

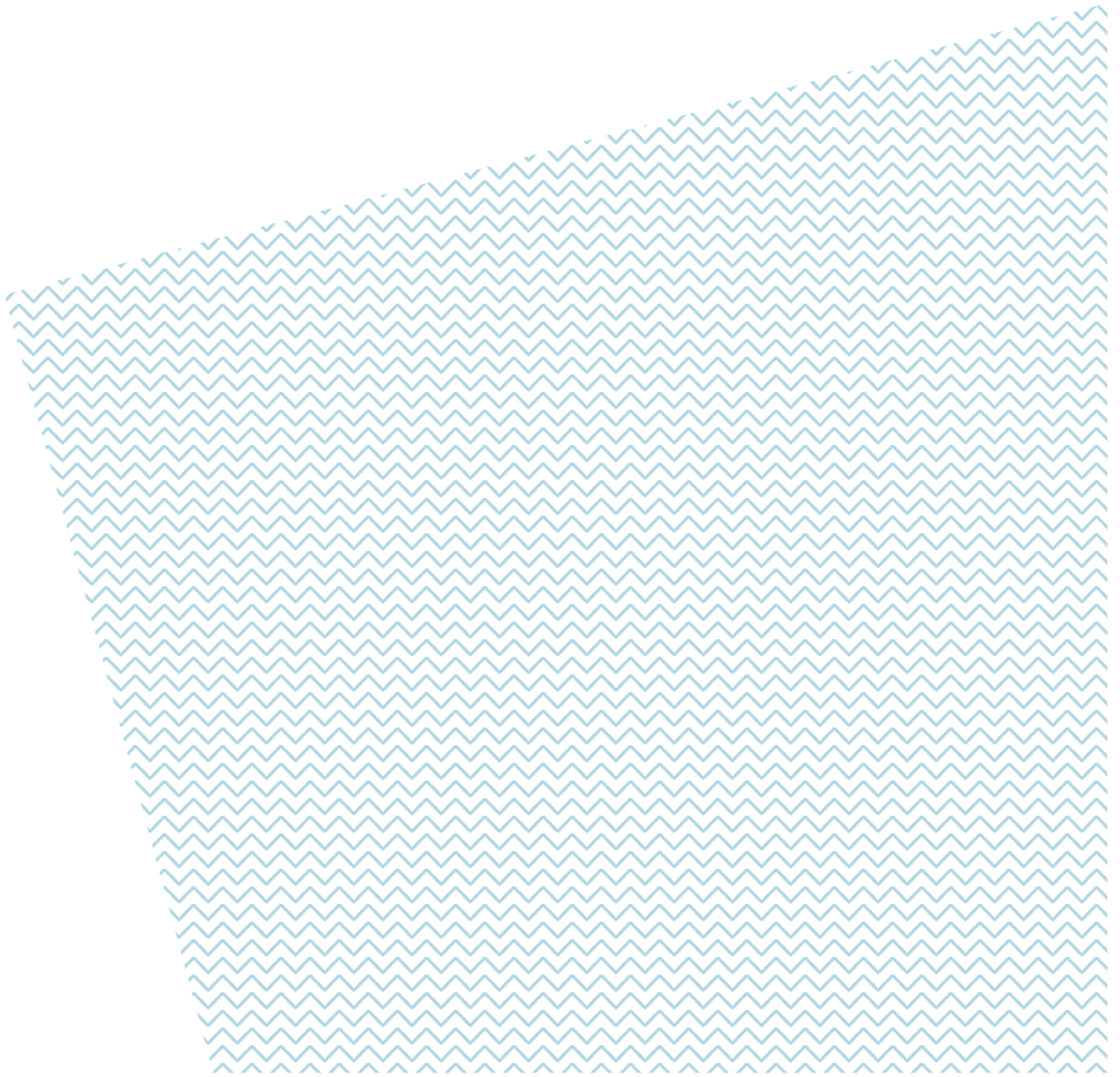


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# **Sun, Sand and Surf: Benefits, Elements and Pathways to Accessible Beaches**

Ilan Wiesel, Sofia Weerts, Miriam Lewis

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## 1. Introduction

“We all dream of the sand and the sea, in Australia.” (Bonner et al., 2001; p.269).

The beach is Australia’s most popular recreation destination, valued and enjoyed by local residents and tourists (Maguire et al., 2011; Teles da Mota et al., 2022; Job et al., 2022). Close to 12 000 beaches are located along Australia’s 60 000 km coastline (Teles da Mota et al., 2022). 85% of the Australian population resides within 50 kilometres of the coast (Clark & Johnston, 2016), and the beach is a quintessential aspect of Australian culture and identity (Lobo, 2014), with some internationally renowned beaches such as Bondi Beach in Sydney and Bells Beach in Victoria. As in other countries, participation in beach culture is considered a rite of passage for young Australians (Alterman & Pellach, 2022; Hayden, 2021). In 2019-2020, 14.1 million Australian adults visited the coast an average of 3.1 times a month (Surf Life Saving, 2020).

However, most beaches are inaccessible for people with mobility-related disabilities, who encounter physical and social barriers that impede their participation in beach spaces (Mayordomo- Martínez et al., 2019; Hayden, 2021; Job et al., 2022). Job et al.’s (2022) survey suggests that upwards of 60% of Australians aged 65 or over and/or living with a disability cannot participate in their preferred beach activity, including 26% who are unable to visit the beach at all (2022). The number of Australians with a mobility-related disability will increase from 2.9 million in 2018 to around 4.7 million people over the next 40 years due to population growth and an aging population (CIE, 2020). Mobility restrictions can be lifelong, temporary (e.g., due to an injury or pregnancy), or changing over time (for example, due to aging). Thus, most people will experience disability at different stages of their life.

The removal of barriers, and implementation of accessibility features, has the potential to enable equitable access and participation in beach activities for people of all abilities (Maguire et al., 2011). However, to date, little research has investigated beach accessibility and participation for people with disabilities in Australia. The objectives of this report are therefore to explore:

- The benefits of accessible beaches for people with disability, and the wider community;
- The elements that make beaches more or less accessible for people with disability;
- The challenges and opportunities to making Australian beaches accessible.

To address these objectives, we have undertaken a review of existing literature on accessible beaches in Australia and internationally. The results from this review are summarised in chapter 2.

We have also collected new qualitative data about beach accessibility in Australia, including:

- Three ‘go-along’ interviews with three participants with mobility restrictions; a member of the research team joined participants in their visit to a beach, observed their experience at the beach (recording written observation fieldnotes), and interviewed these participants on site;
- Five in-depth interviews (conducted over zoom) with two local government officers, one Life Saving Club executive, and two disability rights advocates involved in accessible beaches advocacy and governance;
- Four hours of observation in Altona and Williamstown beaches to observe use of accessibility infrastructure and equipment such as beach matting and beach wheelchairs.

All interviews and observations were conducted in the State of Victoria, Australia, in 2022. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Melbourne’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes in the data from the interviews and observations. The results from this analysis are presented in chapter 3.

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## 2. Review of existing literature on accessible beaches

### 2.1. Benefits of beach access

#### 2.1.1. Australian cultural identity

The beach is a hallmark of Australian culture and identity, as portrayed in films, popular culture, television, art, and tourism campaigns (Booth, 2001; Bonner et al., 2010; Teles da Mota et al., 2022; Lobo, 2014). Beachgoing is synonymous with the laid-back coastal lifestyle that has influenced the Australian sense of national identity (Lobo, 2014). The beach represents a space of relaxation or adventure and freedom, and is the site for pivotal life moments such as travel, retirement, or marriage (Lobo, 2014; Huntsman, 2001). One's past experiences at the beach can create a sense of place attachment, from which aspects of their identity are formed (Walton & Shaw, 2016). The beach is a place that Australians wish to reside by and return to (Bonner et al., 2010).

