

Building Inclusive Communities Through a National-to-Local Delivery Partnership

Designing the Inclusive Communities Fund

August 2026



The voice for
local government

Climate volatility, social fragmentation, digital disruption and rising costs are reshaping the way we live, work, and connect. Local government is where these global challenges turn into local responses – strengthening trust and resilience through the places, services and experiences people rely on every day.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body for local government in Victoria, advocating for all 79 councils across the state.

MAV works closely with councils, state and federal governments and global experts across industry and academia to deliver services and solutions grounded in local knowledge and community needs across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria.

MAV offers sector-specific, not-for-profit procurement and insurance services, a local government innovation lab and statewide annual learning, convening programs designed to support Victorian local government to meet the challenges of a fast-changing future.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Executive Summary

Local government is best placed to lead the place-based delivery of the Inclusive Communities Fund. Councils provide an established national system spanning metropolitan, regional, rural, remote and First Nations communities. They can coordinate local action, connect disability-led expertise with council services and mainstream community organisations, embed successful approaches into everyday practice, and collect consistent data to demonstrate the Fund's impact locally and nationally.

About the Municipal Association of Victoria

The MAV is the peak body for Victoria's 79 councils with the purpose of mobilising action that supports Victorian councils to create cities, regions, and towns that are thriving, resilient and inclusive communities. The MAV vision is to be a nation-leading thought leader, partner and resource hub for the Victorian local government sector in strategic foresight, policy and research, leadership and governance, service design and advocacy impact.

For over two decades, the MAV has supported and worked closely with the Victorian Local Government Disability Planners Network (VLGDPN). This network brings together disability inclusion practitioners from across Victorian councils to promote leading practice and influence state and Commonwealth priorities.

This submission has been prepared in partnership with the VLGDPN and Victorian representatives of ALGA's National Disability Inclusion Community of Practice. A special thank you to Alexandra Bignell, Disability Inclusion Advisor at the City of Casey for her work leading the development of this submission.

How this submission responds

Consultation Questions	MAV & VLGDPN response
What role could local governments play in supporting community inclusion?	Make local government the Fund's place-based delivery platform and system steward. Councils connect Commonwealth investment with ordinary community life, coordinate action across whole communities, and improve both their own services and the mainstream organisations they fund, host and partner with.
What support, resources or changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible?	Enable councils to connect local organisations with the guidance, disability-led expertise and co-design support they need to become more inclusive. Councils can identify local gaps, reach organisations that may never apply directly for Commonwealth funding, coordinate practical assistance and address the organisational and attitudinal barriers preventing inclusion.
What activities should the Fund support, given that it will not pay for ongoing service delivery?	Fund the coordination and capability required to change continuing practice. Councils can help services and community organisations redesign programs, communications and facilities, then embed successful approaches into grants, leases, procurement, partnerships, policies and planning. This creates lasting change without funding ongoing service delivery.
How can the Fund create meaningful and lasting inclusion, including for diverse communities and locations?	Use local government's national reach and established planning and reporting systems. Councils span metropolitan, growth, regional, rural, remote and First Nations communities and work across disability, culture, age, gender and other identities. Common measures, consolidated through state associations and

	ALGA, would show what changed locally and establish the Fund's impact across Australia.
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Introduction and recommendations

The Inclusive Communities Fund should build a connected delivery system, not another collection of isolated projects.

The success of the *Inclusive Communities Fund* will depend not only on which organisations receive grants, but on whether funded work is connected to the local places, organisations, relationships and public systems that shape everyday participation. A strong project can make one organisation more inclusive. Local government can create the conditions for that change to spread across an entire municipality. Councils influence the facilities, public spaces, communications, grants, partnerships and planning systems that shape the work of community organisations and everyday community life. Embedding successful approaches through these systems allows one investment to change how a whole community operates.

People with disability currently encounter significant variation between communities in the accessibility of information, facilities, programs and opportunities to participate. It can be difficult to know what is available, plan access before attending, raise barriers or influence how local activities are designed. Councils also vary considerably in their disability inclusion capacity, meaning effective approaches developed in one location are not consistently available elsewhere.

