



**Submission to the Victorian Government's
consultation on a new
State Disability Plan**

April 2021

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1. 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 Victorian government's consultation on developing a new Victorian State Disability Plan. We welcome the opportunity to address issues raised in the Consultation Paper from the Office for Disability in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and to provide comment on some key issues relevant to local government. Some councils may be making their own submissions in response to the Consultation Paper.

The MAV submission on the 2017-20 State Disability Plan emphasised the importance of state and local governments working together. It also highlighted the importance of the funded Building Inclusive Communities (BIC) program. Since the BIC program ceased, for the first time in two decades neither MAV nor councils have received any funding to support state-wide and inter-council collaboration and strengthen and continually improve this kind of important community-facing work. Council resources continue to tighten in the context of own-source revenue constraints, declining grants and increasing service demands. Continued sector-wide collaboration and reform will be challenging if there is no centralised mechanism to bring councils together to share case-studies and develop practical approaches to improve access to services and local facilities for people with disabilities.

As the recognised 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. They often work in partnership with community organisations and individuals using a place-based approach.

This submission strongly recommends that local government's role and its potential for future involvement in disability access and inclusion be acknowledged and featured in the new State Disability Plan. An implementation plan with associated partnership funding will also strengthen the reach and effective delivery through the life of the new Plan.

We would welcome and value the opportunity to continue to work with DFFH to identify key issues which can be addressed at a local level, and the necessary funding which would be required.

2. MAV response

Set out below are our responses to key topics of interest to local government which are included in the Consultation Paper.

Improving how we describe disability and disability inclusion in the next plan

Local government recognises the social model of disability and supports a Human Rights approach through council Disability Action Plans. The MAV developed the [Creating a more inclusive community for people with a disability framework \(Word - 191KB\)](#) to assist councils in doing this through addressing ways in which barriers to participation and access can be reduced.

The strategic framework guides Victorian councils to work in the following ways to continue to systematically improve inclusion for people with a disability and their families. It describes what councils can do to facilitate better inclusion:

1. A whole-of council approach
2. Incorporate access and inclusion objectives in key strategic documents
3. Facilitate civic participation and inclusive consultation
4. Systematically improve the accessibility of council buildings and infrastructure
5. Inclusive communication and information approaches
6. Accessible and inclusive council services, programs and events
7. Strategic use of statutory and regulatory roles
8. Improve employment opportunities
9. Influence community attitudes and perceptions
10. Exercise leadership in advocating to other organisations
11. Foster partnership and collaboration
12. Effective accountability practices
13. Reviewing and evaluating progress

Disability should be recognised as a diversity characteristic in local communities. Intersectionality is emerging as a trend in council approaches to diversity, partly as a result of the current high-profile work happening in councils to meet the requirements of the Gender Equality Act 2020. How disability affects people can include intersection with gender, CALD background, LGBTIQ+ identity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the different age cohorts including children, young adults and older adults. The challenge is to ensure that priority issues specifically relating to people with disability are not

overlooked in the process of promoting recognition and inclusion for a wider range of people who face disadvantage due to other attributes.

The needs of some specific groups should be addressed in the State Disability Plan. In its role of advocacy in support of the disability sector, MAV recognises the positions put by other organisations. For example, we support the 10 priorities developed by the First Peoples Disability Network Australia being referenced in the new State Disability Plan.

Prevention of Violence Against Women is currently a priority social policy area for many councils. Under “Fairness and safety” there needs to be more focussed action on the unacceptably high number of women with disabilities experiencing domestic violence. Women With Disabilities Victoria works actively on this issue and MAV would like to see this issue addressed in the State Disability Plan.

Councils tend to use a wide definition of disability and commonly include people with a psychosocial disability. It is important that the State Disability Plan explicitly includes these people, particularly as the transition to the NDIS caused new problems for people most likely to fall between the gaps. The Report of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental health system is a relevant source. For example, local government has a particular interest in the recommendation on Community Collectives.

