

## EVALUATION REPORT

# Evaluation of Voice at the Table

Final Report

Prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd  
for the Self Advocacy Resource Unit  
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Report commissioned by **Self-Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU)**

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EVALUATION



RESEARCH



CONSULTATION & FACILITATION



RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT



PLANNING



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# Executive Summary

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*"It taught us, 'We are the experts. We are the ones to tell our stories'."*

(Voice at the Table graduate)

*"Voice at the Table is changing the way professionals see people with cognitive disabilities. Great job!"*

(Inclusive Meeting Practice Workshop participant)

Funded by the Victorian Office for Disability and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the *Voice at the Table* project aims to build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to participate in a range of civic and decision-making processes and to build the capacity of organisations to support increased civic participation. People with cognitive disabilities includes people with an acquired brain injury (ABI) and people with an intellectual disability (ID). The project commenced in July 2017 and will conclude in June 2019.

The *Voice at the Table* project is run by the Self-Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU). SARU's Management Group is made up of representatives from disability-led organisations: Brain Injury Matters, Reinforce Self Advocacy group, start Community Arts and Action for More Independence and Dignity in Accommodation (AMIDA).

## Rationale for *Voice at the Table*

Traditionally, people with cognitive disabilities have not been provided with the opportunity to act as representatives, inform policy development or to have real input into decision making.

On the rare occasion people with cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to provide representation many express strong concerns about the process. They often find that meetings are not run in ways that support real inclusion, information is not accessible and their opinions, while listened to, are frequently not acted on leading to feelings of disenfranchisement.<sup>1</sup>

Civic participation of people with disability is acknowledged in the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) as a fundamental human right. Civic participation of people with disability is policy both for the Australian government and the Victorian government. The Victorian government's state disability plan, *Absolutely Everyone*, commits the government to '*providing opportunities for people with a disability to lead and contribute to public debate and influence change within government and communities.*' Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) - part of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) – which will be implemented in Victoria in 2019 focusses on activities aiming to influence change so that people with disabilities have the skills and confidence to participate and contribute to the community and protect their rights, participate in and benefit from the same community activities as everyone else and actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community.

## About the *Voice at the Table* project

The *Voice at the Table* project builds on the experience and successes of the pilot project of the same name undertaken by SARU in 2016. As part of the pilot project, a consumer representative training course for people with cognitive disabilities - '*Voice at the Table*' - was developed.

<sup>1</sup> <https://voiceatthetable.com.au/resources/consumer-participation-kit/>

The Voice at the Table project comprises four key elements:

- ♦ **training and skills development** for people with cognitive disabilities through:
  - the six-day Voice at the Table training, developed with and co-facilitated by people with cognitive disabilities
  - refresher training and skills development for VATT graduates
- ♦ **Inclusive Meeting Practice training** for organisations
- ♦ development and dissemination of Voice at the Table and inclusive practice **resources** for participants and organisations
- ♦ on-going **mentoring and support** for consumer advocates and participating organisations.

### Evaluation of *Voice at the Table*

Effective Change was commissioned by SARU to conduct an external evaluation of the Voice at the Table project in early 2018 in order to:

- ♦ ensure a process of continual improvement during the project delivery.
- ♦ create a model for best practice in relation to supporting real and equal civic participation for people with cognitive disabilities
- ♦ report on the evaluation findings.

### Key findings

The evaluation of the Voice at the Table has found successful achievements of all of the project's aims.

**Aim 1: Increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes.**

- ♦ The Voice at the Table course was delivered to 30 participants with cognitive disabilities in 2018, and 21 completed the pilot program in 2016
- ♦ As at the end of 2018, there is a total of 51 VATT graduates
- ♦ Of the training participants surveyed before and after the course (n=21), nearly 75% of participants felt confident to join a committee, speak up, or ask a question after the training, compared to 10-20% before the course
- ♦ All (100%) of surveyed participants felt that after the training they *'can help the community understand more about people with intellectual disabilities or an ABI'*

**Aim 2: Build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in decision making processes within government departments and community organisations by providing opportunities for mentoring, skills development, training and hands on experience.**

- ♦ VATT provides further training, support, and participation opportunities for graduates after the course
- ♦ Ten (10) graduates were mentored and supported to co-facilitate VATT training courses
- ♦ Six (6) graduates have co-facilitated VATT training for organisations
- ♦ Nearly half of all graduates have been involved in civic participation options including membership of boards, committees, project advisory groups and participation in community consultations
- ♦ Graduates noted that on-going support from VATT staff was *'crucial to their success'*

VATT staff estimate that at least two hours of coaching and support is required for every hour of participation in a committee for a VATT graduate. The coaching and support activities can range from preparing the VATT graduate for the meeting, reviewing the agenda, considering who will be in attendance, reminding the graduate before the meeting, arranging transport and/or a support person. Similarly, VATT staff work with co-facilitator graduates to prepare before and debrief after training.

