

Equity and Inclusion in Local Public Administration

José Miguel Nogueira, Alexandre Calado, Paulo Pedroso, João Paulo Henriques, Sérgio Caramelo, Micaella Freitas, Lia Ferreira
Iscte-Knowledge and Innovation - Technology Transfer and Valorization Centre
(CVTT-Iscte)

Executive Summary

Persons with disabilities continue to face persistent inequalities in access to education, employment, social and political participation, and community spaces. Despite legislative progress, public action has often prioritised the individual capacity-building of persons with disabilities, while placing less emphasis on strengthening the social and institutional contexts that must ensure effective conditions for participation.

The pilot project "Equity and Inclusion in Local Public Administration" tested a training programme aimed at municipal leaders, technical staff and other municipal workers, centred on organisational transformation for equity and internal and external inclusion. The experience showed that collaborative training, tailored to identified needs and oriented towards concrete problems in municipal services, can function as an instrument of institutional change by strengthening competences, legitimising policy priorities and opening the way to more structured, participatory and monitored local inclusion plans..

Recommendations

- Conduct holistic and cross-cutting municipal diagnoses of the social situation of persons with disabilities in municipal territories, and identify local policy measures capable of mitigating the most relevant social problems detected;
- Design and implement municipal plans for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, based on the diagnoses carried out;
- Design and implement a municipal system of indicators on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, enabling the monitoring of actions and the fulfilment of the targets set out in the inclusion plan;
- Create and implement continuing training programmes on inclusion, accessibility, inclusive public-facing service, accessible communication, recruitment and workplace adaptation, among other relevant domains, in order to deepen and consolidate the content delivered in the pilot project;
- Promote collaborative local governance models, ensuring the regular participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of municipal policies. In this regard, the creation of municipal councils for the inclusion of persons with disabilities is recommended.

Intended Audience(s) of the Policy Brief

Local authorities - elected officials, senior and middle managers;
Intermunicipal Communities and Metropolitan Areas;
Directorate-General for Local Authorities;
Government offices, namely those of the Secretariats of State with responsibilities for local authorities, inclusion, public administration, territorial cohesion, labour and social security;
Organisations working in the disability field.

Introduction and Problem Statement

Persons with disabilities continue to face persistent inequalities in access to education, employment, social and political participation, and community spaces. Despite the legislative progress achieved, public action has privileged the individual capacity-building of persons with disabilities, relegating to the background the transformation and strengthening of the social and institutional contexts responsible for ensuring effective conditions for participation.

The pilot project "Equity and Inclusion in Local Public Administration" made it possible to test a training programme aimed at municipal leaders, technical staff and other municipal workers, centred on organisational transformation in favour of equity and inclusion, both internally and externally. The experience showed that collaborative training, adjusted to needs and oriented towards concrete challenges faced by municipal services, can constitute a relevant instrument of institutional change by strengthening competences, legitimising policy priorities and paving the way for the development of more structured, participatory and monitored local inclusion plans.

The promotion of inclusion and accessibility cannot be reduced to the mere removal of architectural barriers; the concept also encompasses access to information, clear and understandable communication, responsive services and the substantive participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes (Carnemolla et al., 2021a; Corcuff et al., 2023; Rachele et al., 2020). However, significant asymmetries remain between municipalities in terms of resources, technical knowledge, planning capacity and monitoring

mechanisms (Carmo & Oliveira, 2026). These inequalities are also recognised in the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2026-2030, which notes the persistence of disparities between regions and municipalities, exacerbated by the absence of integrated municipal inclusion and accessibility plans (Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 64-B/2026).

International experience on inclusive cities and local inclusion plans shows that architectural accessibility, while indispensable, is insufficient on its own. Inclusion is intrinsically linked to different forms of accessibility, but it is important to bear in mind that the effectiveness and efficiency of both depend on the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, the quality of public-facing services, the capacity to adapt municipal activities, and the existence of regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Boucher et al., 2015; Nogueira, 2026; Stafford et al., 2024).

