disabled people from public transport services is intolerable and this is an issue that must be tackled by AT, even in the current economic climate.

**Recommendation 2:** that Auckland Transport fully invest in improving the accessibility of all public transport services and modes through a comprehensive plan developed in partnership with disabled people, leading to their increased use by disabled people.

Also, how will services improve without investing the necessary funding for AT to recruit more drivers? Central government have already provided significant funding to regional councils to enable this to occur, so Council (through AT) will now have to come to the party on this too.

One of our Auckland members outlined why there is a need to actively recruit bus drivers through supporting pay increases and better conditions for them:

“*One of the reasons that people do not use public transport at the moment is that it is super unreliable. The working conditions of bus drivers need to be addressed. If it was more reliable, it would be more profitable.”*

**Recommendation 3:** that Auckland Council use additional government funding provided to regional councils to raise bus driver pay rates to address driver recruitment and retention issues.

Another Auckland DPA member said that due to the current lack of buses in the city that more of them were running either close to or at full capacity, creating further access barriers for disabled people using them:

“*Auckland’s buses are packed. People with small children and wheelchair users shouldn’t be competing for space but they are. Currently there is only half the number of scheduled buses which should be working – that locks it in. This means that people are standing for more time. It also means that wheelchair users and their friends can’t catch buses together as there too few accessible seats available.”*

While not specifically linked to this budget, AT’s fare rises slated for introduction on April 1 will see even fewer Aucklanders accessing buses and this includes disabled people and their families/whanau. This also raises the question of how the number of passenger trips will be grown if fares keep rising?

Another DPA member spelled out what this could mean for them, especially after the comparatively lower fares of recent years:

“*As an Aucklander who struggles to use public transport, when reduced fares came in, my use of transport went up. The idea of fares increasing just blows my mind. ... They’re wasting the spend that has happened to date.”*

We acknowledge that the rise in fuel and other costs have led to these fare increases but Auckland Council should apply to central government for more funding to cover them so that fares can be reduced again.

**Recommendation 4:** that Auckland Council apply to central government for more funding to cover transport cost increases so that this can be passed on in lower fares to AT public transport users.

DPA is also very concerned about the potential for any cuts to the Total Mobility scheme by Auckland Council.

**Recommendation 5:** That Council retain the permanent 75 percent fare subsidy which came into effect last year.

#### 2.2 Cuts to Auckland Council staff numbers

Mayor Brown and senior management have recently indicated that staff reductions could be on the cards at Auckland Council because of the budget. We noted earlier the suggestion by the mayor that librarians could be replaced by volunteers. Our concern also extends to suggestions that staff within all branches of Auckland Council could be impacted by cuts. We are especially concerned about the impact this will have on disabled staff.

New Zealand has an ongoing issue with comparatively high unemployment and underemployment rates for disabled people when compared to non-disabled people. Therefore, DPA believes there should not be any cuts made to services that would result in redundancies, particularly for disabled staff.[[10]](#footnote-11)

For this reason, if job losses happen, Auckland Council should be aware of the ramifications this will have for affected disabled people made redundant including that any job search will be more prolonged than for their non-disabled counterparts.

If any redundancies result from the budget process, DPA believes that disabled employees should be afforded as much protection as possible against redundancy given that disabled employees possess many skills that have contributed to the work of council and the loss of these skills would be considerable.

**Recommendation 6:** Ensure that disabled council employees are not disproportionately affected by any potential redundancies.

#### 2.3 Cuts to Tātaki Auckland Unlimited

The proposed cuts at Tātaki Auckland Unlimited, in terms of funding for museums, art galleries and the city’s zoo, will have impacts in terms of the ability for everyone, including disabled people, to enjoy connection within Auckland’s cultural, recreational and community spaces. For many disabled people, an outing, whether it be to the city’s various museums, art galleries or zoo, is often a low-cost way to fully participate in the community.

DPA is also concerned that if the review of pricing, opening hours, staffing costs and programmes offered at community facilities by Tātaki results in the introduction of user pays for areas not currently charged for, then this will have negative impacts on disabled people in terms of the ability to easily and affordably access community, recreational, sporting, cultural and other opportunities. If undertaken, these changes will contribute to further social isolation, marginalisation and loneliness within Auckland’s disabled community which will have further negative downstream impacts on health and other community services.

**Recommendation 7:** that Tātaki Auckland Unlimited not introduce user pays or increase admission charges to community facilities in any areas where these are not currently charged.