The beach is a liminal space, blurring boundaries between land and ocean, city and nature, and as such also a space of opportunity where people can temporarily engage in activity that transgress more rigid norms of behaviour (Pritchard & Morgan, 2010). The beach is therefore a place of pleasure, play and sociability in forms that are often not possible in other urban environments (Walton & Shaw 2016). Huntsman writes of the Australian beach:

*“We discover again the joy of play: of dancing through the froth, gliding up the wave face or diving through it...enveloped in total sensory stimulation as the cool silky water slides around our bodies, the foam fizzes over the surface of our skin, the roar of the waves fills our ears, the taste of salt in our mouths, as the body...responds with ecstasy to the stroking, touching, murmuring, feeding.” (2001, p.8).*

#### 2.1.2. Physical and mental wellbeing

Two recent studies have demonstrated the relationship between participation in beaches' recreational and social activities and physical health and psychological wellbeing (Job et al., 2022; Teles da Mota et al., 2022). Teles da Mota et al. (2022) argued that the beach environment provides the setting for land and water-based recreation such as swimming, fishing, walking, and surfing. These beach activities are closely associated with enjoyment and relaxation that can directly improve one's health and wellbeing. Job et al. (2022) found that the beach's scenery, experienced through all senses, from the rhythmic sound of crashing waves to the feel of squeaking sand, has rehabilitative qualities that positively affect human wellbeing. The beach also fosters social togetherness amongst friends and family and is a space where communities can gather to participate in civic life. In their study on beach use patterns in south-eastern Australia, Maguire et al. (2011) found that 76.8% of beachgoers visited the beach with their friends, family, or partners. However, 21.8% of Australian beachgoers cannot participate in their preferred beach activities, with 15.8% citing reasons such as disability or old age.

### 2.2. Barriers to and enablers of beach access and participation

Despite recent accessibility improvements to some Australian and international beaches, barriers to beach access persist for people with mobility-related disabilities. In the following sections we examine these barriers, and opportunities for reforming beach accessibility, drawing on Australian and international literature.

#### 2.2.1. Physical infrastructure

Physical mobility barriers, and the absence of accessible infrastructure, are key factors underpinning the exclusion of people with disabilities from beach life. This includes the absence of accessible public transportation, parking spaces, pathways along the promenade, and changeroom and toilet facilities (Santana-Santana et al., 2021). While an essential service required for beach accessibility, Santana-Santana et al. found that 40% of Spanish beaches did not

have accessible public transportation services for people with disabilities (2021). These barriers can deter people with disabilities from visiting the beach or severely compromise their participation. Hamilton's (2002) study on the utility of accessible beach surfaces in Daytona Beach, Florida, found that 84.7% of participants with mobility-related disabilities avoided the beach, citing reasons of mobility difficulties across the sand, and 95.8% of participants noted that they would visit the beach more often if measures were in place to assist their mobility. This indicates that barriers to beach access stem from the absence of matting or other accessibility measures that facilitate access to the waterfront for people with mobility-related disabilities.

Some accessible amenities and infrastructure – such as amphibious wheelchairs rental services and beach matting – have been applied in some beaches to improve accessibility. Studies suggest these are often only partially successful in generating inclusion of people with disability. In Spain, Santana-Santana et al. (2021) explored the specialised mobility equipment available to people with disabilities, such as amphibious chairs and crutches, floats, and transfer hoists. However, this equipment was only offered seasonally during peak tourism months. Similarly, beach matting designed to ease wheelchair access, often does not extend all the way to the water; in one case cited in a New Zealand study, the beach matting extended only halfway down the beach to avoid destructive tidal surges, prohibiting access to the water for wheelchair users (Hayden, 2021).

The beachscape is a dynamic physical environment subject to daily and seasonal change (Ellison, 2013). High tide, sand build-up, or erosion can displace matting or damage temporary surfaces and often cannot be controlled (Hayden, 2021). The irregular terrain of the beachscape, such as inclines and soft sand, presents further challenges for implementing a surface that is both accessible for wheelchair users and preserves the atmosphere of the beachscape (Hayden, 2021). In these natural conditions of the beach, adapted amenities to improve accessibility for people with disabilities typically require regular maintenance.

### 2.2.2. Social attitudes

Beyond physical barriers and enablers, social attitudes and practices also play an important role in shaping inclusions and exclusions at the beach. Although not focused specifically on people with disability, studies have examined the social expectations underpinning beach participation. In their study on gender and sexuality at the beach, Pritchard and Morgan (2010, p. 131) suggest that the presence of semi-naked bodies creates "...an anxious place of display and body management...", especially for women and girls. Tourism, media, and television representations of the Australian beach have long privileged the athletic, muscular male and the slim, sun-kissed female as 'acceptable' beach bodies. This able-bodied figure has dominated imaginaries of Australia's beach culture, as depicted by Lobo:

*"...white Australian-ness is performed by wetsuit-clad athletic bodies surfing, bronzed bodies wearing bikinis or board shorts swimming, sun-tanning, or reading, energetic bodies running or walking dogs and animated children building sandcastles with bucket and spades." (2014, p.101).*

These representations of the Australian beach body are often hyper-sexualised and communicate ideas of sensuality as something to be attained and desired (Pritchard & Morgan, 2010). This can shape the general public's understanding of the types of bodies that are accepted at the Australian beach. Those bodies that do not conform to this able-bodied representation may feel unwelcome or hyper-visible in the beachscape, discouraging people with disabilities from visiting the beach.

## 2.3. Improving beach accessibility: Opportunities and barriers

### 2.3.1. Indifference and opposition to accessibility features in beaches

Studies suggest that there is still little public awareness on the issue of beach accessibility, and at times even negative attitudes towards accessible infrastructure in beaches. Hayden (2021), in New Zealand, found the general public was largely oblivious to the importance of accessibility measures. In some cases, there was direct opposition to new accessible facilities by local residents. People were more likely to have awareness and positive attitudes towards beach accessibility if they had, or knew someone with a mobility-related disability. However, Hayden argues that the presence of accessibility amenities within the beachscape can help normalise the idea that people of all abilities have a right to use the beach. Silva et al. (2002), in Portugal, similarly explored how implementing accessibility facilities at the beach can increase public awareness and acceptance of beach accessibility measures.

One factor driving resistance to beach accessibility is the perception of beaches as 'natural' environments which need to be conserved, even for those beaches within urban or semi-urban areas that are thoroughly transformed by human activity and development. Alterman & Pellach (2022) argue that installing accessibility features often requires the construction of built infrastructure, which is perceived as disrupting or compromising the natural environment. Thus, local councils responsible for coastal management must consider both beach access rights for people with disabilities and environmental sustainability. Hamilton's (2002) study examined whether the aesthetic qualities of temporary surfaces, such as beach matting, implemented for access to the waterfront detracted from the 'natural' atmosphere of the beach. However, most participants in Hamilton's study, all of whom had physical disabilities, strongly agreed that temporary surfaces did not detract from the environment.

### 2.3.2. [Designing for universal accessibility](#)

The concept of universal design is well documented in disability accessibility literature (Job et al., 2022; Hayden, 2021; Gossett et al., 2009; Hanh, 1986). A universal design approach acknowledges the need to meet diverse needs within the broad population of people with disabilities (Hayden, 2021). Importantly, it also highlights that improvements to accessibility are beneficial not only for people with disability, but also many others such as older people, families with young children and others (Hanh, 1986). Hanh (1986) argued that universal design principles guide the inclusive design of urban environments, aim to reduce accessibility barriers, and consider the continuum of people's ability over the lifecourse. However, very little has been written about the benefits of accessible beaches for people both with and without disabilities, from a universal design perspective.

