



# Universal Design and Social Equity in our Parks





## KOMMUNESEKTORENS ORGANISASJON

The Norwegian Association of Local and  
Regional Authorities

**COVER PHOTO:** The carousel is Arvid's favourite at the playground at Skjoldstølen in Bergen. He can spin it himself, but it is extra fun when Dad, Svein, makes it whirl super fast. Read more on page 12. (Photo: Fredrik Naumann/ Felix Features)

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**Graphic design:** Bly

**Printing:** Byråservice

**Publication date:** 2025

**ISBN:** 978-82-93866-67-1

### This booklet was published by KS

The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) is the organisation for all local governments in Norway. KS is Norway's largest public employer organisation. All of the country's 357 municipalities and 15 county councils are members, as well as about 500 municipal, intermunicipal and county council undertakings.

This booklet was inspired by the members of KS Municipal Network for Universal Design, established in 2013 and funded by the Ministry of Culture. The goal is to contribute to an inclusive society by sharing best practices and removing barriers.



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## Parks promote public health

Universally designed parks mean that more people can be active and social in their own neighbourhood – regardless of functional ability.

This promotes both mental and physical well-being.

Now that more people choose to live in the city, more parks are needed, green areas where we can relax, unwind and connect with nature. This booklet provides a few good examples of parks in Norwegian municipalities and the steps they have taken to make them accessible to all.

All projects face challenges. The examples in this booklet are not intended to serve as perfect examples, but rather as inspiration and learning opportunities. We have intentionally challenged everyone we interviewed to reflect on what they could have done differently.



**ENORMOUS AREA:** Mjøsparken is 82,600 m<sup>2</sup> in size, with plenty of activities for young and old – and everyone in between.

# Abandoned industrial area transformed into popular park

Originally a sawmill, later used for lumber storage and subsequently abandoned. An industrial site has now been reshaped into a popular park.



**FULL SPEED AHEAD:** Brothers Vegard and Magnus like to go to the park as often as possible. That's just fine with mum Pia Haugsjordet.

Brothers Vegard and Magnus ride their bikes around Mjøsparken at full speed. Soon after, they're dangling in the jungle gym. Mum Pia Haugsjordet helps her two and four-year-old boys in the park, a large area packed with adventure in the Municipality of Ringsaker between the E6 motorway and Mjøsa lake. The park opened in the summer of 2020 and people have flocked to it ever since.

"If it were up to my boys, we'd come here several times a week," says Pia.

The family lives three kilometres away and either drives and parks in the large adjacent car park or, like today, rides their bikes.

Electric bikes can be charged at the park.

"There's also bicycle equipment here, such as bike pumps," says Pia while the boys run around.

"The park is fantastic and makes it easy to

spend time outdoors and be active, instead of only playing in the backyard. It's local, flat, free and safe, so I can let the boys do their own thing."

### **FOR ALL AGES**

According to Pia, the fact that the park has such a variety of activities is what makes it so appealing to people of all ages.

"We come here often with the boys' cousins, who are 9, 12, and 14 years old. They like to play basketball here. It seems like the park is used by people of different ages."

The park has three restrooms.

"That there are so many restrooms here is fabulous. My oldest boy no longer uses diapers, so it's nice to not have to go home every time he has to go to the bathroom," says Pia Haugsjordet.



**1) POPULAR DESTINATION:** Pia Haugsjordet goes to the park often, which not only she and her boys enjoy, but also the rest of the family.

**2) VIEWS OF THE WATER:** The park has a number of benches, all with armrests to make it easier to stand up again. In front of the benches is a bathing ramp leading to a designated bathing area.

**“It’s local, flat, free and safe, so I can let the boys do their own thing.”**

Pia Haugsjordet



→ **SOCIAL MEETING PLACE**

A short distance from the active boys is a group bent over the boules on the petanque court. One of the players is Jan Håvard Smedby, who lives nearby.

