



Inclusive Communities Fund

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What is MS?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) remains one of the most common causes of neurological disability in the young adult population (aged 18–40 years) with over 2.9 million people affected worldwide. More than 37,756 Australians live with MS and over 7.6 million Australians know someone or have a loved one with this potentially debilitating disease.

Three times as many women have MS than men. Symptoms vary between people and can come and go; they can include severe pain, walking difficulties, debilitating fatigue, partial blindness and thinking and memory problems. For some, MS is characterised by periods of relapse and remission, while for others it has a progressive pattern of disability. MS robs people of quality of life, primarily driven by the impact of MS on pain, independent living, mental health and relationships.

MS Australia is Australia's national multiple sclerosis (MS) not-for-profit organisation that empowers researchers to identify ways to treat, prevent and cure MS, seeks sustained and systemic policy change via advocacy, and acts as the national champion for Australia's community of people affected by MS.

MS Australia represents and collaborates with its state and territory MS Member Organisations, people with MS, their carers, families and friends and various national and international bodies to:

- Fund, coordinate, educate and advocate for MS research as part of the worldwide effort to solve MS
- Provide the latest evidence-based information and resources
- Help meet the needs of people affected by MS

George Pampacos
President

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Inclusive Communities Fund

MS Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing on the design of the Inclusive Communities Fund (the Fund). For people living with MS and their carers, community participation is essential to wellbeing, independence, employment, social connection and quality of life. However, participation is often limited by the episodic, invisible and fluctuating symptoms of MS, such as fatigue, heat sensitivity, pain, mobility changes and cognitive symptoms, as well as structural barriers such as inaccessible transport and limited flexible supports.

Lived Experience

This submission draws on the experiences and expertise of MS Australia's [Lived Experience Expert Panel](#) (LEEP) and state and territory [Member Organisations](#). LEEP members are people who live with MS or care for someone with MS and provide expert advice to inform MS Australia's advocacy. Our Member Organisations are registered NDIS providers delivering supports including support coordination, plan management, allied health, accommodation, respite, social support and in-home care. Some also support people with other neurological conditions, including stroke, Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, acquired brain injury and motor neurone disease.

To ensure the Fund delivers meaningful and lasting change, MS Australia recommends the following key provisions be included in its design.

MS Australia Recommendations

- Prioritise recurring, inclusive activities that build connection, wellbeing, skills and confidence, including sport, recreation, arts, social programs, accessible tourism and mainstream community participation.
- Fund core inclusion costs, including reasonable adjustments, accessible transport and parking, minor access works, communication supports and clear accessibility information.
- Address practical barriers through affordability, flexible scheduling, safe and dignified access, weather-aware planning, accessible alternatives and participant feedback.
- Embed paid co-design and representative governance, and require culturally safe, accessible delivery, outreach, reasonable adjustments, measurable outcomes and safeguards against misuse.
- Support partnerships between community organisations, DROs, service providers and local governments through clear roles, templates, guidance, resourcing and flexible models.
- Recognise the real costs of supporting safe disability inclusion, including coordination, supervision, volunteer induction, facility use, consumables, specialist advice, public liability and insurance requirements.
- Ensure people with complex, progressive or fluctuating disabilities can participate safely through skilled support, safe staffing ratios, training, risk guidance and practical safeguards.
- Invest in lasting inclusion through accessible infrastructure, reusable and updated training resources, ongoing evaluation and links with other funding streams to sustain benefits beyond the Fund.

Lived Experience Expert Panel Feedback

Consistent with the consultation paper, the first four responses summarise feedback from MS Australia's LEEP. These responses reflect the views of people living with MS and carers about the activities, supports and safeguards needed for genuine community inclusion.

1. Community Activities the Fund Should Support

LEEP members were asked what community activities they would like the Fund to support. LEEP members noted the importance of funding programs that support social connection, inclusion, mental wellbeing and gentle participation in physical activity for people with disability. Suggested activities include accessible sport and fitness options, creative and social programs, peer groups and community events, skills-building opportunities, improvements to make existing activities more accessible, and programs designed or led by people with lived experience.

"Creating partnerships between disability organisations and community groups, and practical things like modification to facilities/equipment and trials where disabled people actually participate. Disability inclusion training and expert advice is fine but generally doesn't have a longer-term impact on actual participation rates of people with disability. Any types of activity where disabled people and non-disabled people participate from an equal foundation. Not a "special day" where accessibility is considered."

– LEEP member Jodi Martin

LEEP members also highlighted the importance of accessible tourism and sightseeing options, Jody Cypelt suggested the Fund offer "Tour groups or sightseeing activities for people using mobility scooters."

The feedback also suggested a need for better accessibility in regional areas, particularly through improvements to older buildings, commercial premises with stepped entries, public transport and tourist buses, so people with mobility issues can participate more fully in community life. As LEEP member Rachel Kerr explained, "In my regional area there are many older buildings without suitable access to people with mobility issues – potentially some of the fund could be used for minor capital works, like ramps and rails."