The MAV strongly supports *Every Opportunity* – Victorian economic participation plan for people with disability 2018-2020 that sits alongside the *Absolutely Everyone* State Disability Plan. Councils continue to be very interested in initiatives which provide more employment, work experience and training for people with disability. Financial disadvantage clearly exacerbates other barriers for people with disability to participate equally in community life. Also, community attitudes to disability can be changed through positive relationships with people with disability in the workplace. The MAV’s Disability Employment and Economic Participation (DEEP) Project was funded by Office for Disability under the *Every Opportunity* plan. It is a good example of how State government resources can stimulate valuable activity in the local government sector. Further Victorian government resourcing in this area would be welcome.

Finding better ways to include people with disability in making the next plan

The 2020 COVID pandemic has been very disruptive to the work of the Victorian government and councils. We acknowledge that the planned State Disability Plan consultation had to be paused for most of the year. Now that we are learning how to live and accommodate working in a COVID-safe environment, it is timely that the development of the new State Disability Plan continues, and that communities are engaged in its development.

One result of the COVID lockdown is that more people are now confident to attend online meetings, webinars and workshops. The MAV has found that the increased emphasis on internet-based communications has markedly improved the participation rates of people in regional and rural councils. There is some evidence that online community participation may be a benefit for some people with disability as it cuts out the barriers in transport and the built environment. However, it brings new focus to the issue of the digital divide. Support is needed to ensure people have equitable access to the equipment, software and training they need.

Co-design is a strong trend in the disability community. While it is a good outcome of the “nothing about us without us” approach to participation, there are many ways to do it. Lived experience of disability is a crucial element of any policy development but those using it need to be mindful that the agenda doesn’t give too much influence to those with the loudest voices. This is an ongoing issue addressed by councils in many different advisory committees and should be considered by the Victorian government.

It is not the responsibility of people with disability to have all the answers and the expertise needed to address the barriers they face. Governments and other organisations need to do the policy development work and research that is needed. Organisations, including all levels of government, must invest their resources to translate the codesigned activities into tangible outcomes.

The Victorian Disability Advisory Council (VDAC) ensures the voices of people with disability are heard by the Victorian government. It is less effective in its liaison with people in the disability community across the state. Councils typically have a mechanism to consult with local people with disability – Disability Advisory Committees (DACs), other Access and Inclusion committees and local networks. It would be ideal to see the VDAC connect with these wider contacts to inform their advice to the State. Resourcing will be needed to facilitate this process. Since the defunding of the Building Inclusive Communities program in 2020, councils receive no financial support for any community-facing work or to assist other levels of government in their policies and plans. The MAV knows that civic participation of people with disability through the council advisory mechanisms is sometimes a starting point or stepping-stone to other leadership roles. It is also a path into learning skills and a gateway into volunteering or employment. In this context, there is an opportunity for the Victorian government to support this process through resourcing the community-facing work of DACs.

The State Plan can be informed by other consultations of people with a disability as the main issues identified are often the same. For example, the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability is a good source because many people with disability have given evidence.

The Commonwealth government has also undertaken a large national consultation to aid the development of the next National Disability Strategy. *“Throughout the consultation activity, people identified areas of concern and issues, which should be addressed in the next national disability strategy to help improve the lives of people with disability in Australia. Feedback is summarised in four key areas:*

- *Upholding the rights of people with disability*
- *Inclusion in community life*
- *Independence and wellbeing*
- *Responding to the NDIS and other emerging areas.”*

(Summary report - to help shape the next national disability strategy (beyond 2020))

Some councils have undertaken their own local community consultations in the last two years with people with disability on specific topics and to develop their Disability Action Plans. If asked, councils are likely to respond positively to providing these reports to the Victorian government.

Strengthening the state disability plan outcomes framework

There is a proposal to add Intimacy and Recognition/Pride to the Outcomes framework.

