Brotherhood
of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

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Dear Committee Members,

RE: the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) writes to Inquiry into the Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities. We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this review.

As an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s, BSL has a strategic focus on building community inclusion for people experiencing social exclusion. This commitment is reflected in our role as a Local Area Coordination (LAC) and Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) provider in the North Eastern Metropolitan Area in Victoria. We have been delivering LAC since July 2016 as part of the first phase of implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). We commenced work as an ECEI provider in November 2016. Our engagement in this planning and community capacity building work is driven by the recognition, underlined by research including our own social exclusion monitor, that people with disability are among the most socially and economically excluded Australians. Without significant and diverse investments in opportunities for inclusion this situation will continue. We recognise that participation and inclusion are vital because we know people are members of communities, not merely individuals.

The Senate Inquiry invites response in relation to four key areas. We focus our response on the impact of restricted access for people with disability on inclusion and participation in economic, cultural, social, civil and political life. First we outline our understanding of the four forms of participation nominated. This underlines the need for clarity in relation to the scope and focus of community inclusion activities for people with disability. Next we comment on:

• barriers to participation

• inclusive communities for people with disability

- Local Area Coordination (LAC) and its role in community inclusion and participation.

We conclude with a set of recommendations.

Our understanding of participation and community inclusion

The Brotherhood understands the four forms of participation listed by the Inquiry – social, cultural, civil and political inclusion – to have particular practical meanings. Each involves the opportunity to meet and communicate – both face to face and on-line – with others in one's locality and beyond the local community. While these forms of participation are not confined to a specific locality, we contend that the capacity to move and interact in a specific locality is important. We also understand that there are many forms of community (communities of interest, place, etc); and that one person's 'community' may not be another's, and people choose what activities they take up.

In the simplest form, we believe:

- **Social participation** means having friends or acquaintances that one sees and/or communicates with regularly, not only those within one's own family.

- **Cultural participation** means accessing groups with which one identifies (e.g. a women's group or a group of ethnic affiliation) or activities in which one is interested (such as a musical group or a sporting club).

- **Civil participation** means having the means to contribute to the way one's area and community are run, in the broader sense that our society is made up of organisations that do things, such as volunteer groups, as well as individuals who do things.

- **Political participation** and inclusion might include going along to meetings of the local council, or to events in which local people are consulted about new policy directions, or having some involvement with a local political organisation; this is more than just voting.

We recognise that in practice there are significant overlaps between the domains and that not everyone is interested in every facet.

Barriers to participation

We know through our work and relevant national data sets that people with disability experience exclusion and barriers in relation to all four domains for participation. Barriers are numerous but typically include poor access (physical and virtual), regulatory oversights in legislation or accessible communication, lack of services to enable participation, societal attitudes and discrimination and the economic and emotional costs of participating. Given these barriers, people with disability require trusted advice and support from a variety of sources including workers, trusted advisors, friends, communities, and social, service, advocacy and political organisations to enable their participation in communities. To increase their participation will require a focus and investment in the advocates and community supports.

Inclusive communities for people with disability

The role of the community in providing opportunity for participation and inclusion cannot be overlooked if the outcomes, in relation to community inclusion and participation, under the National Disability Strategy are to be achieved. For the Brotherhood, an inclusive community is one that maximises the opportunities for people with disability to engage in the cultural, social, civil and political aspects of life. This is more than just being a citizen of a nation; rather it is belonging to a specific context of networks and facilities that are

local (but often extend in their reach beyond the locality), through which one can contribute or socialise actively.

Inclusive communities are more than simply local populations that are generally receptive to difference among their neighbours; they are communities in which people with disability themselves are individually equipped with the capabilities, knowledge, resources and networks to move around and express themselves in their localities or neighbourhoods. In such communities, people with disability are not an afterthought or a group included because of legislation; instead they are respected, recognised and enabled to flourish. This benefits individuals and their families and it also benefits the communities in which they participate.

LAC

We believe that the Local Area Coordination (LAC) service, as part of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), provides a critical backbone for increasing participation for people with disability and building inclusion in their communities. LAC is described by the NDIS as having three key roles:

- to link people to the NDIS

- to link people with disability, their families and carers to information and support in the community

- to work with their local community to make sure it is more welcoming and inclusive for people with disability.

