



Submission in response to the inquiry on foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in NSW

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## Who is the Physical Disability Council of NSW?

The Physical Disability Council of New South Wales (PDCN) is the peak advocacy organisation for people with physical disabilities in NSW. We stand up for the rights of people with physical disabilities, advocate for disability inclusion across Government and business, and drive systemic reform around accessibility.

The objectives of PDCN are:

- To educate, inform and assist people with physical disabilities in NSW about the range of services, structure and programs available that enable their full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.
- To develop the capacity of people with physical disability in NSW to identify their own goals, and the confidence to develop a pathway to achieving their goals (i.e. self-advocate).
- To educate and inform stakeholders (i.e.: about the needs of people with a physical disability) so that they can achieve and maintain full participation, equality of opportunity and equality of citizenship.

PDCN also convenes the NSW Disability Advocacy Network (NDAN), which is a network of disability advocacy organisations across NSW. We are funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Collectively we deliver systemic, representative and individual disability advocacy services across the state and represent people with disabilities in NSW at the National level.

The following submission draws on the knowledge and experience of people with lived experience of physical disability (and the lived experience of all people with disabilities shared through NDAN).

## Executive summary

The introduction of foundational supports for people with disability was a key recommendation of the Independent Review of the NDIS in 2023, intended to address a core failure of the current system: that for many people with disability, the NDIS has become an “oasis in the desert” of available support. These community-based services, such as peer mentoring, rights education, and self-advocacy skills building, are essential to ensuring that all people with disabilities, including those not eligible for individual NDIS plans, can access the support they need to live independently, pursue their goals, and participate fully in their communities.

However, while reforms aimed at improving the sustainability of the NDIS are already underway, foundational supports have not yet been established or even scoped and agreed upon between the federal, state and territory governments. This imbalance is creating urgent risks. Without foundational supports in place while record numbers of NDIS participants are exiting the scheme, people with disability continue to fall through the cracks.

People with physical disabilities in NSW report significant service gaps for those not eligible for the NDIS. Over half of people with physical disabilities surveyed by PDCN say adequate supports do not exist outside the scheme, and satisfaction with current options is low. There is overwhelming support (96.6%) for expanded foundational supports, particularly in areas such as daily life assistance, health, assistive technology, transport, mental health, and housing.

PDCN’s 2025 member engagement highlights strong demand for peer support in areas such as understanding the NDIS (44%), post-traumatic growth (28%), supporting a person with disability (20%), self-advocacy (12%), and addressing loneliness (12%). Other needs include building independence, communication, and transport access (8% each). In response, PDCN offers one-to-one support, peer groups, and workshops on these topics, including a Nurturing Self program for parents and carers.

People with physical disabilities in NSW also told PDCN they want foundational supports that provide choice, quality regulation, and flexible, person-centred approaches. A triaged gateway model led by trained local Navigators was strongly endorsed. Barriers to inclusion remain across sectors, especially retail, business, and banking. Most believe that governments have a responsibility to act, with 80% of people with disabilities in NSW indicating they would be more likely to support a political party that commits to funding foundational supports, demonstrating both strong community need and political urgency.

This submission outlines the most pressing service gaps, especially for people with physical disabilities, and puts forward six recommendations focused on equity, co-design, workforce development, and expanding the scope of what is meant by early intervention to include adults with disabilities. The NSW Government must act swiftly, working with other governments and disability advocacy organisations, to implement foundational supports, as recommended in the NDIS Review, and ensure the entire disability ecosystem is strengthened, not just the scheme itself.

## Recommendations on Foundational Supports

### **Recommendation 1: Foundational supports must be equitably available across the four key disability cohorts—physical, intellectual, psychosocial, and neurodiverse.**

PDCN is concerned that physical disability is not a focus for the Government, despite 75.3% of people with disabilities in Australia reporting a physical disability as their main condition<sup>1</sup>. Many people with physical disabilities struggle to access the NDIS. Foundational supports need to address the needs of people with physical disabilities, including children and young people with disabilities.