In this context, the project "Equity and Inclusion in Local Public Administration" sought to test a pilot methodology for awareness-raising and capacity-building aimed at different actors at local authority level, focused on inclusion literacy (internal and external), person-centred planning and Universal Design. Grounded in the literature, the project was based on the premise that the promotion of inclusion does not end with individual capacity-building; it fundamentally requires the capacity and sensitivity of leadership, as well as of social and institutional contexts, to accommodate structural changes oriented towards a more adequate response to human diversity.

Analysis / Key Findings

The project methodology combined a literature review, consultation with partners and experts, the collaborative design of the training structure and course modules, the experimental implementation of the training action in the four partner municipalities (Barreiro, Loures, Cascais and Sintra), and, finally, the evaluation of results.

The process was based on a collaborative approach involving, from the outset, the then Institute for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Public Institute (IDiPD), the partner local authorities and the CVTT-Iscte scientific team, with the aim of adapting the content to the concrete needs of municipal services. It should also be stressed that both the Iscte team and the focal points in some partner municipalities included persons with disabilities. This enabled

training priorities to be identified not only from an academic and technical-administrative perspective, but also from the experiential knowledge of persons directly affected by policies and services. In a municipal context, the co-creation of training tools and materials facilitates the translation of technical knowledge into operational resources adjusted to the practices, constraints and needs of local services (Corcuff et al., 2024; Benz et al., 2024)

Within this collaborative framework, a focus group was held to validate the course structure, session duration, target audiences and thematic priorities. The contributions collected highlighted the need for pragmatic training, with

language accessible to different professional profiles, sessions of limited duration and a strong connection to the concrete challenges faced by local authorities.

Following this validation and methodological adjustment process, there was also a change from the initial proposal submitted to the call regarding target audiences. The application had envisaged the selection of one department per municipality; however, since the sessions were delivered online, registration was opened to all interested participants, thereby maximising the reach of the training across different municipal services.

Figure 1 – Co-creation methodology of the pilot project



Figure 2 – Contributions from the focus group held with the pilot project partners

Validated aspect	Contribution collected	Implication for the design of the training
Workload	Sessions with a maximum duration of between 2.5 and 3 hours, preferably in the morning.	Greater operational feasibility and less impact on the daily management of services.
Target audiences	Participation of senior technical staff, technical assistants, operational assistants and managers.	Cross-cutting training, adjusted to different levels of responsibility and municipal functions.
Leadership	Need to involve managers and elected officials in an opening moment.	Reinforcement of the political and institutional legitimacy of the training.
Critical content	Accessible communication, accessibility, regulatory framework, leadership, ethics and community resilience.	Reorientation of the training towards needs recognised by partners.
Internal inclusion	Inclusive recruitment addressed as awareness-raising and as an entry point.	Avoids excessive technicality and favours appropriation by non-specialised teams.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The training structure was organised into articulated modules, combining conceptual framing, the regulatory framework, public policies and internal and external inclusion measures. The objective was not limited to the transmission of information; it also included the creation of conditions for participants to identify barriers within their own services and to envisage possible changes in municipal practices..

The opening session was open to all participants and included the presentation of the training structure, as well as a reflection on inclusive leadership and its role in promoting behaviours and attitudes oriented towards normalising difference and developing an inclusive organisational culture.

Module 1 focused on the role of public policies in the inclusion of persons with disabilities, addressing the main theoretical models and perspectives on disability, as well as the concepts of exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion and their practical applicability in the context of local public policies. The concepts of self-representation, self-determination, participation and accessibility were also addressed, alongside analysis of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the paradigm shift it introduces and the challenges it poses to the formulation and implementation of public policies.

Module 2 addressed national and local public policies aimed at the inclusion of persons with disabilities, covering the evolution of the political and regulatory framework in Portugal and its articulation with different areas of intervention, such as education, employment, social protection, taxation and access to assistive products. The new challenges arising from municipal competences and the role of local policy in promoting inclusion were also discussed, together with a 360-degree accessibility perspective, with emphasis on the contribution of new technologies to bringing municipal services closer to residents.

Module 3 focused on internal inclusion, considering the municipality as an employing organisation. In this context, inclusive organisational models were analysed and institutional transformation strategies oriented towards inclusion were discussed. The module also addressed inclusive recruitment, linking theoretical principles with concrete strategies for removing barriers in the selection of persons with disabilities, as well as issues of retention and career development, within an internal human resources policy that is more attentive to diversity and equity.

