



GUIDING THE WAY:
BUILDING COMMON PRINCIPLES
FOR NAVIGATORS



DANA

Disability Advocacy
Network Australia

NDS

National Disability Services



INTRODUCTION

The NDIS Review set a vision of a connected system of support for people with disability.¹ This connected system should include accessible and inclusive mainstream, foundational, and individual support funded through the NDIS. The Review recognised that for this to become a reality, all people with disability and their families, supporters and kin need more assistance to navigate this system (not just NDIS participants) and proposed the creation of a new role called a ‘Navigator’. Navigators would be available to assist all people with disability under the age of 65, including those that get NDIS supports.

General Navigators would help people with disability access and utilise mainstream services, engage in community activities, and use foundational supports. For people with disability in the NDIS, Navigators would also guide planning and effectively using their NDIS budgets with regular check-ins and risk management assistance. Additionally, there would be specialist Navigators for people with psychosocial disability and with complex needs, young children and their families and people with housing and living budgets. Unlike the current intermediary roles (including support coordination local area coordination and plan management), the Navigator role would be funded independently of individual NDIS budgets, ensuring that people with disability do not have to choose between a having a Navigator and other supports.

Navigators are poised to play a vital role in building a more connected and supportive system for people with disability and their families. Recognising the importance of this role in driving the success of proposed reforms, Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA) and National Disability Services (NDS) have proactively partnered to develop a set of common principles for the Navigator role. These principles will guide our advocacy efforts with Disability Reform Ministers and across governments. Through consultations with our members, we have gathered valuable insights that have shaped the principles and vision for the role.

¹ Working together to deliver the NDIS: Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Final Report October 2023.

Principles and Application of the Navigator Role

DANA and NDS believe that clearly defined, shared principles are essential to guide the development of Navigators as they help people with disability access services, engage in their communities, and navigate both mainstream and disability supports. By establishing these principles early in the reform process, we aim to create a cohesive framework that ensures Navigators operate consistently and effectively across diverse settings. This proactive approach not only strengthens advocacy efforts but also aligns with the broader goals of system-wide reform, ensuring people with disability have the guidance and support they need to thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

INDEPENDENT

From NDIS funding:

A person has access to a Navigator regardless of their NDIS funding status, and the Navigator role is funded independently of a person's NDIS plan. This should allow for a person to easily adjust the intensity of support that they require from a Navigator(s) to changes in their circumstances. Navigators should also be protected from being drawn into acting on behalf of the agency and centre the support of the person they are working with in all of their work.

From service provision:

Support from a Navigator is separate from a person's service provision. It is not an additional service layered onto what a person already receives. While exceptions may arise where a Navigator is connected to service provision, this should be rare and a last resort. Safeguards could include making sure this only occurs in thin markets, making sure choice is available for people during tendering, and securing binding commitments from providers to not share or discuss information between navigator staff and staff for other services. Navigators should be able to refer a person to a service provider without concern about conflicting interests or taking away from broader service offerings.

From advocacy:

Navigators do not provide advocacy services but instead refer people to appropriate advocacy services. Advocacy services need adequate funding to handle these referrals and provide support, allowing Navigators to focus on their core function without being drawn into informal advocacy roles.

CONNECTED

Navigators are deeply connected to local communities and possess extensive knowledge of both disability and mainstream supports. They are ideally located within the community or, if not resourced to, maintain strong local connections. Specific resources are allocated to enable Navigators to reach people with disability in regional, rural and remote areas, providing in-person support when necessary. They know when to seek expertise outside of the area if local options are unavailable. Additionally, Navigators help build the capacity of mainstream services to support people with disability and their families.

PERSON-CENTERED

Navigators tailor service delivery to align with a person's values. They treat people with respect, empower them to take control of their NDIS plan, and uphold their dignity and rights. The focus is on the person's best interests, prioritising autonomy, well-being, and fostering self-determination.

HUMAN-RIGHTS FOCUSED

The Navigator model recognises the impact of impairment in the lives of people with disability, seeing it as a natural part of human diversity. The model supports the rights of people with disability to live independently and be included in their communities with the support they need and choose, acknowledging that this goal requires more than just removing mainstream barriers.

