

29 August 2022

Mr Ronald Sackville AO, QC  
Chair, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect,  
and Exploitation of People with Disability  
GPO Box 1422  
Brisbane Qld 4001  
Via email: [DRCenquiries@royalcommission.gov.au](mailto:DRCenquiries@royalcommission.gov.au)

Dear Mr Sackville,

**ALGA Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect,  
and Exploitation of People with Disability**

I am writing to provide the Australian Local Government's Submission to the Disability Royal Commission.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Royal Commission's inquiry into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. ALGA is the voice of local government in Australia, representing around 537 councils across the nation. In structure, ALGA is a federation of state and territory local government associations. This submission has been prepared in consultation with ALGA's members and should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from state and territory associations, as well as individual councils.

**ALGA Recommendations to the Royal Commission**

ALGA recommends funding a Disability Inclusion Officer in ALGA, and also in every State and Territory Association, to enable each Association to assist the councils in their state/territory, to increase the capacity of Local Government to provide local solutions and drive social change. It would also enable councils to be more agile in responding to emerging issues, share knowledge and experiences, and improve capacity at local level.

To provide sustainability and to embed long term-change, we recommend funding for an initial period of 5 years.

ALGA further suggests that the launch of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31 presents an ideal opportunity to update the 2016 Disability Inclusion Guide for Local Government. We recommend an update of the Guide to ensure councils are aware of new Strategy's priorities and directions and receive the guidance they need to align their activities and Disability Plans to the new Strategy. We estimate an amount of up to \$100,000 would be required to update the Guide.

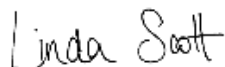
## Key Points

- Councils want to play a bigger role in improving outcomes for people with disability and embedding disability inclusion into our communities. However, councils need financial assistance to allow us to play a greater role and achieve long-term changes. Embedding a Disability Inclusion Officer in ALGA and every State and Territory Association would not only enable each Association to assist the councils in our states and territories, but also to be more agile in responding to emerging issues, share knowledge and experiences, and increase the capacity of Local Government as a sector to drive change. The position at ALGA would allow ALGA to coordinate activities and provide oversight.
- Councils are already playing an important role in disability inclusion at local level. Providing assistance will promote systemic and long-term change. Even where councils are not mandated by State or Territory Government legislation, there are already excellent examples of councils in these jurisdictions preparing comprehensive Disability Action Plans and implementing meaningful change.
- For a relatively modest amount of funding, locating a dedicated Policy Officer in each Association will have a major impact in maximising the capacity of the whole sector.
- Updating the Disability Inclusion Guide for Local Government would ensure councils are aware of the priorities and goals of the new Strategy and that their activities and Access and Inclusion Plans align with the priorities and directions of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031. We estimate an amount of up to \$100,000 would be required to update the Guide.

Further information to support our recommendations is contained in the Attachment.

Please contact Monica Telesny, Senior Policy Adviser on 02 6122 9433 if you require further information on this issue.

Yours sincerely



Cr Linda Scott  
ALGA President

## **ATTACHMENT: Background and Rationale**

### **Local Government overview**

Council facilities and services touch the lives of every Australian. Councils are in the unique position to be able to listen directly to people with disability, identify barriers and obstacles to inclusion and respond with local solutions.

They are the closest level of government to the community and are uniquely placed to drive social change and create inclusive environments.

Councils have long understood that planning for disability inclusion benefits not only people with disability, but also the wider community. Local Government comprises a significant workforce, with almost 200,000 people employed in 537 councils across Australia, the majority of which (55%) are rural, regional, or remote. Most people employed in councils also live locally and have capacity to influence change beyond their workplaces in their communities such as sports clubs, schools, faith-based settings, and neighbourhoods.

The Australian Local Government Association is a signatory to Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 and was a signatory to the inaugural National Disability Strategy 2020-2021. Councils are committed to playing their role in partnership with other levels of government under the Strategy to make Australia a more inclusive and accepting society.

It is important to note that local government is not funded to provide disability services. Provision of disability support and services is the responsibility of State and Commonwealth Governments. However, some councils apply to be registered providers under the National Disability Insurance Scheme and receive grant funding. Whether or not a council receives funding as a registered service provider, all councils play an important role in providing accessible service to their communities. Because of the close connection with their communities, they are often at the vanguard of innovation and change.

Each Local Government State and Territory Association is supporting councils in its state or territory to the extent of its capability, and ALGA is supporting all councils nationally. Local Governments and our Associations recognise this issue as a priority. With financial support to build the capacity of local government, councils could play a bigger role in driving social change at local level.