### 3. **Participants' perspectives and observations**

Turning our attention now to Australian beaches, the following sections summarise key themes that emerged from our interviews and observations with research participants. The results are structured in line with our three research objectives, focusing in turn on the benefits of accessible beaches; the elements of accessible beaches; and barriers and opportunities to making Australian beaches accessible.

#### 3.1. **The benefits of accessible beaches for people with disability: Inclusion, freedom, equality, health and wellbeing**

Many participants raised concerns about the exclusion of people with disability from beaches, recognising beaches as an integral part of Australian culture. Participant 5, a disability rights advocate, emphasised this latter point:

*It comes down to basic fundamental...rights and expectations of people to be included in life full stop, and in Australia going to the beach is such an integral part of Australian culture, and it's so iconic. Pretty much everybody else can choose to go to the beach whenever they want to... why should a whole subsection of our community not be as valued as everybody else in society by not making the beaches accessible? (Participant 5)*

Participant 4, a local government officer, commented on the absolute exclusion of many people with disability from beaches, and the life changing impact of improvements to beach accessibility:

*We ran a brief survey getting feedback [on accessibility features]. So, I got about 52 responses of people's thoughts. Apart from one person who thought it was a complete waste of time ...everyone else just thought it was a great idea, and a couple of people said they hadn't been to the beach in about 40 years and got there and just cried ... until you start hearing those stories you don't realise how much of a life changer it can be. (Participant 4)*

People with disability who participated in the 'go-along' interviews, spoke about their own experience of exclusion from inaccessible beaches, and the sense of inclusion that comes when visiting a beach designed to be accessible. Participant 7, for example, spoke about accessible beaches in terms of equality and being treated as 'anybody else':

*It [beach accessibility] just makes me feel included like anybody else... I mean if you've got a disability, if there's barriers like being in a wheelchair and no matting to access it, well that excludes you straight away. (Participant 7)*

In Australian culture beaches are often associated with 'freedom' (Huntsman, 2001). Participant 6, a person with disability who participated in a go-along interview at Altona Beach, described visiting an accessible beach as an experience of freedom:

*I think having a beach that is accessible just provides freedom. Gives you the choice, you can go on the beach and feel for lack of better words 'able'. To be able to do that*

*and independent. So if you're, a beachy' at heart, not sure how to phrase it, you love the beach at heart, it provides that opportunity to be able to roll up onto the beach, jump on the ground or the sand or just get as close as you can to the water. Yeah, just like, freedom. (Participant 6)*

Beaches are known as places of social gathering, where people spend time with family and friends, and also encounter new people. The relaxed atmosphere at the beach is conducive to socialising, as evident in the notes taken by the researcher about the go-along interview at Anglesea Beach:

*There was a sense of serenity and calm. The area we were in did have a lovely view of shining water and long grass and was very calm, this atmosphere seemed to transfer itself onto our conversation. (Observation notes, Anglesea Beach)*

However, *Participant 7* and *Participant 6* reflected on the experience of being left out of social activities with family, a partner or friends in inaccessible beaches:

*Q: Have you ever missed out on going to the beach with friends or family because you've gone and found it's not been accessible?*

*Participant 7: Yeah, there's been quite a few occasions when I missed out. Or I've gone and watched them on the sand say throwing a frisbee or going in the water and you have to watch from the sidelines.*

*Been with my partner years and years and years ago... down at Bells Beach... I was set up at the top, and she ran down the ramp jumped into the water had photos and came back up, and we drove off. I didn't get to go down. I'd love to check it out, but wasn't able to ... I didn't wanna dwell in the emotions of it. But it's hard, to not be able to access something like that and then you wanna see something, and you can't, its disempowering. (Participant 6)*

*Participant 2*, a disability rights advocate with lived experience of disability, highlighted how beaches are highly versatile urban spaces, allowing for diverse types of land and water activities, catering for many different personal preferences and changing circumstances. She emphasised the importance of accessibility to enabled such diverse uses of beaches:

*There's many different ways that people use and experience a beach, and sometimes my experience is completely different to other people's experience. ... So for me sometimes just putting my legs in the water is enough of an adventure for me. Whereas if it was hot ...I'd love to get into the water itself. But again, that's a bit of a challenge getting out of a beach wheelchair and into the water. But for others they're like a lot more adventurous. And then there's others that don't really want to go in the*



*water at all, and are happy, you know, with just a boardwalk or a viewing platform. ... for some people, all they want is to be able to go to the beach and maybe sit on a park bench and watch, you know, watch the activity of the beach because they're not really keen on all the aspects. (Participant 2)*

Participants also spoke about the health and wellbeing benefits of participating in beach culture. Some reflected on existing research evidence on 'blue space' as a sites associated with increased physical activity and improved mental health (Job et al., 2022). Others spoke from their personal experience about the importance of the beach in their lives.

For Participant 2, the beach was a 'therapeutic' place coming out of a long period of loneliness and isolation – but emphasised the frustration of not being able to visit inaccessible beaches because of her injury:

*I've had a lifelong disability, and um, it's a weird thing but there's a long period in my life where I didn't really do much. I was socially isolated... And then I got a best friend and we used to do stuff together, and one of my favourite things to do was to get onto the beach and just paddle in the you know, the shallows of the water, and it was one of the most, I don't know, kind of therapeutic in a way. And then um not long after I had sort of started doing that, I had a fall and I broke my hip and pelvis and my muscular weakness condition deteriorated, and I couldn't, I could no longer stand. So one of the things that I like to do is go on to beach, and I couldn't do that anymore, because I was permanently in a wheelchair. (Participant 2)*

Participant 7 described beaches as places of calm, happiness, rejuvenation and wellness:

*The beach is definitely a huge part of my life. ... when I've got some free time I head to the beach cause I just love being outdoors, yeah just calm and happy. ... obviously if it was like 10 degrees hotter, I'd be swimming all day, but I also just love paths along the beach just going for a look, looking at the scenery, just sitting, I just feel so refreshed just seeing the sea yeah.... it's a huge boost for the wellbeing. (Participant 7)*

In contrast, the experience of inaccessible beaches can be a source of anxiety, as described by Participant 6:

*You know, before the beach mats came out I'd go on the beach, I've got bogged on the beach, but I'm so determined I've jumped and crawled on the beach, and crawled to the water which is good fun, but it's exhausting. And to know that if you wanna go to the beach and you have to do that, it can be overwhelming and cause anxiety where you won't wanna go down to the beach (Participant 6)*

Initiatives to improve beach accessibility have been life transforming for Participant 8, who previously had rarely visited beaches, and now it has become a central part of his life:

*I have become a fan of it in the last two years. ... Changed my life. (Participant 8)*

The immediate positive effects of the beach on Participant 8's wellbeing were evident in the go along interview, as captured in the researcher's fieldnotes:

*As they crossed the road, the first thing I noticed was the participant's massive smile that was incredibly infectious to all of us when I greeted him and his support worker. After some words of joking and laughter, even without any verbal words from the participant, it was clear through the bright eye contact and smile that he was looking forward to the day. (Observation notes, St Kilda Beach)*

### 3.2. **Universal design: the benefits of accessible beaches to the wider community**

The benefits of accessible beaches extend beyond people with disability. In our observations in Williamstown and Altona beaches, we found beach matting in particular was widely used by various people, including children, elderly people, and parents, serving a variety of uses and purposes. These benefits were captured in the researcher's fieldnotes:

*The beach matting was utilised in many ways by different groups of people. Young children were the most common users of the beach matting. During my observation, many children jumped or ran along the matting, tracing its 'L' shaped frame like an obstacle course. Several children rode their scooters up and down the matting. Second to children, elderly people frequently used the matting, often when entering or exiting the beach. ...Many mothers also entered and exited the beach via the matting, holding their children's hands (usually under four years old). .... Lots of parents also used the matting for their prams. At one point during the observation, a pram was parked at the entry point of the matting (where the sand meets the promenade), which prohibited access for other beachgoers. Another mother breastfeeding her child was seated on the matting for roughly 30 minutes. The matting seemingly provided an on-beach seat where the mother could observe her other children play on the sand and in the water. It seemed the matting offered a 'hard' infrastructure compared with the soft sand, which may be uncomfortable or unstable for breastfeeding purposes. Many people with beach trolleys also used the matting. ...The trolleys were filled with beach toys, towels, eskys, and sometimes small children. (Observation notes, Williamstown Beach)*

In Altona, we observed that most people at the beach set up around the beach matting. Often parents would park their prams on the matting. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1: Beach matting used by parents of young children as parking for prams**

One participant commented how some people now specifically request the matting for events such as weddings, illustrating the positive impacts of such infrastructure for the wider community.