When developing and implementing general supports, governments must consider the life stages of an individual from birth to old age and the journey of disability for an individual. This involves whether a disability is temporary, dynamic, or permanent, functional ability, whether a disability is from birth or acquired and when someone has multiple disabilities.

### **Recommendation 2: Foundational supports must be co-designed with people with disability, their families, and disability advocacy organisations.**

All foundational supports should be co-designed with people with disabilities and their families to ensure they are fit for purpose, sustainable, and trusted. Establishing advisory panels at both state and regional levels will help guide the development and continuous improvement of services. A collaborative approach will not only ensure supports meet real needs but also foster trust in the system and improve the sustainability and cost-effectiveness of services.

### **Recommendation 3: Extend early intervention supports to adults with acquired or progressive disability to maximise recovery and inclusion across all life stages.**

Early intervention is a key principle guiding decision making about supports provision. However, we propose that early intervention is not only applicable to children. The principle of early intervention can also be applied to adults as a way of enhancing and accelerating recovery from sudden illness or injury e.g. stroke and degenerative conditions. It is important that people who have acquired disability later in life have access to adequate and early supports to optimise recovery which will also reduce the need for further supports down the line for some people and improve the recovery experience for the patient.

### **Recommendation 4: Professionalise Linkers/Navigators and disability support workers through regulated education and training.**

A Foundational Supports Navigator, as proposed in the 2023 NDIS Review, is a key role in helping people with disability access the full range of foundational, mainstream, and community supports outside the NDIS. These roles are especially vital for those not eligible for the NDIS or struggling to navigate complex service systems.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://australiandisabilitynetwork.org.au/resources/disability-statistics/>

To be effective, Navigators must be qualified professionals, supported by mandatory and ongoing training, and governed by clear regulations and practice standards. This includes a formal qualification, regular professional development, and oversight mechanisms to ensure quality and consistency.

Navigators must also be equipped to support informed decision-making and provide person-centred guidance tailored to individual needs. Community feedback—particularly from people with physical disabilities—has raised concerns about current service gaps, unqualified staff, and fragmented access. Professionalising the workforce will address these concerns and improve trust, consistency, and service quality across the board, particularly in regional and remote communities where navigation challenges are often greater.

### **Recommendation 5: Establish integrated triage and navigation pathways across health, NDIS, foundational, and mainstream supports to ensure a seamless entry point and continuity of care.**

Many people with disabilities first engage with services through hospitals or GPs, which focus primarily on discharge rather than long-term support planning. These entry points often lack clear referral pathways to ongoing services such as the NDIS or foundational supports.

To ensure a more person-centred and coordinated approach, the NSW Government should establish an integrated triage model that supports “soft landings” into the disability ecosystem. This includes equipping local Navigators with the skills, authority, and referral protocols to provide warm referrals and guide individuals through appropriate pathways, before a crisis point is reached.

A whole-of-government customer service model should also be developed, enabling agencies to securely share information and reduce the administrative burden on individuals. This will improve continuity of care and avoid repeated storytelling across different systems.

Importantly, foundational supports and navigation must also be embedded in key service sectors such as education, where allied health professionals can ensure children with disability receive timely and appropriate support. An integrated triage system will support smoother transitions, enhance early intervention, and strengthen long-term outcomes.

### **Recommendation 6: Fund advocacy and community organisations to deliver foundational supports and map existing services to guide smart investment.**

Advocacy and community organisations that work with people with disabilities, and families of children and young people with disabilities, are well-placed to help design and deliver foundational supports. With increasing demand and no current foundational supports system in place, these organisations can act as a critical bridge during the transition. The NSW Government should invest in these trusted networks and their existing capabilities. At the same time, funding should be directed toward mapping current services to inform strategic, evidence-based decisions on future investment.

## Overview of Foundational Supports- what we know so far

**Foundational supports**, as proposed in the NDIS Review, are intended to provide inclusive, community-based services for people with disability, particularly for those who do not qualify for individualised NDIS funding. These supports are meant to sit alongside the NDIS and mainstream services to ensure no one is left behind.

