

A brief history of Disability Voices Tasmania

Our story began with the hope and determination of many Tasmanians' with disability and their allies to fill what has long been a gap in our community - a cross-disability organisation that would be managed and driven by people with a wide range of disability to identify barriers to inclusion, build our voices around issues of shared concern and influence our own lives and the communities in which we live.

The fulfillment of this desire was given energy by work undertaken by Anglicare in 2016 who consulted on the need for an across-disability rights organisation and the later work done for the State Government by Purple Orange Julia Farr Centre on possible models for change.

This led in 2018, to a pilot project funded through the then Department of Health and Human Services aimed at increasing the individual skills and capacity of Tasmanians' with disability to have our voices heard and progressing the establishment of a long term cross-disability, Disabled People's Organisation.

This was known as the "*Disability Voices Tasmania* pilot" project which was guided by a Reference Group which included people with disability and representatives from Brain Injury Tasmania, the Association for Children with Disability, Speak Out Tasmania and Epilepsy Tasmania, and headed up by Fiona Strahan as our first Project Manager.

The year-long pilot project was exciting and demanding, as we tried to respond to the hopes of Tasmanians' with disability; establish ourselves as the 'new kid on the block'; steer our way through the difficult area of community politics and forge a relationship with long-established and well-respected existing disability organisations.

The pilot project concluded in September 2019 and despite appeals to the state government for funding to support us while we attempted to establish long-term funding for our new organisation, we had to shut up shop and down tools. Unfortunately, this meant losing all of the momentum we had gathered during the pilot project, causing many to lose hope.

A small group of volunteers of people with disability then had to do what most new community based organisations have to do; which was to continue to work voluntarily, to achieve our goals.

In late 2019 we applied for grant funding under the Information Linkage and Capacity, (ILC) program from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and were successful in getting 3 years funding under the Individual Capacity Building program.

Funding was released in late February 2020 just in time for the initial COVID 19 lockdown and while we appointed our staff in April, it wasn't until July that we were all able to actually get together to meet in person.

When we actually established the new Disability Voices Tasmania in April 2020, we had no phones, no computers, no desks, no files, no social media presence, no database of contacts, no website, no policies and procedures, no premises and most important of all no way to bring people together to share stories and develop relationships.

What we did have though, was a fabulous staff who brought a wealth of advocacy, community development, business and strategic knowledge to this new venture; under the leadership of our Manager, Tamar Cordover. Tamar and The staff established our first round of projects, worked with the Committee of Management on establishing policies and procedures, a constitution and other necessary frameworks to establish Disability Voices Tasmania as the organisation it is today.

We also had an experienced and committed Committee of Management and a reputation developed during the pilot project.

In each of our 3 years of NDIA funding we were contracted to undertake 3 projects that involved people with disability throughout Tasmania to develop skills; to build confidence and to empower people with disability to engage with and contribute to our communities. Tamar and the staff worked diligently to involve people with disability, the Committee of Management and other stakeholders to deliver these projects under extremely difficult circumstances.

Our original plans were to involve people with disability in 3 different parts of Tasmania to identify a local issue of concern and then develop a program of training and skills development.

Covid 19 put paid to that idea and while the pandemic had massive negative effects on the lives of many people with disability, it opened up opportunities to think outside the box and grasp new opportunities to engage with our community. It allowed us to connect with people with disability who would not usually join in activities that required a physical presence or significant organisation and time investment. Whilst many people with disability are excluded from joining in meetings through Zoom and other online systems because of cost, technology or accessibility but there are also many people with disability who really like these new ways of getting to open up new opportunities for participation.

In our first few months, as we set up our office and developed our contacts, we commenced our first round of projects and made lots of contacts in the community, business, government and the media.

Most excitingly in later 2020 we successfully incorporated as a legal organisation Disability Voices Tasmania Inc. with a formal structure and a new Board. As of September 2022, we are registered as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not For Profits Commission.

In July 2022, our manager Tamar Cordover Pritchard left Disability Voices Tasmania to head up her own business, Compass Disability. During her time leading the organisation, Tamar made a valuable founding contribution to Disability Voices Tasmania, allowing it to progress as a disabled persons' organisation in Tasmania.

Given her passion for advocating for the rights of people with disability, we are sure our paths will cross again in the future.

In August of 2022, we successfully recruited our first Executive Officer, Vaughn Bennison, who continues to deliver on our funded projects and grow and develop the organisation. Vaughn comes to us with a wealth of experience in people management, advocacy, policy and the media.

In November 2022 we were advised that we had been granted an extension of our ILC funding to end of June 2024. To date, we continue to deliver funded projects, advocate for the human rights of people with disability, and work with Government, community and disability organisations, other groups and individuals, for equality, and to raise the voices of Tasmanians with Disability.