CULTURALLY SAFE

Navigators provide support in a way that ensures individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds feel respected, valued, and safe. Cultural safety involves self-reflection, respect, and recognition of historical and social contexts that contribute to power imbalances. Navigators engage in ongoing learning to mitigate these challenges.

TRAUMA-INFORMED

Navigators recognise that certain services may carry trauma for individuals and work to provide alternative options when needed. They acknowledge trauma's impact on a person's engagement with services and offer trauma-sensitive support.

COLLABORATIVE

Navigators work closely with the person, their family, service providers, and stakeholders to ensure coordinated, seamless support. They are connected through formal support networks and information-sharing structures.

CHOICE AND CONTROL

Navigators ensure that people have the choice to access the services they need. They facilitate supported decision-making and provide wrap-around support to enhance the person's ability to exercise control over their services and transition between settings.

INCLUSIVE

Navigators focus on connecting people with mainstream and foundational services, promoting inclusion rather than limiting access to disability-specific supports.

RESPONSIVE AND FLEXIBLE

Navigators are adaptive to changes in a person's circumstances, offering proactive support when needed. Their approach is flexible, ramping up assistance during challenging times and stepping back when the situation stabilises.

TRANSPARENT

Navigators provide clear, accurate, and timely information about available options and services. They have the resources to build and maintain trust with the person and their family.

ACCOUNTABLE AND CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVING

Navigator services are registered, and Navigators receive regular training and follow practice guidelines. They maintain manageable caseloads to ensure effective service delivery and are held accountable to key performance indicators. Navigators continuously assess their effectiveness, seek feedback, and stay informed about best practices.

PROMOTES EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AS NAVIGATORS

Navigators prioritise the employment of people with disability to provide these services. Hiring people with disability as Navigators brings lived experience and authentic understanding to the role. This approach not only improves service quality but also sets an example of inclusion within the disability sector.



A VISION FOR THE NAVIGATOR ROLE

What Could the Navigator Model Achieve If Done Right?

The Navigator role can potentially have numerous benefits for people with disability and their families. One of the primary advantages is easier access to information and resources. Navigators are intended to simplify the complexities of disability and mainstream service systems by offering relevant and accessible information. The role is intended to actively connect individuals to services through a streamlined and seamless process, ensuring that people do not face unnecessary administrative hurdles, especially for people with disability who do not meet the NDIS eligibility criteria.

If implemented effectively, the role will provide personalised support tailored to individual needs. Navigators will consider local context and relevant data when tailoring support options, linking people to advocacy services, emergency support, and crisis management. Regular check-ins with the person with disability will help maintain effective navigation, emphasising accountability and positive outcomes. Navigators will work closely with individuals to troubleshoot and find solutions when certain aspects of support are not working as intended and will offer further support to people with disability who have complex needs, including referrals to specialised Navigators for specific needs.

The role should promote increased independence and self-advocacy skills among people with disability, improved coordination among different services and supports, positive outcomes and satisfaction with service providers. For NDIS participants, Navigators help increase understanding of NDIS processes making the system more accessible and user-friendly.

Importantly, people should have the choice of who their Navigator is, with a clear process for changing Navigators if needed.

How Can We Bring the Navigator Model to Life?

The implementation of the Navigator role is a multifaceted process that requires careful planning and consideration to ensure its success. Central to the successful implementation of the role is the need for clear guidelines and standards for Navigator practice. These guidelines will serve as a foundation, ensuring that Navigators operate consistently and effectively across different regions and contexts. By establishing a solid framework, we can enhance the quality of support provided, foster trust among participants, and ultimately contribute to more inclusive and accessible services for all individuals navigating the disability landscape.

A roadmap and transition plan are necessary for the introduction of the Navigator role. Foundational supports must first be in place, and the use of pilot programs will allow the model to be tested and refined before a broader rollout. By drawing on learnings from existing Support Coordination and Local Area Coordination (LAC) models, best practices and potential problems can be factored into implementation. Transparency and clear communication about the timing of the transition to the Navigator model and expectations are essential. People with disability have expressed concerns about losing their current support coordinators and the daunting process of transitioning to new Navigators. As a result, a gradual and well-planned transition is essential to address these concerns effectively.

