

Building Disability Messaging Capacity Proposal

A project to build the persuasive messaging and advocacy capacity of the disability sector

Background context

Building Disability Messaging Capacity, a partnership between Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA) and Australian Progress, is an urgent and groundbreaking research project to shift public narratives by testing and developing messages that build widespread support for transformative disability policy change.

We know that mainstream ways of thinking often label people with disability as ‘less’ and ‘not capable of making their own decisions’. Barriers put in place by governments (inaccessible public transport and infrastructure, as well as limits to supports available at home, school and in the workplace), alongside harmful community attitudes have a major impact on the wellbeing and day to day lives of disabled people – they are exclusionary and often result in disabled people being denied autonomy to make decisions about their own lives.

Off the back of the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review, the disability advocacy community identified a number of upcoming moments to proactively influence political decision making, building the foundations needed to win transformative disability policy changes in the years ahead. The most immediate of these is the 2024 federal budget this May, with an opportunity to reframe conversations about funding of the NDIS and disability supports in a way that centres the strengths of the disability community, demonstrates practical concepts of self determination, creates shared values, and a vision for the future where people with disability live fulfilling and independent lives.

Further ahead, state and federal elections in the coming 12 months offer a political opportunity to firmly place disability front and centre on election policy agendas, building the public momentum and political will necessary to build a nation that includes and values people with disabilities and respects human rights for all.

We have the solutions needed to realise this vision, but right now, shared, persuasive messaging that’s tested and proven to build public and political support for these solutions is a critical gap. The project will build advocacy messaging and leadership capacity to fill this gap.

A note on identity-first and person-first language: In this project proposal, we use the term “disabled people” to highlight that we are disabled by others’ decisions, by how the world is set up, and how we’re treated. However, we acknowledge people’s right to choose the terms they use to describe themselves and their communities, and acknowledge that outside advocate circles, the phrase “people with disability” is commonly used.

Project overview

Mainstream narratives influence public opinion, in turn shaping political decision making. To create a society that works for all of us, we must build and demonstrate widespread public support for transformative disability policy change, shifting mainstream narratives and public sentiment from prevalent deficit frames, into strengths and values-based frames.

The project is based on a proven theory of change that has shifted national narratives and public support on issues from First Nations justice to refugee rights. It responds to both the identified capacity building needs of disability advocates, and external factors like public sentiment and the opportunities to influence political change in the coming 12 months.

Our theory of change says: If we test and share messages proven to build widespread support for disability self determination, and equip disability advocates with persuasive messaging and advocacy skills, we can strengthen narrative power and shift mainstream discourse about people with disability, compelling decision makers to create better policies for disabled people.

Throughout this project we will analyse existing advocate and opposition narratives for strengths and weaknesses, and equip advocates with best practice theory and frameworks for persuasive messaging. We will deliver nationwide qualitative and quantitative research and testing to find messages proven to win persuadable support, and undertake a nationwide rollout to share messages far and wide with disability advocates, strengthening the communications capacity of both advocates and allies. Alongside the message research, rollout and strategic communications capacity building, we'll build critical advocacy and leadership skills of changemakers with disability, equipping them with tools and strategies to level up approaches to campaign strategy development, decision maker engagement, and media engagement. Simultaneously, we'll build cross-sector peer relationships to enable collaborative campaigns at the intersection of issues.

The project will be delivered across three phases, with each new phase building on the phase prior.

Phase 1: 101 messaging and foundational advice - April - May 2024

With a federal budget fast approaching, the coming months present a critical moment to shift narratives from deficit to strengths-based frames and build the messaging capability of key disability advocates to communicate shared values-based messages.

To reframe national conversation on the NDIS and win increased government resourcing for disability inclusion and supports within the federal budget, we will:

- Understand the shared messaging challenges of disability advocates and people with disability,
- Map the strengths and weaknesses of messages used by advocates and opponents
- Equip advocates with a foundational understanding of strengths-based messaging theory, audience segmentation, frameworks to draft persuasives messages, and messaging advice based on first principles and rapid turnaround qualitative research.

Phase 2: National message research, testing and rollout - May 2024 - March 2025

Phase 2 will significantly scale upon phase 1. We'll follow a proven, unique, advocate-led methodology that draws on global best practice, and has informed previous message research projects like [Passing the Message Stick](#), [How to talk about economics: a guide to changing the story](#), and [Words that Work: Making the best case for people seeking asylum](#).

