

Submission to Consultation

National Disability Strategy Position Paper

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AASW

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Australian Association
of Social Workers

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The Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 12,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, discrimination, and matters that influence people's quality of life.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

The AASW subscribes to the social model of disability which takes a person-in-environment view and distinguishes between 'impairment' and 'disability'. From this position, impairments, whether they be physical or cognitive, are recognised as presenting challenges and complexities for people, but ultimately it is society's inability to accommodate these impairments that is truly disabling. Therefore, the term 'disability' encompasses the interaction between the individual who lives with impairment and the structures of society.

OUR RESPONSE

1. During the first stage of consultations we heard that the vision and the six outcome areas under the current Strategy are still the right ones. Do you have any comments on the vision and outcome areas being proposed for the new Strategy?

Social workers operate at the interface between people and their environment, maintaining a dual focus on improving wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any systemic or structural issues that influence wellbeing. Advocating for a more accessible and inclusive society is a central element of the profession; and the AASW endorses the emphasis on inclusion in this vision. Social workers know that genuine inclusion requires more than the removal of barriers such as discrimination. Instead it requires that all levels of government, business and civil society actively create processes and structures that promote full economic and social participation.

Translating this vision into actual outcomes is a necessary step in pursuing it because it demonstrates the implications and helps identify next steps. While not minimising the importance of economic security, the AASW believes that inclusion should be listed as the first outcome for the strategy, reflecting the all-encompassing nature of the actions that flow from it.

2. What do you think about the guiding principles proposed here?

The values of self-determination and empowerment have guided the social work profession for many decades, and social workers know that building an inclusive community requires that professionals work alongside people with a disability and their carers. The AASW agrees that this should be the first of the guiding principles. We suggest the following amendments to other principles:

- Principle, 4: 'Address barriers...' The AASW believes that barriers faced by all people with a disability should be removed, rather than only the barriers faced only by 'priority populations'.
- Principle 5: 'Support Carers...' Social workers have supported grandparents, siblings, in-laws and children through the challenges of caring for a person with a disability, and the AASW believes that the term 'carer' should be interpreted to recognise this broader group of people rather than the narrow meaning which is sometimes ascribed to it.

3. What is your view on the proposal for the new Strategy to have a stronger emphasis on improving community attitudes across all outcome areas?

As indicated in our answer to question 1, the AASW strongly supports promoting inclusion into all aspects of social, political and economic life. The position paper nominates improvement in community attitudes and particularly the attitudes of potential employers as the key to this process, and the AASW agrees that changes in attitudes will flow from people's increased interaction with people with a disability in important roles. The AASW encourages the federal government to lead the way in this important task and calls on the government to increase the proportion of employees in government and government-aligned organisations who are living with a disability.

4. *How do you think that clearly outlining what each government is responsible for could make it easier for people with disability to access the supports and services they need?*

The AASW supports the proposal that the new strategy clearly outline the responsibilities of all levels of government. Because these responsibilities flow directly from Australia having ratified the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, the statement of responsibilities should be structured according to the 10 rights listed in the declaration. To meet Australia's obligations, it will be important that the responsibilities encompass all aspects of government services both mainstream and specialist, with particular attention to the intersection of multiple needs.

The proposal to list government responsibilities is only one of four measures to Strengthen Accountability that are listed in the position paper. Although the paper proposes that the roles be outlined, it does not specify mechanisms for making government accountable for the actual outcomes experienced by people living with a disability. The AASW believes that introducing such accountability mechanisms and ensuring that all people with a disability are aware of them is also an important step strengthening accountability and that this task should be included in the next version of the strategy.

5. *How do you think the Strategy should represent the role that the non-government sector plays in improving outcomes for people with disability? (Examples of the non-government sector include big, medium and small businesses, community organisations, employees of these businesses, private research, investment organisations and individuals.)*

As is the case for the statement of the government's role in question 4, the statement of the role of the non-government sector should take the form of a statement of responsibilities that flow from the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons; and the statement should be structured according to the rights as listed in that declaration. In other words, the strategy's description of the role of business, community sector organisations and researchers should start by describing their responsibility to respect the human dignity of every person.

Such a statement will require that services take a different approach from the one that has previously been adopted by some for-profit businesses which have been operating within the disability sector. The AASW regards the new strategy as an opportunity to elevate the rights of people with a disability over the desire for profit.

The next strategy should also encompass the role of universities and other tertiary training institutions so that the workforce for the whole of the community sector is introduced to the rights of people with a disability and the implications of those rights.

6. *What kind of information on the Strategy's progress should governments make available to the public and how often should this information be made available?*

It is important that the public have access to information about how public resources have been spent as well as assessments of progress towards improved outcomes. Therefore, the AASW believes that Parliament should receive annual reports on government expenditure and programs; and that every two years, it should receive reports on progress against the priority areas in the strategy.

7. *What do you think of the proposal to have Targeted Action Plans that focus on making improvements in specific areas within a defined period of time (for example within one, two or three years)?*

Targeted action plans can be helpful tools for improving outcomes if they encompass all the elements that have been discussed in the previous answers to this discussion paper. The AASW's position is that this proposal has value if the action plans:

- Are informed by our human rights obligations
- Are oriented toward improving all 6 outcome areas
- Are identified in partnership with people with a disability and their carers
- Contain accountability measures for government and non-government sectors
- Specify time limits
- Are reported to Parliament
- Encompass mainstream and disability specific services
- Address complex and intersecting needs.

8. *How could the proposed Engagement Plan ensure people with disability, and the disability community, are involved in the delivery and monitoring of the next Strategy?*

To effectively engage with all people the engagement plan should pay attention to the needs of people with other vulnerabilities as well as living with a disability. People whose first language is not English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people in remote locations, people who have experienced trauma all need specific tailored engagement strategies.

Conclusion

The AASW welcomes the position paper and the opportunity for consultation on the next National Disability Strategy and looks forward to working alongside people with disabilities, their carers all levels of government and the non-government sector to ensure better outcomes for all people living with disability in Australia.



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