

A Skellefteå for All - Year-Round Accessibility in a Small Winter City



Background

- Skellefteå is a growing city in northern Sweden known for its cold climate and dispersed geography. With a relatively small population, the city has nonetheless made major improvements in terms of accessibility for persons with disabilities. Recognising that inclusion can boost social cohesion and economic participation, the municipality invested in both infrastructure and digital tools to support mobility.
- The city prioritised inclusivity, despite its northern location with harsh winters, through the implementation of universal design in public spaces and services.
- Skellefteå won the 2023 Access City Award for embedding accessibility into its 2015 –2025 municipal development plan, “A Skellefteå for All.”

Key Activities

Accessible infrastructure: The city used a co-design model, actively involving residents with disabilities in decision-making panels. Infrastructure upgrades were installed, including widened pavements, ground heating in pavements and public areas to prevent snow/ice build-up, visual and audio signals at crossings and lifts in public facilities and tactile signage and paths in parks and streets.

Public transport: All buses feature low floors, ramps, high-contrast LED screens, audio announcements, and wheelchair access.

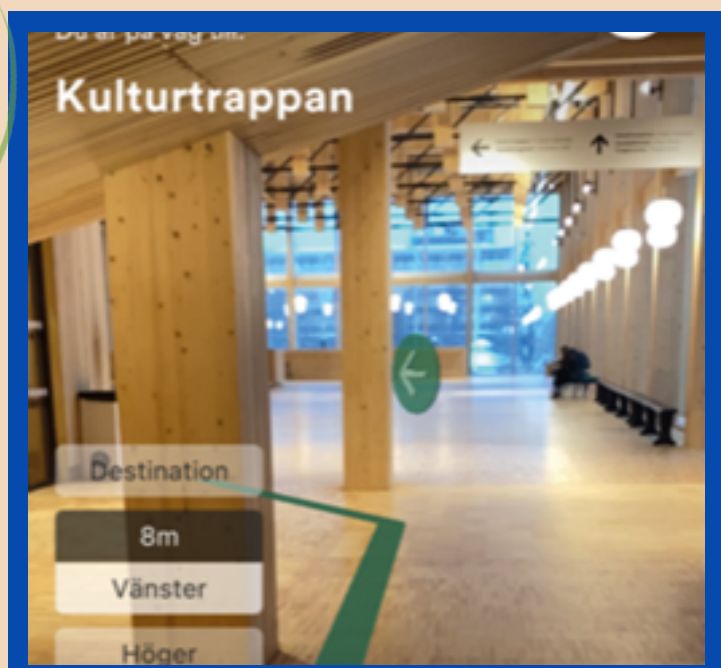
Digital inclusion: The city developed a mobile app that maps public building accessibility in real time. Additionally, a municipal SMS service informs residents who are blind or partially sighted about construction and obstacles. A tourism site lists accessible establishments.

Youth empowerment: Technology training is offered to enable young people with intellectual disabilities to live more independently.

Cultural inclusion: The SARA cultural centre offers an AR navigation app, including 3D mapping and audio for people with visual impairments.

Impact

Enhanced accessibility: Accessibility has improved across different areas, including housing, transport, and public spaces. The city has become more attractive for tourism and business, and the public’s trust in municipal services has increased.



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Impact

Recognition: Skellefteå's efforts earned it a finalist place in the EU Access City Awards 2023, as it ensures year-round accessibility and equal participation in public life. In addition, its comprehensive strategy, from infrastructure to digital services, sets a European benchmark for accessible cities.

Challenges & Solutions

- **Coping with winter conditions:** The city had to overcome geographic isolation and seasonal weather issues, such as harsh winters. To do that, it used heated pavements in key zones and extended accessibility services to ensure functionality and accessibility even in snowy conditions. The city also focused on digital information tools to minimise physical signage clutter.
- **Necessity of long-term commitment:** The city's municipal plan clearly assigns roles and timelines to sustain progress.

Tips for Similar Projects

- Use digital mapping to empower users to navigate proactively.
- Actively include people with lived experiences of disability from the outset.
- Use weather-responsive design (e.g., heated pavements) where needed.
- Pair physical accessibility with digital tools and real-time information.

Identified Limitations/Weaknesses

- Limited budget and scale mean some rural or less frequently used areas remain partially inaccessible.

Identified Limitations/Weaknesses

- Limited digital literacy poses a barrier for some residents.
- Temperature-related costs and maintenance are higher.
- Reaching rural zones with these standards remains slower.

Video

- ["Access City Award 2020 – Skellefteå"](#)

Video Description

Produced by the European Commission, this video celebrates Skellefteå's recognition in the Access City Awards. It features a narrated tour of Skellefteå's accessibility efforts, highlighting inclusive snow-clearing strategies (heated pavements), tactile wayfinding, public transport adaptations, and technology tools for persons with disabilities. It showcases real city infrastructure and emphasises how accessibility is woven into municipal planning and cultural life.

Resources/Links

- [Access City Award – Skellefteå](#)

Partners