DPA is very concerned that Tātaki might also have to draw back from supporting new businesses and start-ups given that some will be led by disabled entrepreneurs and/or employ disabled people within them. Any cuts to council economic development programmes will have ramifications for not only disabled people and other employment marginalised groups but the whole city economy.

DPA also opposes the proposal to de-fund COMET, the council-controlled organisation supporting skills training as this will impact on disabled jobseekers who are seeking to train or re-train before entering or returning to the workforce.

### 3. Environmental wellbeing of disabled people

The disabled community are already being severely hit by the impacts of climate change and are expected to be one of the hardest hit population groups going forward, locally, nationally and internationally. [[11]](#footnote-12)

DPA found that after reaching out to our members in Auckland following the recent weather events that while many disabled people were resilient and had withstood the floods well, others had not as we heard stories about the impact that weather-enforced homelessness had on disabled people, especially given the lack of accessible housing.

DPA is supportive of all efforts to both manage and reverse climate change and prevent any further damage to the planet we live on, not only for disabled people but for every one of us.

#### 3.1 Cuts to environmental programmes

DPA believes that both central and local government have a joint responsibility to fund, lead and coordinate programmes in partnership with local communities to address the impact of climate change and environmental degradation head on.

DPA are very disappointed at budget proposals which will see funding for various Council-based environmental programmes reduced, effectively undermining *Te Tāruke-ā-Tāwhiri*, the city’s climate plan. We share the concerns of environmental organisations including Forest and Bird about this and other proposals to reduce funding around environmental programmes and infrastructure.[[12]](#footnote-13)

#### 3.2 Cuts to weed control and mowing programmes

Reducing funding for stormwater management following the recent weather events, community-led environmental programmes like weed and predator control, and even funding for grass mowing around footpaths and in parks and recreational spaces will all negatively impact Auckland’s environment. On this last point - reducing the ability of Council to manage grass, weeds and other natural hazards - will create accessibility barriers for disabled people and others in our community who will find it increasingly difficult to navigate around overgrown grass and hedges.

#### 3.3 Cuts to Eke Panuku urban regeneration

DPA is concerned about Eke Panuku delaying several planned sustainable urban regeneration projects because of these budget cuts, which will delay accessibility improvements. Urban regeneration offers the opportunity to upgrade Auckland’s communities to make them more user friendly and accessible for everyone, including disabled people, who will benefit from having more mobility curb cuts, safer footpaths and easier access to community facilities including shops, schools and workplaces.

#### 3.4 Cuts to public transport

As pointed out earlier, we noted the negative impacts of the proposal to maintain Auckland Transport bus services at their Covid-19 levels on disabled people.

DPA believes that maintaining a lower level of public transport services will impact on Auckland’s ability to contribute towards this country’s goals of being carbon neutral by 2050. It will also undermine the Council’s own stated goals of progressing the delivery of public transport improvements designed to reduce carbon emissions.

Inevitably, if environmental funding is cut, then for every day it remains cut, the prospect of an even harder blow back for the city in terms of even worse climate events occurring than those experienced this summer will be inevitable.

If these and other cuts are avoided then the impact of climate change will continue to be disproportionately visited on some of the most marginalised groups in the Auckland community, including disabled people.

## DPA’s recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** that Auckland Council do not proceed with proposed cuts and engage in constructive, open and transparent dialogue with disabled people and disabled people’s organisations, around how best to maintain investment in programmes that promote social and cultural, economic, and environmental wellbeing.

**Recommendation 2:** that Auckland Transport fully invest in improving the accessibility of all public transport services and modes through a comprehensive plan developed in partnership with disabled people, thereby enabling greater use by disabled people.

**Recommendation 3:** that Auckland Council use additional government funding provided to regional councils to raise bus driver pay rates to address driver recruitment and retention issues.

**Recommendation 4:** that Auckland Council apply to central government for more funding to cover transport cost increases so that this can be passed on in lower fares to AT public transport users.

**Recommendation 5:** That Council retain the permanent 75 percent fare discount for the Total Mobility scheme, which came into effect last year.

**Recommendation 6:** Ensure that disabled council employees are not disproportionately affected by any potential redundancies.

**Recommendation 7:** that Tātaki Auckland Unlimited not introduce user pays or increase admission charges to community facilities in any areas where it is not currently charged.

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