*We trailed a spot down at Sorrento ... just next to the Baths restaurant. And that went quite well, and the restaurant was happy to have it there, and it's actually a site where people have their wedding photos. And at first, we got a few complaints because you have to book that site through Council. But now we are actually having requests to have the matting there for weddings, so that's really awesome to see that shift.  
(Participant 4)*

### **3.3. The elements of accessible beaches**

Many participants recalled the elements that made it possible for people with disability to fully participate in the beach experience. These ranged from specific equipment, such as beach matting and wheelchairs, to the surrounding infrastructure at the beach, such as accessible parking and accessible changing rooms or toilets.

Participants identified accessible parking as an important element of beach accessibility, and specifically the number of accessible car parking spaces, and the proximity and connectivity of these spaces to the beach. An accessible car parking space was a space in which people with mobility-related disabilities could access the beachfront from their parking space with relative ease, as outlined by *Participant 5*:

*So, the key elements are accessible parking, and I often say practical, accessible parking. Not somewhere where you ticked a box and said, 'Yeah, we've got an accessible car park', but to get from there to the pathway is uneven, and lots of slippery surface... so it's got to be practically accessible parking, and multiple... if you only provide one, um again, it's, it's one person goes and nobody else can. (Participant 5)*

The importance of multiple accessible car parking spaces was furthered in the researcher's field observation notes:

*They [the participant and his support worker] had parked in a carpark on the other side of a very busy road.... Of note, at the carpark where we were originally situated [closer to the beach], there was only one accessible parking space. (Observation notes, St Kilda Beach)*

While additional accessible car parking spaces have been installed at certain beaches, these spaces were often occupied and insufficient to meet high demand on warm days.

All participants noted the importance of accessible bathrooms and changing facilities at the beach. The absence of such was a key deterrent from visiting certain beaches, and often meant that one's visitation was cut short when they needed to use the bathroom.

*For me, if I want to go to the beach, I can't use a bathroom or a toilet, because there's no changing places toilets along the Mornington Peninsula on that side. So, you know, if you want to go to the beach, you want to be able to use the bathroom... And then it's like 'Oh I've got to go to the toilet', so we've got to leave the beach to find a suitable toilet, which was pretty disappointing. And then, by the time you got back in the car and gone off to the toilet it's like 'nah I can't be bothered going back to the beach again'. (Participant 2)*

The maintenance of these facilities was also important to ensure they were available for use by people with disabilities. Participants' accounts suggested the upkeep of the accessible bathrooms and changing places was not prioritised by local councils, as noted by one participant's experience at St Kilda beach:

*Like St Kilda, they've got one [accessible toilet] there, and I was really excited because I just moved up to Melbourne. But the changing places toilet was out of order the last two times I've tried it, and I reported it...' (Participant 2)*

The location of accessible bathrooms, and inconvenient arrangements for accessing them (such as need to obtain a key held elsewhere), also impacted on access, as evident in one go-along interview:

*We then went to [...] the accessible bathrooms. This was across the road, [...]. When we arrived at the bathroom, we abruptly realised that we needed to get one of the MLAK*

*[Master Locksmith Access Key] keys to access – the participant explained that this was a relatively common thing, however he did not have one. We then went around to the closest café about 20 meters away to see if they had one (it was also indicated on a sign that you could call a number to access a key). The café had a key and passed it to the participant – we then went back to the bathroom. (Observation notes, Altona)*

In contrast, when accessible bathrooms and changing facilities are available and well maintained, this can positively influence one's overall accessible experience at the beach. *Participant 7* noted the positive impact of having accessible bathroom and changing facilities at the beach:

*Definitely having the changing places facilities for toilets, it's a huge game changer for anyone in a wheelchair, it just makes life so much easier having all the room to get changed. (Participant 7)*

Participants also considered beach matting a key accessibility element, implemented in several beaches across Victoria. The matting enabled participants to navigate the uneven terrain of the sand to get onto the beach and enter the water. This was noted by *Participant 7*, in her go-along interview at Anglesea Beach:

*Well obviously the sand is the biggest challenge to someone in a wheelchair. So, if there's no blue matting like this one, you pretty much can't go on the sand*

*Participant 4* noted the relative ease with which beach matting could be installed compared with the logistical complications associated with other accessibility measures, such as the beach wheelchair. As the matting was permanently installed at the selected beaches, it was available for use at all times and did not require the presence of Life Saving Club volunteers to organise its hire.

*It wasn't until the beach matting idea came along, which was Hobsons Bay through Push Mobility, that it was a game changer in terms of something that was a bit lower risk and was available 24/7, whereas the chair needed to be booked and you also needed to think about hoists and maintenance and a whole lot of other logistics, so the matting was just, it kind of, to use the pun, 'paved the way' for other beach access initiatives because it was just a lot more straightforward. (Participant 4)*

As discussed in the previous section, the beach matting was positively received not only by people with disabilities but also by the general public, evidenced in positive responses on social media.

Despite the positive improvements that beach matting has made to people's experiences at the beach, there were certain limitations to the matting that impeded people's access to the water and overall participation at the beach. These limitations were associated with the natural environment, specifically tidal cycles or strong currents that displaced the matting, meaning the matting often stopped far from the shoreline as a preventative measure. Beaches with steep inclines can also be unsuitable for beach matting. Consequently, beach matting is not suitable for every beach, as explained by *Participant 4*:

*There's a 3m tide in Western Port compared with 1m in Port Phillip, so the difference between low tide and high tide is about 60m on the Western Port Beaches. So, it means the matting would be covered in water half the time, or too far from the water's edge, so in terms of suitable locations... not all the beaches are ideal... we had it at Mills Beach in Mornington... the high tide was actually coming up to the rock wall and completely covering the matting and tangling it up and sending it down the beach for*

*metres. So, we had to make the decision to pull it up, like it was completely covered in sand we needed machinery to lift it out. (Participant 4)*

The length of the beach matting at certain locations was a source of disappointment for some participants with disability, who could not access the water without assistance from their peers, support workers, or other beachgoers. This disappointment was captured in the researcher's field notes:

*As we rounded the corner and saw where the matting, there was a brief silence. One of the first comments the participant made was that if she wanted to go to a beach, it would not be here, but somewhere that she would be able to access the water. Even here, the matting did not go into the riverbed, but stopped shortly before the water. (Observation notes, Anglesea Beach)*

The length of the beach matting was also noted by *Participant 6*, who wished that the matting would extend to the shoreline to facilitate their access into the water:

*I personally would love to see, it's not really practical, but be able to roll all the way along the beach with beach mats would be amazing, but yeah beach mats yeah, can be hard to be able to provide that all the time, and they can block, things can happen. (Participant 6)*