Councils work alongside their State and Territory Governments in implementing State and Territory Implementation Plans to create inclusive communities. Councils must meet requirements under the Commonwealth's strategic framework - Australia's Disability Strategy - as well as the requirements of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. The Disability Discrimination Act applies to all services, policies and amenities provided by councils.

The new Strategy builds on the previous National Disability Strategy and contains a number of new features to drive action over the next decade. Australia's Disability Strategy has involved considerable engagement with people with disability and peak organisations, to drive real change, including a stronger policy focus on housing, safety, employment and community attitudes and better articulating the roles and responsibilities of the levels of governments and the systems of support each deliver.

### **Disability plans**

Councils are required to prepare a range of plans which respond to the unique and specific needs of their communities, including strategic plans, economic plans, environmental plans, social inclusion plans, and disaster management plans, to name a few.

While many councils have standalone disability plans, others include disability priorities within other plans, such as their health and wellbeing plan, or their social inclusion plan. Disability plans are developed in consultation with people with disability and their advocates, often through specially formed Disability Advisory Groups.

Prior to the establishment of the National Disability Strategy 2020-2021, some local governments were already required by legislation to develop Disability Access and Inclusion Plans (disability plans) and report on progress to their State Governments. Councils in Western Australia have developed disability plans under State Government legislation since 1993. Victorian councils have been required to produce disability plans since 2006. These plans focus specifically on the needs of people with disability.

Since the commencement of the National Disability Strategy 2010-20, councils in New South Wales under the *NSW Disability Inclusion Act 2014* and South Australia, under the *SA Disability Inclusion Act 2018* have been required to produce disability plans, reflecting the impact of the National Disability Strategy.

In other jurisdictions, where disability plans are not mandatory, local governments often voluntarily develop disability plans, or include disability planning in social inclusion or equal access plans. In Queensland, Tasmania and the Northern Territory disability plans are not mandated, however, there are excellent examples of councils in these jurisdictions preparing comprehensive Disability Action Plans.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) has encouraged all local governments to develop disability plans and to consider the needs of people with disability in their planning processes. It has also drawn councils' attention to developments in disability policy, such as access to premises regulations.

Disability Guide for Local Government - tangible Local Government outcome under the National Disability Strategy 2010-20

In 2016, ALGA, in partnership with the Department of Social Services, produced a guide to assist all councils to plan and implement improvements in their communities for people with disabilities and to drive change and create inclusive communities for all people. This is a tangible outcome of the National Disability Strategy. The Guide responds to the priorities of the National Disability Strategy as well as the requirements of State and Territory Governments.

[Disability Inclusion Planning - A Guide for Local Government](#) has been a valuable resource for councils across Australia, not only assisting councils to respond to Commonwealth and State Government legislation, but also to proactively address the cultural change in relation to disability issues, as encouraged by the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020.

The Guide provides councils with the tools they need to set priorities and goals in partnership with their communities. It contains case studies, templates, checklists, and a wealth of information for councils to either prepare their first Disability Access and Inclusion Plan, or to update an existing one.

Access to a small amount of funding would be important in updating the Disability Guide for Local Government to reflect the changes and directions in the new Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, so that all councils have the most up to date information to help them to create more inclusive societies. The funding required to update the guide and to bring the guide into alignment with the priorities and directions of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, would be in the vicinity of \$100,000 to engage a consultant to undertake this work.

The University of Technology Sydney Institute for Public Policy and Governance received a grant of \$400,000 from the National Disability Insurance Agency to prepare an additional resource for Local Government – *How local governments can increase the social and economic participation of people with disability: A place-based framework for success* - which was launched in 2017.

**Financial support needed to maximise local government capacity**

It is important to note that local governments are not funded to provide disability services. Provision of disability support and services is the responsibility of State and Commonwealth Governments.

It is also important to note that councils operate under increasingly constrained financial environments including rate capping (in some states), cost shifting of services from the State/Territory Governments and increasing costs of delivering services to communities. Rate capping in some states (NSW and Victoria) constrains the ability of local government authorities

to generate own source revenue and can result in councils having to make decisions to rationalise and prioritise the delivery of services.

Councils collect only 3.5% of Commonwealth Government taxation revenue. Despite this incredibly constrained budget, councils deliver around 150 services to their communities and are often at the vanguard of change.

Many smaller, regional, and rural councils are fully reliant on grants from other levels of government for their income. For councils to be able to be able to maximise their contribution to disability inclusion in their communities, funding assistance is critical.