The Department of Social Services currently defines foundational supports as:

- **General Foundational Supports:** Available to all people with disability under 65, including information and advice, peer support, self-advocacy, capacity building, and employment supports. *However, to date, there has been no clear consultation on what services should be included in this category.* This must be urgently addressed through genuine co-design with people with disability and advocacy organisations.
- **Targeted Foundational Supports:** Described as tailored supports for people under 65 who do not meet NDIS eligibility, such as community access, aids and equipment, psychosocial supports, early intervention for families, and transition supports for young people. *However, the rationale for identifying specific target cohorts—such as children aged 0–9—remains unclear and lacks transparency.* Targeted supports must be defined based on demonstrated need, with robust consultation on who these supports are for and what they include.

In contrast:

- **Mainstream Services** are those provided to the general population and include accessible public systems such as transport, health, education, and community programs.
- **Individual Supports** refer to personalised budgets and funded supports under the NDIS, tailored to a person's specific disability support needs.

The National Cabinet Agreement, signed by the Prime Minister and state premiers, outlines that foundational supports will be jointly commissioned by the Commonwealth, states, and territories. However, NDIS contraction has already commenced, despite foundational supports not yet being in place. This has left many people with disability without access to essential services, with flow-on effects across employment, education, health, and the broader economy.

## What people with physical disabilities told PDCN about their needs

PDCN regularly surveys our members to better understand their peer support needs. Our 2025 engagement to date has revealed strong demand in several key areas, including: accessing and understanding the NDIS (44%), navigating post-traumatic growth (28%), supporting a person with disability as a parent or carer (20%), self-advocacy in challenging situations (12%), addressing loneliness (12%), building independence and practical living skills (8%), developing communication and relationship skills (8%), and improving access to transport and community participation (8%). PDCN currently delivers a range of peer support offerings, including one-to-one support, peer groups, and workshops focused on navigating the NDIS, post-traumatic growth, self-advocacy and speaking up, building employment skills, and a dedicated *Nurturing Self* program for parents and carers of people with disabilities.

In June 2024, the Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) conducted a statewide survey to better understand the support needs of people with physical disabilities who are not covered by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The survey received 162 responses from people with disability, families, and carers, and was supported by qualitative insights from PDCN's Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP). The findings provide evidence of systemic service gaps and inform recommendations for the development of foundational supports outside the NDIS.

### **Service gaps outside the NDIS**

Respondents to the PDCN Foundational Supports survey highlighted the absence of consistent, affordable, and accessible supports for people not eligible for the NDIS. A majority (56.6%) indicated that adequate support options do not exist outside the scheme. This perception was reinforced by 54.4% of respondents stating that no such supports were available to them, with an additional 25% unsure.

Satisfaction with current non-NDIS supports is also low. Just over half of respondents (50.9%) expressed some level of satisfaction, while 42.95% reported dissatisfaction, with "Strongly disagree" being the most common negative response (22.1%). These results reflect deep concern about the fragmented and inconsistent nature of existing systems and a reliance on informal support.

Critically, 85.8% of respondents believe that the NSW Government has a responsibility to fund additional disability services outside the NDIS.

### **Benefits and priorities for additional supports**

There is overwhelming community consensus (96.6%) that additional disability services would have a positive impact. Respondents highlighted key benefits such as increased choice and control (18.6%), more support with daily living (16.6%), and the ability to bridge service gaps left by the NDIS (15.2%). Many also noted that improved services would enhance quality of life, safety, social inclusion, and income stability.

Priority areas identified for foundational supports include assistance with daily life (33.1%), access to health services (28.3%), and the provision of assistive technology (17.9%). Other essential areas include accessible transport, mental health support, and appropriate housing.

These findings reinforce the urgent need for foundational supports that meet people's day-to-day needs and work alongside both mainstream services and the NDIS.