The beach wheelchair is an additional accessibility measure that enables people with mobility-related disabilities to access the beach and enter the water. The wheelchair enables people to move across the sand relatively easily to prevent their wheels from getting bogged in the sand. Booking systems for hire mean people with disability do not need to own and bring their own beach wheelchair; additionally, electronic booking systems have the potential to collect data on levels of demand and usage for further improvement over time. However, the beach wheelchair posed logistical complications relating to the storing and hiring of the chairs. This meant that participants could not hire a beach wheelchair upon arrival at the beach but instead had to organise to hire the beach wheelchair in advance through the council or Life Saving Clubs:

*So ridiculous, to be able to book a wheelchair, now this is actually another massive barrier... you have to call one person at a council between the hours of nine A. M. And five P. M. Monday to Friday, and if you decide on a Saturday or a Sunday that you want to, 'Oh, let's go to the beach.', you either try and call the Surf Life Saving Club and hopefully get someone pick it up and say, 'Oh yeah, the beach wheelchairs available. Come on down', or you just don't get to go (Participant 5)*

The seasonal availability of the beach wheelchairs proved to be a point of frustration for participants. As the beach wheelchairs are stored and managed by Life Saving Clubs, they are only available to hire between the months of December through March when the Life Saving Clubs patrol the beaches. This significantly limited the period when people with disabilities could visit the beach if they wished to hire a wheelchair to access the sand or enter the water. While some larger Life Saving Clubs sometimes offer additional patrols on warm off-season days, not every Life Saving Club had the volunteer capacity to do so.

*And also, the frustration around the beach wheelchairs are only available when the surf Life Saving Club are open, so that's probably on weekends mostly. And it's like what happens when all the good weather comes, you know, during the week or something, I still feel very frustrated. I think the wins feel like 'old news'. (Participant 2)*

Several participants noted that a solution to these hiring complications was that of a central booking system. A booking system enabled people to independently hire a beach wheelchair using an Master Locksmith Access Key (MLAK) without relying on the presence of Life Saving Club volunteers to assist.

*We are looking to see if we can get an MLAK ... so that if someone was to look to book a chair, they could go down there after doing, you know, doing the training online or booking online, signing waivers, you know, making sure they've got the right people with them all the things...so that they will then be able to go and use the chair at let's say 7am in the morning when they're going out with their rather mates for a swim, and then would bring it back afterwards, rinse it off, put it back, sign it back in and lock the key, lock the lock ready for the next person. ...Why should it rely on someone being there to be able to open and close it? (Participant 3)*

Some of the insurance complexities of offering beach wheelchairs are elaborated in section 3.4.3.

The nature of the beach as a social space where people gather with friends and family meant that some did not visit the beach solely to swim in the ocean. Participants noted that oftentimes, they frequented the beach to watch the water from the promenade or enjoy the serenity of the beachscape. This reinforces the importance of having other accessible features and infrastructure for beach access and participation, as noted by Participant 2:

*For some people, all they want is to be able to go to the beach and maybe sit on a park bench and watch, you know, watch the activity of the beach because they're not really keen on all the aspects... during lockdowns, one of my favourite things to do was to... go to the beach and watch the waves come through...sometimes you get to see the dolphins and things like that on the bay and all those magical things. So sometimes it's just even about having a car space somewhere that's got the view to the beach and it isn't, you know, hidden (Participant 2)*

The accessibility of surrounding infrastructure, such as hospitality or retail venues, playgrounds, and picnic areas, were important, as such sites were commonly frequented by beachgoers. *Participant 7*, for example, mentioned that the café near the beach she visited was inaccessible, with steps at the front, preventing her from getting in. *Participant 4* also emphasised the importance of the accessibility of surrounding infrastructures, and specifically mentioned picnic tables as one feature which could be designed to be more accessible.

Non-physical enablers, such as positive social attitudes held by the general public, were noted by participants as other important elements of beach accessibility. Positive attitudes communicate a sense of belonging and inclusiveness among people with mobility-related disabilities and are a key driver of implementing accessibility improvements.

*You can have all of those physical components, but without having that software that we talk about, the perspectives of people, the true drive to make people feel included, and to really deliver a proper accessible experience, that can't be undervalued, because it's, you know, unless they feel like they're not a burden, and that they're just being able to participate, then you know, you're never going to get to that full, that proper place of being truly accessible and inclusive. (Participant 5)*

The level of social comfort that participants experienced at the beach influenced their ability to participate in the beach, even in the absence of physical accessibility elements, such as beach matting or beach wheelchairs. *Participant 7*, for example, describe a sense of social comfort – even in the face of other people staring – meaning they felt comfortable leaving their wheelchairs and crawling on the sand to enter the water:

*Yeah, I usually feel socially comfortable. I went three weeks ago to Phillip Island with my girlfriend and we're both in wheelchairs, and there's no blue matting down there. We knew everyone was looking at us anyway cause wheelchairs, and we thought 'we don't care' so we hopped out, literally had to bum across the sand for a good hundred meters, but my friend halfway through was about to give up, like 'no no no, were here, we're getting in' so, and we were aware people were watching but it was still okay. I mean being in a chair, people are looking anyway, but once you're in the water, you just feel like everybody else. (Participant 7)*

Information regarding beach accessibility can help inform visitation decisions regarding which beaches are the most accessible for people with mobility-related disabilities, and what accessibility infrastructures are in place at certain locations. Online access to informative resources enables people to conduct this research prior to their beach visitation. *Participant 6* identified social media as a powerful and accessible resource for sharing beach accessibility information:

*I think just at the beginning before I knew about this, I think it's about getting your hands on the information. When you're new to a spinal injury, or you know or you just want to jump into, get into the beach, you really gotta put in a bit of research. But I think now there's a lot more out there especially with the beach matting and companies advertising themselves so well these days in social media it's so much easier, so I'd say now, no not so much... Oh yeah, it's incredible, times have changed for sure. Social media, it's a lot more powerful than you realise yeah. (Participant 6)*

This information was also valuable for increasing awareness and educating people on the benefits of beach accessibility. Inaccessible or little available information online meant that some were unaware of what accessible facilities were available to people with mobility-related disabilities. This was evident in the researcher's fieldnotes, which demonstrates difficulty accessing information about accessibility equipment due to a disconnect between local council departments:

*Before visiting Williamstown beach, I contacted Hobson City Council to confirm that the matting would be available... I was aware that I was visiting the beach during an 'off-season' period and was unsure if the matting would be present. Interestingly, the lady I spoke to from the Council was unaware of the beach matting and its booking requirements. She referred me to her supervisor, who too was unaware of the accessibility measures available at Williamstown beach. I was then referred to the Social Planning team, who confirmed that the matting was permanently installed at Williamstown beach. (Observation notes, Williamstown Beach)*

Participants emphasised the importance of looking beyond beach matting and beach wheelchairs as the baselines of beach accessibility, which were described as 'old wins'. Little significant progress surrounding beach accessibility had been achieved since these measures were first introduced. Participants felt that greater steps could be taken to improve beach accessibility, and that they should not have to settle for just beach matting or beach wheelchairs. Instead, the surrounding beach infrastructure must also be accessible, and different accessible elements need to be better integrated, for people with mobility-related disabilities to expand their opportunities for participation within the beachscape:

*I think we need to do a lot more around the beach infrastructure itself ... beach matting, you know it's good, it's better than nothing. But it's not a whole beach experience, if that makes sense... I'm not lowering my expectations, and I'm going to be*



*just grateful for, you know, beach matting and a beach wheelchair. I want more... And there's so many things out there that, like, for instance, at Rye, there's scuba diving, and things like that that you could do. But the infrastructure isn't there to support that, and that becomes frustrating that, you know, when you think of what could be done if there was more supporting infrastructure, and supporting infrastructure that provides dignity of access to the beach too, you know, so people will still go and do diving and disabled diving at places. (Participant 2)*

When prompted to recall what elements made their preferred beaches accessible, participants mapped their accessible journey from the carpark to the waterfront, noting multiple features that contributed to their accessible beach experience. However, it was clear that despite the presence of some accessibility features, the absence of others was felt as barriers to participation, as identified by *Participant 7*:

*Just from the parking to where the blue mat is, it's just all totally flat and then you just go straight on the mat and then you're pretty much in the water. The only, well I haven't been there for a while, but they didn't have a changing places facility like they do here so that is one disadvantage. (Participant 7)*

*Participant 7's* comments reinforce the importance of integrating multiple accessibility features that contribute to a more accessible beach experience for people with mobility-related disabilities, addressing their diverse abilities, interests and ways of participating at the beach. Beach matting and beach wheelchairs have been important catalysers of change, but limited progress has been achieved to date in improving surrounding infrastructure for accessible beaches. The drivers of change, and limiting factors, are discussed in the following section.