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- prioritise recurring inclusive programs that promote connection, skills and gentle physical activity;
- support accessible sport, fitness, creative, social, peer-led and community activities, including lived experience-led programs; and
- fund reasonable adjustments, accessible transport, minor access works that improve access to older buildings, commercial premises with stepped entries, and accessible tourism, including in regional areas so people with mobility issues can more fully participate.

2. Examples of Inclusive Community Participation

LEEP members were asked to identify good examples of inclusive community activities. They highlighted inclusive sport and events, arts, gardening, volunteering and public workshops as activities that foster connection, achievement and participation.

"Community events such as MS walk, run and roll is a good example of community sports and recreational event to bring the community together."

– LEEP member Deize

Good disability inclusive practices included mainstream venues that welcome the broader public, provide suitable access and clearly communicate accessibility information. LEEP members also noted poor-quality or tokenistic disability-specific activities, inaccessible practices and limited examples beyond programs already funded by clubs and charities.

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- prioritise inclusive mainstream activities that foster connection, achievement and participation;
- require clear accessibility information in all promotional and event materials;
- assess program quality, participant experience, dignity and accessibility, not attendance alone; and
- apply an additionality test so grants address genuine gaps and do not duplicate effective existing programs.

3. Barriers to Community Participation and How to Address Them

LEEP members were asked about barriers to participation and what would help them take part in the future. They identified transport difficulties, limited accessible parking, cost, unsuitable event times, hot weather, physical access barriers, undignified access routes and inaccessible venue entry points for wheelchair users as key issues. For instance, one LEEP member shared “I am in a wheelchair, and physical entry barriers are a major problem. Even some new premises think that wheelchair access round the back, via the rubbish bin is ok!”

A major concern was the lack of clear accessibility information in promotional materials, which makes it difficult for people to feel confident that an activity will meet their needs. One member had not experienced major barriers but emphasised the need for ongoing awareness, accessibility and flexibility.

“My biggest barrier is not knowing about accessibility beforehand. If I can’t look at the marketing materials and know if the venue is wheelchair accessible or if there’s quiet spaces etc, then I have to either make a phone call which takes time from my day and is frustrating or choose to wing it and just turn up which is a big risk.”

– LEEP member Jodi

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- require funded organisations to publish clear accessibility information in advance;
- support transport, parking and affordable participation to further facilitate people with disabilities to attend;
- set minimum standards for safe and dignified physical access;
- offer varied days, times and delivery formats; and
- require weather-aware planning, accessible alternatives and ongoing participant feedback to identify and address emerging barriers.

4. Designing an Equitable and Inclusive Fund

LEEP members were asked how the Fund could work well for all people with disability, including people from diverse communities, age groups, income levels and locations. They emphasised that the Fund should be shaped with people with disability and communities throughout planning, delivery and evaluation, and support a broad range of activities that reflect different interests, needs and preferences.

Activities should be culturally safe, accessible, affordable and genuinely inclusive, with clear promotion, reasonable adjustments, transport and communication supports, regional and rural equity, remote or digital options, staff and volunteer training, ongoing monitoring to identify who may be missing out, capped grants and safeguards against misuse.

“I think making sure that everyone has options which are of interest or are suitable for the different streams of people with disability. Making sure access is simple, safe and genuinely inclusive. While accessibility is important, so too is the initial information spread, to make sure people are aware of the opportunities available to them. Being able to monitor and review the fund and activities to see who might be missing out, and if there are ways to encourage participation or solve any barriers that may be present. Involving people with disability in the design of the fund in all aspects.”

– LEEP member Julie

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- establish paid, representative co-design and governance mechanisms;
- require grant applicants to demonstrate culturally safe and accessible delivery, outreach and reasonable adjustment practices;
- monitor geographic and demographic reach, including who may be missing out;
- support hybrid participation and regional access;
- combine training with clear access standards and accountability; and
- use proportionate grant caps, outcome reporting and assurance controls to protect equity and value for money.

Disability Representative Organisation Feedback

The final four responses draw on the implementation expertise of MS Australia’s Member Organisations and their role as DROs and service providers. These responses focus on what is needed to make inclusive activities safe, practical and sustainable for people with MS and complex neurological conditions.

1. Strengthening Partnerships Between Community and Disability Organisations

When asked what would help community organisations become more inclusive and partner effectively with disability-led or disability representative organisations, our Member Organisations emphasised the need for clear structures, shared expectations and adequate resourcing. For more formal partnerships, simple agreements, such as a simple Memorandum of understanding, that can clarify roles, responsibilities, insurance, liability and each organisation’s contribution. For example, one Member Organisation described a community group running a coffee catch-up at a regional facility for local community members and residents. This created valuable social connection but relied on clear communication and shared responsibilities.

Less formal community groups may also volunteer within disability organisations to provide defined activities or supports. However, this can create ongoing costs for staff time, coordination, oversight, induction, insurance and facilities, which must be recognised if partnerships are to be safe and sustainable.