### **Barriers to inclusion across sectors**

Survey participants were also asked to identify the sectors where disability inclusion needs the most improvement. The sectors most frequently cited were retail (29%), general business (19%), and both banking and transport (8% each). Other areas of concern included entertainment, health, and employment services.

This feedback highlights the systemic nature of exclusion faced by people with disability and underscores the need for coordinated and widespread inclusion efforts across all industries and service sectors.

### **Policy significance**

The provision of foundational supports is a growing political and social priority. According to a separate NDAN community survey, 80% of people with disability in NSW reported they would be more likely to vote for a political party that committed to funding foundational supports adequately. These findings highlight a clear policy imperative: without robust support structures outside the NDIS, many people with disability will remain underserved, excluded, and at risk.



## Further information on our recommendations

### Current Gaps and Risks

Reforms to the NDIS are progressing ahead of the rollout of foundational supports, leaving many people with disability without access to essential services. This misalignment has created significant gaps in the support ecosystem, undermining the intended benefits of reform and reducing employment, health, and economic outcomes for all Australians. The lack of clarity around foundational supports has also fuelled community anxiety, particularly in the context of NDIS reassessments, raising concerns about the continuity and adequacy of support for people with disability across all age groups.

#### Service gaps outside the NDIS

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#### Early Intervention and cohort focus

Early intervention supports are increasingly difficult to access. Many now require an NDIS plan, creating significant barriers for families, especially those from low-income, regional, or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds who face additional barriers to securing access to NDIS supports. Restrictive and inconsistent eligibility criteria further compound the problem, often compelling families to pursue formal diagnoses merely to qualify for support. This undermines the intent of early intervention and creates inequitable access.

PDCN is particularly concerned that the NSW Government has identified children under nine with developmental delay as a priority cohort for foundational supports without adequate consultation with the broader disability community. We are worried that this narrow focus risks overlooking the needs of other groups, particularly people with physical disabilities, those with acquired or degenerative conditions, and adults who require early or preventative intervention. While children with developmental delay must be supported, foundational supports must be inclusive of all disability cohorts across the life course.

There is also a risk that foundational supports will not be equitably extended to all children with disabilities. For example, children with neuromuscular or degenerative conditions often require targeted supports like accessible camps, inclusive playgrounds, peer mentoring, and mental health support, which are services not always available through mainstream channels. Similarly, parents with intellectual disabilities need foundational supports to assist their children in accessing education, health care, and social inclusion. These gaps highlight the importance of targeted supports that address the full diversity of disability experiences and life circumstances.

Advocacy organisations are well placed to provide cohort-informed advice on how foundational supports can be designed and delivered inclusively. Without urgent investment and greater clarity in the foundational supports framework, these service gaps will continue to widen, placing greater pressure on individuals, families, and existing service systems.

### **Designing Effective Foundational Supports**

A key recommendation from the 2023 NDIS Review was the introduction of Foundational Supports Navigators. These roles are intended to help people with disability access a broad range of supports outside the NDIS. Navigators would be responsible for bridging the divide between health, disability, education, aged care, and community services—particularly for individuals who are not eligible for the NDIS or are having difficulty navigating the system.

PDCN supports a triaged, localised gateway model led by trained, local Navigators who can guide individuals to the most appropriate combination of NDIS, foundational, and mainstream supports. This model has the potential to ease administrative burdens, improve service navigation, and deliver benefits in regional and remote areas. Currently, many people with disabilities first seek assistance through hospitals or general practitioners. However, the focus in these settings is typically on immediate discharge, rather than long-term support planning. As a result, individuals often miss out on sustained assistance from the NDIS or other foundational and mainstream services.

To address these gaps, there is a need for a more integrated, person-centred system that ensures a “soft landing” into the broader support ecosystem. A triage and navigation approach could minimise bureaucratic hurdles and support smooth transitions between systems. Local Navigators should be equipped with the authority, knowledge, and referral pathways to respond effectively to the diverse needs of individuals. Navigators could assist people as they move between service systems and help identify and connect individuals to supports before a crisis occurs.