Ongoing training, professional development and supervision for Navigators should be set, designed, and monitored by the Department of Social Services (DSS). Navigators need qualifications and experience working in the disability sector, along with extensive community knowledge and connections. The entire existing intermediaries' market, including Specialist Support Coordinators, Support Coordinators, Recovery Coaches, and LACs, should be considered for the Navigator roles if they possess the appropriate skills, experience, and local connections.

Collaboration is crucial to the success of the Navigator role. Navigators should work closely with existing support networks, the NDIA, NDIS Commission and the health, justice, and education systems. This collaboration will ensure that people with disability receive comprehensive support that goes beyond merely providing information. Navigators should have the authority to act and collaborate with service providers, rather than acting solely as referral points or information hotlines.

Cultural safety is another critical aspect for the implementation of the Navigator role. Navigators must provide support in an environment where individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds feel respected, valued, and safe. This involves self-reflection, respect, recognition, person-centred support, ongoing learning, and acknowledging historical and social contexts that contribute to power imbalances. A cultural brokerage model² could be applied to help individuals connect with culturally appropriate resources and support, reducing misunderstandings and promoting equity. Additionally, it is essential to consider intersectionality, recognising that individuals may experience overlapping identities and challenges that impact their access to services, thereby ensuring that support is tailored to their unique circumstances.

Navigating Complexity: The Role of Specialised Navigators

The NDIS Review proposed several specialist Navigator roles to enhance support for participants with complex needs:

1. **Specialist Navigator:** Assists NDIS participants who frequently engage with multiple service systems, such as hospitals or child protection services.
2. **Psychosocial Recovery Navigator:** Supports individuals with psychosocial disabilities, connecting them with both NDIS and non-NDIS services, and facilitating goal setting and access to mental health and housing support.
3. **Housing and Living Navigator:** Helps participants explore and negotiate housing and living options.
4. **Shared Support Facilitator:** Ensures that individuals sharing housing and support have a voice in how their services are organised, operating independently from service providers.
5. **Lead Practitioner:** Focused on children and families, this role identifies needs, connects families to support services, and coordinates NDIS-funded services to support child development.

These roles aim to provide tailored assistance, ensuring responsive and effective support for people with disability.

² Cultural brokers are individuals who have knowledge and understanding of both the Australian culture and the culture of CALD individuals. They act as a mediator between CALD individuals and the NDIS staff, ensuring that cultural differences are recognised and respected.

Role delineation can become confusing when an individual requires the assistance of multiple Navigators. For instance, consider a person who may require multiple Navigators due to their diverse needs. In such cases, having a single point of contact can enhance efficiency. This might mean that a person might have either a specialist navigator who is the primary contact for the work that they are doing, who then coordinate with housing and living navigator while looking for a suitable home.

This 'lead' Navigator would coordinate with other Navigators, ensuring effective communication and seamless support for the individual and their network. By minimising overlap and confusion, this approach creates a more streamlined and effective support system.

In rural or remote areas, access to specialised Navigators may be significantly limited due to factors such as workforce shortages and geographical challenges. This lack of access can create significant barriers for individuals seeking support, as they may struggle to navigate the complex landscape of services and resources necessary to meet their diverse needs. Without Navigators resourced to provide direct support, individuals may face increased challenges in accessing essential services, which can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration.

Transitioning between different life stages can be challenging, and having a Navigator role specifically for these transitions could be beneficial to a person with disability and their families. For example, a Navigator could assist individuals moving from disability support to aged care, ensuring continuity of care and addressing aging-specific issues. Similarly, investing in Navigator roles during youth and adolescence could provide long-term benefits, helping young individuals develop strong self-advocacy skills and knowledge.