Community inclusion cannot rely on goodwill alone. Partnerships need governance, guidance and funding that recognises the real costs for disability organisations, especially when supporting people with complex, progressive or fluctuating disabilities.

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- support the development of simple partnership agreements to help community and disability organisations clarify roles, responsibilities, insurance and liability arrangements;
- recognise and include funding for the ongoing coordination costs incurred by disability organisations when supporting partnerships with community groups;
- provide guidance and training to support community and disability organisations on working safely and respectfully with people with complex and invisible disabilities;
- allow flexible partnership models for both formal organisations and smaller less formal community groups.

2. Funding the Supports Needed for Safe and Meaningful Participation

Member Organisations were asked what supports the Fund should cover, noting it will not pay for service delivery. They emphasised that people with complex, progressive or fluctuating disabilities may need practical support to participate safely in community activities.

For some people, inclusion cannot be separated from the support needed to take part. This may include trained support workers, safe staffing ratios, mobility support, fatigue management, communication support, mealtime safety or assistance with other complex needs. These responsibilities cannot always be managed safely by volunteers.

If these supports are not funded, people with higher support needs may miss out and community organisations may be asked to manage risks they are not trained, resourced or insured to take on.

Member Organisations may also incur costs when supporting inclusive activities, even if they are not delivering the activity. These can include coordination, supervision, volunteer induction, insurance requirements, facility use, consumables, refreshments and specialist advice.

Where direct participation supports cannot be funded, the Fund should invest in training and practical guidance so community organisations can understand access needs, manage risk and involve disability providers where specialist support is required.

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- recognise that safe and meaningful participation for people with complex and invisible disabilities may require skilled, trained and funded support;
- consider funding support workers or safe staffing ratios where needed to enable participation by people with progressive disabilities;
- cover disability service provider costs, including coordination, supervision, facility use, staff and volunteer induction, insurance-related requirements and consumables; and
- fund disability organisations to provide training, education and practical guidance to community organisations and volunteers.

3. The Role of Local Government in Sustaining Inclusive Communities

Member Organisations were asked what supports or accessibility changes would help community organisations become more inclusive, and what role local governments could play. They identified local government as an important enabler through accessible venues, practical assistance and support with insurance or shared resources. Without this support, disability organisations may be left to carry the costs and risks of hosting inclusive activities, including facilities, public liability, coordination, oversight and accessibility-related modifications.

Local governments could help by making suitable community spaces available and supporting assessments or minor modifications to ensure they are accessible and safe. This could include physical access, appropriate amenities, safe layouts and other practical changes that support participation.

Local governments could also assist with public liability and insurance arrangements, making it easier for community providers to offer inclusive activities without unreasonable financial or legal risk. They could also support ongoing practical costs, such as materials, refreshments and shared resources, which can affect whether regular activities remain viable.

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- encourage local governments partnerships to provide accessible community spaces for inclusive activities;
- fund disability-led access assessment and minor modifications to community infrastructure;
- explore how local governments could support public liability and insurance arrangements for disability community providers;
- ensure local government complements, rather than replaces, disability organisation's expertise to make community inclusion safe, accessible and sustainable.

4. Building Lasting Inclusion Beyond the Fund

Member Organisations were asked how community organisations can build lasting inclusion and how benefits can continue after the three-year funding period. They emphasised that sustainability depends on investing in lasting access improvements as well as ongoing support for people with complex disabilities.

Some investments, such as infrastructure improvements, accessibility upgrades and practical education resources, can create benefits that continue beyond the life of the Fund. However, meaningful inclusion often requires ongoing investment in volunteer training, updated resources, partnership coordination and skilled support. Without this, the benefits of the Fund may reduce once funding ends.

The Fund's sustainability model should therefore recognise that different disability cohorts need different levels of support. One-off changes may help some people, but people with complex neurological conditions may also need ongoing coordination, training and skilled assistance.

MS Australia recommends the Fund:

- prioritise investments that create lasting accessibility benefits, including local infrastructure improvements;
- fund reusable education and training resources, with periodic review and updates;
- recognise that training, coordination, and skilled support may require ongoing funding beyond the three-year period; and
- consider how to link the Fund with other funding streams and evaluate whether benefits are sustained for people with complex and progressive disabilities.

Conclusion

The Inclusive Communities Fund has the potential to strengthen social connection, participation and belonging for people with disability across Australia. For people living with MS, this will require more than funding activities alone. The Fund must recognise the practical supports, accessibility adjustments, skilled assistance and partnerships needed to make participation safe, meaningful and sustainable.

MS Australia urges the Department to design the Fund in a way that embeds co-design, recognises the real costs of inclusion and ensures people with complex, progressive or fluctuating disabilities are not left behind. This includes supporting accessible mainstream community activities, funding reasonable adjustments and participation supports, investing in disability expertise, and building partnerships that can continue beyond the life of the Fund.

With clear expectations, adequate resourcing and ongoing accountability, the Fund can help remove barriers to community participation and create lasting benefits for people with disability, their families and the wider community.