Module 4 addressed external inclusion, focusing on public-facing services, municipal services and activities promoted by municipalities. The experience of the Inclusion Desks (Balcões da Inclusão) was presented by

the IDiPD officer responsible for implementing and coordinating the network and for monitoring the project. The module also addressed the importance of digital inclusion, products and services as instruments for promoting equal opportunities for the participation of municipal residents with disabilities, and discussed ways of integrating diversity into municipal activities and events through practical strategies aimed at including persons with disabilities in initiatives promoted by the local authority.

The number of registrations in each module greatly exceeded initial expectations,

demonstrating strong uptake by local authorities and the relevance attributed to inclusion within local administration. As shown in the following table, all sessions recorded high levels of participation, with particular emphasis on the thematic modules, which brought together between 189 and 204 participants. In total, the programme involved 232 unique participants, of whom 122 registered for all sessions. This suggests not only initial interest, but also a high degree of commitment and continuity throughout the training pathway.

Figure 3 - Number of registered participants by training module

Module	Registered participants
Opening Session (10/04)	172
Module I (14/04)	195
Module II (17/04)	204
Module III (21/04)	189
Module IV (28/04)	196
Total (unique participants)	232
Registered for all sessions	122

Fonte: Elaboração própria

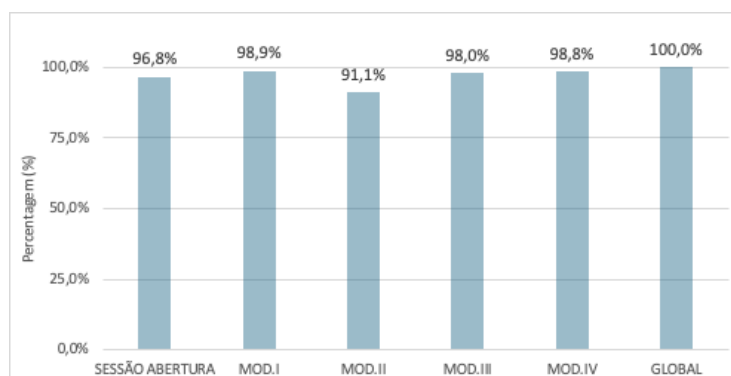
Results of the Satisfaction Surveys

At the end of each session, an anonymous satisfaction survey was administered through the Qualtrics platform in order to collect participants' evaluations. The instrument included seven closed questions, organised into ordinal Likert-type scales (or equivalent), and one open-ended question for additional comments.

The dimensions evaluated included: i) overall satisfaction with the module; ii) satisfaction with the trainers or speakers; iii) clarity of content; iv) relevance of content; v) usefulness of the session for personal and/or professional practice; vi) adequacy of duration and pace; and vii) contribution of the session to strengthening participants' motivation to promote equity and inclusion practices.

The results for overall satisfaction show consistently high levels throughout the training programme. The percentage of participants who declared themselves "very satisfied" or "satisfied" remained above 90% at all times, ranging from 91.1% in Module II to 98.9% in Module I. For the programme as a whole, overall satisfaction reached 100%, suggesting a strong alignment between the training and participants' expectations, as well as the needs identified in the capacity-building of Local Public Administration for the promotion of equity and inclusion.

Figure 4 - Percentage of participants who reported being very satisfied / satisfied with the module attended



