

Ms Merrin Thompson
Committee Director
NSW Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports for children and young people

19 February 2025

By email: disabilitysupports@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Ms Thompson

Request for an invitation to appear before the Committee

I write to request that SSI be invited to appear before the Committee to provide insights into the impact of intersectionality – culture, disability, gender, social economic status and geography – as they relate to foundational and disability supports for children and young people.

About Us

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation providing dedicated human and social services to a diverse Australia. We connect individuals, families and children from all backgrounds with life-changing opportunities. Our expertise in working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds is the foundation for our services, with settlement and new arrival support at the core of SSI's history.

SSI has been delivering major disability programs, funded either by the NSW or Federal Government, for over 10 years. We currently partner with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to deliver Local Area Coordination (LAC) services in the Sydney and South-West Sydney regions. We support people with disability aged 9 – 64 to navigate their goals, connect to supports in their local area, and access the NDIS. In FY2024-25 we supported over 26,000 people with disability.

Prior to this we were a major provider of Ability Links, funded by NSW Family and Community Services from 2014-2020 and delivered into greater Sydney and Southern NSW. The program offered a network of “linkers” tasked with connecting people with disability, their carers and families to local community supports and services, empowering them to build on their strengths and skills and develop their own networks. In 2016 Urbis found that Ability Links had achieved high economic and social benefits, delivering a 3:1 ratio of benefit to delivery cost. Significantly, the social and economic outcomes were found to be even higher for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people with disability – a major achievement.

The importance of research

We work with cohorts including First Nations, LGBTIQ+ and CALD communities, and deliver LAC in a range of low socio-economic Status (SES) areas. We also work with adults with disabilities who are parents.

Research demonstrates the strong interaction between unmet disability needs among children and young people and low SES. A past National Disability Research Partnership led by Jennifer Smith-Merry, with which SSI was involved, surveyed almost 700 parents/caregivers of children 2-17 with disabilities. This was the first dedicated large survey aiming to understand the needs and experiences of children with disabilities and their families in Australia, and as such, contains insights in terms of navigation support and foundational supports, especially compared to prior, predominantly qualitative studies.¹

The findings show that most children with disabilities (83%) have unmet needs for support, with a sample average of 2.3 different unmet needs. The most common unmet needs were for therapy, school-based support, and support workers. The most common reasons for unmet needs were exclusion of the support from the child's NDIS plan, provider availability, and cost.

Unmet needs were inequitably distributed: after accounting for differences in the child's functional difficulties and disability types, higher number of unmet needs was associated with lower family income, the presence of adults with disabilities, single parent families, and residence in regional or remote areas.

In summary, the findings indicate that there are substantial unmet needs for support among Australian children with disabilities and that these unmet needs are inequitably distributed.

Our position

Australia is now more diverse – particularly ethnically, linguistically and culturally – than ever. The 2021 Census reported that just under half of the population are migrants themselves or have a parent born overseas and 5.5 million people, 1 in 4 households, speak a language other than English in the home.²

Cultural, ethnic and linguistic background is often associated with disparities seen across a range of social and economic outcomes including health, education, housing and employment; pointing to wider causes rooted in structural inequalities. These inequalities for newcomers were clearly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.³

There are debates on how best to deliver services in the context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of newcomers in ways that bolster belonging and integration. Access by newcomers to specialised multicultural and ethno-specific services has been linked to higher levels of social capital, belonging and civic engagement and stronger intercultural relations.⁴

¹ O'Flaherty, Hill and Smith-Merry (2024) Australian children with disabilities' unmet support needs: Evidence from the Better Support for Kids with Disabilities survey <https://apo.org.au/node/329298>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (27 June 2022). 2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas. Accessed 28 July 2024.

³ Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marshall, I. & Varghese, P. (2022). Fault Lines: an independent review into COVID-19. Accessed 1 August 2024

⁴ Mansouri, F., Vergani, M., & Weng, E. (2024). Parallel lives or active citizens? Examining the interplay between multicultural service provision and civic engagement in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 60(2), 419-439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833231219033>

In our view, delivering inclusive, accessible services that respond to the diverse lived experiences and identities of Australians is a core responsibility for mainstream, specialised services and place-based approaches alike. Specialist providers are able to draw on skills and capabilities that are responsive to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups, can contribute strongly to co-design through their existing links and knowledge of community needs and preferences, and can deliver strong reach and outcomes to disadvantaged cohorts.

Equally, evidence indicates the importance of inclusive and accessible mainstream services in the early years of residence in a new country and for sustaining this momentum over the longer-term.⁵

A useful pathway to improve access and inclusion for mainstream services as they seek to respond to diversity, is skill and organisational development to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the needs and preferences of diverse communities.⁶

I look forward to SSI being invited to provide insights to the Committee and relevant case studies relating to foundational and disability supports for children and young people.

Yours sincerely

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⁵ McKinsey & Company. (2016). People on the move: global migration's impact and opportunity.

⁶ ARTD Consultants/SSI. (2021). Summary of the Evaluation of the HSP In Armidale. Sydney: SSI.

SSI Disability Services

Connecting people with disability, their families and communities with life-changing opportunities.



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About SSI

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation providing dedicated human and social services to a diverse Australia. We connect individuals, families and children from all backgrounds with life-changing opportunities.

Our expertise in working with people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds is the foundation for our services, with settlement and new arrival support at the core of SSI's history.

SSI has a national and international footprint, and continue to be an umbrella organisation for 17 migrant resource centres, multicultural services and specialist human-service agencies that work together on program delivery, advocacy and sector development to create the best outcomes for the people we serve.

Our disability services extend across New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, helping more than 26,000 clients improve their health & wellbeing, participate more meaningfully in the economy, and achieve their social inclusion goals.

In FY2024

67,000+
People

accessed SSI services

59
**Programs
& initiatives**

were offered by SSI

Reform readiness

People with disability (PWD) continue to experience injustice and inequality, as highlighted in the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review. The latter underscored the crucial importance of implementing greater Foundational Supports for people with disability, with an emphasis on individuals from CALD backgrounds.

NDIS and CALD communities

NDIS participation for CALD people with disability currently sits at 10 per cent nationally, well below the original projection of 20 per cent. This is likely due to ongoing concerns around communication barriers, cultural stigma, lack of trust in government, and poor connections to supports and services.

To eliminate these barriers, the government needs a service that can act as an information highway to and from specific CALD communities. In addition to strengthening communication and trust, this service should also be well-equipped to bring about genuine co-design, consultation and collaboration opportunities with these cohorts.

SSI has played a critical part in the communities we serve for over 10 years and has strong connections to the NDIS and a variety of mainstream supports, allowing us to better assist and serve our clients. SSI can contribute greatly to a revitalised and sustainable disability sector due to our past accomplishments and current capabilities as a community-focused organisation.

SSI's role in the community

SSI is a for-purpose organisation that has deep place-based connections with CALD communities, particularly in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The future disability landscape requires organisations who can leverage existing trust and relationships with local networks to provide services and information to communities. SSI is well-positioned to act as a junction between people with disability from diverse backgrounds and the future NDIS ecosystem of supports.

Disability programs in SSI

Local area coordination (LAC): SSI is partnered with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to deliver LAC services in the Sydney and South West Sydney regions. We support people with disability aged 9 – 64 to navigate their goals, connect to supports in their local area, and access the NDIS. In FY2024:

We support over

26,000

People with disability

Over

52%

of our NDIS participants have an economic participation goal

We answered

12,890

calls through our community information line from January to June 2024

IgniteAbility: A groundbreaking program that was developed in 2016, co-designed by PWD to address barriers facing entrepreneurs with disability. The program supports individuals exploring self-employment and working towards operating a business independently. The program provides tailored one-on-one guidance targeting building capacity, increasing business support networks and developing pathways for employment or self-employment. Since the project's inception:

414

participants in Capacity Building Sessions

326

referrals into mentoring program

76%

of businesses still operating after two years

88

businesses operating independently

Disability Employment Services (DES): SSI delivers the DES program across NSW and QLD, with an emphasis on preparing jobseekers with disability to be hired and feeling comfortable in the workplace. The cultural and linguistic preferences of our participants are considered by our facilitators when assisting them in accessing training, creating resumés, preparing for interviews and advocating for workplace adjustments.