### **3.4. Pathways towards accessible beaches**

#### **3.4.1. Accessible beaches advocacy**

Momentum towards improved beach accessibility has been driven primarily by the advocacy of people with disabilities and allies, especially 'champions' in local government and Life Saving Clubs, coordinating their activism through the Accessible Beaches Network. Within the network, Accessible Beaches Australia – a registered not-for-profit established in 2016 – was mentioned by several participants as a major driving force. The organisation's vision is to make all patrolled beaches accessible, and it has campaigned relentlessly towards this goal:

*The first level is that we'd love to get all patrolled beaches made accessible. Anywhere that there's a lifesaving patrol, we'd love to be able to get those beaches accessible. And then there is also other, and probably the next level down, where some, where a location perhaps isn't patrolled, but it is quite safe, and the terrain in the area, and say that access to parking and things like that, would actually enable those beaches to be made accessible quite easily, and we would love to be able to do that... we've got like sixteen thousand beaches in Australia. Three hundred, and I think it's three hundred and sixty-seven, or something are patrolled. We have about seventy that are accessible at this point in time. (Participant 5)*

In some local government, council officers with diversity and inclusion portfolios – including some funded through the State Government MetroAccess program – championed and coordinated many of the early initiatives to improve beach accessibility in their local government area. People with disability acting as members on councils' disability advisory groups, or in organisations such as Disabled Surfers, were also noted by participants as change leaders in this space.

Life Saving Clubs initially responded to initiatives led by others, but over time some clubs have taken a more proactive approach led by individual champions in local clubs. At a later stage, the Life Saving Clubs' state-level peak body has taken a more coordinated approach, providing resources to clubs to support accessibility improvements, as pointed out by Participant 3:

*And it's a new focus area for Life Saving Victoria since we have seen probably an increase in advocacy and awareness by, pushed by the Accessible Beaches Network also through um Accessible Beaches Australia, and an increase in questions being directed to us from our Life Saving Clubs. So, where it's kind of been, we'll do what we can when we can. Um, we're now putting some focus on it to go 'Okay, let's see what we can do here.'* (Participant 3)

In those councils where some initial measures such as matting and booking systems for beach wheelchairs have already been implemented, community members' expectations for improved accessibility have also increased, leading in turn to further community support and pressure on councils and clubs to take action. For example, one participant described the community 'backlash' on social media due to delays in laying out beach matting:

*And the backlash for not having it out, that was awful. Because I've got friends who use it and I knew people were planning their holidays around it being out, and yeah so, I felt personally a lot of pressure, and I can't remember if that went in the papers or not. Yeah, I can't, I'll have to look back. But I know it was on social media, and whenever we've done social media posts about it, it's always gotten a huge number of comments, and likes and shares, so it's a highly popular activity on the Peninsula which is great. So, it's got lots of support* (Participant 4)

Other participants also mentioned social media as an 'arena' for campaigns. Most discussion on social (and other) media was described as largely supportive of improvements to beach accessibility. There were only few mentions in our interviews of direct community opposition to installation of matting, or other accessibility features, and these incidents were relatively minor. One participant commented on one such minor incident, which reflected lack of awareness more than any substantial opposition to accessibility features:

*They advertised a trial for one [beach matting] in the Mornington Peninsula down at Sorrento, and one guy put in 'What they're too posh to walk on sand in Sorrento?'. Which is quite amusing. And someone explained to him what it was for, then they're like, 'Oh, okay, yeah, that's right.' It goes to prove though that, um, you need to do the education around it to get positive feedback, but for the most part like lots of people are really positive about beach matting.* (Participant 2)

Campaigns to promote accessible beaches have focused on lobbying and building relationships with relevant actors, growing wider public awareness of the issue, and generating and sharing knowledge on best practice examples. *Participant 5* and *Participant 3* emphasised the value of knowledge sharing:

*Sometimes, it seems scary and too hard and too big when it actually isn't, especially when you have organizations like us that can help people every step along the way.*  
(Participant 5)

*Through investigation we've seen that there's a lot of stuff happening in a lot of different areas. And there's no, there hadn't been much consistency in the approach. ... So, I'm trying to work through to try and fix a little bit of that through work in our network, through work with our Life Saving Clubs, and ... build some case studies of best practice sort of models, so that when we have new ... Life Saving Clubs that come on board, we can ... say, 'Well, this has been done really well in these X Y Z locations, yours is a Z location. Let's look to roll out and see if we can use this template to see if that might help or guide um in that aspect'. (Participant 3)*

Rather than direct community opposition, other factors – such as insurance and governance complexity, on which we elaborate in the following sections – were described as more significant barriers to implementation. Despite important ‘wins’ in improvement to beach accessibility, some key advocates described an overall sense of frustration at the slow and incremental pace of change, and as of yet unsatisfactory outcomes, as commented by Participant 2:

*But I think as a whole, amongst the disability community, yeah like we're frustrated by it. But I think a lot of people don't know how to get the next level happening.*  
(Participant 2)

In the absence of systemic change, the reliance on individual champions in specific Life Saving Clubs or local governments has proved precarious; participants raised concerns about the risk to existing initiatives if for example the individual who was driving it leaves. Concerns have also been raised about the focus in early campaigns on matting and beach wheelchairs, which were seen as a useful initial step, but insufficient on its own (as discussed in section 3.3). One participant raised a concern about the ‘blurred line’ between commercial enterprises supplying beach matting and wheelchairs, and wider campaigns to improve beach accessibility, but also noted some of those issues have been addressed and resolved.

#### 3.4.2. Beach governance and accessibility

Beaches in Australia are governed and managed by complex networks involving multiple actors driven by different interests and cultures, including: state government planning departments (in Victoria, the State Government Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)); local governments; Life Saving Clubs; and land managers (such as Parks Victoria). Even within a single Local Government Area, different beaches may be subject to different arrangements involving these various actors and others.

*There's like two or three levels of responsibility of parts of a beach that fall under different authorities. So, there's like the beach sand to the beach. And then there's from there to the car park, and it's, they're different authorities (Participant 5)*

*So, we as council are the Committee of Management for a lot of beaches on the Peninsula, not all of them, its broken up into 25 different sections just on the Peninsula alone. And they're all managed differently, some of it is council, some of it is voluntary committees, some of its DELWP (State Government Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning). (Participant 4)*

Local and state government, themselves, are complex organisations with multiple departments representing different, at times competing, interests, agendas and cultures. Building relationships across the various actors involved was described as a critical challenge to overcome:

*A lot of work over a long period of time. Building relationships with the life-saving clubs with the local traders getting support within council across the different parts of council. (Participant 1)*

*There's just too many departments like too many different departments, levels of government, and there's no sort of awareness. (Participant 2)*

In addition to complexity and fragmentation of actors involved in beach governance, the current legislative and regulatory environment provides little support for accessible beaches. Environmental legislation – such as the Marine and Coastal Management Act – is primarily concerned with conservation of beaches' natural environment, and can present barriers to installation of accessibility infrastructure. Concurrently, the lack of accessibility standards for beaches, and difficulties to enforce the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1992, mean there are weak legislative drivers for accessibility improvements. The DDA requires all public spaces, either existing or under construction, to be accessible for people with disabilities. Organisations managing public premises are obligated to undertake 'reasonable adjustments' to make these accessible. However, when the cost or difficulties of providing access will place an 'unjustifiable hardship' on a person or organisation managing that public space, they are exempt from this legal requirement. Furthermore, the onus of proving discrimination is placed on people with disability directly affected by it, who are required to file a complaint. Thus, despite anti-discrimination legislation, many premises and critical parts of the built environment are not accessible in Australia, including beaches.

