

Disability Sector Strengthening Plan Guiding Principles

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.

This fact sheet sets out the Guiding Principles for strengthening the community-controlled disability sector for First Nations people with disability. 24% of First Nations people are living with disability, almost double the non-Indigenous rate (ABS 2024; AIHW 2023a). The DSSP, co-designed by FPDN and the Australian Government under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, provides a minimum standard for culturally safe, rights-focused and place-based practice. The Principles align with the latest national frameworks, including Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 and the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, and require all parties to centre First Nations leadership, uphold self-determination and accountability, and embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

This work is supported by the new APS Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data (NIAA 2025) and the latest Productivity Commission review (PC 2024). Clear calls-to-action urge governments, sectors and community to strengthen funding, leadership pathways, local solutions and robust annual reporting on the effectiveness of reforms. Implementation of these Principles is vital to deliver more inclusive, equitable and sustainable outcomes.



First Peoples
Disability Network

The Disability SSP

The First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) co-designed the Disability SSP in genuine partnership with the Australian Government under Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CTG).

The 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.

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

Closing the Gap & Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31

The Commonwealth, state and territory governments have committed to implementing CTG and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 (ADS). Given that almost half of First Nations people are estimated to have a disability or long-term health condition, all governments therefore have a responsibility to centre First Nations people with disability in the implementation of both national frameworks. In its CTG Implementation Plan, the Commonwealth Government has also explicitly committed to treating disability as a cross-cutting outcome area across all priority reforms and socio-economic targets.

The Coalition of Peaks shares responsibility with governments for implementing CTG and must ensure the voices of First Nations people with disability are prioritised in related work.

Guiding Principles

The Disability SSP is underpinned by twelve Guiding Principles. These reflect the unique social and cultural rights, needs and aspirations of First Nations people with disability, their families, carers and communities. The Disability SSP Guiding Principles are complementary to the Guiding Principles included in the ADS, expanding on them in a practical way through a First Nations lens to ensure cultural safety and alignment with CTG.

The Guiding Principles establish a minimum standard of practice for working with First Nations people with disability. Applying the Guiding Principles will lead to a more culturally inclusive, accessible and equitable society.

All parties to the Disability SSP have committed to incorporating these principles into their standard approach to ensure best practice that recognises and responds to the specific needs of First Nations people with disability. This includes all levels of government and the Coalition of Peaks.



Implementing the Disability SSP Guiding Principles

The below table provides an overview of how the Guiding Principles can be implemented.

Guiding Principles	Description
Human rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Nations People with disability are recognised as the experts on determining how best to enshrine their rights and resource their needs. • A rights-based approach unpins all work with First Nations Peoples with disability. • Alignment of all work with the UNCRPD and UNDRIP.
Self-determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions are made by and in partnership with First Nations Peoples with disability about matters that affect their lives in the design and implementation of policy, strategy, and programs. • Recognition and support of self-determination for First Nations Peoples with disability.
Cultural integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unique cultural knowledge, practices, languages, traditions and perspectives of First Nations Peoples with disability are respected. • These knowledge systems are valued and help shape future policy and programs. • Cultural integrity also refers to the need to be responsive to diversity and the need for place-based approaches.
Cultural safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally safe and appropriate practices are used when working with First Nations Peoples with disability, their families and communities. • Recognition that culturally safe practice is different in each community and should be implemented according to local systems.
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles of co-design and partnership are embedded in all work with First Nations Peoples with disability and their communities. • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise is recognised and supported. • The development and implementation of the Disability SSP should be based on extensive engagement and consultation with First Nations people with disability and the sector.
Place-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local approaches, practices, ideas and solutions are developed and implemented in co-design with the local community. • Recognition of the ongoing work taking place on the ground in local communities; whether regional, remote or urban contexts. • Building on and investing in existing place based solutions that are valued by First Nations people with disability, their families and communities.

Guiding Principles	Description
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure new work builds on and augments existing efforts, particularly work that is valued by the community-controlled sector, First Nations communities and First Nations people with disabilities. • Recognise barriers in previous efforts and models (i.e. medical model of disability). • Adopt transformative approaches, which aim to build on existing strengths and approaches proven to work. • Ensure new efforts are not duplicative or tokenistic, and that all corresponding actions are implemented with integrity and innovation
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising, affirming and supporting community-controlled efforts. • Increased capacity and resourcing of community-controlled organisations. • Ensure the voices of First Nations people with disability are at the forefront of all actions and decisions. • Increased pathways to leadership within the sector for First Nations People, including those with disability. • Increased access to and holding of qualifications and skills, alongside professional recognition of community-based skills, relationships and cultural knowledge.
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger focus on and support of First Nations Peoples with disability including those living in regional, remote and very remote areas; young and older people; LGBTIQ+ people; and/or those incarcerated or on remand. • Recognition of the importance of place-based approaches, and not a one-size fits all approach.
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated and consistent funding models for the sector. • A strong peak body governing the sector that has a sustainable model of care and resourcing. • Supporting sustainability beyond the life of the Disability SSP (i.e. reform).
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in strengthening the evidence base through improved data and research. • All data and research efforts align with principles of data sovereignty.
Nationally consistent approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All work with First Nations Peoples with disability aligns with and/or complements existing relevant frameworks and strategies, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 ○ The National Agreement on Closing the Gap ○ State and territory disability strategies, frameworks and action plans. • Recognition of the ongoing policy and program priorities of jurisdictions, and ensuring to augment rather than duplicate efforts.

