

Disability Sector Strengthening Plan

The evidence base for this paper draws on the work of the National Disability Footprint, including the Data and Research Footprint (Element 2) delivered in partnership with Dr Scott Avery and Girra Maa Indigenous Health, University of Technology Sydney.

What is the DSSP?

The Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (Disability SSP) provides a national framework for all levels of government, the Coalition of Peaks and the community-controlled sector to strengthen the First Nations community-controlled disability sector and improve outcomes with and for First Nations people with disability.



Agreed in-principle by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap in August 2022, the Disability SSP was developed in partnership between the First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) and all levels of Australian governments (Coalition of Peaks 2022; NIAA 2023). The Disability SSP was developed to support achievement of Priority Reform Two: Building the Community-Controlled Sector under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, while also supporting all four Priority Reforms and embedding disability as a cross-cutting outcome across all 17 socio-economic targets (Disability SSP 2022; DSS 2024). The Disability SSP provides a framework to align the key priorities of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 (Australia's national disability policy framework) and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Disability SSP 2022).

Key messages

- **The Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (Disability SSP)** is a national framework to build the First Nations community-controlled disability sector, developed in partnership between First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) and all levels of government and agreed in-principle by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap in August 2022.
- **The Disability Royal Commission** recommended in September 2023 that the Disability SSP be revised and strengthened, with dedicated funding, extended timeframes, and clear accountability measures, guided by a First Nations Disability Forum. All governments accepted this recommendation in-principle in July 2024.
- FPDN supports **Recommendation 9.11** in full and is working with governments and the community-controlled sector to ensure the revised Disability SSP delivers sustained outcomes for First Nations people with disability through genuine partnership and self-determination.



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Human rights foundations

The Disability SSP is underpinned by Australia's international human rights obligations, including:

- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, particularly Articles 12 (equal recognition before the law), 13 (access to justice), 19 (living independently and being included in the community), and 26 (habilitation and rehabilitation)
- **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**, emphasising self-determination, participation in decision-making, respect for and protection of culture, and equality and non-discrimination
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reforms**, particularly Priority Reform Two: Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- **Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031**, particularly the Safety, Rights and Justice outcome area

Key Areas for Action

The Disability SSP focuses on building the community-controlled disability sector across six key areas for action, with 31 specific actions to guide governments and the community-controlled sector (Disability SSP 2022; ADS Review 2024).

1. **Workforce:** Focuses on growing and strengthening a culturally safe, inclusive and disability rights-informed community-controlled disability workforce.
2. **Capital Infrastructure:** Addresses the need for the community-controlled sector to have accessible and appropriate infrastructure, services and facilities.
3. **Service Delivery:** Aims to build the capacity of community-controlled disability services to deliver a full range of culturally safe and inclusive services, centring human rights and allowing greater choice, control, and social and economic participation for First Nations people with disability.
4. **Governance:** Seeks to enhance governance structures, accountability, and decision-making processes within the sector.
5. **Consistent Funding Model:** Seeks to ensure sustainable funding models that support community-controlled disability organisations.
6. **Peak Body:** Seeks to strengthen the peak body¹ to advocate for the disability sector and promote collaboration. FPDN is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability.

Guiding Principles

The Disability SSP is underpinned by twelve Guiding Principles that address the unique social and cultural rights, needs, and aspirations of First Nations people with disability, their families, carers, and communities.

1. Human rights
2. Self-determination
3. Cultural integrity
4. Cultural safety
5. Partnership
6. Place-based
7. Innovation
8. Empowerment
9. Equity
10. Sustainability
11. Knowledge
12. Nationally consistent approaches

These principles complement the guiding principles in Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 and provide practical guidance to implement them through a First Nations lens, promoting cultural safety and self-determination consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Disability SSP 2022).

What work has happened to date?

Since August 2022, FPDN and other community-controlled organisations have progressed implementation of the Disability SSP across multiple areas.

Key achievements include:

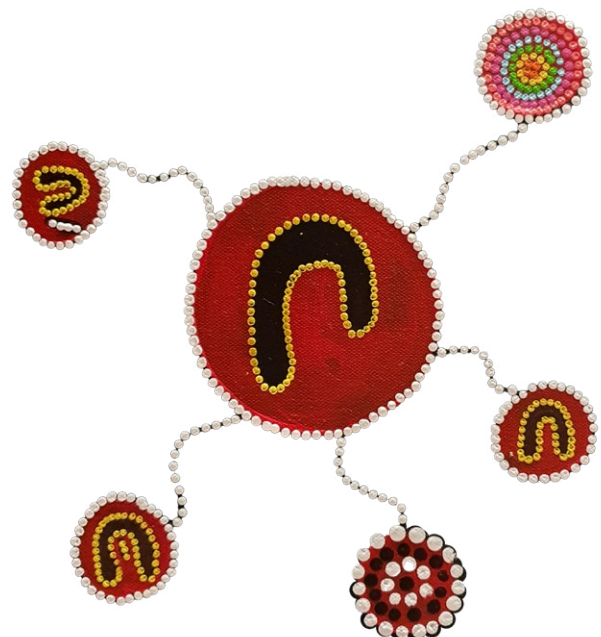
- Development and commencement of FPDN's National Disability Footprint initiative (funded by the Commonwealth from 2022), working across education, housing, justice and health sectors to ensure reforms are informed by the intersectional challenges faced by First Nations people with disability (NIAA 2023, 2024)
- Active engagement in national policy development, including submissions to the NDIS Review, Australia's Disability Strategy Review, and the Disability Royal Commission (FPDN submissions 2023–24)
- Creation of training programs and educational resources to build cultural competence in mainstream disability services (NIAA 2024; DSS 2024)
- Advocacy through Senate Committee Hearings on NDIS reforms, resulting in new draft rules supporting First Nations NDIS participants in cultural activities (NIAA 2024)

- Development of the Cultural Model of Inclusion which brings together cultural safety, inclusion and disability rights into one framework (Avery 2018; NIAA 2023).

Jurisdictional implementation is reported annually through Closing the Gap Implementation Plans, with progress tracked by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap (NIAA 2024, 2025). A disability sector specific annual report was also published in 2023 under Closing the Gap (NIAA 2023).

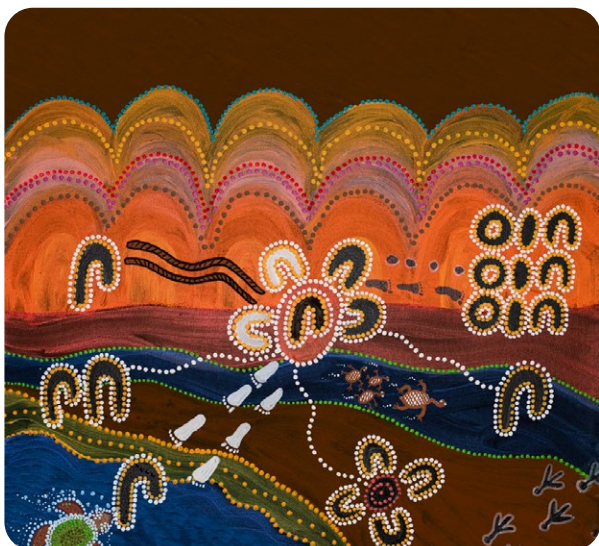
Future of the Disability SSP and the First Nations Disability Forum

The Disability SSP was agreed in-principle in August 2022 as a time-limited resource (covering the period 2022–2025) and was not designed to commit parties to resources or actions not already announced (Disability SSP 2022). Consequently, dedicated funding for Disability SSP implementation was not attached at the national level, and jurisdictions have been responsible for progressing actions through their own budget processes and Implementation Plans (Disability SSP 2022, section 4.2). With the Disability SSP timeframe concluding in 2025, attention has turned to strengthening and extending the plan to enable sustained outcomes.



The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission) Final Report, released in September 2023, acknowledged the Disability SSP as an important step forward while recognising the need to strengthen it through revised implementation arrangements (DRC Final Report 2023, Vol 9). The Commission made a specific recommendation (Recommendation 9.11) around parties to Closing the Gap committing to releasing a revised Disability SSP, in partnership with a First Nations Disability Forum (Recommendation 9.10), that has (DRC 2023, Rec 9.11):

- agreed priority areas, determined through consultation with First Nations people with disability, the community-controlled sector and representative organisations, under the guidance of FPDN
- dedicated funding commitments and extended timeframes beyond 2025
- clear timeframes and milestones for delivering actions and achieving outcomes
- annual reporting requirements for all parties to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, with monitoring by the Joint Council



FPDN supports Recommendation 9.11 in full. In July 2024, all Australian governments accepted Recommendation 9.10 in-principle, committing to work in partnership with First Nations people to develop options for a First Nations Disability Forum or other appropriate shared decision-making mechanism (Australian Government Response July 2024; DSS Engage 2024). Public consultation on Forum design closed in January 2025, with governments expected to begin considering and endorsing options in 2025 (DSS Engage 2024). The revision of the Disability SSP is expected to occur in partnership with the Forum, once established, addressing Recommendation 9.11's requirement for a revised plan by September 2024 (noting this date has passed and implementation is ongoing) (DRC Rec 9.11; Commonwealth CTG Implementation Plan 2025).

Ensuring the revised Disability SSP includes dedicated funding, clearly articulated actions and responsibilities, agreed timeframes, and strong accountability and monitoring arrangements will be critical to achieving the vision of a strong First Nations community-controlled disability sector.

Acknowledgement

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