The 2021 National State of Assets Report, indicates that rural agriculture and rural remote LGAs (or 55% of all LGAs) are highly reliant upon Financial Assistance Grants to fund assets renewals (Source: 2021 National State of the Assets Report <https://alga.com.au/2021-national-state-of-the-assets-report/>). Commonwealth Financial Assistance Grants contribute more than 20 per cent of the total operating revenue for 42% of rural agriculture councils and 40% of rural remote councils. Rural agriculture and rural remote local LGAs (comprising 55% of all local government bodies in Australia) reported high incidence of operating deficits across the last five years (2018-2022).(Source: AEC Summary Report 2022 <https://alga.com.au/app/uploads/Importance-of-Financial-Assistance-Grants.pdf>).

Councils have significant reach in their communities and comprise a significant workforce, employing almost 200,000 people and they do want to play a bigger role in disability inclusion, but need financial assistance to increase local government capacity to allow them to drive and implement change at local level. Councils can partner with their local disability service providers to extend their ability to create employment opportunities. Programs such as the Employee Assistance Fund are important in allowing employers to purchase a range of work-related modifications and services to address accessibility and other needs.

Local Government's experience is that short term, project-by-project approaches to primary prevention will not have a lasting effect. Short-term programs do not enable sustainable long-term change. Changing attitudes, practices, structures, and norms needs sustained, coordinated effort. Australia's experience with domestic and family violence demonstrates the need for long-term funding and long-term government leadership to achieve progress in attitudinal and behaviour change.

Additionally, short-term programs build community expectations that programs and services will continue to be available. It can result in pressure on councils to continue the service from within their already constrained budgets, resulting in a cost shift to local government.

To embed change, response is required across all levels of government is required.

### **Commonwealth funding to councils is important to build capacity**

There is precedent for Commonwealth funding to enable councils to step up their activities under national priorities.

Federal Government initiatives such as the Healthy Communities Initiative (which was designed in conjunction with local government, supported councils to deliver community-based preventative health programs. The Initiative was auspiced under the COAG National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health. The initiative was invaluable to local government to support obesity reduction initiatives by enabling local governments across Australia to deliver effective community-based physical activity and healthy eating programs and activities, to increase the capacity of local communities to promote healthy living and develop a range of policies to support healthy lifestyle behaviours. Councils partnered with other organisations such as the National Heart Foundation, Australian Diabetes Council and local fitness and cycling groups to boost participation in existing healthy lifestyle programs. (Note: HCI provided up to \$71.8m over four years from 2009-10).

#### Model recommended by ALGA – a funded disability inclusion officer in every Association

Based on evidence from the family violence sector, ALGA is advocating for the Commonwealth to embed a funded, dedicated Disability Inclusion Policy Officer in ALGA and every Local Government State and Territory Association, to create impact over the long term to reduce the disadvantage that can arise for people living with a disability.

ALGA has made a similar recommendation to the House of Representatives inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence (2020), for dedicated Domestic Violence Prevention Officers. The Committee supported this recommendation, recommending that *“a domestic violence policy officer in each state and territory local government association be funded by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments on a 50/50 basis for an initial period of 5 years.”*

The model proposed by ALGA is based on funded positions for Domestic Violence Prevention in two of our Associations – the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), which has had a funded position since 2011, and the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ), which has had a funded position since 2020.

Benefits of a domestic family violence prevention officer have been clearly demonstrated in the MAV and LGAQ, where these two officers have significantly increased the capacity of councils in those states to prevent violence against women at the local level.

The MAV has developed a range of factsheets, advice, booklets, and workshops and has assisted councils across Victoria to develop standalone Domestic Violence plans.

The LGAQ, in only one year, has implemented several initiatives, including all 77 mayors Queensland signing a pledge to support the campaign “Not in our backyard”.

For a relatively modest amount of funding (approximately \$1.5 million per annum for 8 funded positions at approximately \$150,000 each), locating a dedicated Policy Officer in each Association, and potentially at ALGA, will have a major impact in maximising the capacity of the sector. To provide sustainability for the long term, funding should be for an initial period of 5 years.

Additionally, it will ensure that all councils across Australia, including the smaller regional, remote, and rural councils which have least financial capacity to drive and implement change without assistance, can be supported and upskilled.

Supporting councils through a funded disability policy position was recently demonstrated by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). The officer was able to source funding (from the Commonwealth’s Information Linkages and Capacity Building Grant Program) and provide support to councils during a 2020 Disability Work Experience Project. The project involved 10 councils, funded at \$20,000 each, to develop pathways to employment for people with disability. It helped MAV to explore and showcase different models and approaches to implementing work experience and opportunities to improve economic participation and inclusion of people with disability.

Embedding a Disability Inclusion Officer in ALGA and every State and Territory Association would have a major impact in maximising the capacity of the local government sector. It would enable each Association to assist every one of its councils, to share learnings between Associations, and to build council capacity to respond to new and emerging issues.