While these are interesting to debate, they are examples of several future aspirations that can be referenced but require further consideration before they are strongly focused on in the next State Disability Plan. The existing domains in the Outcomes framework (page 21 in *Absolutely Everyone*) are Inclusive Communities, Health, Housing and Wellbeing, Fairness and Safety and Contributing Lives. These are still relevant and can accommodate Intimacy in Fairness and Safety, and Recognition/Pride in Inclusive Communities. Recent discussions in local government identifies that these topics are likely to attract both supporters and opponents. From a practical “action” point of view, it may be better to continue to focus on priority issues and domains in the Outcomes framework.

We are aware that the Commonwealth government is also developing an Outcomes framework for the National Disability Strategy and it would be useful if this was aligned to the State framework. It will be part of the national strategy that all states and territories will sign.

The new State Disability Plan may also reference the findings in the 2020 Interim Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Introducing overarching approaches to strengthen government commitments under the new plan

Community attitudes and universal design are still relevant and are commonly considered by councils.

There needs to be more focus on what works well to change community attitudes. As individual people with disability become more included and recognised in community life, it is to be hoped that other people will become more confident. It is recognised that attitudinal change is a whole-of-society issue and too far-reaching for local or state governments to achieve individually. We recommend that the Victorian government lobby the Commonwealth to take up this issue in the new National Disability Strategy.

The concept of Universal Design has long been supported by officers working on disability access in councils. It is commonly used in terms of infrastructure and the built environment although it is equally applicable to communications and customer service. A new network of professionals interested in promoting Universal Design in local government is being formed.

We would welcome promotion of Universal Design in the State Disability Plan.

Supporting the interface between NDIS and mainstream services

This is a priority as the majority of people with disability are not eligible for NDIS funding and will increasingly need to use mainstream services. The National Disability Strategy consultation also addresses access to mainstream services. The following quotes address barriers to mainstream health care. However, the situation is replicated in other important mainstream sectors.

“People were concerned that focusing only on the NDIS could leave out millions of Australians with disability, including people over the age of 65, refugees and new migrants, people in rural and remote locations and those whose disabilities are less understood. Some people said the significant focus on the

NDIS over the past five years, while critically important, had shifted responsibility for provision of services and supports away from government and put the onus on individuals and families.” Summary report - to help shape the next national disability strategy (beyond 2020)

“Based on the evidence, we found there has been and continues to be systemic neglect of people with cognitive disability in the health system” Royal Commission Interim Report 2020 p 267

“People with disability have also told us about barriers to accessing health care, including high costs, long waiting lists, physically inaccessible services and complex medical forms. Research by the AIHW suggests that a lack of timely, available, affordable and physically accessible services can be a barrier to basic health care for people with disability.” Royal Commission Interim Report 2020 p 382

“In community workshops, many people raised issues with access to mainstream health services and hospitals, primarily related to physical access and having support workers available to assist through health and hospital experiences. There were also concerns about poor treatment by medical professionals in hospitals and health services. In this area, people said: □ more training for health professionals is required so that they better understand disability, including invisible disabilities □ access to health supports had worsened for people since the introduction of the NDIS due to a ‘passing of the buck’ between what is covered by health services and by the NDIS Consultation report - to help shape the next national disability strategy (beyond 2020) 39 Home □ improvement might happen through better recognising disability in hospital and health agreements between Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Summary report - to help shape the next national disability strategy (beyond 2020) p 38

Emergency Management is an area where a lot more work is needed by governments to ensure systems are inclusive of the needs of people with disability. This has been demonstrated in the recent COVID 19 response of the Victorian government but is known through previous emergencies including the bushfires in 2019. It is necessary to identify how the COVID lockdown has affected/changed people with disability and what can be done to support them and plan better for the future. Councils are well-placed to gather information, but not to assume responsibility for people with disability who need to be included in mainstream systems.