Local government is the practical bridge between national policy and community life. Councils operate in every part of Australia and already work across the settings named by the fund: sport, recreation, arts, culture, volunteering, events and community services. They also have the authority, infrastructure and relationships required to coordinate local action and sustain change after the grant ends.

The proposed model connects national funding with coordinated local delivery. The Commonwealth would set the Fund's outcomes, safeguards and evaluation requirements. State and territory local government associations would support participating councils, coordinate shared learning and consolidate results, with ALGA bringing these together nationally. Councils and regional partnerships would coordinate local implementation. People with disability would share decisions about priorities, initiatives and evaluation, while participating community organisations would make practical changes to their services and programs. Councils would also embed successful approaches within the grants, facilities, partnerships, policies and planning systems they control.

PRIMARY RECOMMENDATION

Create a dedicated local government funding stream within the Inclusive Communities Fund.

Establish the stream as a coordinated national program delivered through a representative network of councils and regional council partnerships. State and territory local government associations would support implementation and consolidate results, while ALGA and the national Disability Inclusion Community of Practice would connect local work into a national evidence base.

SUPPORTING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Fund councils and regional council partnerships to coordinate inclusion across whole communities, working with people with disability and mainstream community organisations.
- Fund state and territory local government associations to support participating councils, coordinate implementation, consolidate results and identify geographic gaps.
- Fund ALGA and the Local Government Disability Inclusion Community of Practice to coordinate national learning and bring local and jurisdictional results together.
- Provide three-year funding for coordination and practical implementation, not only training, resources or planning.
- Establish shared national outcomes and evaluation measures so local results can demonstrate the Fund's impact at state, territory and national levels.
- Provide additional funding for regional, rural, remote and First Nations communities where distance, cost, limited infrastructure or workforce availability create additional barriers.
- Require councils and participating community organisations to embed successful approaches within the policies, systems and operations they each control, so improvements continue after funding ends.

From isolated projects to a sustainable inclusion ecosystem

Australia has funded many worthwhile inclusion activities. The continuing gap is a mechanism to connect, sustain, and scale them.

The former Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program pursued goals that overlap with the Inclusive Communities Fund: stronger individual and organisational capability, improved connections and more accessible mainstream services. Many funded organisations produced valuable resources and local initiatives. However, as the NDIS Review identified, the short-term grants model lacked a coherent structure for connecting individual projects and translating them into sustained improvements across mainstream services.

The new Disability Peer Support and Connections Program already includes a Community Capacity Building stream. The Australian Government has committed \$364.5 million over five years to ILC reform and a further \$150 million annually from 2029–30. The Inclusive Communities Fund therefore needs a distinct role: strengthening the local systems and mainstream settings that turn disability expertise and community capacity-building into sustained inclusion.

If the Fund operates mainly as another national competitive grants round, familiar problems may recur: uneven coverage, duplication, repeated development of similar tools, weak connections between projects and local institutions, and the loss of knowledge when projects end. Smaller

organisations and communities may also be disadvantaged by application burden and limited grant-writing capacity. Reporting may again demonstrate that activities occurred without showing whether organisations became more inclusive.

The Inclusive Communities Fund provides an opportunity to establish the connecting structure that has been missing. Inclusion is sustained when mainstream organisations change how they plan, communicate, govern, recruit, design and deliver opportunities over time. Local government can coordinate this change across communities, connect organisations with people with disability and disability-led expertise, and embed successful approaches within continuing local systems.

A place-based backbone changes the funding model from a collection of separate projects into coordinated local implementation. Councils can:

- identify local organisations, assets, barriers and participation gaps;
- connect organisations with disability-led expertise;
- support practical implementation; align initiatives with local plans and partnerships; and
- collect results through a common evaluation framework.

State and territory local government associations would consolidate results and share learning across councils, while ALGA and the national Community of Practice for Disability Inclusion would bring this evidence together nationally. Councils would not replace community organisations or disability-led expertise; they would connect and support their work and help successful approaches become part of continuing local practice, including promoting practice to non-funded councils.

Local government already has the machinery to embed change

Councils use legislated planning and reporting systems that connect community priorities with council strategies, budgets, annual actions and public reporting. In New South Wales, all council projects, activities and funding allocations must link to the council's Delivery Program. Victoria **similarly requires an integrated approach to planning**, monitoring and performance reporting. The Inclusive Communities Fund could use this existing infrastructure to assign responsibility, monitor implementation and connect local results into state and national evidence.