When it comes to housing-related needs, the roles of the Living/Housing Navigator and the Shared Support Facilitator could come into play. The Living/Housing Navigator focuses on the individual's housing needs, while the Shared Support Facilitator provides broader assistance to those living in shared environments. Together, these two roles could collaborate effectively by coordinating housing options, addressing barriers, and ensuring seamless access to resources for individuals in shared housing.



Strengths-Based Perspectives on the Navigator Role: Addressing Concerns

It is important to be mindful of the potential for variations in the quality of service delivered by Navigators. This inconsistency could stem from a range of factors, including the varying levels of training and experience among Navigators. As a result, individuals may receive varying levels of support, which could lead to confusion and frustration. Furthermore, inconsistent service quality may hinder the ability of individuals to achieve their goals and navigate the complex systems they are trying to access. To address this, it is essential to establish clear guidelines and standards for Navigator practice. Regular training and professional development will ensure that all Navigators are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide high-quality support consistently.

A key aspect to consider is the need for clear responsibilities within the Navigator role to minimise inconsistency in service delivery. Well-defined roles and expectations can help ensure that all Navigators provide a consistent level of support, regardless of their individual training or experience. By establishing clear guidelines for each Navigator's responsibilities, individuals seeking assistance can have confidence in receiving reliable support tailored to their needs. This clarity not only reduces the potential for confusion and frustration but also enhances the overall effectiveness of the Navigator role, fostering trust and promoting positive outcomes for those navigating complex systems. Clearly defining the Navigator role can ensure they provide independent support without any conflicting duties.

It is vital to acknowledge the need for adequate funding and resources for providers delivering Navigator services. Concerns have been raised about the ability of providers to effectively support people with disability if they are not properly equipped. Inadequate funding and resourcing for the role will lead to high workloads and stress for Navigators, reducing the support available to people with disability and their families. Resourcing must include providing sufficient time, a reasonable number of Navigators, and the necessary level of training to meet the demands of the role.

It is important to consider how the Navigator model will integrate with existing services and supports. When implementing the Navigator model, it is crucial to focus on maintaining continuity and enhancing existing support arrangements. Many individuals already benefit from well-established services (including support coordination and LACs), and it is essential to recognise the value these arrangements provide. The introduction of the Navigator role should aim to build on these strengths rather than disrupt them.

It is important to recognise the variability in the availability of Navigators across different regions. This inconsistency can impact how effectively individuals access the support they need. Understanding these regional differences is essential for ensuring that all individuals receive equitable access to Navigator services, regardless of their location. Navigators in rural and remote areas may face challenges in providing the same level of support as those in urban areas. To tackle this, specific resourcing should be available to enable Navigators to engage with people with disability in rural and remote areas in person where appropriate. This ensures that everyone, regardless of their location, receives the support they need.

It is essential to be aware of the potential for conflicts of interest and bias when Navigators make referrals to services. To address this, it is crucial to establish transparent processes and guidelines for referrals, maintaining their independence and fostering trust among the individuals they support.

By addressing these concerns with clear guidelines, adequate resources, and transparent processes, we can ensure that the Navigator role effectively supports people with disability and their families without introducing new challenges.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The implementation of Navigators as outlined in the NDIS Review holds the potential to significantly enhance the way people with disability access and navigate the supports available to them. By establishing common principles, DANA and NDS are helping create a consistent framework that ensures Navigators work independently, focus on the individual, and support broader human rights objectives. These principles aim to make the system more connected, transparent, and responsive, fostering greater inclusion and equity across the disability sector.

Looking forward, the successful integration of Navigators into the disability support landscape will require continued collaboration among governments, service providers, and advocacy groups. Key areas of focus should include securing sustainable funding models, ensuring widespread availability in rural and remote areas, and refining training and accountability mechanisms for Navigators. Moreover, ongoing consultation with people with disability, their families and service providers will be essential to refine and adapt the Navigator role to meet evolving needs.

As reforms progress, DANA and NDS are committed to working collaboratively with the broader disability community to ensure Navigators support a more inclusive and accessible system. Our goal is to ensure that people with disability have the support to exercise choice and control, with their voices at the centre of the services they rely on.





DANA

Disability Advocacy
Network Australia

NDS

National Disability Services