Effective foundational supports must prioritise individual choice and control, be accessible and flexible, and operate within a regulated and transparent framework. However, PDCN survey participants raised concerns about the current system, citing issues such as unqualified staff, confusing pricing structures, and fragmented services. There is a clear call for more coordinated, person-centred service delivery.

To further reduce the burden on individuals, a whole-of-government customer service model should be considered. This would allow relevant agencies to securely share documents and information, eliminating the need for individuals to repeat their story multiple times. Such an approach would promote continuity of support and help people achieve their goals.

The professionalisation of Navigators and disability support workers through structured education and training is essential. Support should also be embedded in sectors such as education, where allied health professionals are needed to ensure that children with disability receive timely and appropriate assistance. Overall, foundational supports must be designed to provide early, localised, and expert-led guidance that reduces red tape, ensures continuity, and promotes inclusion at every life stage.

## Advocacy Organisations and Foundational Supports

### Role and Impact of Advocacy Organisations

Disability advocacy organisations play a vital role in both individual and systemic support. Many already deliver services that align with the intent of foundational supports, such as peer mentoring, self-advocacy workshops, rights education, and leadership development. These programs empower people with disability to understand and navigate support systems, assert their rights, and connect with others who share similar experiences. Such services are particularly important for individuals who have fallen through the gaps of the NDIS and broader service systems.

However, advocacy organisations are often engaged only as a last resort, due to the lack of accessible, early supports. A 2022 Melbourne Disability Institute study found that 90% of surveyed adults without NDIS funding considered the available support outside the Scheme to be inadequate<sup>2</sup>.

For families supporting children with disability the responsibility of identifying and coordinating supports often falls entirely on them. PDCN's parent peer groups provide crucial support, but the demand far exceeds capacity, highlighting the broader need for structured foundational supports that extend beyond informal peer connection.

### Lessons from the ILC Program

The rollout of foundational supports must learn from the failures of the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program commissioning process in 2024. A lack of service mapping and strategic coordination led to fragmentation, funding losses, and the dismantling of trusted programs and partnerships. As a result, critical community infrastructure was lost. The NSW Government must not repeat this mistake. A coordinated mapping of existing services, gaps, and community needs, developed in partnership with advocacy organisations, is essential to inform evidence-based investment.

## Concluding Remarks

The development of foundational supports must be inclusive, co-designed, and available throughout the life course, from early childhood through to older age. The NSW Government must act urgently, in partnership with the disability community and advocacy sector, to ensure that foundational supports are scoped, developed, and implemented without delay.

Finally, early intervention needs to go beyond children and young people with disabilities but be applied as a principle to adults who develop a condition, receive a diagnosis or experience an accident which leads to disability. Inclusive, well-resourced targeted supports must be available for all disability cohorts, not just young children with developmental delay, to ensure no one is excluded from essential services.

Foundational supports must be built on the principles of equity, inclusion, and co-design. They must be available throughout the life course and address the real and immediate service gaps facing people with disabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> S Olney et al, [The Tier 2 tipping point: access to support for working-age Australians with disability without individual NDIS funding](#), June 2022, p. 13. NB: Survey respondents were from Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia

These supports are not merely safety nets; they are the infrastructure of an inclusive society. Foundational supports must empower people with disability to pursue their goals, access inclusive services, and lead full and independent lives. To achieve this vision, supports must be person-centred, flexible, professionally delivered, and seamlessly integrated across health, education, disability, and community systems.

Community demand is clear, with 96.6% of people with physical disability in NSW supporting the expansion of foundational supports, particularly in daily living assistance, health, assistive technology, transport, mental health, and housing. A triaged gateway model led by trained, local Navigators is essential to simplify system access, particularly in regional areas, and to ensure continuity of support.

Finally, governments must learn from past failures, such as the ILC commissioning process, and commit to coordinated service mapping and evidence-based investment. Foundational supports are essential to building an equitable and sustainable disability support ecosystem, one that supports not only the individual but the whole community. This is the moment to act.