Sources: NSW Office of Local Government, *Integrated Planning and Reporting*; Local Government Victoria, *Preparing Council's Annual Report 2025–26*.

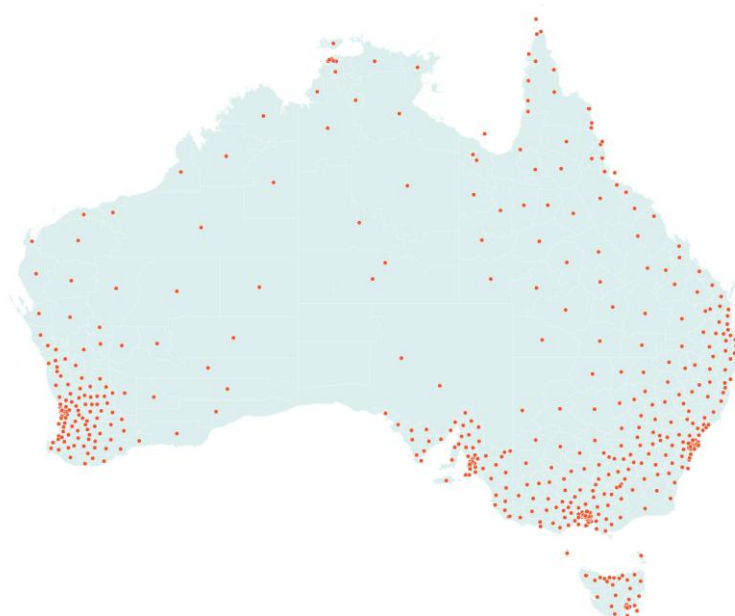
Local government connects the systems that shape inclusion

Councils connect people and households with the organisations, places and services that shape participation in everyday community life.

National policy can set expectations and provide funding, but it cannot coordinate inclusion community by community. Local government provides the missing link between national investment and the organisations, places and services that shape everyday participation.

Councils influence three connected parts of community life: the physical environment, the community environment, and access to services and support. They manage facilities and public spaces; deliver libraries, recreation, arts, events and community programs; fund and partner with clubs and not-for-profit organisations; provide information and customer service; and convene advisory groups and community networks. As leaders, service providers, employers, information providers, connectors and empowerers, councils can coordinate change across a municipality rather than within only one funded organisation or activity.

Local government also provides substantial national reach. Australia has 537 councils, with around 55 per cent located in regional, rural or remote areas. Councils employ approximately 213,500 people across more than 400 occupations and manage around one-third of Australia's public infrastructure assets. This gives the Fund access to an existing workforce and established systems spanning planning, engineering, communications, community development, libraries, recreation, arts, procurement and other areas of community life.



537

**local councils
across Australia**

● One dot = one council

An existing delivery system spanning metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities.

Source: ALGA, Facts and Figures

Councils can also extend successful approaches beyond the organisations initially funded. Through grants, procurement, leases, permits, facilities, partnerships and planning, they can encourage and support inclusive practice across their communities. Disability Action Plans and existing council planning and reporting systems allow this work to be assigned, monitored, publicly reported and incorporated into continuing practice.

This approach builds on an established mechanism. A 2017 Senate inquiry found that local government disability planning was consultative and effective in producing tangible results but was not adequately funded.

We have done this before

Victoria's MetroAccess and Building Inclusive Communities (BIC) program funded dedicated disability-inclusion capacity within local councils. Council officers worked across local businesses, community organisations, disability groups and internal council services, while common planning and annual outcome reporting connected local work with state oversight.

The programs produced immediate local outcomes. In the City of Yarra in Melbourne's inner north, these included disability-led access assessments of businesses, a Vietnamese disability advocacy group and initiatives spanning Aboriginal communities, justice, arts and employment.

The BIC Program was wound down in 2019 with the rollout of the NDIS and the introduction of the ILC Program. MAV understands that the Victorian Government's investment was transferred to the Commonwealth as part of NDIS arrangements.

BIC's wider legacy remains visible. Sustained investment created disability-inclusion capability, relationships and professional infrastructure across an entire system of local government. The Inclusive Communities Fund could build this capability nationally.

