Disability Support Pension Roundtable

What we heard report

About the Disability Support Pension Roundtable

On 20 November 2025, Inclusion Australia hosted a Roundtable for people to come together to talk about the Disability Support Pension (DSP). People with an intellectual disability, advocates and other allies shared their experiences of applying for, receiving, and trying to work while on the DSP. 40 people took part across Australia from different organisations and as individuals.

The purpose of the Roundtable was to understand what is working, what is not working, and what needs to change.

What we heard

The DSP system is hard to understand and inaccessible

People said the DSP is complex and inaccessible. This creates stress, confusion and a heavy administrative burden, which often also impacts peoples' families and other unpaid, informal supports.

People described:

- Difficulty finding accessible information about the DSP
- Confusion about how much income can be earned before someone's DSP is affected, making it hard to plan ahead or make informed decisions about work
- Uncertainty about reporting dates and requirements.

For people with an intellectual disability, this complexity often means relying on others to manage DSP interactions. This reduces independence and places pressure on families and other unpaid supporters to interpret complex rules and manage reporting.

Income reporting is stressful and doesn't reflect real working lives

People described how income reporting rules do not work for people with irregular or flexible work patterns. People shared experiences of:

- Working different hours each week or doing short-term, casual, or project-based work
- Being unsure how reported income would affect future payments
- Feeling stressed by long reporting periods and delayed adjustments, which carries the risk of receiving debts if income is assessed in a way that did not reflect when it was earned.

This uncertainty discourages people from taking on work that may otherwise suit their capacity. Instead of encouraging participation, the system creates risk and fear.

Confusion about honorariums, volunteering, and what counts as 'income'

People raised concerns about confusion and miscommunication about what counts as income, particularly in relation to honorarium payments and volunteer roles. People explained that:

- Some people do not have formal employment but receive honorarium payments through volunteer or community initiatives
- It is unclear whether honorariums affect DSP payments, and by how much
- Information about where volunteering ends and employment begins is unclear or inaccessible.

This lack of clarity creates anxiety and risk, and discourages participation in volunteering, advocacy and other parts of community life.

Fear of losing DSP stops people from trying work

People described the DSP as something they must protect, rather than a support that enables participation. People spoke about:

- Choosing not to work more because the risks feel too high
- Anxiety that if work ends, it is difficult to get back onto DSP
- Fear of losing important concessions linked to DSP, such as healthcare, medication, and transport supports.

Hours-based work thresholds limit opportunities and do not reflect peoples' real capacity

People spoke about rigid work-hour thresholds that do not reflect the reality of how people's support needs and work capacity can change over time. Some people described feeling pressure to limit their work hours to avoid losing the DSP or other supports, even when they wanted to work more. People talked about:

- Their capacity for work changing over time
- Being able to work some hours but not enough to live on
- DSP rules treating work as evidence that someone is "no longer disabled".

The partner income test undermines independence and safety

Strong concern was raised about the partner income test. People said many people with disability, including people with an intellectual disability, rely on DSP as their main or only secure income, and reductions or loss of DSP due to a partner's income removes financial autonomy and stability. People described how it:

- Removes individual income security
- Forces people with disability to rely financially on partners
- Creates risks in situations of control, abuse, or unsafe relationships
- Forces people to choose between relationships and financial independence.

Compliance requirements create fear and confusion and do not support people into work

People also raised concerns about compliance requirements, including compulsory participation requirements and the Program of Support. People described:

- Feeling pressured to meet activity requirements when unwell or facing other barriers
- Fear that missing an appointment or requirement could lead to payment suspension
- Experiencing the system as focused on monitoring and compliance rather than support
- Not understanding what the Program of Support involves or why they must complete it.

People said these requirements create additional stress and financial hardship rather than improving employment opportunities.

Priority recommendations to government

The following recommendations were endorsed by the people and organisations who took part in the DSP Roundtable. They reflect the priorities that people at the Roundtable identified as having the greatest impact for people with an intellectual disability.

These recommendations **do not cover every issue raised at the Roundtable**. Many other important changes were discussed, and Inclusion Australia remains committed to advocating on those issues and supporting our sector colleague's advocacy, alongside this core set of priorities.

This list is intended to focus attention on reforms that would most directly improve access, independence, and opportunities for work for people with an intellectual disability and their families, while providing a practical starting point for government action.

These recommendations are endorsed by the following organisations:

Down Syndrome Australia

NEDA National Ethnic Disability Alliance

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA)

cyda Children and Young People with Disability Australia

physical disability AUSTRALIA

DANA Disability Advocacy Network Australia

AUSTRALIAN Autism Alliance

AC

pwda PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AUSTRALIA

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AUSTRALIA For a fair social security system

1. Extend the DSP suspension period to 10 years

Increase the DSP suspension period from two years to 10 years to provide genuine employment security.

The current two-year limit does not reflect the reality that employment pathways – particularly for people with intellectual disability – are often gradual, fluctuating and non-linear. The risk of losing DSP eligibility entirely, and having to reapply through a complex and uncertain process, creates a strong disincentive to increase hours or remain in work.

This reform would align DSP settings with the government's employment participation objectives by embedding confidence and continuity.

2. Remove the Program of Support requirement

Commit to not reinstating the Program of Support (POS) legislative instrument when it sunsets in April 2026, and remove the requirement entirely.

The Program of Support embeds a compliance-based framework that requires people to demonstrate participation in prescribed activities before qualifying for DSP. This approach is experienced as monitoring and conditionality rather than support and can delay vital access to income security for people with disability, including people with an intellectual disability.

3. Make income reporting accessible

DSP income reporting should be reformed to reduce administrative burden and remove structural barriers to work.

Reform may include extending the streamlined reporting arrangements already available in ADEs across the broader workforce, leveraging existing payroll and reporting systems such as Single Touch Payroll to reduce duplication, improve accuracy, and reduce risk of error. For many people with an intellectual disability, their families bear the primary administrative load. As such, there is also a strong view that the requirement for income reporting itself should be reconsidered.

Reforming income reporting must be co-designed with people with an intellectual disability, families, employers, and disability advocacy organisations to ensure it is genuinely accessible, supports participation, and aligns DSP administration with government objectives for workforce productivity.

4. Reform inconsistent work-hour rules and remove artificial caps

Harmonise and reform the rigid and inconsistent hours-based rules across DSP and related legislation.

Currently, different parts of the system apply different work-hour thresholds to assess disability, eligibility and financial arrangements.

For example:

- DSP eligibility may require demonstrating an inability to work more than 15 hours per week
- Payment eligibility is affected once a person works 30 hours per week
- Special Disability Trusts use a 7-hour per week threshold
- Different rules apply across ADE and open employment settings.

These inconsistencies create confusion, discourage increased participation, and embed artificial caps that do not reflect real-world work patterns. Reform is needed to create a coherent framework that supports gradual increases in work without triggering unintended loss of eligibility or support.

5. Reduce the DSP taper rate from 50c to 30c per dollar

Lower the DSP taper rate from 50c to 30c per dollar to enable people to retain more of their payment as they earn income and encourage greater participation in work.

The current 50-cent taper creates very high effective marginal tax rates, discouraging people from increasing their work hours or taking on new employment opportunities.

Reducing the taper rate would provide greater financial security, support gradual or part-time work, and help people with intellectual disability engage in the workforce with confidence while maintaining access to essential income support and associated concessions.