The group often meets to work up a sweat together, but Tuesdays are dedicated to petanque.

“It’s social and fun, and there’s no hard feelings at the end of the day,” says Jan Håvard, who is thrilled with the universally designed park.

“The municipality has really done a fantastic job here. There’s lots to do here for children, adults and older people,” he says with a smile.

**STATE-PROTECTED RECREATION SITE**

That was precisely the idea behind the park, previously used for anything but recreation. The site was used as a sawmill from around 1916 until World War II, after which it was used to store lumber – until well into the 1990s.

“In 2013, an agreement was signed on the purchase of what was then an abandoned industrial area. Ownership of the site was

transferred from Norske Skog to the municipality of Ringsaker, but paid for by the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management and Norwegian Public Roads Administration. This was the start of the plans for what would later become Mjøsparken,” explains city planner Monica Østenheden from the Municipality of Ringsaker.

**MAJOR TRANSFORMATION**

Ringsaker had long wanted to open the area to Mjøsa. The planning and development phase entailed a partnership among a wide range of parties, including participation processes with residents, teams and associations, as well as with different age groups.



**REGULAR EVENT:** Every Tuesday, a group meets for a petanque match on the court set up in the park. Here, Jan Håvard Smedby throws himself into the game.

“The entire process has been part of a comprehensive plan in which Mjøsparken has been a decisive step towards promoting attractiveness and driving growth. The area was planned and developed as part of a larger whole in close coordination with other major projects,” explains the city developer and mentions residential development, office workspaces, the world's tallest timber building Mjøstårnet, a hotel, expanded marina, construction of the four-lane E6 motorway, integrated rest stop – and the recently opened amphitheatre, constructed as a noise barrier next to the E6 motorway.”



**ILLUMINATED:** There is lighting along all footpaths. Grass, curb stones and asphalt create contrasts to make orientation easier.



**1) SENSORY GARDEN:** Aromatic sensory garden with wheel-friendly surface.

**2) PLENTY OF RESTROOMS:** The park has three restrooms, as well as a restroom just outside the park area.

**3) CONTACTLESS OPENING:** There is no need to press anything, but simply place a handover the sensor to open the restroom door.

**4) FOR BIKES AND BOARDS:** A large area is designated for cycling and skating fun.



#### → CONNECTING CITY AND WATER

“Brumunddal has become an attractive city in recent years, especially since the city centre has been brought closer to the water. This connection is the result of a river promenade and path along the Brumunda river, with a variety of nature and cultural experiences along the way. A bicycle and pedestrian path has also been constructed along the road network to promote walking and cycling,” emphasises Monica Østenheden.

Three years after the opening, the 82,600 m<sup>2</sup> park has firmly established itself as an attractive destination and recreational area.

“On hot summer days, hundreds of people flock to the park. Most of them are locals, but people also come here from much further away,” says the city planner about the project, which cost the municipality NOK 161 million to build.

“The goal is to continue to develop Mjøsparken into the most attractive yet urban recreational destination in the county of Innlandet, with activities and experiences for everyone and every season. We hope that Mjøsparken will become a magnet, a place where people stop along the E6 motorway, Ringsaker’s X factor.” ●





Monica Olsen Østenheden,  
city planner for the  
Municipality of Ringsaker  
(Photo: Municipality of  
Ringsaker)



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### Solutions:

- Three restrooms in the park itself, all of which have an accessible toilet (sensor door opener)
- Skating rink
- Skate park for kick scooters and skateboards
- Basketball court
- Ping pong table
- Playground with mini zipline, sand and water play areas, and climbing equipment
- Bathing beach with universally designed bathing area
- Sensory garden
- Miniature golf
- Petanque courts
- Sand volleyball court
- Barbecues
- Historic cultural heritage sites
- Skibladner pier
- Six accessible parking spaces
- Concert amphitheatre
- Charging station for electric bicycles
- Lots of benches with armrests
- Sunbeds
- Dog park

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### What we could have done differently:

“With such a large project, there are always challenges that arise and changes that need to be made along the way. But almost everything turned out as outlined in the original plans and we are very pleased with the result. At the same time, we are continuing to develop Mjøsparken, so that it will have even more to offer local residents, visitor, and those who work here,” says city planner Monica Østenheden from the Municipality of Ringsaker.



