



First Peoples
Disability Network

First Peoples Disability Network Australia

Inclusive Communities Fund Consultation Paper

Submission to the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, August 2026

About First Peoples Disability Network Australia

First Peoples Disability Network Australia (FPDN) is the national peak organisation representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, their families and communities. FPDN's work is based on the principles of self-determination and "nothing about us, without us". It is also guided by the:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031
- National Agreement on Closing the Gap

FPDN advocates for the rights, inclusion and wellbeing of First Nations people with disability across all areas of life, including health, justice, education, housing and social security. We believe and follow our framework for a Cultural Model of Inclusion which emphasises ensuring the cultural, social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people with disability to move past the rigid and culturally unsafe medical and social models of disability.

This submission has been endorsed by:

- Physical Disability Australia
- People with Disability Australia
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia
- The Australian Autism Alliance
- National Ethnic Disability Alliance
- Women With Disabilities Australia
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- The Down Syndrome Australia Consortium

Executive Summary

First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the design of the Inclusive Communities Fund.



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We support the intent of the Fund and the Australian Government's commitment to creating more inclusive communities for people with disability. We believe the fund presents an important opportunity to strengthen communities by recognising, valuing and supporting the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability already make to community life.

FPDN's support for the Inclusive Communities Fund does not indicate support for the significant reductions to NDIS expenditure and participant supports associated with recent NDIS reforms. A community cannot be inclusive if people do not have the individual supports they need to participate in it, and the fund must not be used to offset, justify or obscure reductions to those supports.

This submission proposes a different way of thinking about the purpose of the fund. Rather than asking how communities can include people with disability, we believe the fund should ask how it can help communities recognise, value and strengthen the contribution people with disability already make.

We believe the fund will be strongest if it:

- recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as leaders and subject matter experts in creating community inclusion
- invests in the strengths that already exist within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities while also supporting mainstream organisations to create genuine belonging
- supports different funding approaches that recognise the diversity of communities across Australia
- ¹ ~~focus~~ through shared decision-making and dedicated investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), including quarantined or prioritised funding for ACCO-led initiatives, organisations and other First Nations community organisations
- measures success through meaningful outcomes, including belonging, trust and contribution, rather than attendance and participation alone; and
- builds community capacity that continues beyond the life of the fund.

The Inclusive Communities Fund presents an opportunity to move beyond funding inclusion towards recognising, valuing and strengthening the contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability already make to their families, cultures and communities. Success should not be measured by how many people attend an activity. It should be measured by whether people feel they belong, whether their contribution is recognised and valued, and whether communities are stronger because of it.

Introduction

Building Belonging Through Community Inclusion

Throughout this submission, we use the word *belonging* deliberately. Participation and inclusion are important concepts, but they do not necessarily describe how people experience community. A person can participate in an activity without feeling welcomed, valued or connected. 'Belonging' better captures what it means to be recognised, respected and able to contribute as a full member of a community.

¹ National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020), particularly Priority Reforms One, Two and Three, available at: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>





For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, belonging means being able to participate in community life without leaving any part of your identity behind. People should not have to choose between culturally safe spaces and disability-inclusive spaces. They should be able to experience belonging in both. Belonging requires both disability inclusion and cultural safety. Neither is sufficient on its own, and neither happens by accident.

For generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability have contributed to our families, cultures and communities in countless ways. Our knowledge, leadership, creativity, care, lived experience and connection to community have always strengthened community life. These contributions have often been overlooked by disability policy and mainstream systems, despite being central to the strength and resilience of our communities. Therefore, the opportunity is not to create our place within them, but to recognise, value and strengthen the contribution we already make.

Over time, disability policy and service systems have often positioned people with disability primarily as recipients of care and support rather than as contributors, leaders and active members of their communities. While care and support are essential, they should never define someone's role in community life.

The Inclusive Communities Fund presents an opportunity to shift this narrative. Rather than simply funding organisations to include people with disability, the fund should recognise, value and strengthen our contribution by removing the barriers that prevent us from fully participating in, shaping and leading community life.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability are uniquely placed to understand what creates belonging. Our lived experience reflects both the barriers we have faced and the strengths, relationships and connections that have enabled us to contribute to our families, cultures and communities.

