



# **Municipal Association of Victoria**

## **Submission Paper**

**National Disability Strategy Consultation**

**October 2020**

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*All requests to reproduce, store or transmit material contained in the publication should be addressed to Liz Harvey on [lharvey@mav.asn.au](mailto:lharvey@mav.asn.au) October 2020*

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*While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils. This submission has been endorsed by the MAV management as suitable for distribution and comment to members.*

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## **MAV Submission to the consultation on a new National Disability Strategy**

### **Introduction**

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body representing Victoria's 79 councils. Local government has multiple roles relevant to the Commonwealth government's consultation on developing a new National Disability Strategy. We recognize the work of the Australian Local Government Association in the process so far. The MAV has given advice to ALGA to inform their advisory role. The MAV is now commenting on the issues most relevant to local government in Victoria. Some councils are making their own submissions to your consultation.

As the recognized voice for local government in Victoria, our role is to:

- represent and advocate for local government interests
- build the capacity of Victorian councils
- facilitate effective networks
- initiate policy development and advice
- support councillors
- promote the role of local government.

Councils have a role as civic leaders, planners, employers, advocates, managers of public environments and providers of community, arts and sport/ leisure services as well as delivering relevant physical and social infrastructure. They often work in partnership with community organisations and individuals using a place-based approach.

This submission advocates for consideration of issues relevant to people with disabilities and carers across Victoria. It asks that local government's role and its potential for future involvement be acknowledged and supported by the Commonwealth government.

### **Question 1 Do you have any comments on the vision and outcome areas being proposed for the new National Disability Strategy?**

We agree that the six original outcome areas are still appropriate for the next National Disability Strategy.

Based on previous and current work and their Disability Action Plans, Victorian councils are likely to focus on:

- Economic security
- Inclusive and accessible communities
- Learning and skills (vocational learning can be included as strategies aligned with Economic security)
- Health and wellbeing

It is important to provide details of specific activities that will be included in these outcome areas.

For example, economic security could include paid employment, education, vocational training, support to jobseekers before during and after a job placement, support to become successfully self-employed, work experience, internships, access to apprenticeships and traineeships and employment outcomes of social procurement. It also encompasses the level and type of income support arrangements through the Disability Support Pension, Carers Allowance and other income entitlements. A person with a disability needs to be able to participate in economic participation opportunities without their options being limited by the rules of the Disability Support Pension and recipients' concerns about qualifying for it in future if a specific job comes to an end. The Prime Minister recently announced a large financial investment in post-COVID19 jobs and training for young people. It is hoped that this program will, under the new National Disability Strategy, have a specific allocation for young people with a disability.

Inclusive and accessible communities should include improvements to access in the built environment. The provision of more accessible toilets, for example, can make a real difference to the confidence of people with a disability to get out and about. For example, more Changing Places facilities need to be built across Australia. Local government in Victoria has led the way in providing these facilities and the original concept was developed from the UK by the City of Maroondah in Melbourne. Standard accessible toilets do not meet the needs of all people with a disability or their carers. People with profound and multiple learning disabilities, as well as spinal injuries, spina bifida, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis or an acquired brain injury, often need extra facilities to allow them to use the toilets comfortably. Changing Places toilets are different to standard accessible toilets in that they have extra features and more space to meet these needs.

Changing Places was featured as a case study in the Review of implementation of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 by the SPRC. A recent meeting of the Changing Places Advisory Group in Victoria endorsed MAV's intention to further highlight the initiative in this submission. Investment in Changing Places is a practical and proven way to invest in communities and has a very tangible measurable result for users. [www.changingplaces.org.au](http://www.changingplaces.org.au)

The Health and Wellbeing outcome area needs to include lessons learned during the 2020 bushfire season and, especially in Victoria, the COVID19 lockdown. The needs of people with a disability in emergency and recovery situations needs to be researched. It is vital this research informs dedicated strategies to ensure people with a disability are not overlooked in emergencies. Also, these emergencies in Victoria have exposed the digital divide and how that negatively impacts on people with a disability. Many of us have depended on internet-based connections in the long COVID19 lockdown – telehealth, videoconferencing for work and social connections and news. People with disability need to be supported to access the internet for these purposes.

**Question 2: What do you think about the guiding principles proposed here?**

The guiding principles are suitable, though it is important to develop clarity around the practical implications.

