



## **Submission of Family Planning NSW**

### **A new National Disability Strategy – Stage 2 consultations**

September 2020

Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the National Disability Strategy – Stage 2 consultations. This submission responds to the *National Disability Strategy Position Paper* and associated questions.

This submission focuses on the importance of ensuring and promoting the reproductive and sexual health and rights of people with disability. The new Disability Strategy must recognise the reproductive and sexual health and rights of people with disability to ensure full and meaningful participation within society.

## About us

Family Planning NSW is the leading organisation for reproductive and sexual health in New South Wales and Australia. Our mission is to enhance the reproductive and sexual health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their reproductive and sexual health throughout their lives.

Family Planning NSW has been delivering targeted services to people with disability and those who support them for over 35 years, including clinical services, health promotion and professional education. As a registered provider under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), we provide sexuality and relationship support to people with disability, primarily delivered through psychology services at our Newcastle clinic.

We firmly believe in the right of all people to make decisions about their own body and relationships, and the right of all people to live without violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. However, the evidence is clear that people with disability are much more likely to experience violence, particularly sexual violence, compared to people without disability.(1) People with disability have the same reproductive and sexual health needs as other people, however, we know that they often face barriers to accessing reproductive and sexual health information and services.(2)

Our key points, in relation to the *consultation questionnaire*, are outlined below:

### **1. Do you have any comments on the vision and outcome areas being proposed for the new National Disability Strategy?**

Family Planning NSW supports reproductive and sexual health and rights for everybody in every family. People with disability have the same reproductive and sexual health needs as other people, however, we know that they often face barriers to accessing reproductive and sexual health information, education and services.(1)

The National Disability Strategy provides a large-scale coordinated approach to ensuring meaningful, inclusive and accessible policies, programs and services for people with disability. We support the proposed vision “an inclusive Australian society that enables people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal members of community”.(3)

Protecting the rights of people with disability is clearly articulated in international conventions and is particularly important in regard to reproductive and sexual health.(4) We are pleased to see *Rights protection, justice and legislation; Personal and community support; Learning and skills; and Health and wellbeing* as key outcome areas within the Strategy - they are essential elements that support people with disability’s right to optimal reproductive and sexual health as outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.(4) We encourage the Government to align the proposed Strategy with the Convention.

The Strategy outcome areas should be supportive of people with disability’s right to access reproductive and sexual health services, comprehensive sexuality education and sexuality support. The Strategy should

also ensure that disability workers have access to training so they are equipped as advocates to promote the reproductive and sexual health and rights of people with disability.

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

We support the guiding principles proposed in the Strategy namely, active engagement and collaboration with people with disability - and commend the Government for their strong alignment with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.(4)

People with disability must be at the centre of decision-making processes and be consulted about matters that affect them, including the development of new policies, programs and services. Too many people with disability are not given the opportunity to make their own decisions or have a say in matters relating to them, particularly those with intellectual disability. Actively engaging people with disability in decision-making processes is essential in promoting their independence and right to live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Resources, training and information should be made available in accessible formats using technology to maximise active and supported decision-making. Resources and education should also be made available to support workers so they understand how to maximise the decision-making capacity of people with disability along with rights-based advocacy training.

## **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?**

Improving community attitudes and educating community members on the rights, including reproductive and sexual health rights, of people with disability will result in a more inclusive society. We encourage the Strategy to prioritise fostering ongoing attitudinal change across Australia to ensure that people with disability are able to fully engage within society.

Negative attitudes by community members, support people and health professionals significantly affect responses to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability. For example, such attitudes may contribute to the disbelief of reports of violence and sexual abuse of people with disability by individuals, services and the justice system leaving them vulnerable to ongoing violence and sexual abuse. Education of support people and the general public, visibility of people with disability, and advocacy services can contribute to improving attitudes towards people with disability.

In May 2019, Family Planning NSW conducted a needs assessment to investigate sexuality support needs from the perspective of disability sector workers and organisations. The needs assessment identified gaps in disability sector workers and organisations knowledge and ability to provide consistent, quality sexuality support, often due to lack of training, organisation attitudes and clear organisational and NDIA policy.(5)

Family Planning NSW commends the World Health Organization (WHO) guidance note on *Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities* to the Commission.(2) This document outlines best practice methods which include the need to establish partnerships with people with disability and organisations that focus on people with disability to improve community attitudes.

## **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?**

As a registered NDIS service provider and reproductive and sexual health organisation, we recognise the NDIS system and wider disability sector is complex and can be confusing for people with disability and those who support them to navigate, particularly when trying to access specialist reproductive and sexual healthcare, including sexuality and relationship support.