Sources: *City of Yarra, MetroAccess Achievements and Future Funding of the Building Inclusive Communities Program; Municipal Association of Victoria*

A federated model: national consistency, local ownership

The fund needs clear responsibilities at every level and a feedback loop that turns local experience into national learning.

A national-to-local model allows the Commonwealth to maintain consistency and accountability while communities retain ownership of priorities and delivery. It also uses the existing federated structure of local government: councils connect through state and territory associations, and those associations connect nationally through ALGA. This creates a practical pathway for support to move down to local places and for evidence to move back up.



Commonwealth Government

The Commonwealth would establish and fund a dedicated local government stream, with common outcomes, safeguards and evaluation requirements. Councils would determine how these requirements are implemented in response to local priorities.

Councils and regional partnerships

Councils would lead two connected streams of local change:

- improve the inclusion and accessibility of the services, facilities, programs and communications they deliver; and
- coordinate practical support for mainstream community organisations across the municipality or region.

Councils would embed effective approaches within their planning, grants, procurement, leases, facilities and partnerships, extending the Fund's impact beyond the organisations directly funded. Direct grants can improve individual organisations, while councils can improve their own systems and coordinate change across many organisations and community settings.

Councils could also connect the Fund with aligned place-based investment from other governments, philanthropy, non-government organisations and business, helping communities build on existing work rather than duplicate it.

People with disability and disability-led organisations

People with disability would be involved in identifying local priorities, shaping implementation and assessing whether changes are working. Councils would draw on disability-led organisations, advisory groups and broader community engagement to reach people with different disabilities, ages, cultures, genders, locations and socioeconomic circumstances. Deliberate efforts would be needed to include people whose experiences may not be represented through established groups or advisory structures, ensuring the Fund responds to the diversity of people with disability within each community.

Community organisations

Participating organisations would use disability-led expertise and practical support to improve their governance, communications, workforce, programs and facilities. Funding would support implementation, not ongoing service delivery, and successful changes would become part of each organisations' continuing practice.

Disability service providers could contribute local knowledge, specialist expertise and connections with people with disability, while councils facilitate partnerships between providers, mainstream organisations and the wider community. The Fund would not support ongoing disability service delivery.

From emergency response to lasting local infrastructure

During COVID-19, the City of Casey established the CSO Relief and Recovery Network to coordinate Council and community organisations responding to urgent local needs. By 2021, the network connected more than 25 agencies working across housing, material aid and other community services.

Rather than allowing these relationships to disappear after the crisis, Council used them to develop its Community Service Organisation Growth and Attraction Framework. The network has since evolved into the Casey Futures Partnership, which maps services, identifies gaps, builds sector capability and coordinates planning and advocacy.

Local government can turn short-term investment into continuing community infrastructure by connecting organisations and embedding collaboration within its planning and partnerships.

Sources: *City of Casey, CSO Growth and Attraction Framework and Casey Futures Partnership.*

What funded local action could look like

The Fund could support practical initiatives that respond to barriers identified through engagement with people with disability, make immediate improvements and change how councils and community organisations operate in the future.

These initiatives would also provide a practical local mechanism for advancing Australia's Disability Strategy, including its commitments to inclusive communities and changing community attitudes. The following areas of local action are provided as examples only.