Note: Guiding Principles will extend into all forms of government policy and programs relating to First Nations Peoples with disability, beyond strategies and other formats listed above.

Implementation of the Guiding Principles for Policymakers

The below provides advice on how to embed the Guiding Principles in practice.

Principle 1: Human Rights

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise First Nations people with disability as experts on how best to enshrine their rights and resource their needs.
- Ensure all work with First Nations Peoples with disability is underpinned by a rights-based approach and aligned with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) and [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

How do you implement this in practice?

- Your policies and programs comply with the UNCRPD and UNDRIP, and you ensure the rights of First Nations people with disability to participate and be included equally in society are upheld through the application of the ADS and Disability SSP Guiding Principles.

Principle 2: Self-determination

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise and support self-determination, including by ensuring decisions are made by and in partnership with First Nations people with disability.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You provide accessible information that allows First Nations people with disability to understand and respond to proposals. This includes tailoring information to reach people in different settings by providing reasonable adjustments and access to supported decision-making that is also culturally appropriate, and adhering to the Australian Human Rights Commission's [guide to hosting accessible and inclusive in-person meetings and events](#). You further ensure there is

adequate time for people to consider information you provide before asking them to make decisions and ensure they are fairly compensated for their time.

Principle 3: Cultural Integrity

What does this require you to do?

- Respect and value the unique cultural knowledge, practices, languages, traditions and perspectives of First Nations people with disability and ensure these help shape future policy and programs.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You engage First Nations researchers, communities (urban, regional, rural and remote), and people with lived experience of disability (including children, youth, Elders and carers) throughout the policy cycle. This includes the design, implementation and evaluation phases.

Principle 4: Cultural Safety

What does this require you to do?

- Use culturally safe and appropriate practices when working with First Nations people with disability, their families and communities, and recognise that this differs between communities and should be implemented according to local systems.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You tailor communication and engagement to suit the needs, history and lore of place and peoples.

Principle 5: Partnership

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise and support First Nations' expertise, and embed principles of co-design and partnership in all work with First Nations people with disability and their communities.

- Ensure Disability SSP implementation efforts are based on extensive engagement and consultation with First Nations people with disability and the sector.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You create formal policy and place-based partnerships that drive national action and ensure shared, transparent decision-making as required under CTG Priority Reform One, with strong elements as defined under CTG Clause 32.

Principle 6: Place-based

What does this require you to do?

- Co-design local approaches, practices, ideas and solutions with the local community.
- Recognise, build on and invest in existing place-based solutions valued by First Nations people with disability, their families and communities.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You engage with communities and community-controlled organisations at a regional level to assess community needs and the effectiveness of existing programs.

Principle 7: Innovation

What does this require you to do?

- Ensure new approaches are transformative, build on existing strengths, are not duplicative or tokenistic, and are implemented with integrity and innovation.
- Recognise barriers in previous efforts and models (e.g., medical model of disability).

How do you implement this in practice?

- You develop a new policy/program taking into account previous policies/programs evidence and learnings, current contemporary initiatives/best practice to assess whether they can be supported for expansion or used in other settings through place-based approaches. You further consult with First Nations people with disability and their representative organisations, such as FPDN, to ensure any new policy/program will facilitate an improvement in the outcomes for First Nations people with disability.

Principle 8: Empowerment

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise, affirm and support community-controlled efforts, including through increased capacity and resourcing of community-controlled organisations.
- Ensure the voices of First Nations people with disability are at the forefront of all actions and decisions.
- Support the professional recognition of community-based skills, relationships and cultural knowledge, and increase access to qualifications, skills and pathways to leadership within the sector for First Nations peoples, including those with disability.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You quarantine funding and implement targeted recruitment to the First Nations people with disability sector to encourage ACCO participation in grant rounds. You further dedicate a minimum provision of funds to target First Nations people with disability under your Stream.

Principle 9: Equity

What does this require you to do?