The Rights Path Project (TRPP): TRPP is designed to deliver robust choice and control-focused outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people with disability through an approach that draws on their own experiences. SSI is working closely with NDIS participants and providers across NSW, QLD and VIC to consult, co-design, test and disseminate relevant and accessible in-language resources, and advocate the responsibilities set out by the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework. In FY2024:

18

Lived Experience
Consultants engaged
in consultation
workshops

17

Lived Experience
Consultants
engaged in in
co-design workshops





Foundations for Belonging Research: SSI and Western Sydney University are collaborating on research to explore refugees' sense of belonging in Australia, with a focus on refugees with disability in 2024. The findings will contribute to public policy conversations and evidence-based practice in the delivery of services.

Previous programs

Ability Links: From 2014, SSI delivered Ability Links for six years covering greater Sydney and Southern NSW, and offered a network of “linkers” tasked with connecting people with disability, their carers and families to local community supports and services, empowering them to build on their strengths and skills and develop their own networks.

Urbis revealed in 2016 that ALNSW had high economic and social benefits, delivering a 3:1 ratio of benefit to delivery cost. Significantly, the social and economic outcomes were found to be even higher for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people with disability – a major achievement.

Multicultural Peer Network (MPN):

The MPN was a co-design initiative that established localised peer support networks for CALD people with disabilities and their caregivers. These peer networks were used as a communication and capacity building tool for CALD people with disability and their communities to access and utilise both the NDIS and mainstream/community services.

71 community leaders with lived experience of disability were recruited and trained to facilitate multicultural peer group sessions in 14 different languages across NSW. The Peer Facilitators established 97 multicultural peer networks and had over 1000 people attend localised workshops over the contracted period. The project also offered co-facilitation and supervision with the goal of ensuring these networks became sustainable over time, without the need for ongoing support or funding at the conclusion of the initiative:

100% reported an improved understanding and knowledge of both disability and mainstream service systems.

92% of PWD and **87%** of carers/families reported improved sense of confidence, autonomy, and self-efficacy in managing health.

85% of PWD and **97%** of carers/families said they had new skills to help them achieve their goals.

LAC innovation and impact

Since 2020, the LAC program at SSI has built and maintained strong relationships and an active presence with the community, enabling us to effectively reach and support people with disability. SSI also has a variety of satellite offices in our communities for better access.

Community at the heart

In FY2024, SSI LAC engaged over 3,000 people through hosting 51 community engagement initiatives in Sydney and Southwestern Sydney. Our genuine connections with diverse communities reflect the significance of experience and knowledge. For instance, members of our reference groups with lived experience of disability collaborate on designing projects related to CALD community development and employment.

Our impact

In the two Sydney regions that SSI provides services in, CALD NDIS participation has increased since SSI started operating the LAC program. Previous organisation (Sep 2019) **21.1%**. SSI (Sep 2024) **27.3%**.

Our people

SSI has the understanding and capability to provide culturally safe and responsive services. In FY2024:

21%

of LAC staff identified as living with disability and/or chronic health condition

38%

of LAC staff identified as caring for someone living with disability

51%

of LAC staff were born outside Australia

4.7%

of LAC staff identify as First Nations

37%

of LAC staff have a primary language other than English

25

languages spoken by LAC staff

Disability Reference Group: People with disability from the local community are engaged in a reference group to drive projects through sharing lived experience insights and advising SSI on the improvement of access, inclusion, and community participation. SSI has recently expanded the project with two additional specialist groups, one for First Nations and the other for Rural / Regional communities.

Navigating the NDIS with Confidence: Responsive community workshops, offered in multiple languages, aimed at building capacity for individuals to deepen their understanding of the NDIS ecosystem and other available supports.