LAC is uniquely placed to support a localised approach that builds on the assets and strengths of communities and participants. By working at a local level through the LAC, the NDIS can focus on removing barriers for people with disability to participate in social, civil, economic, cultural and political activities. The need for this role is underlined in the international literature. Duffy (2012) notes in *Designing NDIS: an international perspective on individual funding systems* that, despite their original intention, the way that systems to provide individually for people with disability are operationalised can de-emphasise or diminish broader, community and place-based forms of participation. As a LAC provider, we see LAC as having three key ways of positively contributing to the outcomes of the National Disability Strategy, outlined below.

LAC and its role in building good lives

Importantly, LAC involves much more than delivering services to people. Rather, it is a citizen-centric approach that builds good lives for people with disability, primarily by positioning them as active members of the existing social and cultural networks of a place. Including people in the interactions that make up society, in a way that is grounded in place, is a core philosophy. Providing governmental services to people is done only when needed, not as a defining aspect of their life experience.

To build good lives in places for people with a disability, LAC work with individuals in each place, to articulate (in some detail) what a good life for them would comprise. Most importantly, the work of LAC is simultaneously to assemble knowledge of what and where the networks of social, political, cultural and civil inclusion are in that place, in order to help people with disability to join in those networks, and to render those networks as accessible as possible.

LAC and its role in building inclusive places and environments

The Brotherhood's work has confirmed that it is important for the LAC work to be place-based and tailored to local residents with disability. The choices that individuals make about how to live a good life are strongly influenced by the options available. The national and international literature often notes that LAC

is adapted during the implementation process, to respond to the different settings and local features. Key elements of this approach include:

- service delivery that is driven by local, grassroots activity and networks

- co-productive approaches to all aspects of service delivery with the key government stakeholders (including all three levels: local, state and Commonwealth)

- a two-tiered strategy of working with individuals, their families and carers and with their communities to grow all forms of capital and participation

- fostering and building on networks and partnerships at a local level to achieve outcomes, specifically with services, local government, business and community groups

- facilitating the active transfer of knowledge by ensuring there is an open exchange between community members. This recognises that communities are experts in their own right and their wealth of knowledge can be used to deliver outcomes

- supporting peer groups to help individuals solve problems or remove barriers to achieve their aspirations. This includes adopting methods that assist communities to work together to find creative, low-cost solutions.

LAC as a cornerstone for learning and adaptive improvement

In implementing the NDIS and the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020, a nimble, adaptive approach will be required. The Brotherhood believes that it is unreasonable to expect that a major reform such as the NDIS will be perfect from the start. It will take some time to get the implementation right. This is a learning process for all involved including the NDIA (central and regional), participants (funded and unfunded) in the scheme, LAC providers, service delivery agencies, and the broader community. We all have much to learn about how this ambitious new strategy can be citizen-centred, by involving people with a disability in the social, cultural, civil and political activities of the places in which they live, in their great diversity.

Recommendations

We contend that if the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020, through the NDIS, is to maximise inclusion and participation, a coherent approach to community inclusion that can be adapted to local circumstances, is required across the country. To guide this approach, it will be essential to:

1   Develop an in-depth understanding of inclusion and exclusion, particularly for those groups, such as people with mental health and psychosocial disability, who may find inclusion the most difficult. This could lead to the development of a set of exclusion/inclusion indicators and outcomes that reflect the social, cultural, civil and political inclusion needs.

2   Develop an investment strategy to support the increase of participation through advocates and community supports. This should include support for peer groups (both face-to-face and virtual), peak bodies, and other community groups.

3   Invest in a specialist communication and information advisory agency to develop and disseminate key communication and information materials for communities, service providers and government.

4   Develop a revised National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan that identifies key areas of investment and allows for phased implementation of responses to areas of inclusion and participation that are priorities for people with disability. This plan should be devised through extensive consultation with people with disability, their families, carers and advocates. Local Area Coordination should also be

recognised as a key vehicle for achieving the National Disability Strategy and be represented within any revisions to the strategy or associated implementation plans.

5   Develop a comprehensive joint research strategy between the NDS and NDIS to understand the varying LAC approaches that have been successful, or not, in a variety of locations from remote to metropolitan; with different opportunities for access to networks, organisations and experiences. This research should lead to tools, training and practice guides to assist with a consistent approach to LAC across the nation.

6   Support the comprehensive research strategy with deliberate dissemination to LAC providers and their communities across the country. We understand that timely learning is facilitated through developmental evaluation that adopts participatory action research and emancipatory approaches. This could be supported by regular online communication and dialogue between LAC providers.

The Brotherhood stands ready to assist the Committee in its work.

Tony Nicholson

Executive Director