Source: Authors' own elaboration

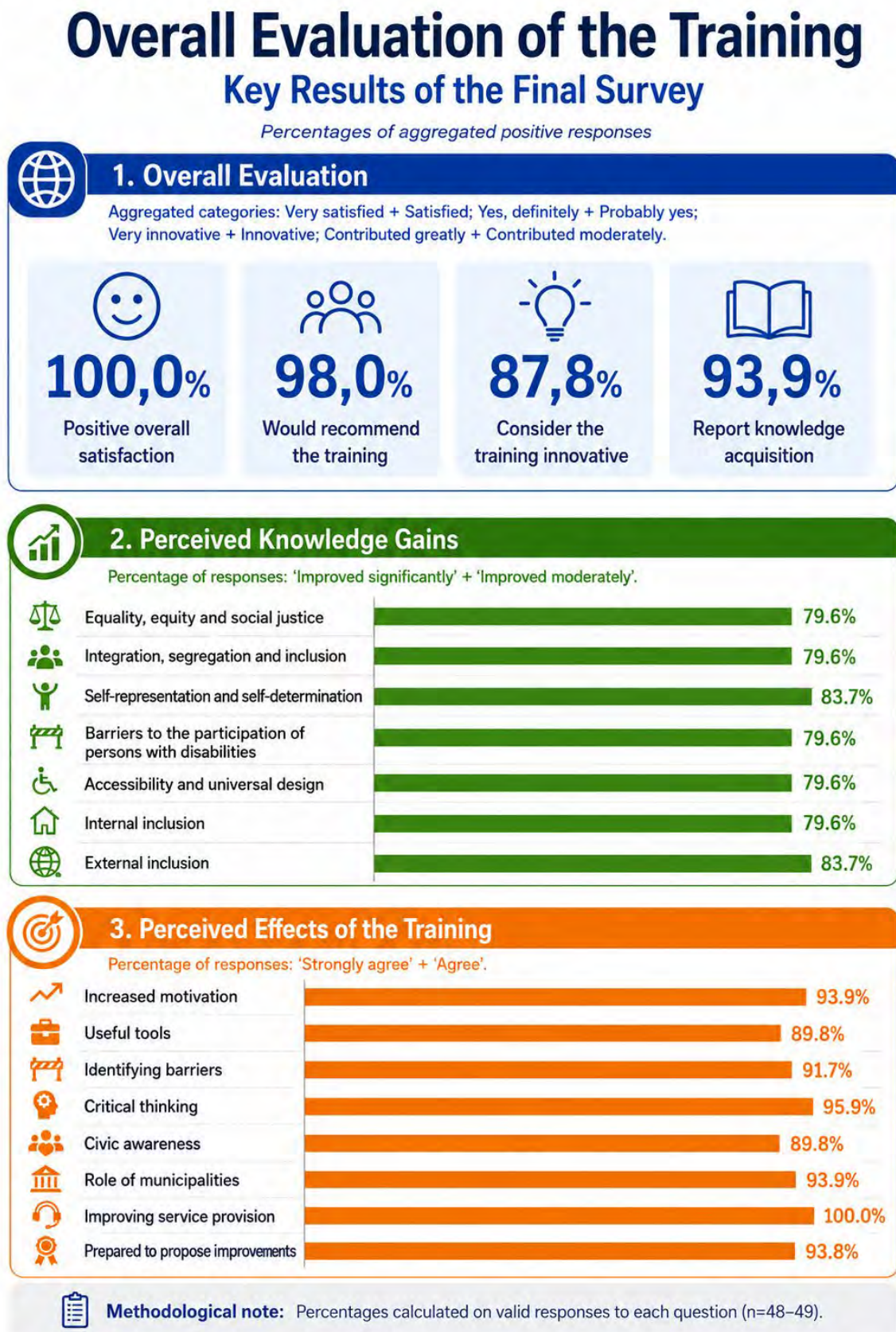
The overall project evaluation survey also included a set of specific questions on the perceived development of participants' knowledge in central areas of the training, namely: i) equality, equity and social justice; ii) integration, segregation and inclusion; iii) self-representation and self-determination; iv) barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities; v) accessibility and Universal Design; vi) internal inclusion of workers with disabilities; and vii) external inclusion in public-facing services and municipal service provision.

To assess the perceived effects of the training, statements measured through an ordinal agreement scale were included. These addressed: i) motivation to promote equity and inclusion practices; ii) the usefulness of the theoretical tools acquired for application in the professional context; iii) the capacity to identify barriers to inclusion in municipal services; iv)

the strengthening of critical thinking around inequalities and disability; and v) participants' civic awareness.

The instrument also included questions centred on the role of local authorities and the practical applicability of the training. In this context, participants were invited to assess: i) the extent to which the training contributed to a better understanding of the role of local authorities in promoting inclusion; ii) its potential contribution to improving public-facing services and the services provided to municipal residents; and iii) the degree to which they felt prepared to propose concrete improvements in their respective work context. An open-ended question was also included to collect examples of concrete changes that participants considered possible to implement in their service or area of activity after the training.