Area of local action	What the Fund could support	What would continue and what it would mean for people
Council and community events	A council could use a disability-specific or highly accessible event to test accessible information, booking, transport, wayfinding, sensory spaces, captions, Auslan and volunteer support. It could then help community organisations apply the same approaches.	Successful approaches would become part of council event guidelines, templates, budgets and funding requirements. People with disability would have more opportunities to attend mainstream events with family, friends and other community members.
Council buildings, facilities and public spaces	Councils could work with people with disability to assess libraries, leisure centres, arts venues, community facilities, parks and public spaces, undertake priority improvements and develop consistent design requirements.	Accessibility would be incorporated into maintenance, asset planning, capital works and future designs. People would be better able to use ordinary community places safely, independently and as part of everyday community life.
Responding to community access barriers	Councils could establish an accessible process for people to report barriers or request changes in facilities, services and public spaces. Funding could establish the system, responsibility pathways and initial responses.	The process would become part of continuing customer service, facility management and planning. People with disability would have a clearer way to raise barriers, contribute to decisions and see that their feedback produces change.
Local clubs and community organisations	Councils or regional partnerships could support sporting clubs, arts organisations, neighbourhood houses, volunteer groups and community centres to review and improve their governance, communications, workforce capability, facilities and activities.	Inclusive practice would be embedded within participating organisations and reinforced through council grants, leases and partnerships. People with disability would gain more opportunities for membership, volunteering, leadership, employment and social connection.
Information about accessible places and activities	Councils could develop access guides, sensory information, mobility maps, accessible booking information and digital wayfinding for venues, parks, programs and community activities.	Common approaches would make accessibility information a standard part of council websites, booking systems and venue information. People with disability would be better able to find and compare information, plan participation and visit places within their own municipality or elsewhere with greater confidence.
Involvement in local decisions	Councils could strengthen disability advisory groups, accessible community engagement and opportunities for people with disability to contribute to planning for services, facilities, events and community initiatives. Support could also help mainstream organisations involve people with disability in reviewing their practices.	Councils and community organisations would have stronger, more regular ways to hear from people with disability. People would have greater opportunities to contribute to local decisions, participate in advisory groups and committees, and build pathways into community leadership, including elected local government.

Funding for coordination, local action and national learning

Concentrate investment on local implementation, with proportionate support for coordination, evaluation and accountability.

The \$200 million Fund should establish a scalable, opt-in network of council and regional partnerships. Participation would not be required from every council, and funding would not be divided equally among Australia's 537 councils.

Two separate decisions would be needed: which councils participate and how much funding each receives. Participants should be selected to achieve broad national coverage across metropolitan, growth, regional, rural, remote and First Nations communities. Funding for each council or regional partnership should then reflect:

- the population and geographic area covered;
- the number and diversity of community organisations to be supported;
- the scale of capacity-building and organisational change proposed;
- the disability-led expertise, coordination, implementation support and evaluation required; and
- additional costs arising from distance, limited infrastructure or cultural requirements.

Funding would not need to take the same form in every location. Larger councils may coordinate substantial local initiatives, while smaller councils could participate through regional partnerships that share coordination and expertise. The program should also allow smaller practical investments where limited funding could remove a significant barrier, provided these changes form part of a broader local inclusion approach. Grouping smaller initiatives through a council or regional partnership would allow the Fund to support practical change without creating hundreds of separate grants and reporting arrangements.

Grant-design requirements

- Provide funding for the full three-year period so councils and regional partnerships can establish relationships, implement change and embed successful approaches.
- Use clear eligibility requirements to select a representative network of participating councils and regional partnerships.
- Allow councils to participate individually or through regional partnerships, with application support available to smaller and less-resourced councils.
- Keep application and reporting requirements proportionate to the funding, scale and capacity of each council or partnership.
- Establish common national outcomes while allowing councils to determine how they respond to local priorities.
- Require each proposal to identify the practical change it will deliver, how successful approaches will be incorporated into continuing practice and what will remain after funding ends.
- Require funded councils and partnerships to document and share their methods, tools, results and implementation lessons.
- Report publicly on participating locations, funding distribution, outcomes and lessons from the national program.

Measuring whether inclusion improves

Measure whether councils and community organisations become more inclusive, and whether people with disability experience lasting improvements in participation and influence.

Councils already have established responsibilities for planning, community engagement, performance measurement and public reporting. The Fund could use this capability to collect a small set of common measures across participating councils, alongside additional measures reflecting local priorities and communities.

Reporting should show whether:

- council services and mainstream community organisations became more inclusive;
- people with disability gained opportunities to participate, contribute, build relationships and influence decisions; and
- successful changes continued beyond the funding period.

From local reporting to national evidence

Participating councils would collect the common measures and locally relevant evidence. State and territory local government associations would consolidate results, identify patterns and share learning across councils. Local government disability inclusion practitioner networks and topic-based peer groups would also identify common implementation issues and bring practical learning into state and national evaluation.