People with disability and those who support them report being confused about accessing essential reproductive and sexual health services and supports. A lack of clarity about the roles of federal (NDIA) and state (health and education) responsibility leads to unmet need for reproductive and sexual healthcare.

We believe that this Strategy and the Government have a responsibility to clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of each government in regard to providing access to essential supports and services for people with disability. The Strategy should also ensure information is made readily available in accessible formats to empower people with disability and those who support them to access essential supports and services, including reproductive and sexual health care.

**5. How do you think the Strategy should represent the role that the non-government sector plays in improving outcomes for people with disability?**

We support the Strategy vision for “an inclusive Australian society that enables people with disability to fulfil their potential as equal members of community.” This vision requires all of Australian society, including all levels of government and the non-government sector, to have a role in improving outcomes for people with disability.(3)

The role of the non-government sector is varied but integral to the true inclusion of people with disability. In key areas of life, such as housing, health and education, the non-government sector may have an adjunct role in service provision or it may fill service gaps. For example, our Sexuality and Disability Service is one of the only services in NSW (government or non-government), that specialises in providing therapeutic sexuality and relationship support to people with disability.

Improvements in areas, such as employment or community access, cannot be achieved without the participation of the non-government sector. In representing the role of the non-government sector, consideration should be given to aligning these to the key outcome areas of the Strategy, reinforcing the collaborative approach required across all sectors.

**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?**

We believe the Strategy should clearly outline the measures that will be used to assess progress and identify whether the Strategy has achieved its intended aim. Information that can help to evaluate the Strategy’s progress should include qualitative and quantitative data that captures a comprehensive picture of the experiences of people with disability, and how these experiences change over the course of the Strategy.

Progress reports should be available to the public annually, or more often depending on the measure. We emphasise the importance of consulting with people with disability on the kind of information they would like to see made available and approaches on how to best assess the effectiveness of 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 may improve accountability and alleviate pressures of process evaluation. Targeted Action Plans are particularly important in outcomes areas that have traditionally been difficult to measure and/or make progress.

We encourage the Government to work with people with disability to determine the feasibility and appropriateness of developing Targeted Action Plans that aim to make improvements in specific areas. Guidance and support for greater inclusion of people with disability must come from people with disability themselves supported by the policies and processes of government.

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

We support the inclusion of a Strategy Engagement Plan to clearly articulate the Government's commitment to ensure that people with disability can actively shape future disability policies, programs and services.

A best practice approach involves collaborative consultation with people with disability to ensure their voice is heard throughout all stages of planning and implement. We strongly encourage the Government to co-design the Strategy Engagement Plan with people with disability from diverse backgrounds.

Processes that facilitate collaborative work include ensuring that all material is provided in accessible formats, adequate time allocated for consultation and partnering with key disability advocacy organisations to ensure that a diverse range of perspectives are gained.

## 9. Is there anything else you would like to share about the ideas and proposals in the position paper?

We are supportive of the development of a National Disability Strategy and encourage the Government to reflect the reproductive and sexual health and rights of people with disability throughout. The reproductive and sexual rights of people with disability should inform any strategy that aims to address health and wellbeing, education and improve the outcomes of people with disability. The Strategy and related disability policies should also acknowledge the diversity of experiences of people with disability in regard to reproductive and sexual health care access.

Family Planning NSW commends the World Health Organization's guidance note on *Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities* to the Government. This document outlines best practice, including specific considerations for programming, to ensure full inclusion in the development of policies and programs, and the need for further research as part of the framework to achieve societal inclusion.

The Strategy should be developed in consultation with diverse groups of people with disability. The Strategy should also include content on the importance of people with disability being at the centre of decision-making processes and be consulted about matters that affect them, especially in regard to their reproductive and sexual choices.

Family Planning NSW has a strong history of working in partnership with people with disability to develop accessible services, information and resources. One example of this is the [Outing Disability Project](#) that showcases LGBTIQ people with disability at art venues across Australia.(6)

## References

1. Disabled People's Organisations Australia. Joint Position Statement: A call for a rights-based framework for sexuality in the NDIS. Strawberry Hills: Disabled People's Organisations Australia, 2019.
2. World Health Organization. Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities: WHO/UNFPA guidance note. Geneva: WHO/UNFPA; 2009.
3. Department of Social Services. National Disability Strategy Position paper: July 2020. Canberra: Department of Social Services, 2020.
4. United Nations. Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. New York: United Nations General Assembly, 2006.
5. Family Planning NSW. Project Report: Disability Needs Assessment. Ashfield: Family Planning NSW, unpublished report, 2019.
6. Family Planning NSW. Outing Disability – A photographic journey. Ashfield: Family Planning NSW, 2019.