The people who best understand belonging are those who have experienced exclusion. Our lived experience is not simply a perspective to be considered. It is expertise that should help define what success looks like, shape how it is achieved and lead the work wherever possible.

The fund also presents an opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's obligations under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Throughout this submission, we identify opportunities to better align the fund with those commitments, particularly in relation to genuine partnerships, shared decision-making, strengthening the community-controlled sector and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability.

The fund should also be designed consistently with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities² and guided by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples³. Together, they provide a clear rights-based foundation for inclusion in community and cultural life, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability to be actively involved in decisions and programs that affect them.

Response to discussion paper questions:

² United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), particularly arts 4(3), 19 and 30, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

³ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), particularly arts 18, 19, 21 and 23, available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>



1. What support, resources or changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible for people with disability?

- **How could community organisations partner with disability-led organisations to achieve this?**

Creating genuinely inclusive communities requires more than improving physical accessibility or delivering disability awareness training. It requires organisations to build a culture where disabled people are recognised, valued and able to contribute as full members of a community.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, this also requires organisations to understand that belonging is created through both disability inclusion and cultural safety. People should not have to choose between culturally safe spaces and disability-inclusive spaces. They should be able to experience belonging in both.

We are concerned that the discussion paper places significant emphasis on organisations building the capacity of other organisations, while giving less attention to the expertise of disabled people themselves. Community organisations should work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, communities and their representative organisations to understand what creates belonging, identify the barriers that prevent it and design solutions that reflect local communities.

Meaningful partnerships have an important role to play, but partnerships should never become a substitute for engaging directly with disabled people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability should be recognised as educators, leaders and subject matter experts whose lived experience can help organisations understand what creates belonging in practice.

The discussion paper should also more clearly distinguish between disability-led organisations, Disability Representative Organisations, advocacy organisations and disability service providers. These organisations perform different roles and bring different expertise.

In particular, disability service providers should not automatically be regarded as experts in creating community belonging simply because they deliver disability supports. If disability service providers were already the experts in creating community belonging for disabled people, there would be no need for this fund. The establishment of the fund is itself an acknowledgement that service delivery alone has not been sufficient to create genuinely inclusive communities. This creates an opportunity to recognise and invest in different forms of expertise, particularly the lived experience and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability.

Not every community has access to disability representative organisations, disability advocacy organisations or disability-led organisations. Some regional, rural and remote/very remote communities have very limited disability infrastructure, while others rely on outreach or fly-in, fly-out services. This should not disadvantage communities during assessment. Funding should recognise different community contexts and support approaches that build local leadership and community capacity.

Where organisations seek funding to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, they should demonstrate genuine relationships, cultural safety and shared decision-making. Where appropriate, this should include genuine partnership with relevant ACCOs. However, partnerships with mainstream organisations should not replace direct investment in ACCO-led initiatives. An intention to become more inclusive should not on its own be sufficient to receive funding.

These principles should also extend to the governance of the fund itself. For initiatives that seek to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



should be involved in decisions about funding priorities and grant assessment processes. This reflects Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, recognising that genuine partnerships require shared decision-making, not simply consultation.

2. What activities should the Fund support, given that it will not pay for service delivery?

We support the Fund focusing on activities that strengthen communities rather than replacing disability supports. This distinction is particularly important in the context of recent NDIS reforms: the fund must be genuinely additional and must not be expected to fill gaps created by reductions in individual supports. Individual supports are often what enable disabled people to attend events, access community spaces and participate meaningfully in community life. Investment in inclusive communities cannot succeed if people lose the individual supports they need to participate.

The greatest opportunity lies in investing in activities that create the conditions for belonging and leave communities better equipped to continue this work after funding has ended. The fund should support activities such as leadership development, community capacity building, accessibility improvements, inclusive communication, cultural safety, mentoring, community education and initiatives that remove barriers to participation and belonging. In regional, rural and remote communities, practical improvements to infrastructure and equipment may provide lasting benefits that continue well beyond the funding period.