ALGA and the Community of Practice would bring this evidence together nationally so the Commonwealth could report what changed, where gaps remained and which approaches should be continued or expanded. An independent evaluation would assess whether the model reached diverse communities and produced lasting organisational change, not simply whether money was spent and activities were delivered.

South Australia shows how shared outcomes can support local action

South Australia already demonstrates how shared outcomes can connect disability-inclusion work across different organisations and locations. Its *State Disability Inclusion Plan* establishes 27 priority areas, each with a defined outcome and measures for tracking progress. State authorities, including local councils, develop their own measurable actions in response to these shared outcomes.

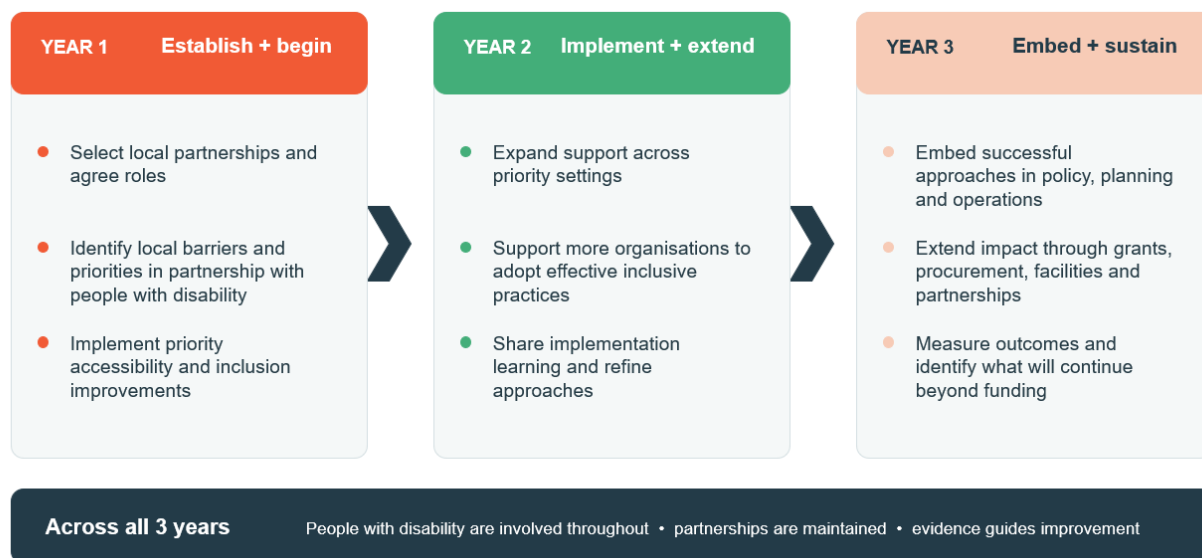
This creates consistency without requiring every council to undertake identical activities. The Inclusive Communities Fund could apply the same principle nationally: common outcomes and measures, locally determined action, and consolidated reporting that shows whether inclusion is improving across Australia.

Sources: *Inclusive SA, State Disability Inclusion Plan 2025–2029 Outcomes Framework*; *Inclusive SA, Disability Access and Inclusion Plan Guidelines*.

A practical three-year pathway

Practical change would begin in Year 1, expand through connected implementation and become continuing practice before the funding period ends.

The three-year funding period would allow councils and regional partnerships to establish the foundations for change, expand practical support and embed successful approaches within continuing council and community organisation systems. Practical change would begin in Year 1, with disability-led participation, learning and evaluation continuing across all three years.



An opportunity to build lasting inclusion across Australia

The Australian Government has an opportunity to create more than another grants program. Local government provides an established national network reaching communities across Australia, with the systems, infrastructure and relationships needed to turn national investment into lasting change.

A dedicated local government stream would enable councils to improve their own practice, support mainstream community organisations to become more inclusive and embed successful approaches across continuing local systems. State and territory associations and ALGA could connect this work nationally, consolidate results and give the Commonwealth clear evidence of what its investment has achieved.

Local government is ready to deliver this work. We ask the Australian Government to invest through this established national network so the Fund reaches diverse communities, produces measurable results and leaves a lasting legacy of inclusion across Australia.

MAV would be pleased to provide clarification on any information in this submission. For further information, please contact, Ellie Packham, Policy Lead - Inclusion, at epackham@mav.asn.au.

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