*Well, the problem is the DDA is retrospective, so it's not like standards where you have to follow them, it's based on people with disabilities suing organisations for not doing the right thing. You can say it's a legal mandate but its only by people bringing the law into force, it's a bit back to front. (Participant 4)*

*So the DDA does apply to everywhere, but no one challenges. So it's a complaints based system, so often you've seen something being built that's totally awful. But I think we get conditioned to believe that it's just not worth the hassle to complain sometimes, or that we are just complaining, and like I don't know. It's just so complicated. (Participant 2)*

Within local government, accessibility initiatives are often institutionalised in 'action plans', which one participant commented tend to be weaker than 'policies' in driving initiatives.

Progress has been achieved when different actors have collaborated effectively; for instance when the state government's Metro Access program funded officers in local governments, who then led significant initiatives to improve accessibility. Some participants noted that funding opportunities exist, offered by different actors – such as grants offered by local and state governments (the NDIS, however, was not mentioned as a source of funding for beach accessibility initiatives, reflecting its individualised approach to allocation of funding). However, often there is lack of clarity about responsibility for beach accessibility, and lack of interest to lead initiatives even when funding opportunities are available.

This means that improvement to beach accessibility is haphazard, slow and incomplete: councils with proactive individual staff members, or strong disability advisory groups, have taken significant steps to improve beach accessibility, but only in beaches with supportive Life Saving Clubs, for example; while many others clubs or councils have taken no steps in this direction.

*With the absence of state or federal base directives, it is up to council by council to determine what they want....then it comes down to individual councils and the individual Life Saving Clubs ... so the ones that, that are committed are really committed, then others you know again, who have purchased the matting and stuff and then they put it away. [For example,] my local beach [was] doing this massive redevelopment of their Life Saving Club... this is a multi-million-dollar redevelopment like twenty-one million or something... And I thought 'Oh, fantastic!'... So, I contacted the council and said, 'Just hoping that you're also going to be including ... beach matting and beach wheelchairs'. 'Nope, we'll think about it, maybe we'll think about it in the future.' So, like you're talking, maybe an extra ten, not even ten thousand dollars to do that on top of this twenty-one million, but nope. (Participant 5)*

As discussed in the following section in relation to insurance, the complexity and fragmentation of governance also means agreements between relevant actors about liability for accessibility equipment must be negotiated on a case by case basis, with significant costs in terms of labour, and significant delay to implementation of initiatives.

### 3.4.3. Risk and insurance

Concerns about risk for people with disability were mentioned by participants as a major barrier to improvement of beach accessibility. Hundreds of people die from drowning in Australia every year. In 2021-22 alone, 339 people lost their lives to drowning and a further 686 people experienced a non-fatal drowning incident. Natural water bodies are the most common locations for drowning leading to death (Royal Life Saving Australia, n.d.; AIHW, 2022). Consequently, for organisations such as Life Saving Clubs, safety and risk reduction are a first priority, relegating inclusion and accessibility to a secondary concern, as explained by Participant 3:

*Life Saving Clubs .... they're a volunteer organization, and their primary focus is not people on the beach, it's [people] in the water and keeping them safe. And you know, secondary, they will look at everything else. But that's not their main focus..... some clubs really struggle to be able to get their minimum numbers to actually put on a patrol... and ensure that those that are in between the red and yellow flags are being looked after. And then there's all the additional layers that can come after that.*  
(Participant 3)

Not only does accessibility become a secondary concern relative to safety, but at times it is also perceived as a direct risk factor. Organisations were concerned that taking action such as installing beach mats or renting out beach wheelchairs, meant that they were also taking responsibility for any risks for people with disability using these facilities. Indeed, insurance companies seek a clear allocation of responsibility for the potential risk associated with equipment such as beach matting or wheelchairs. In some instances, provision of mats and wheelchairs was made possible by an agreement on shared liability between council, the Life Saving Club and other organisations such as Disabled Surfers. Other times, such agreement was difficult to achieve, or existing agreements had to be renegotiated from scratch due to changes in council staff or the engagement of a new insurer. 'Grey areas' and uncertainty about liability can arise, for example, where a wheelchair is stored and managed by a Life Saving Club but used primarily outside the Life Saving Club, on public land. One participant, a local government officer, reported spending much of her time negotiating insurance liability for accessibility features with other council staff, Life Saving Clubs, state government and insurers, blocking progress with accessibility initiatives.

A telling example of the insurance conundrum is that even when external organisation (say Parks Victoria, as the land manager of a particular beach) is willing to fund the purchase of equipment such as matting or beach wheelchairs, they often wish to 'gift' it to others, such as the local Life Saving Club, to avoid the liability. Life Saving Clubs, in turn, may not be willing to accept that 'gift' because of the insurance premium and liabilities associated with it.

While advocates of accessible beaches acknowledged the validity of safety concerns, they also emphasised the double standards applied to people with and without disabilities when it came to risk, and the ableist tendency to deny people with disability of the dignity of risk. Some highlighted the kinds of risks able-bodied people are allowed and even encouraged to take in beaches, while people with disability are proactively denied access to the beach on the basis that it puts them at risk.

*Often the talk from the disability community themselves is that why shouldn't they be allowed to make informed, risk judgments like everybody else. Do you know what I mean? So, it's not saying, oh you know 'I want to drown', but it's saying, 'Why shouldn't I be able to make that judgment on someone tell me no or yes', when everybody else is able to make these informed risk choices in their life.* (Participant 5)

*It's frustrating to when you watch like people who unload their boats into the bay, and like they end up with their cars in the water and stuff like that, and no one says, 'Oh, God! We've got to stop this. We've got to find a different way to, because that's potentially a risk to others, because they've, you know, they've crashed the car or*

*backed the car into the water'. But if it happens with wheelchair users it's like, 'Oh, my God! We've got to stop a potential risk happening'. (Participant 2)*

The comments above align with existing literature that highlights beaches are often places of risk-taking behaviour by able-bodied people. Beachgoers are often motivated by a sense of elation, hedonism, or peer pressure to partake in risky practices unique to the beachscape, such as sun tanning or swimming outside the flags (Walton & Shaw, 2016) and drinking or sexual behaviours (Lewis et al., 2014). Jumping off cliffs into the ocean is another risky activity in that is prevalent in Australian beaches (The News Bayside, 1 Feb 2016). Risk taking is part of the allure of Australian beach culture.

