

First Nations Disability Forum (FNDF)

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.

First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) advocate for the human rights of 60,000+ First Nations people with disability and their families and work to ensure policies, programs and services are culturally safe, accessible and anchored in self-determination. FPDN is actively pursuing the establishment of the First Nations Disability Forum (FNDF), key recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission (rec 9.10) and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review (action 20.4) supported by the Federal Government. FPDN is the national peak organisation led by and for First Nations people with disability.

This position statement provides an overview of the role, form and function of the FNDF that FPDN has advocated for. FPDN acknowledges that alternative models may be suggested by community members and organisations and are willing find the model that best services First Nations people with disabilities and that the implementation of a FNDF is a future decision for government.

The First Nations Disability Forum (FNDF)

FPDN has advocated for a model such as the First Nations Disability forum in some way for several decades. The idea behind the Forum is to create a governance mechanism for the First Nations Disability sector, a central body which takes the lived experience of First Nations people as its highest authority, and engages with the national and jurisdictional governments as a mechanism which translates policy to action. As part of that goal, the forum would engage in design, consultation, and representation to guide Australia's collective First Nations Disability community toward better outcomes through better and more engaged government, business, and NGO action.



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Summary of Functions

The functions below have been reverse-engineered from the various reviews, analysis, roles, actions and recommendations assigned to the FNDF over time from sources such as the Disability Royal Commission, the Productivity Commission’s Closing the Gap Review, the NDIS Review and Supporting Analysis, among others. Note that these functions are a minimum as defined in those sources, and could expand as the Forum develops.

Category	Function
Principles and Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The forum will be based on principles repeated across varied reports, such as: • Core focus on strengthening and elevating the voices of First Nations people with a disability • A Cultural model of inclusion¹ • Culturally responsive delivery • Share power meaningfully with trust and relinquishing control by government • Address power imbalances • Systemic change • Long term vision and investment • Safeguarding against the occurrence of violence against, and abuse, neglect and exploitation of, First Nations people with disability
Membership and Representation	<p>Membership will include representatives from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Peoples Disability Network • First Nations Community Controlled Organisations • both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies • First Nations people with varied disabilities and diverse needs. <p>A schedule will set out the governance arrangements for First Nations Disability Forum including minimum standards for effective membership, meeting frequency, remuneration and secretariat support to reflect a new system-wide, holistic approach to First Nations disability policy and services.</p>

1. As outlined in: Avery, S. (2018). *Culture is inclusion: A narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability*. First Peoples Disability Network Australia, Sydney, Australia.

General Functions and Strategy

Representation and Advocacy

- Address the lack of diverse voices of First Nations people with disability across key areas funded by the Australian Government and state and territory governments
- Provide a mechanism for First Nations people with disability to provide input into policy, programs and practices, directly and through community-controlled advocacy and service providers
- Improve understandings of cultural models of disability and care

Community Control

- Be a platform for First Nations community-controlled sector organisations to collaborate with First Nations people with disability
- provide a platform for existing community-controlled organisations to collaborate across relevant strategies and frameworks and provide leadership and expertise on the issues that First Nations people with disability face
- Combine the policy expertise of FPDN with the service system expertise of the First Nations community-controlled sector and on-the-ground experiences of policy and services from members of the First Nations community with disability
- Work with the government parties that are signatories to the National Agreement

Policy

- Drive policy and service reform: Advocate for and guide the development of effective, economical, and culturally safe policies and services specifically tailored for First Nations people with disability. This includes ensuring their inclusion in broader national agreements and addressing systemic neglect.
- Enhance safety, access, and system navigation: Work to prevent and eliminate violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation experienced by First Nations people with disability. This also involves improving coordination between agencies and departments to simplify access to services and support.
- Oversee implementation, review, and recommend improvements: Monitor the implementation of relevant recommendations (such as from the Disability Royal Commission and Closing the Gap initiatives) and continuously review existing practices, standards, and legislation to provide evidence-based recommendations for improved cultural safety, accessibility, and overall effectiveness.

Funding and the First Nations Disability Investment Fund

- All governments contribute to a First Nations Disability Investment Fund (FNDIP) to resource the Forum, ensuring it has the resources and legal powers to function as intended.

**DSSP
Leadership**

- Lead and revise the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (DSSP), in partnership with the Parties to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

**Specific Policy
Functions**

Develop and implement a National First Nations Disability Strategy, that bridges the gap between the National Closing the Gap Agreement and Australia's Disability Strategy. This strategy could include, but not be limited to:

- Enhancing disability-specific expertise into First Nations community controlled organisations, supported by the First Nations disability investment fund
 - A disability-inclusive cultural safety strategy based on the Cultural Model of Inclusion that improves the cultural safety of all services that support and have a responsibility for First Nations people with disability, including in the NDIA, health, criminal justice and early childhood sectors
 - Collaborate with all relevant stakeholders to renew the Disability Sector Strengthening Plan (DSSP), and develop a strategy to develop First Nations local workforces in remote communities
 - The forum should drive community-led design, implementation and evaluation
 - The national strategy will address persistent gaps in the investment, coordination and development of culturally accessible and safe services for First Nations people with disability
 - It would also facilitate performance monitoring for First Nations people with disability against Australia's Disability Strategy (ADS) and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Targets and Priority Reforms)
 - Ideally the Forum would direct and distribute resources to enable a place-based, community-led approach which is required to understand needs and the best ways to support the First Nations disability workforce
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Summary of Structure

In order to enact the functions defined above, FPDN advocates for the below structure, with a review mechanism to evaluate the governance arrangements and effectiveness of the Forum at an appropriate interval.,

The Forum has a similar structure to the policy partnership mechanisms that sit within the Closing the Gap framework. FPDN has designed a basic structure based on these examples, which have been implemented, tested and refined over time. FPDN is cognisant of the need to ensure that the establishment of national bodies have built in linkages with jurisdictional and local contexts and communities to ensure the relevance and success of the body.



Diagram of a national forum under which set of form for each jurisdiction.

National Forum:

- Nine government members, one for each jurisdiction* with DSS as the co-chair
- Nine First Nation members, one from each jurisdiction* and FPDN as the co-chair
- Jurisdictional representation on the National forum should be made up by the co-chairs of the jurisdictional forums

Jurisdictional forums and working groups to sit underneath the National forum

- Consisting of equal government/non-Indigenous and First Nations parties as determined most appropriate to that place (size also to be determined by key jurisdictional parties)
- A Commonwealth Forum where national peaks and agencies would come together
- Jurisdictional Forums and working groups to be supported by the secretariat to come together and feed up into the forum
- First Nations Caucus to support First Nations members to meet separately ahead of National Forum meetings

Image: From "Options for a First Nations Disability Forum Engagement Paper," Department of Social Services, 2024

Working Groups and Secretariat

- Additional working groups will be created and dissolved as per need to drive targeted action
- Secretariat for the forum should be joint between the relevant government department and FPDN, with equitable resourcing and funding for each side, and additional funding to support the jurisdictional groups and/or First Nations caucusing, to allow for self-determined policy development and research

Conclusion

This policy position statement provides a framework for establishing a First Nations Disability Forum that is culturally authoritative, genuinely representative, and empowered to drive the systemic changes needed to ensure First Nations people with disability can live free from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and achieve their full potential. We urge the government to adopt these recommendations in partnership with First Nations people with disability.



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