Involve and engage - Victorian councils have disability advisory frameworks to advise on council disability access and inclusion activity under Disability Action Plans. These can be Disability Advisory Committees, Access and Inclusion Advisory Committees and Disability Networks. People with disabilities and carers are strongly represented through these processes. The potential for the National Disability Agreement stakeholders to reach people with disabilities through these existing structures is huge.

Design universally – Universal design is strongly supported by councils. Some Victorian councils are currently developing and adopting their own Universal Design Plans on the built environment. It would be useful if national legislation demanded more use of universal design rather than it being a voluntary approach.

Engage the broader community – councils have several ways to influence and educate the broader community on disability access and inclusion. The wider community will benefit from modelling of good practice by councils at major events, routine use of AUSLAN interpreters, conditions for community grants recipients and inclusive statements in job advertisements. Also, councils can reach businesses in local industry through the networks and newsletters of Economic Development departments. For example, the September 2020 edition of one such council magazine has features on social procurement, bias-free recruitment and what businesses can learn from the disability sector in COVID19. It was encouraging that this content was included by the Economic Development team and not at the request of the Disability Planner. This is an example of a successful whole-of-council approach.

Support carers and supporters – More attention is needed on this issue, especially since the NDIS has an individual focus on the participant. In emergencies like bushfires and COVID19, carers can become even more isolated and become more essential for providing support to the person they care for. Stronger focus in this area is needed.

### **Question 3 What is your view on the proposal for the new Strategy to have a stronger emphasis on improving community attitudes across all outcome areas?**

Community Attitudes must change. Recent research on this issue was undertaken by the Disability Institute at Melbourne University on behalf of the Victorian government: <https://mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-equity/disability-and-health-unit/community-attitudes> Key findings stress the need to change societal attitudes to enable real progress in disability access and inclusion. The National Disability Strategy can use this research to inform the development and targeting of education campaigns.

Barriers and stereotypes can be overcome as more people with a disability participate fully in mainstream community life as students, employees, customers and participants in arts/sports/recreation and in leadership positions. Intersectionality is emerging as a strong theme – councils are increasingly looking for ways to support inclusion and access in a holistic

way for a person with a disability who may also identify as Indigenous, from a CALD background and/or from the LGBTIQ community.

The introduction of the NDIS has seen a healthy growth in the media presence of people with a disability and more films, arts events, television programs, articles and books that address disability barriers and aim to change attitudes. The National Disability Strategy can usefully contribute to this effort.

**Question 4 How do you think that clearly outlining what each government is responsible for could make it easier for people with disability to access the supports and services they need?**

There is a disconnect with information in the community about what supports are available and who is responsible. MAV and some councils have been involved in consultations on the new Disability Gateway which is about to be launched. It is hoped it will provide clarity on the range of vital information for people with a disability. However, as a stand-alone centralised IT system, there is a concern it will have problems similar to the well-documented problems of My Aged Care and the Carers Gateway. MAV believes that funding for a number of face-to-face information officers who know local communities would enhance the effectiveness of the Disability Gateway.

As the NDIS becomes more established and its teething problems are resolved, it is critical that all three levels of government focus on the 90% of people with a disability who will not be eligible for the level of support provided by the NDIS. In Victoria, there have been negative, unintended consequences for many people with a disability due to the large financial commitment of the Victorian government to the NDIS. It is hoped that the NDIS will, in future, be able to facilitate more community-based disability access and inclusion activities. Councils are experienced in delivering innovative projects and, with resourcing, can continue with this work.

People with a disability and carers focus on getting their needs met without getting lost in a complex service system. It is not of primary importance that they know which levels of government provide necessary supports as long as they get what they need.

**Question 5 How do you think the Strategy should represent the role that the non-government sector plays in improving outcomes for people with disability?**

Our society benefits when community diversity is seen as the strength it is – socially and economically.

The National Disability Strategy might look at how the Victorian State and local governments engage on disability with the non-government sector and find ways to elevate this work at a national level, with national organisations. For example, many councils have worked with local

sporting clubs and recreation providers to influence them to include people with a disability. Council-sponsored arts events and Festivals can be used to showcase accessible features to events planners and arts organisations. Councils can also use links with local hospitality businesses to promote the business benefits of disability access and their obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

**Question 6 What kind of information on the Strategy’s progress should governments make available to the public and how often should this information be made available?**

Reports should be annual. They need to give the public an understanding on progress that has been made directly by the National Disability Strategy. It will be good to track outcomes of national plans as we already do at State and local government levels.