The fund should also complement, rather than replace, existing legal and policy responsibilities. Funding should not be used to subsidise activities that organisations are already expected to undertake under disability discrimination, accessibility or other legislative obligations. Instead, the fund should support initiatives that create additional and lasting community benefit by building belonging, strengthening community capacity and removing barriers that would otherwise remain unaddressed.

The fund should also create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and other disabled people to contribute as trainers, mentors, facilitators, advisors and community leaders. This recognises disabled people as contributors to community life rather than passive recipients of inclusion.

Importantly, the fund should not be limited to strengthening existing organisations. It should also create opportunities for new community-led initiatives to emerge, particularly where there are identified unmet needs or where existing organisational structures do not reflect local communities.

A dedicated proportion of the Fund should be quarantined for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). At a minimum, ACCO-led applications should be prioritised. This will help ensure funding reaches culturally safe, community-led initiatives and supports self-determination.

Assessment processes should recognise that communities start from different places. Communities with limited disability infrastructure or fewer organisations should not be viewed as less capable of creating belonging. In many cases, these communities present the greatest opportunity for the fund to build local leadership, strengthen community capacity and create lasting change.

Additionally, assessment processes for initiatives involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in funding allocation and grant assessment. This will help ensure funding decisions are informed by lived experience, community

priorities and cultural knowledge, while supporting the National Agreement on Closing the Gap's commitment to formal partnerships and shared decision-making.

3. What role could local governments play in supporting community inclusion?

Local governments already have an important role in creating inclusive communities. The fund should complement and strengthen these existing responsibilities rather than replace them.

As a level of government, local governments already have responsibilities under Australia's Disability Strategy⁴ to improve inclusion and accessibility within their communities. They also have an important role in supporting implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The fund provides an opportunity to strengthen these existing commitments through practical community-led initiatives.

Local governments are well placed to improve accessibility across community facilities and public spaces, support inclusive communication, promote community events, encourage local leadership and bring together organisations, businesses and community members to remove barriers to belonging.

Where local governments receive funding to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, they should demonstrate shared decision-making and genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and relevant ACCOs. Funding should strengthen, rather than compete with or bypass, the community-controlled sector, consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

4. What is the best way for community organisations to build meaningful and lasting inclusion?

o How can we make sure the benefits of the Fund continue after the 3-year funding period ends?

Meaningful and lasting inclusion requires more than accessible buildings, policies or programs. It requires organisations to build a culture where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability are recognised, valued and able to contribute as full members of a community.

The goal should not be for organisations to become better at including disabled people. The goal should be for belonging to become part of how the organisation thinks, acts and makes decisions every day.

Belonging cannot be embedded through policies alone. It is created by the everyday decisions, behaviours and relationships that shape how people experience a community organisation. Leadership, staff, volunteers and community members all have a role in creating environments where people feel welcomed, respected and valued.

Community organisations should create belonging with people with disability, not for them. This means involving people in designing initiatives, identifying barriers, evaluating success and shaping how organisations continue to improve over time. Belonging is strongest when Aboriginal and Torres Strait

⁴ [Australia's Disability Strategy Hub | Disability Gateway](#)



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Islander people with disability are recognised not only as participants, but as contributors, leaders and subject matter experts.

The greatest legacy of the fund will not be the activities delivered during the funding period. It will be whether organisations continue to create belonging after funding has ended. This requires investment in relationships, leadership, community capacity building and organisational culture so that belonging becomes part of everyday community life rather than something dependent on ongoing grant funding.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, lasting impact also requires investment in ACCOs and the community-controlled sector. This builds culturally safe capability and keeps knowledge, leadership and resources within communities after individual grants have ended.

Conclusion:

The Inclusive Communities Fund presents an opportunity to create stronger communities by recognising, valuing and strengthening the contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability already make to community life. If the fund is to achieve its ambition, it must recognise that the people best placed to create belonging are those who have experienced exclusion. By placing the lived experience, leadership and expertise of people with disability at the centre of the fund, government has an opportunity to build communities where belonging is not the exception but the expectation, and where success is measured not by how many people attend an activity, but by whether people feel they belong, whether their contribution is recognised and valued, and whether communities are stronger because of it.

Accessibility Statement

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Information on this Statement

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