

BY US, FOR US

Disability Messaging Guide Summary

Introduction

This is a summary of the ***By Us, For Us: Disability Messaging Guide***, which can be [found here](#) alongside the full set of messaging resources.

The guide was developed with input from many people with disability, to help us build widespread public support for transformative policy change led by us. Further stages of this work could include testing messages with the public.

Overarching themes for talking about disability

THEME 1: SELF DETERMINATION

Disabled people and communities want a genuine say over what happens to us, including through leadership and exercising power over our lives.

Where inclusion is all that's realistic (e.g. Parliament), emphasise that **our knowledge and expertise are essential**: we make better decisions when everyone is in the room.

Embrace	Replace	Why
Led by disabled people	A seat at the table	Replace inclusion and tokenism with self-determination

THEME 2: DIVERSITY

Our messages can helpfully showcase the diversity and size of the disabled community. This includes stories about people with visible, invisible, physical and intellectual disabilities, and facts like *'1 in 5 Australians are disabled'*.

Embrace	Replace	Why
Collectively, disabled people have so much expertise in so many fields	Disabled people are vulnerable and powerless	Diversity + strengths language (see Tip 3)

Top tips

1. VISION-BARRIER-ACTION STORY STRUCTURE

We recommend using a **Vision - Barrier - Action structure** for every message. This leads with a clear **vision** of what we want and the values at stake, then describes the problem or **barrier** to achieving that vision, and the **action** or solution required.

If we want to persuade people who are unsure, we need to **paint a picture of the world we want** and avoid leading with the problem.

Vision	Barrier	Action
Describe an attractive vision - a positive outcome that you and your audience would value	Point to what stands in the way of that vision, and who is responsible	Describe the action required and who needs to act , to remove the barrier and achieve the positive vision

A general format for disability advocacy messages:

Vision	Barrier	Action
We all want X [good thing] in life	But [name people or organisations] are denying disabled people X	Disabled people in charge can put things right so we have X.

2. THE DESIGN FRAME

Similar to the social model of disability, the design frame says that **non-disabled people have designed the world** we live in today to suit themselves and no-one else. We need to **redesign our society** together so it works for everyone.

This means making sure our messages say **who** has created the problem or barrier, and who can fix it. Facts should be only part of our story – include the ‘who and ‘why’ rather than leaving facts to speak on their own.

Embrace	Replace	Why
[Organisation] is discriminating against disabled people [by doing X]	Disabled people experience discrimination	Make passive sentences active – identify who is causing the problem and who needs to act

3. STRENGTHS LANGUAGE

Being clear about current problems and injustices is important, but in telling our truth, using **deficit** language has been proven to reinforce negative stereotypes and reduce public support. Deficit language is any language that suggests there is something *wrong* or *lesser* about people with disability.

In contrast, using **strengths** language has been found to increase support for our messages from the public. Strengths language highlights the many and varied strengths of disabled people.

Another key ingredient in communicating our pain and anger is to **pair truth with action** – to help move people past guilt or defensiveness to solutions.

Embrace	Replace	Why
We have been clear about what’s needed, but [the government/others] are not listening to us	Disabled people have no voice	Replace deficit language with strengths language

4. TELL OUR STORY, NOT THEIRS

Research has shown that repeating misinformation or unhelpful statements only reinforces them in the minds of our audiences. Mythbusting messages don’t work because people tend to remember the myth we’re busting. They forget small words like ‘not’. Instead, we should **state our truth clearly** and **avoid repeating lies and misinformation**.

Embrace	Replace	Why
The NDIS is an essential public service	The NDIS is not a waste of taxpayers’ money	State our truth; avoid reinforcing unhelpful ideas.

5. BRING THE NDIS BACK TO VALUES AND BENEFITS

When we need to ask for resources or improvement to a system (like the NDIS), it’s important to **keep firmly focused on values** like equality, social justice and human wellbeing.

Adequate funding is then *how we get what we need*, not *why we care*. We need to make **human wellbeing** (not the economy) the reason for our asks.

Embrace	Replace	Why
Essential public service, lifesaving/life changing,	Value for money, return on investment, taxpayers’ money	Focus on why things matter to people’s wellbeing, rather than economic benefits

giving us control over our lives		
The NDIS is an essential public service that needs redesigning/reforming	The NDIS is broken The NDIS is a failure	Show the NDIS needs redesigning, not reducing or abolishing

6. BUILD EMPATHY WITH RELATABLE HUMAN STORIES

UK research found that building empathy with **relatable human stories** was the most effective way to shift public attitudes about disability¹. Rather than attempting to stir sympathy about the plight of disabled people, which risks othering us and falsely portraying us as needy victims, it’s more effective to build empathy by creating a shared connection with the audience.

7. SHOW CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Messaging research shows that **people like solutions** far more than they like hearing about problems. We can tap into this tendency by using messages that show people with disability have won massive changes already. Covid19 policy responses provide a good example of how fast governments, workplaces, businesses and civil society can adapt.

¹ [‘Changing attitudes towards disability: What works’. Scope UK](#)