22 September 2025

Quote from attendee:

…I know this is going to be a bigger discussion that we've got to work on, but. …I think there's got to be a lot more help for mob.

Overview

Our first meeting was collaborative, with strong engagement and a clear focus on making the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) more culturally safe, accessible, and responsive for First Nations peoples. The group highlighted significant barriers and made practical suggestions for improvement, particularly around workforce, access and communication.

What we talked about

Topic 1: Purpose and role of the group

- The group's role is to provide advice and feedback on NDIS reforms, ensuring First Nations voices are central to changes.
- Members will share lived experiences to help improve the NDIS for First Nations peoples with disability.
- Terms of Reference were discussed and members expressed agreement, with no objections or requests for changes.

Topic 2: Ways of working and group agreement

The group discussed and agreed on meeting protocols.

Topic 3: Co-chair arrangements

- The group agreed on two community Co-Chairs and one National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) Co-Chair, preferably from the First Nations group.
- Two members were nominated and accepted as community Joint Co-Chairs, with support for alternating roles.
- The NDIA will nominate a First Nations Director as agency Co-Chair for future meetings.

Topic 4: NDIS reforms and new framework

- The NDIA provided an overview on NDIS reforms, moving from “old framework” to a “new way of planning”.
- The new way of planning will use needs-based assessments to determine NDIS budgets and plans.
- Support Needs Assessments will be done by the NDIA at no cost to participants.
- Concerns were raised about the term “impairment” and the need for culturally safe language and processes. Another NDIA team is working on this.
- New way of planning rolls out from mid-2026. First Nations participants will transition from mid-2027, after any early issues are fixed.

What we heard

Key issues raised

Access to culturally safe support:

- It is difficult to find First Nations staff or culturally safe providers, especially in regional or remote areas.
- High turnover of Local Area Coordinators (LACs) leads to a lack of continuity.
- Indigenous providers are leaving the market due to sustainability issues. Larger providers take over but often lack culturally appropriate services.

Barriers to access and equity:

- High out-of-pocket costs for medical reports (e.g., over $6,000 for one participant).
- A lack of transport and accessible infrastructure in remote areas.
- Plans are often rolled over without addressing changing needs, leading to unspent funds and unmet support.
- Navigating the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) process is difficult, with little support for families.
- Equipment is often not fit for purpose or not usable at home. (e.g., wheelchairs).
- Most First Nations staff are in frontline roles, not in decision-making positions.
- There is a need for more First Nations navigators and planners.

Support and communication:

- Use a mix of communications, including accessible presentations, printed copies, and screen reader friendly.

- Allocate up to a half-hour yarning at the end of meetings for open discussion.
- Maintain flexibility and respect for language preferences. Be open to feedback if words are offensive in different languages.
- Use “boomerang” as a cue to keep meetings on track.
- Presenters are not required to re do the Acknowledgement of Country when entering the meeting halfway through.

Process improvements:

- Increase support for participants and families navigating the NDIS and appeals process. This should include access to First Nations legal aid and advocacy.
- Develop place-based solutions for remote communities, such as transport and access to services.
- Provide regular updates and deep dives into different reform areas and allow the group to influence design.

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