People with disability are overrepresented in the Justice System. We would like to see the State Disability Plan address this at a systemic level.

There is some confusion about the Victorian government’s current and future role in disability access, inclusion and service provision now that the NDIS has been rolled out. It would be good if the State Disability Plan can identify the services that the state will continue to fund directly as well as the roles in access and inclusion.

Strengthening disability inclusion through the review of the *Disability Act 2006*

The MAV’s Policy and Advocacy Director is participating in the Disability Act Review Advisory Group.

We note the intention of the Review to seek input from people with disability across the state. We argue that most people (including council officers) do not have enough understanding of the existing legislation and the proposed changes to comment effectively. For this reason, we do not think the current State Disability Plan consultation can properly consult the community on the Review of the Disability Act 2006. We look forward to councils (and possibly Disability Advisory Committees and other

advice structures) being part of a future consultation on the Review that will be properly resourced and allow reasonable time for informed input.

Recommendations:

The MAV recommends the following actions to support and strengthen the development of the new Victorian State Disability Plan and its effective implementation:

1. Local government's role and its potential for future involvement in disability access and inclusion be acknowledged, resourced, and supported by the Victorian government and featured in the new State Disability Plan
2. Councils tend to use a wide definition of disability and commonly include people with a psychosocial disability. It is important that the State Disability Plan explicitly includes these people, particularly as the transition to the NDIS caused new problems for people most likely to fall between the gaps in service systems
3. New Victorian government resourcing in disability employment and economic participation projects like the MAV Disability Employment and Economic Participation (DEEP) project would be welcomed by local government
4. The Victorian government needs to link the Victorian Disability Advisory Council with council Disability Advisory Committees and other advisory structures, including resourcing of the liaison process
5. Universal Design should be promoted through the State Disability Plan
6. The State Disability Plan should clarify the new role of the Victorian government in disability-related activities and services following the transition to the NDIS, addressing the needs of the majority of people with disability who are not eligible for NDIS funding. Improving access to mainstream services is critical.
7. Victorian government continue to work with the Disability Act Review Advisory Group and involve local government when it rolls out its community consultation phase

The MAV would like to highlight good practice in Victorian councils

City of Banyule

Banyule's six-month Inclusive Employment Program is leading the local government sector by providing meaningful paid work experience and learning and development opportunities for people facing unique barriers to employment:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Culturally and linguistically diverse people
- People living with disability
- Young people (age 16-25)

Participants gain valuable work skills and experience across council in a structured six-month program. This Banyule Initiative has won awards including the Victorian Disability Award in 2019 for Excellence in Employment Outcomes.

The MAV commissioned an online Toolkit and Guide about this program for the local government sector and we are excited to be working on a joint launch later this year. We are responding to the high level of interest shown by other councils. The tools are being developed using a grant from the MAV Disability Employment and Economic Participation Project, funded by the Office for Disability under the *Absolutely Everyone* State Disability Plan 2017-20

City of Banyule is currently seeking funding for a pilot project to implement their model of Inclusive Employment Programs in 10 councils in Victoria. It is hoped that a successful pilot project will lead to many more councils adopting this innovative approach.

[file:///C:/Users/lharvey/Downloads/Inclusive-Local-Jobs-Strategy-2020-2025-Final%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/lharvey/Downloads/Inclusive-Local-Jobs-Strategy-2020-2025-Final%20(1).pdf)

City of Manningham – *Manningham Inclusive* newsletter

City of Manningham distribute a high quality newsletter, *Manningham Inclusive*

<https://enews.manningham.vic.gov.au/t/ViewEmail/r/809F9124A73F880B2540EF23F30FEDED/05FAF59225FC7C8E6D4B3A88B040D7D4>

The current issue announces the appointment of 15 community members to its new Disability Advisory Committee. The new committee will provide advice to Council on how to understand and respond to the needs of people with a lived experience of disability and support the community to be accessible and inclusive for all Manningham residents.

Further information

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