

HOW TO BE IN ADVISORY GROUPS

Building capacity in people living with intellectual and cognitive disability

BACKGROUND

Almost 4.5 million Australians live with disability. Of these, 700,000 receive support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). These numbers are not evenly dispersed across the country; a disproportionate and increasing amount live in regional and rural areas. In the Campaspe Shire, there are approximately 1,100 NDIS participants, many of whom live with intellectual and cognitive disability. For this community, life presents complex challenges and unique barriers. Particularly when it comes to accessing services. Without formal pathways to engage, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to have a say. All people deserve to have a voice.

The Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation (2023) described the failure of disability services to include people with intellectual disability on their boards as a critical 'missed opportunity to utilise their skills, knowledge, and experience to improve service quality'.^[1]

If we want to create truly inclusive communities, it is critical to share power. We do this by inviting people with disability to the table, to the places where conversations occur and decisions are made.

This is where organisations such as Melbourne-based Voice at the Table are paving the way for inclusion. Through programs created and delivered by people with disability, Voice at the Table build capacity by preparing their participants to join advisory boards and committees.

^[1] The Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023)

“There was diversity in the room,
diversity of community engagement,
and great peer-to-peer experience”



COLLABORATION

In early 2025, the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU) Murray team partnered with VIVID and Community Living and Respite Services (CLRS) to identify and support the needs of people living with disability. Their recommendation was to engage Voice at the Table, a leader in inclusive community engagement and advocacy, to deliver meaningful training for rurally based residents, previously only available to people living in Melbourne.

Together, all partners co-designed a flyer tailored for the local disability community, aiming to attract interest in the training session.

This resulted in a fully booked, half-day workshop titled "How to be in Advisory Groups", held at VIVID's day program facility in Echuca (June 2025). This was Voice at the Table's first time delivering the program outside of metro Melbourne.

Led by engaging facilitators Jarrod Sandell-Hay, Julyne Ainsley, and Max Jack, supported by Melanie Keely from the Self Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU), the session explored key topics like:

- What is an advisory group?
- How do I choose the right one?
- Tips for participating effectively in meetings

The workshop welcomed 12 participants who actively engaged, shared their lived experiences, and learned from one another.

OUTCOMES

The training successfully prepared 11 Vivid and CLRS participants, referred to as graduates, for possible Board / Community Advisor group roles.

Of this group, eight participants expressed interest in joining an advisory group, either paid or unpaid and were excited to register for opportunities where they could share their experiences and expertise. Participants agreed that joining an advisory board could help improve the lives of people with disability. They also agreed that the training helped them develop new skills. In particular, self-advocacy and the confidence to speak up. LMPHU staff members observed that upskilling of people with disability is powerful when training is delivered by people who also live with disability.

Feedback from CLRS and Vivid was positive, stakeholders agreeing that the training was 'pitched well'. VIVID Business Manager Sue Green said that participants enjoyed the interactive, activity-based session. "Overall, they seemed to really enjoy the session" Ms Green said. "Participants developed important skills around self-advocacy and built awareness around the opportunities advisory groups could bring." Ms Green commented that the session 'could be a bit shorter', and the reason one participant left the training session was because they were having a bad day, not because the content wasn't valuable.

Another participant and their support worker spoke highly of the session, particularly on the growth in knowledge and confidence. "I'm able to share my knowledge with the other volunteers at the community house!" she said.

Jarrold said he was excited to deliver the training outside of metropolitan Melbourne. "This is the first time we have worked with participants in a rural setting" Jarrold said. "It's important we have been able to connect with people with disability in Echuca. We would like to help even more people rurally build their skills to self-advocate".

AT A GLANCE

- People with intellectual and cognitive disability face significant barriers to participation
- Programs need to be accessible to regional communities
- Participants who completed the training increased their confidence, self-advocacy skills and understanding of advisory roles
- Identification of local advisory opportunities for people living with a disability eg. reference groups
- Inclusive engagement leads to more effective and equitable outcomes

LEARNINGS

Involving people with disabilities in the decision-making process is not just the right thing to do, it leads to more just, effective and resilient communities. When power is shared, people with disability feel valued and included. And when they are given a seat at the table, policies and programs are created that are relevant, accessible, and effective.

Jarrold said "the participants gave great ideas on how advisory groups can do better, like making things easier to understand and giving people time to speak". This feedback will be taken on board to enhance future training.

Through this project, we learned that people with disability in regional and rural areas face even greater complexity when it comes to accessing services and experiencing opportunities to self-advocate. As the adage goes, you can't be what you can't see. Programs delivered by Voice at the Table are effective, because they build capacity by people who have similar challenges and experiences to their participants.



"The success of this training highlights the power of genuine collaboration and the importance of making sure all voices are heard - especially in spaces where decisions are made"

NEXT STEPS

In order to upskill more people with intellectual and cognitive disability in the Murray region, we need to advocate for this type of training to be accessible to rural communities. Should this occur, recruitment of participants, timing and accessibility need to be considered within planning.



Community Living
& Respite Services