The double-standard of risk exposes an assumption that any action taken to enhance participation for people with disability in the beach exposes them to additional risk. However, interviews with participants with disability highlighted that the lack of accessibility features does not prevent risk for people disability, rather reinforces it. They highlighted not only their right for the dignity of risk, but also the fact that many people with disability already take risks at the beach because of its poor accessibility:

*Q: So, if a beach didn't have a mat and it didn't have anyone there, what level of risk are you willing to engage with on that beach?*

*Participant 8: Everything. (laughs)*

*My girlfriend and I go away usually once a year we always head to a beach location. Because we're both in chairs obviously that creates a lot of challenges but we both make an effort to get to the, to the water... the stories that I could come up with falling out of chairs, and having random strangers to help us, and being rescued by lifeguards and (we all laugh), yeah gotta make the most of it.... If I'm full of energy and have a good sleep, I'll be quite adventurous and go on the sand, see how far I can get, usually grab a local if I get stuck. (Participant 7)*

*Let's say that time, one of the first times I ever went to the beach ... there was a big massive hill going down to the beach. Once on the beach it wasn't too bad and my sister was with me, holding me down so I didn't fall out of my chair, rolled away down and I'm in the chair, and then I didn't have my other wheels, my off-road wheels, so I said 'I'm just gonna crawl the way' she said 'you're what? You're crazy' and I'm like 'yeah, let's just do it', and then just crawled yeah, couple hundred metres, jumped into the water, didn't even swim, just sat there, just sat there. Mom has a photo of me, just an amazing photo and just happened to get all the way down to water. (Participant 6)*

While having a disability generates additional safety hazards for a person at the beach, participant 2 emphasised that there is a perception that people with disability cannot manage those risks, discounting their agency and resourcefulness:

*Sometimes I've gone there and the lifesaving group are just sat there and watch us struggle with whatever and not bothered about anything. But on this occasion, I was just in my normal wheelchair. We got down to the beach, and we couldn't get all the way back up on the beach matting. It's just too much, and so some strangers on the beach helped out, and that was really good, and it was like, 'Yep, no one got hurt, and that's just great'. And then you get the feedback that 'Oh people, we can't have beach matting anywhere where it's not supervised, because people are getting to down to the water's edge and not being able to get back up again without help', and it's like, but that's just the experience, and it discounts the fact that we've, we're aware of what that challenge was, and we had the contingency there to deal with that challenge. (Participant 2)*



## 4. Conclusion

Beach culture is integral to Australian culture and identity, and as such participation in it is an important aspect of social inclusion in Australian society. There are substantial health and wellbeing benefits for beach access, as a source of joy, pleasure, physical activity, and relaxation. However, people with mobility restrictions are largely excluded from Australia's beach culture, due to physical and social barriers. Improving beach accessibility will enable people of all abilities to fulfil their right to participate at the beach. In accordance with universal design principles, our research shows clear evidence of benefits of accessible beaches to the wider community – with beach matting, for example, being used by many members of the public for diverse purposes.

Accessible beaches require several facilities and infrastructures in place. Beach matting to ease passage with mobility aids to the water; amphibian wheelchairs for hire (and associated booking and storage systems); accessible parking in sufficient quantity and good location; accessible changing places and toilets; accessible information about access facilities at the beach; and other facilities and infrastructures which can change from one beach to another. These multiple facilities need to be well integrated to ensure the beach is fully accessible and caters to diverse abilities, preferences and uses of the beach.

Recent years have seen growing awareness of the need for accessible beaches, driven thanks to the energetic advocacy efforts of people with disability, and individual staff members in some local governments and Life Saving Clubs acting as champions for accessible beaches. In some beaches, accessibility has improved thanks to beach matting and beach wheelchairs for hire. These initiatives were described by many participants as an important first step in the right direction, which can be life-changing for many people with disability; but on their own, such initiatives are only a partial solution, that still has not been taken up more broadly.

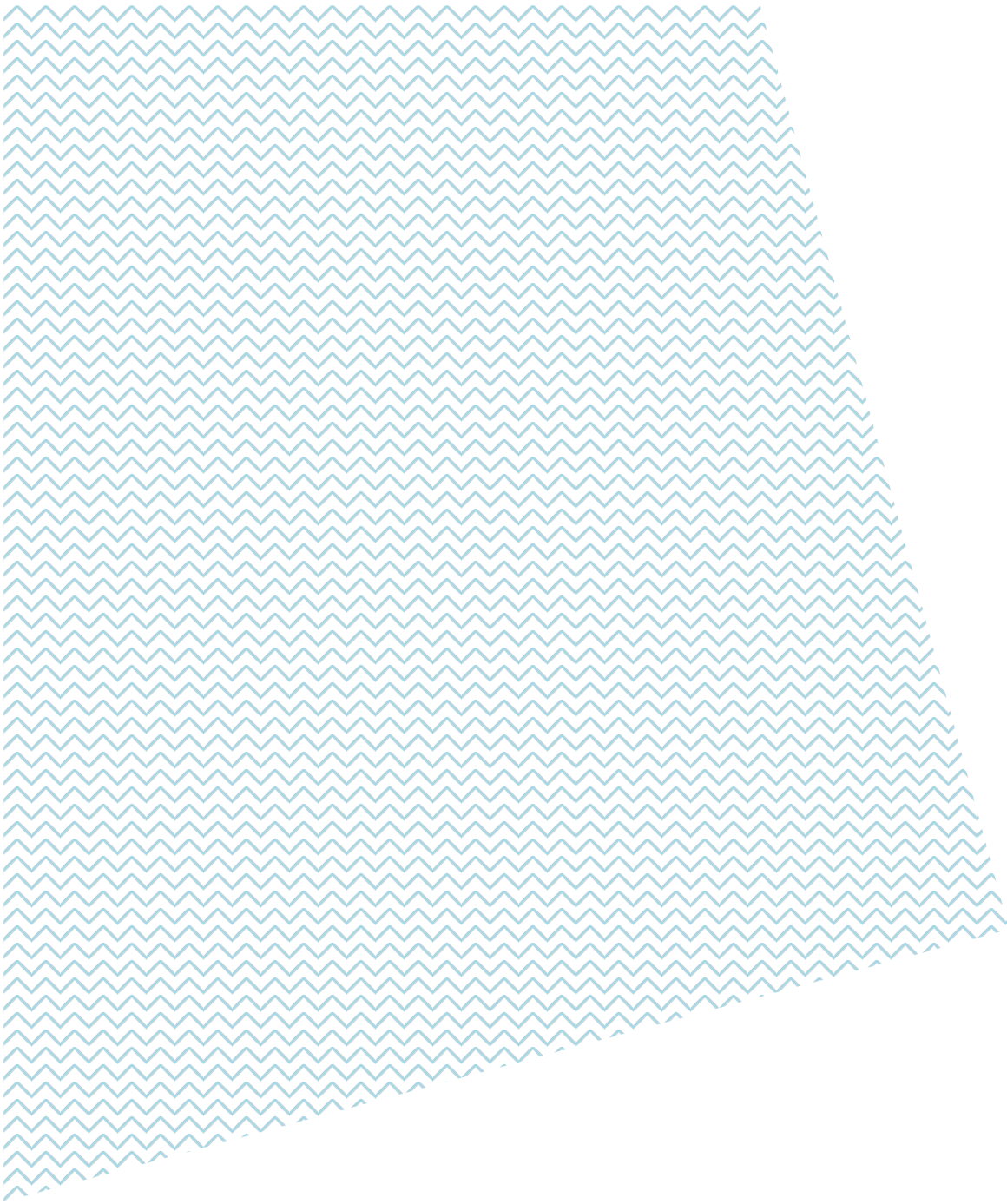
The main barriers to wider and more comprehensive uptake of beach accessibility initiatives are concerns about risk for people with disability at the beach, and related difficulties to provide insurance for accessibility equipment and infrastructure. Underlying these problems are a paternalistic approach to risk management, which does not recognise the dignity of risk, and applies a more stringent and protective standard of risk to people with disability compared to other members of the community. This is further exacerbated by fragmentation in beach governance, and different actors seeking to 'pass the buck' on responsibility for beach accessibility initiatives (and risk).

As a country 'girt by sea', and one that has led the world in initiatives such as the NDIS, Australia is well placed to become a world leader in making its beaches accessible to people of all abilities. This would require investment in advocacy, research and knowledge sharing for accessible beaches; direct public investment in beach accessibility improvement projects; and, stronger involvement of state governments to coordinate more closely the fragmented governance of beach accessibility.

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Contact: Ilan Wiesel, [ilan.wiesel@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ilan.wiesel@unimelb.edu.au)