Social Impact Employment Pilot: Targeted towards understanding our social impact better by tracking key outcomes from capacity-building work with individuals around employment goals. At the end of the pilot, participant outcomes included completing employment goals, increased completion of sub-goals, and positive changes in confidence and work preparedness. Four participants completed their end goals by week 24, with 84% indicating that LAC support helped them feel more prepared to achieve their employment goal.



The **Pathways to Possibilities Symposium** was a successful event aimed at improving the economic participation of people with disabilities. Over 150 attendees, including individuals with lived experience, attended the event, which featured discussions on policy, research, and practical solutions for creating more inclusive workplaces. Following the event, SSI developed a formal report, outlining four critical commitments aimed at employers to advance disability inclusion. In its ideation phase, the report was made in consultation with representatives from 10 different organisations and was endorsed by a further seven.

Pathways Community of Practice: Following the success of the symposium, SSI is trialling a Community of Practice (CoP) pilot. The CoP brings together a wide network of major corporate businesses and local councils to develop, share and promote inclusive employment strategies.

Members include representatives from:

- Allianz
- Australia Post
- City of Sydney Council
- Crown Resorts
- IncludeAbility (Australian Human Rights Commission)
- National Disability Services
- Penrith City Council
- SSI IgniteAbility
- SSI Talent Acquisition
- Woolworths Group



Videos



Pathways to Possibilities



SSI Local Area Coordination 2024



IgniteAbility



Multicultural Peer Network #1



Multicultural Peer Network #2



LAC Employment Pilot

Case studies

Our case studies show firsthand perspectives of the impact and benefits of SSI disability expertise. Ranging from clients to employees, each person's story offers a unique insight into the disability sector.

Scott

Upon starting work at a Disability Confident Recruiter such as SSI, Scott knew that not only could he make a difference in the community, but also be supported by an organisation that resonated with his core values and could provide much-needed workplace adjustments, such as hybrid work policies.

Through his work as a Community Development Officer within the local area coordination program, Scott is focused on delivering projects targeting community engagement and capacity building outcomes for people with disability.

His perspective as a person with lived experience has been crucial in the co-design and development of a range of initiatives at SSI, including the report and launch event for the Pathways to Possibilities project, ensuring that the voices of people with disability come to the fore in conversations that may have previously shut them out.



“I feel like I’ve found a place where I can thrive and give back to the community”, Scott said. His successes are a clear indication that SSI’s commitment to hiring people with disability can lead to impressive outcomes and an inspiringly diverse workplace.”

Waseem

Waseem engaged with our local area coordination (LAC) program at a community consultation session for Urdu speakers. She felt a strong sense of comfort within the group and openly shared her experience of raising a child with disability.

Waseem realised that by taking an active role, she could advocate for people with disability in her community.

SSI connected Waseem with its Multicultural Peer Network, a peer support group for people with a lived experience of disability, where she worked part-time running the group.

“It’s about bringing knowledge and information into the community you know, because I come from the same community and I know how much I’ve struggled.”



Charlie

In his final years of high school, 18-year-old Charlie accessed the NDIS with the support of his LAC. They discussed goals during the planning meeting, including passing his driving test. The approved NDIS plan included funding for Charlie, who lives with autism, to participate in specialised driving lessons to help him gain the necessary skills and confidence to pass.

Charlie's mother explains the remarkable transformation in his behaviour since obtaining his provisional licence thanks to these lessons. "Now he has all the confidence in the world," she said.

Another goal in Charlie's NDIS plan was to gain employment as a mechanic. His LAC provided him with post-school options and linked him to mainstream supports to help achieve his goal. With the help of his LAC, Charlie secured an apprenticeship in the first term of Year 12.

Charlie's life-long dream of becoming a mechanic has become a reality, and he is now thriving in his apprenticeship. He has taken the initiative to purchase his own set of tools to support him in his work and has also expanded his skills and gained new experiences through further education.



Thank you

ssi.org.au

ssi.org.au/policy-advocacy/campaigns/pathways-to-possibilities