- Ensure a stronger focus on and support of First Nations people with disability living in regional, remote and very remote areas, and recognise the importance of place-based approaches.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You provide accommodations and adjustments to address barriers or processes that unfairly restrict First Nations people with disability from accessing your proposal. You partner with disability representative organisations and communities to define equitable outcomes for First Nations people with disability.

Principle 10: Sustainability

What does this require you to do?

- Support dedicated and consistent funding models for the sector, a strong governing peak body with a sustainable model of care and resourcing, and sustainability through reform beyond the life of the Disability SSP.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You scope opportunities for the community-controlled sector to apply for new grant rounds, provide as early as practicable notice if existing grants are ceasing or being renewed (to ensure staff retention and work planning is not impacted by delays), and involve FPDN, other peaks, and communities in conversations about reforms that affect First Nations people with disability.

Principle 11: Knowledge

What does this require you to do?

- Invest in strengthening the evidence base through improved data and research and ensure all data and research efforts align with [principles of data sovereignty](#).

How do you implement this in practice?

- You take an ‘if not, why not?’ approach to transparency of information and the application of [Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles](#).

Principle 12: Nationally Consistent Approaches

What does this require you to do?

- Ensure all work with First Nations people with disability aligns with existing national and jurisdictional frameworks and strategies, including [CTG](#) and [the Strategy](#).
- Continuously recognise the ongoing policy and program priorities of jurisdictions, and ensure to augment rather than duplicate efforts.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You meet regularly with other agencies, jurisdictions, peak bodies and community-controlled organisations to identify potential alignment and opportunities to build on successful measures.

These practice examples are a guide only. All areas should consider appropriate and innovative ways to embed the Guiding Principles of both the Disability SSP and the Strategy in all work with and for First Nations people with disability. This should include, but in no way be limited to, the examples above.

Implementation of the Guiding Principles for ACCOs and Mainstream Organisations

The below provides advice on how to embed the Guiding Principles in practice..

Principle 1: Human Rights

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise First Nations people with disability as experts on how best to enshrine their rights and resource their needs.
- Prioritise rights-based approaches and alignment with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) and [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

How do you implement this in practice?

- You support the rights of First Nations people with disability to participate equally across settings and processes, including by ensuring accessible and culturally responsive supports are available to help people understand and protect their rights. When working with communities, you seek out representation of First Nations people with disability.

Principle 2: Self-determination

What does this require you to do?

- Recognise and support self-determination, including by ensuring decisions are made by and in partnership with First Nations people with disability.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You provide accessible information and access to supports that allow First Nations people with disability to understand and participate in relevant work. This includes offering or promoting advocacy and legal support to help people navigate mainstream and other systems.

Principle 3: Cultural Integrity

What does this require you to do?

- Value and respect First Nations knowledge systems.
- Recognise the need for culturally responsive and place-based approaches.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You engage First Nations researchers, communities (urban, regional, rural and remote), and people with lived experience of disability (including children, youth, Elders and carers) to inform your work, and advocate for government policies and programs to support people to maintain connections to Country and community (e.g., by developing more place-based responses and funding local providers).

Principle 4: Cultural Safety

What does this require you to do?

- Use culturally safe and responsive practices when working with First Nations people with disability, their families and communities, and recognise this will differ between communities.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You tailor communication and engagement to suit the needs, history and lore of place and peoples. When working with governments on justice-related issues, you advocate for the need for policies and programs to be culturally and disability responsive, and to consider the specific needs and understandings of different communities.

2. Per Article 21 of the [UN CRPD](#), information should be provided in accessible formats, technologies and languages (including sign language and braille). For initiatives targeting First Nations people with disability, the FPDN recommends that information should be available in First Nations languages wherever possible.

Principle 5: Partnership

What does this require you to do?

- Value First Nations expertise and embed principles of co-design and partnership in all work with First Nations people with disability and their communities.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You participate in partnerships and advocate for the inclusion of First Nations people with disability and their representative organisations.

Principle 6: Place-based

What does this require you to do?

- Value local approaches and solutions that are co-designed and implemented with local communities.
- Recognise and support in existing place-based solutions that are valued by communities.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You engage with communities and community-controlled organisations at a regional level to assess community needs and the effectiveness of existing programs, and communicate this to governments.

Principle 7: Innovation

What does this require you to do?

- Ensure new approaches are transformative, build on existing strengths, are not duplicative or tokenistic, and are implemented with integrity and innovation. All approaches should recognise the barriers affecting past efforts and shift away from these, including moving away from the medical model of disability to adopt the social model.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You consider learnings from past work and current best practice initiatives to assess how they can be applied or adapted in different settings. You further consult with First Nations people with disability and their representative organisations, such as FPDN, to ensure any new work will facilitate an improvement in the outcomes for First Nations people with disability.

Principle 8: Empowerment

What does this require you to do?