To reframe disability support and inclusion as a shared responsibility of state and federal governments, build widespread public support for investment in disability and inclusion, and lay the groundwork to win transformative policy change, we will:

- Lead nationwide qualitative and quantitative research,
- Produce a series of accessible messaging resources, including (but not limited to) a full research report, summary guide with embrace / replace messaging advice, and an interactive website. Messages will build on recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review, and reframe the narrative away from those advocating for significant cuts to vital services.
- Deliver online briefings, interactive messaging workshops, and media spokesperson training to equip advocates with advice and approaches to shift national debates and policy decisions on the most pressing issues for disabled people in Australia today, like housing equity, quality healthcare, workers rights, education, climate, and social security.

Phase 3: Sector capacity building - March 2025 ongoing

People with disability and representative organisations have identified an ongoing need to build the capacity of the disability advocacy sector off the back of the scaled research and rollout in phase 2. This could include:

- Building advanced media spokesperson capability and providing on-call coaching to enable cut-through in key media moments,
- Growing the movement through entry-level training programs to build skills in campaign strategy and/or community organising,
- Increasing decision maker engagement and persuasive lobbying skills through 1:1 coaching and training at Parliament House,
- Expanding executive leadership skills of new and emerging leaders through management training,
- Convening online and in-person spaces to build cross-sector relationships, foster peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing, and spark collaborative advocacy initiatives.

Project outputs, outcomes and timing

Recognising the urgent moment and opportunity that the May 2024 budget presents, we commenced preliminary work to research, test and develop the messages that will support disability advocates in the coming months, and build the foundations for longer-term capacity building activities in phases 2 and 3 of the project. The critical next step is to finalise the message research and complete an initial rollout to disability advocates and communications experts, and broader civil society, to equip people with the messages that will shift public discourse in this key moment.

Item	Timing	Outputs and outcomes
Phase 1: foundational first principles research and rollout		
Stakeholder communications strategy workshop	Completed Oct 2023	<p>15+ leading disability justice advocates attended a strategy workshop to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discuss and agree on disability justice messaging challenges ● Articulate capacity gaps and needs of the sector ● Discuss frames and messages to test throughout the project <p>Findings sourced from advocates at the workshop have informed the basis of the project, including frames and narratives to test, and priority issue-areas for messaging advice.</p>
Analysis of existing resources	Completed Dec 2023 - Jan 2024	Message research experts analyse existing messaging resources, providing a foundation upon which new messages can be tested and adapted for implementation.
Qualitative research: advocate interviews	Completed Feb 2024	<p>15 disability advocates participate in 1 hour interviews led by linguistic and persuasive messaging experts. The interviews enable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A thorough understanding of ‘advocate’ and ‘opposition’ narrative frames, metaphors,
Ground-truthing consultation	Completed Mar 2024	15-20 disability advocates contributed to a ‘ground truthing’ process, providing feedback on suggested messaging and using early findings alongside messaging theory to workshop the final messages ahead of widespread distribution.
Messaging guide	Mar - Apr 2024	<p>Development and distribution of tailored messaging resources, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A written research report - equipping advocates with an understanding of why and how persuasive messaging is an important tool to shift public discourse and influence policy policy decisions, as well as tools and tips to identify deficit narratives and reframe messages in line with advice. ● Online briefings - providing an opportunity for advocates and allies to understand the research and findings, ask questions and strengthen messaging and communications skills, with immediately-applicable advice to transform existing and new communications.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A website landing page, providing advocates and allies with free, fully accessible resources to strengthen messaging, now and into the future.
Message recommendation rollout	Apr - May 2024	<p>Message recommendations are rolled out via online briefings, intensive workshops, an online resources, resulting in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 disability advocates gain an understanding of persuasive messaging 101, and build skills to shift their communications into a strength and values-based frame (away from the pervasive deficit which undermines progress on disability policy change) • 15-20 advanced disability communications experts gain an in-depth understanding of the most persuasive narratives proven to shift persuadable voters and build widespread public support for transformative policy change. They receive practice advice to shift their own organisational or movement communications into these persuasive narratives, plus a peer network to provide ongoing learning. • 5000 allies from civil society receive foundational messaging advice to shift narrative frames in line with proven messages.
Phase 2: scaled research and national rollout		
Qualitative research: focus groups	Aug 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative research with 6-8 focus groups (including 2 closed to disabled people and 4-6 general population)
Quantitative research: dial tests and public polling	Oct 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A statistically significant national survey and dial test to test how messages resonate with persuadable audiences from word to word, providing data to confirm which messages will be most effective in building public support for transformative change.
Political persuasion strategy	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public polling and analysis into electorate sentiment and motivations for specific state and federal decision makers. • Tailored advice and messages to equip advocates with the knowledge and know-how to apply pressure and shift key decision makers.
Detailed research report, summary guide, interactive website	Nov - Dec 2024	Development and distribution of accessible messaging resources, including a full written research report, summary guide, interactive website, and other resources identified as strategically important by disability advocates.