**WET & WONDERFUL:** Joyful play among the water jets.

# Wheeling and able in the heart of the city

**Working closely with the right people was the trick to creating a park that is a popular destination.**

Erik Månum, who works as a property manager in the City of Gjøvik, looks out over Jernbaneparken in the city centre. It was developed in two construction phases and boasts a skate park, basketball court, climbing boulder, rollerskating area for children, stage, playground and water jets.

“The idea for the park came from passionate skaters in the Gjøvik Skating and Snowboarding Club, which together with young people in

Gjøvik, have had a huge impact on the final result,” says Månum.

And that result is an extremely popular park for all age groups opposite the railway station and at the end of a pedestrian street. A group of volunteers, in partnership with the City of Gjøvik, ensure that everything is kept in proper working order. The Climbing Club and City of Gjøvik are responsible for the climbing boulder, while the



**1) WHEELING AND ABLE:** It's easy to pick up speed in the bowl. Concrete benches that can easily be used by everyone. One of the primary goals of the park was to create a meeting place for young people in the heart of the city. **2) CONTRASTS:** Flat surface, curbstones flush with the ground and a coloured surface that defines the play area and provides a good contrast

skateboarding club and city keep the concrete surface in the skate park clean and in good condition.

“Apart from that, it has a very robust design that requires little maintenance,” says Månum.

The park is 2,600 square metres, cost NOK 22 million to build and has annual operating cost of NOK 500,000. ●



Erik Månum,  
property manager  
in the City of Gjøvik

**Solutions:**

- Bowls for skating
- Playground equipment
- Concrete benches
- Climbing boulder
- In the middle of the city centre
- Water fountains designed for play

**What we could have done differently:**

“The park has a universal design with a focus on accessibility, but does not have equipment that can be used by absolutely everyone,” says Erik Månum.

“Lots of people think that universal design and adaptations are expensive. But if you incorporate them into the design from day one, it is no more expensive and better for everyone. I like to say that moving a line on a drawing costs a fraction of what it would cost to move a wall after everything has been built.”

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Erik Månum

**NO OBSTACLES:** Arvid loves playgrounds. The fact that he uses a wheelchair is not an obstacle at the Skjoldstølen playground.

# The ultimate inclusive playground

Arvid, 8, dreamed of a playground that was suitable for children who use a wheelchair. He and his family helped design the new and easily accessible park in the Fana district of Bergen.

“Faster! Go faster, mum!”

Arvid squeals and laughs while spinning around and around on a merry-go-round at the Skjoldstølen playground.

The merry-go-round is very popular at the playground, which opened in the summer of 2022. Children in a wheelchair can roll right into the step-free playground equipment, where there is also room for friends who want to join the fun. Children can pick up the pace with the wheel in the middle when mum or dad are not nearby and can be commanded to help out.

The playground at Skjoldstølen was designed to allow as many children as possible to take part in the fun. To ensure the best result, the municipality enlisted the expertise of Arvid and his family – mum Anna Hansson, dad Svein Gundersen and two brothers. Their input revolved mainly around what works and does not work for children who use a wheelchair and want to play.

“When Arvid was little, we couldn’t find any playgrounds where he could have fun. So, we sent an email to the city, asking if there were any places we didn’t know about,” explains Anna.

The city answered that yes, there were universally designed playgrounds in Bergen. But that didn’t solve the problem.

## **EXCLUDED FROM PLAY**

“What this meant was that Arvid could roll into the playground in his wheelchair, but then had to sit and watch other kids play. It was neither inclusive nor fun,” says Anna.

