

**Australian DeafBlind Council (ADBC)**

**ADBC is affiliated with the following deafblind organisations**:

Board member Deafblind International.

World Federation of Deafblind,

Helen Keller National Centre (New York, USA),

Norwegian Association of Deafblind,

Danish Association of DeafBlind,

Swedish Deafblind Association,

German Deafblind Consortium,

Let’s Connect Project,

Deafblind Association of New South Wales,

Deafblind Association of South Australia,

Able Australia,

Senses Australia.

**Submission for the review National Disability Advocacy framework**

The Australian Deafblind Council (ADBC) is a peak national organisation for deafblind. ADBC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the policies to enable Government to engage with deafblind participants and their advocacy support services within the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

**ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN DEAFBLIND COUNCIL (ADBC)**

The ADBC was established in 1993 at the National Deafblind Conference in Melbourne, Victoria. This council was established to provide: security; sense of belonging; freedom of speech; and represent the Australian deafblind community and their supporting networks. At present, ADBC represents an estimated 300,000 deafblind people including those with multi disabilities, their families and organisations working the deafblind field.

ADBC’s objectives:

* Provide systemic and individual advocacy to the deafblind community,
* Information services to break down the barriers of inequity and injustice that confront Australians who are deafblind,
* Information and referral centre for families, supporters, deafblind service providers, government agencies and other organisations,
* Provide equal access for deafblind people to communication, employment, accommodation, transport, socialisation and community access.

ADBC understands the importance of providing decision making support, safeguard supports and capacity building for individuals who are deafblind. ADBC works in conjunction with deafblind service providers to encourage and maintain quality and safe practices, and who specialise in providing support services to accommodate NDIS participants living with deafblindness.

What is deafblindness?

“Deafblindness is described as a unique and isolating sensory disability resulting from the combination of both a hearing and vision loss or impairment which significantly affects communication, socialisation mobility and daily living.” Australian Deafblind Council (2015)

Overseas studies indicate that people with deafblindness have greater health concerns, and functional limitations than those with single sensory impairments,

The focus of this submission is to ensure the National Disability Advocacy Framework accommodates and recognises people with disability, particularly those who are deafblind.

The ADBC is the only organisation in Australia that provides systemic advocacy and social change for people who are deafblind. The council is managed by a committee of volunteers and comprised of those with deafblindness and professionals working with those who are deafblind.

According to the National Disability Agreement, paragraph 8 states:

“The Governments need to consider improvements in administration of advocacy services with the focus on improving service delivery and access to advocacy services for people with disability.”

ADBC administration is significantly underfunded, lacks resources to provide advocacy services and support to the Australian deafblind community with high needs. This issue relates to the Framework Outcome ***(e) people with disability receive independent advocacy support that is free from conflict of interest.*** Currently the administration of ADBC receives limited funding through Able Australia (not-for-profit deafblind service organisation).

People who are deafblind require specialist advocacy support. Neither vision nor hearing loss advocacy organisations are suitable or skilled in supporting people who are deafblind. This relates to the Framework Outcome ***(f) people with disability experiencing multiple disadvantage have their needs met.*** Without ADBC advocating for people who are deafblind, there are currently no other suitable organisations capable of doing so.

The Australian Government has not engaged with ADBC and the deafblind community for their responsibility to have access to advocacy services and enable quality standards of service delivery within the NDIS. ADBC is not recognised by the Australian Government for our key role in ensuring deafblind people are free from discrimination and included in society. ADBC is challenging NDIS and the Government to consider their standards for people with disability in compliance with the United Nations treaty:

Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, article 4

Under general obligations, this article confirms the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations

ADBC and the deafblind community would benefit from funded resource support from the Government to facilitate quality advocacy systems and high standards of support to address the issues and barriers that remain prevalent today.

Deafblind participants on the NDIS program would not be able to make informed decisions about their supports with safeguarding rights without the ADBC and their supporters.

ADBC investigated deafblind organisations in Scandinavia and found that their government provided support to develop structured advocacy systems that assisted and addressed the barriers affecting deafblind people and to enable community engagement. ADBC visited the Norwegian Deafblind Association and learnt that they are operated and employed by 10 deafblind people who provided advocacy support for political and welfare issues for deafblind people in all areas of Norway.

ADBC requires support for similar systems that presently support deafblind people in Scandanvia. This quote from the Disability Reform Council would make this possible:

Disability Reform Council agreed that **systematic advocacy** and legal review and representation **will be funded** outside the NDIS. This line with the 2011 Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Disability Care and Support, which recommends advocacy, be funded outside NDIS.

Does the Disability Advocacy Framework under Australian government legislations, United Nations treaties including UN Convention of Human Rights for people with disabilities support deafblind advocacy into the NDIS?

According to the National Standards of Disabilities, NDIS is to enable people with disabilities to have more control over the support they receive, and able to access care that meets their needs – so they can participate in education, work and the community to their full potential. The ADBC and supporting deafblind specialist service providers ensure these standards are met for NDIS participants who are deafblind.

The needs of people with deafblindness are poorly understood by generic disability services or even single sensory services, thus NDIA planners are unlikely to have the knowledge required.

A recent report from a specialist deafblind service provider had identified that funding bodies have failed to recognise the specific needs of deafblind communication to provide interpreters and communication guides. ADBC recognises the lack of knowledge that continues to marginalise deafblind people who are not being understood and respected.

The current National Disability Advocacy Framework requires recognition of people with deafblindness. The framework states:

‘People with disability have access to effective disability advocacy that promotes, protect and ensures full and equal enjoyment of all rights enabling full and equal participation’.

ADBC and the committee have metcontinuous resistance from Governments and Disability Organisations with the attempt to provide deafblind people with the resources, funding, community awareness and advocacy support to meet these objectives.

The principles and the objectives of National Disability Advocacy Framework developed for the future of NDIS participants with disabilities including deafblindness can only be accomplished through the Council of Australian Governments’ Disability Reform. This confirms that NDIS would fund decisions to supports, safeguard support, capacity building for participants, including specialised advocacy/service supports and access mainstream services.

In Australia, the deafblind community is not supported or recognised as members of the Australian society. The following countries have legislation that recognise ‘Deafblind’ as a distinct disability in its own rights: Denmark, England, France, Sweden and Romania.

In Sweden, there is legislation developed where the Swedish deafblind communities have provided successful advocacy supports with the Swedish government on systems similar to the NDIS.

In some areas of Sweden there are laws for all disabilities that include deafblind people:

* Programme for identifying newly diagnosed deafblind people and Early Intervention Services;
* Specialist Organisations provide training for professionals in assessing the needs of deafblind;
* Formal training qualifications available for interpreters and communicators;
* Regional Swedish authorities are required to provide interpreter services for deafblind people;
* Deafblind Information and services are available at rehabilitation centres based in the major regions of the Sweden;
* Legislation for all disabilities gives deafblind people the right to the support they need to work and to receive specialist social care; and
* Deafblind children have a right to an education and there is a school for deaf children with additional disabilities.

The Australian Deafblind Council welcomes a response from the Government as to how it will address the advocacy needs of Australian citizens with deafblindness in line with the National Disability Advocacy Framework.

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