National rollout	Feb - Mar 2025	<p>Message recommendations are rolled out via online briefings, intensive workshops, an online resources, resulting in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100+ disability advocates and 5,000 allies from civil society receive detailed messaging advice to shift narrative frames in line with proven messages, in the context of the federal election and beyond. • 20-30 advanced disability communications experts gain an in-depth understanding of the most persuasive narratives proven to shift persuadable voters and build widespread public support for transformative policy change. They receive practice advice to shift their own organisational or movement communications into these persuasive narratives, plus a peer network to provide ongoing learning. They build 'train the trainer' skills to upskill others in persuasive messaging, enabling great reach and impact of strength-based messaging.
Media spokesperson training	Ongoing, early 2025	<p>10-20 disability advocates build skills and knowledge to engage with mainstream media in a way that centres strength-based messaging and their core advocacy asks. Training outcomes include greater understanding of the media landscape, strengthened core messages, increased capacity to manage challenging media situations, and practical skills to pitch and secure mainstream media slots.</p>
<p>Phase 3: sector capacity building</p> <p>Pending demonstrated sector needs and impact from the first two phases, there's an opportunity to further grow the project through a series of tailored trainings and ongoing capacity building activities. Full details will be scoped and developed during phase 2.</p>		

Budget

Expenditure	Details	Cost (\$)
Phase 1: foundational first principles research and rollout		
Research and report writing	Language analysis and advocate interviews led by message research experts Common Cause.	40,000
Expert consultants	3x Steering Committee members and payment for advocates with lived expertise who provide strategic advice to the project	10,000
Accessibility	Auslan-interpretation and live captioning for online briefings,	15,000

	Easy Read translation for written materials, and UX testing for online resources.	
Strategic leadership and project management	Disability Advocacy Network Australia core staffing costs, project management, facilitation, rollout, and overheads.	40,000
Strategic leadership and project management	Australian Progress core staffing costs, project management, facilitation, rollout, and overheads.	60,000
Contingency	Contingency to account for possibility of higher accessibility costs, and capacity to provide honorariums or support to enable grassroots disability advocates to engage with the project. Any unspent contingency will be carried over to phase 2.	5,000
Total for phase 1		170,000
Phase 2: scaled qualitative and quantitative research and rollout		
Qualitative research	8 focus groups - including general population and people with disability, at approximately \$8K each	64,000
Quantitative research	1 dial tests - including general population statistically significant survey, data analysis, word-by-word video modelling, and report, at approximately \$40K each. If the project is overfunded, we will consider adding a second dial test at an additional cost of \$40K.	40,000
Political persuasion strategy	Public polling and political engagement strategy designed by expert political lobbyists with a track record of building political support and shifting power in favour of ambitious disability policy change.	35,000
Resource development	Data analysis, report drafting and ground truthing to test recommended messages with a core group of advocates for feedback ahead of widespread rollout.	30,000
National rollout	Hard costs for in person and online rollout, including tech, venue hire, catering etc	15,000
Expert consultants	3x Steering Committee members and payment for advocates with lived expertise who provide strategic advice to the project	20,000
Accessibility	Auslan-interpretation and live captioning for online briefings, Easy Read translation for written materials, and UX testing for online resources.	30,000
Strategic	Disability Advocacy Network Australia core staffing costs for	60,000

leadership and project management	strategic leadership, project management, facilitation, data analysis and interpretation, drafting, rollout logistics and overheads.	
Strategic leadership and project management	Australian Progress core staffing costs for strategic leadership, project management, facilitation, data analysis and interpretation, drafting, rollout logistics and overheads.	100,000
Contingency	Contingency to account for possibility of higher accessibility costs, and capacity to provide honorariums or support to enable grassroots disability advocates to engage with the project. Any unspent contingency will be carried over to a possible third phase, or allocated to scholarships for disability advocates to join Australian Progress capacity building training programs.	10,000
Total for phase 2		404,000
TOTAL		574,000

Will you join us?