The email from the family continued through the municipal system and eventually landed at the Agency for Urban Environment, where architect Alexandra Altermark designs playgrounds and outdoor spaces for children and young people. The timing was perfect: The department was just starting to design a new



park in Fana and both universal design principles and user participation were high on the agenda. As a result, the email ended with Arvid and his family, who just happen to live in the Fana district, being invited to help with the design.

### **GREATER FOCUS ON INCLUSIVE DESIGN**

Alexandra Altermark emphasises that the Agency for Urban Environment prioritises universal design. But this is a complex challenge.

“It’s easy to assume that accessibility revolves solely around being able to wheel in and out of a facility. The hard part is to figure out how we can promote inclusion across a range of physical abilities,” she says.

The goal is to create an urban space where people can play together or simply be social. And that includes everyone: children with different ability levels, parents with disabilities

and aging grandparents with hyperactive grandchildren.

### **NEW PLANS**

The city feels strongly about user participation and has also collaborated with graduate students studying community planning at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. The students organised public meetings in the district to hear what residents would like to have built in the Skjoldstølen area.

“There was lots of useful input that we incorporated into the design and ideas were presented that we had not even considered,” says Alexandra Altermark.

“Yes, the playground looks quite different today than it did in the initial sketches,” says Anna. The merry-go-round is only one of many examples. The original version on the drawings could not be used by children in a wheelchair, →



→ who had to be lifted into it. Anna and Svein believed that there had to be a better alternative. Children’s play becomes limited and controlled when children are dependent on help and cannot decide for themselves where they go and what they do.

“So, why not choose something that everyone – or at least the majority – can use?” asks Svein, who is pleased that their input was genuinely taken into consideration in the process.

“It’s nice to contribute when we see concrete results that benefit so many,” he says.

### **SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE**

At Skjoldstølen, the playground is built with a large, specially designed train set inspired by the Nesttun–Os Line, which used to pass by here a long time ago. Some of the train cars are placed

on stilts and too high for some children to climb into, while others are on the ground and can be accessed by everyone. Children can run and ride under and through the train cars, and there are lots of different activities that can be enjoyed at a low height as well. If one piece of equipment is inaccessible, you can use a different one.

The playground has become the destination that Arvid and his family were lacking in their neighbourhood.

“Arvid is getting older now, but he still thinks it’s cool to be here. It’s one of the best playgrounds we’ve ever visited,” says Anna and emphasises:

“Not everything at a playground needs to be accessible to Arvid or other children with a disability. The point is that there needs to be something for everyone.” ●

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**1) PANEL OF EXPERTS:** Dad Svein Gundersen, mum Anna Hansson and Arvid himself are experts in what works – and what doesn't – at a playground where children with different ability levels can play.

**2) NO HEIGHT DIFFERENCES:** “Hey there! What did you do today?” Arvid talks on the ‘phone’ with a friend at the other end.

**3) USEFUL PROCESS:** The playground is one of the best ones the Gundersen/Hansson family has ever visited.

**4) ROOM FOR EVERYONE:** The large bird's nest swing is very popular. Arvid and his little brother Alfred swing until they're dizzy.

**5) SMALL CHANGES MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE:** A basketball net at a lower height attached to a volleyball net steel tube frame is perfect for throwing a ball from a wheelchair.



Alexandra Altermark, project manager in Barnas byrom (Urban living for children), City of Bergen

### Solutions:

- Universally designed park and playground.
- Specially designed play train set that cannot be ordered directly from a catalogue.
- Train cars of different heights with games and activities on the ground level are perfect for children with varying ability levels.
- Step-free merry-go-round with room for a wheelchair and the possibility to go faster without help.
- Activity games at a low height along the path.
- Wide embankment slide with room for an adult to slide together with a child, either as assistance or for fun.
- Barbecue area, benches and tables, where it is possible to sit at the table with a wheelchair, not only at the end.
- Bird's nest swing with plenty of room for several children.
- Ball court that includes low basketball nets.
- Footpath through the area that serves as a detour to the light rail stop.