**Question 7 What do you think of the proposal to have Targeted Action Plans that focus on making improvements in specific areas within a defined period of time (for example within one, two or three years)?**

Targeted Action Plans are desirable. Ideally, the Commonwealth Targeted Action Plans will be aligned with current State Disability Plans, and State Disability Plans align with local government Disability Action Plans. Given that local government in Victoria has a long history of developing and implementing Disability Action Plans (many did so voluntarily before they became mandatory under the Disability Act 2006) we think this should be clearly a co-operative process between all levels of government and not a “top down” exercise.

**Question 8 How could the proposed Engagement Plan ensure people with disability, and the disability community, are involved in delivering and monitoring the next Strategy?**

Some Victorian councils are developing their own submissions to this consultation and are doing so in consultation with local people with a disability and disability organisations in their Disability Advisory Committees and Networks. Councils can facilitate grass-roots input to the National Disability Strategy as it is implemented as well as at this consultation stage.

There is great potential for local government to link grass-roots perspectives with higher policy levels.

The independent Victorian Local Government Disability Planners Network has 58 members from across Victoria and is supported by the MAV. Some of these workers have disabilities. The COVID19 lockdown in Victoria led to meetings being by videoconference. This move has shown us that it is easier to attract guest speakers to meetings. The October 2020 Zoom meeting brought together around 30 council staff with management representatives from the Victorian Office for Disability and the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. It was an



opportunity for the 3 levels of government to discuss complementary disability plans. Using technology that we are now all more used to, there should be ongoing opportunities to continue a meaningful dialogue.

#### Resourcing:

Local government offers excellent opportunities to assist the other levels of government to operationalise elements of their disability plans as well as implementing their own local Disability Action Plans. However, the potential of the sector is not necessarily matched with financial capacity of councils to resource this work. Local government has far less ability to raise funds than the other 2 levels of government so the best results will be achieved if funding is provided to councils.

Victorian councils and the MAV are not receiving any State funding for disability access and inclusion work for the first time in 20 years. The highly successful state-funded Building Inclusive Communities program provided recurrent funding for Rural Access and Metro Access workers in councils but was terminated in December 2019 as a result of the transition to the NDIS. Some of these workers were people with a disability, many made redundant due to this withdrawal of funding.

Funding from the Commonwealth government is now needed to build on that program and to allow councils to address the issues in this submission. NDIS ILC grants are not in any way the solution to the funding issue. In Victoria, the long COVID19 lockdown and associated recession exacerbates the issue of council finances available, with reduced income and increased expenditure and many calls for support from all parts of the community. Reference:

[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/04\\_2019/review-implementation-national-disability-strategy-2010-2020-final-report.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/04_2019/review-implementation-national-disability-strategy-2010-2020-final-report.pdf)

... “When it comes to the implementation of government solutions for accessible and inclusive communities, a large share of work is being done by local governments, which are often under resourced.” page14

The continuation of work described in this submission is at great risk because of lack of resources.

## Recommendations

1. The new National Disability Strategy includes local government as both a sphere of government and an important stakeholder invested in the health and wellbeing of all members of their communities, including people with a disability. We seek acknowledgement of the ongoing work of many Victorian councils to improve disability access and inclusion.
  
2. The new National Disability Strategy recognizes that councils have strong existing community connections and networks that provide extensive reach and influence in local communities, through which disability inclusive policies and practices can be embedded. The potential of local government to link grass roots activities with the highest level of policy is considerable.
  
3. The Commonwealth Government consult MAV when planning the implementation of the National Disability Strategy in our state, about what resourcing and support can most usefully be offered to MAV and councils to further develop the sector's role in contributing to the implementation of the National Disability Strategy.
  
4. The Commonwealth government invest in Victorian councils by funding
  - a replacement for the defunded Building Inclusive Communities program. A new program could focus on the National Disability Strategy priorities. For example, it could be the DARE program...Disability Arts, Recreation and Employment
  
  - new infrastructure to improve access to the built environment, including scaling up the provision of more Changing Places
  
  - creation of a new program in local areas to provide face-to-face support for people with a disability to navigate the new Disability Gateway information system
  
  - recurrent funding for a Disability Adviser position at MAV to support the sector in current disability-related activities and maximise future alignment of the local government sector with the National Disability Strategy