- Support community-controlled efforts, the recognition of community-based skills, relationships and cultural knowledge, and pathways to qualifications and leadership for First Nations people with disability.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You work with ACCOs in local communities to engage with and deliver services to First Nations people with disability. You provide employment, education and training opportunities for First Nations people with disability and promote opportunities through your networks.

Principle 9: Equity

What does this require you to do?

- Prioritise and support of First Nations people with disability living in regional, remote and very remote areas, and recognise the importance of place-based approaches.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You provide accommodations and adjustments to address barriers or processes that unfairly restrict First Nations people with disability from accessing your services. You partner with disability representative organisations, ACCOs, and communities to define equitable outcomes for First Nations people with disability, again noting needs will differ between communities.

3. Strong partnership elements defined in Clause 32 of [CTG](#).

Principle 10: Sustainability**What does this require you to do?**

- Advocate for dedicated and consistent funding for the community-controlled sector and sustainability through reform.
- Prioritise consistent and sustainable service models to minimise disruptions to communities you work with.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You apply for and promote new grant/funding opportunities to your networks, advocate for consistent funding, participate in government forums to promote the need for increased and ongoing funding, and partner with ACCOs to identify opportunities to fill service gaps and upskill to increase business opportunities and sustainability.

Principle 11: Knowledge**What does this require you to do?**

- Support a stronger evidence base through improved data and research and ensure all data and research efforts align with [principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty](#).

How do you implement this in practice?

- You encourage collection of disaggregated data and adherence with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. You are open with communities when collecting data about how it will be used.

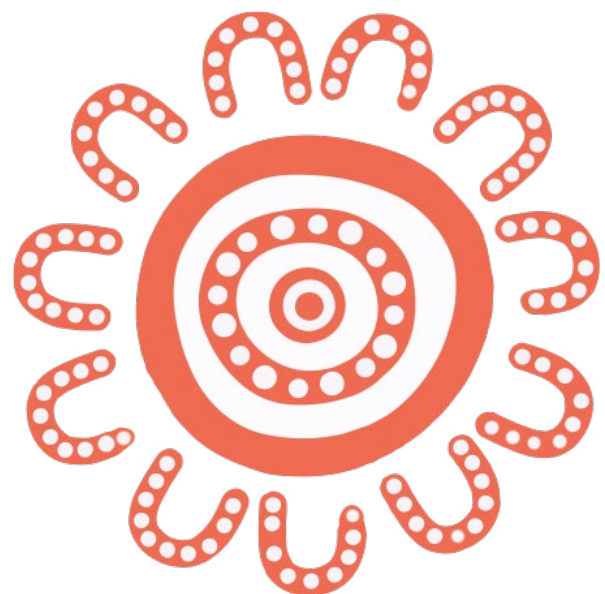
Principle 12: Nationally Consistent Approaches**What does this require you to do?**

- Ensure all work with First Nations people with disability aligns with existing national and jurisdictional frameworks and strategies, including [CTG](#) and the [ADS](#).
- Stay aware of the work happening in each jurisdiction and ensure to augment rather than duplicate efforts.

How do you implement this in practice?

- You meet regularly with ACCOs, government agencies, peak bodies, and communities to identify potential alignment and opportunities to build on successful work.

These practice examples are a guide only. All areas should consider appropriate and innovative ways to embed the Guiding Principles of both the Disability SSP and the Strategy in all work with and for First Nations people with disability. This should include, but in no way be limited to, the examples above.



References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2024, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, ABS, Canberra, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2023a, 1.14 Disability, AIHW, Canberra, <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/1-14-disability>

Productivity Commission (PC) 2024, Study Report – Closing the Gap review, PC, Canberra, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries-and-research/closing-the-gap-review/report/>

Department of Social Services (DSS) 2025, Updated Australia's Disability Strategy to improve the lives of people with disability, DSS, Canberra, <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/17521>

First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) 2025, First Nations People Living with Disability, FPDN, Sydney, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap/first-nations-people-living-disability>

National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) 2025, Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data (GID), NIAA, Canberra, <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/data-evaluation-and-research/framework-governance-indigenous-data-gid>

United Nations (UN) 2006, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN, New York, <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

United Nations (UN) 2007, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UN, New York, https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031 (ADS) 2024, Australian Government, Canberra, <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2025-01/5831-dss3513-ads-strategy-2021.pdf>

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) through funding provided as part of the National Disability Footprint, under the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (DSSP). We acknowledge NIAA as a key partner in enabling the development of these resources.

First Peoples Disability Network Limited

 policy@fpdn.org.au

 fpdn.org.au/policy



First Peoples
Disability Network

Accessibility Statement

If you encounter difficulties, or need this document in an alternative format please contact media@fpdn.org.au or by calling (02) 9267 4195.

Information on this Statement
Date issued: May 2026
Artworks © Uncle Paul Calcott