### What we could have done differently:

- Used a different surface under the drinking water fountain to prevent the gravel from washing away. Kids love to play here and the water often runs for hours on end. A grate was installed after construction, but is insufficient.
- The water fountain is not very intuitive and some users find it difficult to turn on the water.
- Some of the playground equipment, such as the sound installation along the path, was of poor quality and was ruined before long.
- There is no storage facility for the volleyball net or schedule for putting it up in spring and taking it down again in winter.



**THE PLAY AREA:** Children – and adults – in wheelchairs can access the step-free carousel, but others will need to help give it a spin. The climbing area is set low to the ground, making it accessible for some children with disabilities. “It is also great that parents and grandparents in wheelchairs can roll up close to the play structures,” says Annett Garvik.



# Playtime

## in new neighbourhood park

Annett Garvik, 47, is a mum in a wheelchair who would have loved to have had the new playground in Arna when her son was little.



**WATER FUN:** Arna Park is located in a wetlands area, so it comes as no surprise that it has water play equipment. Annett Garvik loves how the trough has different heights, enabling varied play. And it is fully wheelchair accessible. →

→ In Bergen's smallest district, Arna, the new park with easily accessible nature areas and a universally designed playground has become a popular meeting place.

The neighbourhood park opened in the summer of 2022 and is located next to a sports facility and the home field for the Arna Bjørnar football club.

### HAVING FUN TOGETHER

"It would've been a dream to have such a park for our family when my son was very young," says Annett.

She is the mother of an 11-year-old boy who is no longer interested in spending time on the playground with her, but prefers to hang out with his friends these days.

"It used to be impossible to find a playground in the neighbourhood that was accessible to me in a wheelchair. I had to simply let my boy play alone in the playground and hope for the best, while I sat in my wheelchair just outside it. It was a horrible feeling."

The new playground in Arna is designed so that children with varying needs can find something that's right for them, even if not all the equipment is suitable for everyone. Children, parents and grandparents can easily get around the park, including those who use wheels or have trouble walking.

"For children in a wheelchair, the playground may not be perfectly designed, but for me as a mum in a wheelchair, it's perfect because I can get around the entire playground and get close to the equipment," says Annett.



## ARENA FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION

The neighbourhood park in Arna is built in a wetlands area and is accessible thanks to wheel-friendly and easily walkable paths and bridges. Annett, who loves the outdoors and assesses wheelchair accessibility along various routes for the Bergen and Hordaland branch of the Norwegian Trekking Association's project 'Ten on wheels', is delighted to have more accessible recreational options in her own backyard.

"Arna is surrounded by beautiful and steep nature, making it impossible for everyone to go for a walk. That's why it's so nice to have a park where people can easily go for a stroll in their own neighbourhood. This lets more people spend time outdoors," she says. ●



**ACCESS TO PROTECTED NATURE:** Level and even surface on the wooden bridge spanning the wetlands. It's easy to wheel or walk across and nature is protected yet accessible.



Gunnar Rise, project manager in the Agency for Urban Environment, City of Bergen.  
(Photo: Private)

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### Solutions:

- Nature area with gently sloping paths and wooden bridges
- Playground with threshold-free access and surface that is easy to roll over
- Equipment that is suitable for children with a functional disability of varying levels
- Benches, tables, grill and covered pavilion

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### What we could have done differently:

- Installed a merry-go-round that can be used both with a wheelchair and without. A good example of a problem that could have been avoided with closer user involvement during the design phase.
- The gravel is a bit coarse and can be difficult to navigate for some users with a walker or wheelchair. Finer gravel provides a more compact surface.
- More clearly marked main entrance.
- The gate at the entrance is difficult to use.
- The opening mechanism on the water pump is a bit difficult to use and a lot of water suddenly flows out all at once.
- Better signage with information on the natural values of wetlands.

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