We are seeking strategic partnerships with disability representative organisations, service delivery leaders, advocacy groups and philanthropic supporters to bring this critical project to life. To begin, we're working urgently to secure \$170,000 to deliver phase 1 of the project ahead of the federal budget in May 2024, including \$100,000 from philanthropic funders and \$70,000 from organisational partners.

	Partnership offering
Disability Messaging Foundational Partner	<p><i>Contribution \$15,000 - \$20,000</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invitation for CEO and senior-level staff to join exclusive partner-only briefing with message researchers and Steering Committee on Wednesday 17th April at 11.00am. ● Branding acknowledgement (including your organisational logo) as a foundational partner on printed materials, online resources and website landing page. ● Invitation to a strategy workshop with the Steering Committee to contribute to design of phases 2 and 3. ● Free or heavily discounted scholarships for all staff who identify as a person with disability who join Australian Progress-led trainings in FY25 (including the Progress Fellowship, Management Masterclass, Community Organising trainings and more). Allies will be offered 20% off the price that would usually apply for your organisation. ● Free place for media manager or spokesperson in a tailored media training for foundational partners. <p>For foundational partners able to contribute \$20,000+ to the project, we</p>

	welcome discussion about additional opportunities to help build capacity within your own organisation, such as a tailored messaging implementation workshop with a researcher or member of the Steering Committee
Disability Messaging Supporter	<p><i>Contribution \$5,000 - \$10,000</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invitation for CEO and senior-level staff to join exclusive partner-only briefing with message researchers and Steering Committee on Wednesday 17th April at 11.00am. ● Branding acknowledgement (including your organisational logo) as a project supporter on printed materials, online resources and website landing page.

Our team

The project is led by a Steering Committee of disability advocacy and messaging experts, including **El Gibbs**, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA); **Kelly Cox**, Senior Policy Officer and NDIS Lead, First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN); **Kirsten Deane**, Deputy Director, Melbourne Disability Institute; **Stephen Ellis**, General Manager, Clue, and DANA Board Director; and **Elise Dalley**, Acting Co-Executive Director, Australian Progress.

Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA) and Australian Progress provide organisational support and expertise to the project.

About Disability Advocacy Network Australia

With a vision of a nation that includes and values people with disabilities and respects human rights for all, Disability Advocacy Network Australia's (DANA) purpose is to strengthen, support and provide a collective voice for disability advocacy organisations across Australia that advocate for and with people with disability.

DANA achieves this by:

- promoting the role and value of independent disability advocacy,
- providing a collective voice for members,
- providing communication and information sharing between disability advocacy organisations,
- providing support and development for members, staff and volunteers of disability advocacy organisations,
- building the evidence base to demonstrate the value of disability advocacy,
- promoting the human rights, needs, value and diversity of people with disabilities.

DANA has a membership of almost 80 independent advocacy organisations who operate across Australia, and offers advocacy in a variety of ways to suit different communities of people with disability, including individual, systemic, citizen, self, legal and family advocacy all playing a vital role in ensuring people with disability are included in the community, and most importantly, in decisions affecting their lives.

About Australian Progress

Australian Progress plays a unique role across the breadth of civil society, building the capacity of social change organisations and movements to advocate and win.

To realise our vision for a more just, equitable and sustainable society, underpinned by an engaged democracy and civil society, we're building a civil society where organisations and movements are capable, connected, innovative and dedicated to centring lived expertise to create systemic change on our most pressing social issues.

We draw on global thought-leaders and best practice to:

- **Build the skills of social change leaders** - equipping them with cutting-edge leadership and advocacy skills.
- **Foster community and connections** - building relationships, sharing knowledge, and inspiring courage in our network of 10,000+ changemakers and 1,000+ organisations.
- **Drive shared action** - growing the collective impact of the sector by filling strategic gaps, incubating new organisations and approaches to creating change, amplifying the voices of marginalised communities and leading cross-sector message research.

Australian Progress has a history of leading and supporting cross-sector message research projects to shift national dialogue, most recently on First Nations self-determination and justice with *Passing the Message Stick*, and previously on issues including economic justice, refugee rights and climate.

Next steps

With a federal budget looming, and state and federal elections on the horizon, this is an urgent moment to build the capacity of disability advocates and secure widespread support for transformative disability policy change. We would love to partner with you to make this project possible.

Contacts

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