Figure 5 - Global evaluation of the training: main results of the final survey



Policy Options and Recommendations

Participatory municipal diagnoses

It is recommended that each municipality have holistic and cross-cutting diagnoses of the social situation of persons with disabilities in its territory, as well as of the local policy measures capable of mitigating the most relevant social problems identified.

In this context, and considering the role of local authorities as employers and providers of public services, it is also advisable to conduct a specific diagnosis to identify internal and external barriers to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The diagnosis process should cover, in an integrated manner, the different domains of municipal action, namely services, physical spaces, communication, digital platforms, activities promoted by the municipality, local public employment and mechanisms for civic participation.

It should also be based on a participatory and multisectoral approach, involving persons with disabilities, representative organisations, municipal services, educational establishments, health and social security bodies, as well as the business sector and social economy organisations.

Municipal plans for the inclusion of persons with disabilities

The diagnoses carried out should constitute the basis for defining municipal strategies or plans for the inclusion of persons with disabilities, structured around priorities, objectives, actions, responsibilities, timeframes, resources and measurable targets. These plans should avoid a merely declarative logic and should be integrated into municipal planning instruments, with political and technical accountability.

Local systems of indicators

The absence of indicators limits the capacity to characterise the social situation of persons with disabilities and to assess the impact of the public policies implemented. In this regard, the creation and implementation of municipal systems of indicators on the inclusion of persons with disabilities is recommended, enabling systematic monitoring of the implementation of actions and the degree to

which the targets defined in municipal inclusion plans are met. The development of indicator systems, whether municipal or intermunicipal in scope, should be based on a collaborative approach involving national and local administrative authorities, academia and representative organisations of persons with disabilities, in order to ensure their relevance, methodological robustness and alignment with national and international benchmarks.

Continuing and modular training

The training developed and tested should be consolidated and institutionalised as a continuing training offer, structured into core modules and specialised thematic cycles, ensuring the permanent updating of professionals' knowledge and competences. Priority areas to consider include accessibility, inclusive public-facing service, accessible communication, transport, health, civil protection, the organisation of inclusive events and, cumulatively, recruitment, onboarding and workplace adaptation processes for persons with disabilities.

Collaborative governance and participation

The training developed and tested should be consolidated and institutionalised as a continuing training offer, structured into core modules and specialised thematic cycles, ensuring the permanent updating of professionals' knowledge and competences. Priority areas to consider include accessibility, inclusive public-facing service, accessible communication, transport, health, civil protection, the organisation of inclusive events and, cumulatively, recruitment, onboarding and workplace adaptation processes for persons with disabilities.

Collaborative governance and participation

Local authorities should create regular mechanisms for the participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations, avoiding merely formal or consultative approaches. Participation should be ensured transversally across the different stages of the public policy cycle, including diagnosis, the definition of priorities, the design and validation of solutions, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

In this regard, the creation of municipal councils for the inclusion of persons with disabilities is recommended, as permanent consultation and participation structures with diversified representation and clearly defined competences, contributing to strengthening the quality, legitimacy and effectiveness of local policies.

Replication and knowledge transfer

The training programme may serve as a structured methodological reference to be shared with other local authorities, intermunicipal communities and Central Public Administration bodies. Its replication should safeguard adaptation to local specificities, avoiding the adoption of closed and undifferentiated models

Conclusion

The inclusion of persons with disabilities is a cross-cutting responsibility of society as a whole and, by extension, a concern and an objective of twenty-first-century public policies. The project "Equity and Inclusion in Local Public Administration" demonstrated that institutional training and capacity-building, when built in partnership and oriented towards concrete problems in municipal services, can be an effective tool for institutional transformation.

The literature review reinforces that inclusion is not exhausted by awareness-raising: it requires diagnosis, planning, indicators, leadership,

participation and continuity. Municipalities are particularly well placed to lead this agenda, given their proximity to citizens and the diversity of the areas in which they intervene.

To this end, they need resources, technical knowledge and governance instruments capable of transforming intentions into practices. Capacity-building for inclusion is, undoubtedly, a way of transforming territories: territories in which services, spaces, communication, public employment and community activities are prepared to accommodate human diversity under conditions of equity.

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CONTACT

science4policy@planapp.gov.pt

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