The factors which contribute to *Voice at the Table's* success in building the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to engage in civic processes include:

- providing training specifically for cohorts of people with cognitive disabilities
- recognition of the importance that people with an ABI place on being in a group of peers
- an understanding that a 'fun' training environment reduces stress for participants
- delivery of the training in a physically and psychologically safe space for participants
- providing 'small step' opportunities for practice and experience to build confidence at the participant's own pace.

**Aim 3: Build the capacity of organisations to develop inclusive systems and practices which ensure people with cognitive disabilities can participate in civic processes on an equal and valid basis.**

The evaluation found:

- Successful delivery of professional development workshops on Inclusive Meeting Practice and Consumer Participation (delivered with VATT graduates co-facilitating)
- Successful delivery of coaching and consultation for organisations (either considering engaging a consumer advocate or had engaged one or more consumer advocates, either for a one-off consultation, a time-limited committee or an on-going committee)
- Successful delivery of presentations at industry events by consumer advocates

In total, eleven (11) *Inclusive Meeting Practice* workshops were delivered to a range of public and community sector organisations. The workshops were attended by 135 staff, associates, and volunteers of these organisations.

Seventy-five per cent (75%) or more of surveyed respondents found each element of the workshop (out of the four) 'very valuable'. The session with *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of meetings* video and the Top Ten Tips was considered 'very valuable' by 91% of respondents.

Five organisations engaging a VATT graduate were interviewed. They reported that:

- Recruiting consumer advocates through SARU and the VATT project gave them confidence that their work (project, research, change strategy) was informed by a process of genuine participation of people with lived experience, confidence that the consumer advocate was well-supported to participate and confidence that the organisation could seek advice and support through SARU.
- They had built a positive relationship with SARU and the VATT project, and that they would return to SARU in the future for relevant projects.

Findings from the thematic analysis of feedback from the five organisations include the following:

- adopting inclusive practices changed the way organisations conduct their meetings
- organisations reported that accessibility meeting practices benefit everyone on the committee
- participants have been involved in projects with direct and significant impacts on the community and in particular, initiatives which improve accessibility for people with disabilities
- when organisations take on inclusive practice and participation, the effects ripple within the organisation to change and improve their own practices
- when organisations take on inclusive practice and participation, the effects ripple to the wider sector
- as a result of their connections with organisations, VATT graduates have been asked to present to wider audiences, such as conferences and community forums
- SARU is a bridge between organisations seeking consumer input and consumer advocates
- the support provided by the Voice at the Table project staff is critical to the success of the organisational partnerships.

#### **Aim 4: Develop and promote a bank of civic and community participation and inclusive practice resources.**

The Voice at the Table project has created a website and developed and uploaded the following resources:

##### **Written resources:**

- Top Ten Tips for Organisations
- Consumer Participation Kit
- Engaging Consumer Advocates
- Examples of Easy English Agendas and Invitations

##### **Videos:**

- Brain Injury Matters talk about Voice at the Table
- Case Study Videos: Safer Care Victoria & VCOSS
- Meetings...The Good, the Bad and the Ugly
- Reinforce talk about why Voice at the Table is important

The VATT project reports that in 2018 there were:

- 1,011 users of the Voice at the Table website
- 5,473 web page views
- 150 copies of the Top Ten Tips distributed to the community sector
- 75 copies of the Top Ten Tips distributed to the public sector.

Current resources are viewed positively and are being used. There are two opportunities for future resource development:

- Easy English templates and resources
- Remuneration standards and guidelines

#### **Aim 5: Engage partners in order to deliver Voice at the Table in a local government/regional area.**

VATT partnered with New Wave Self Advocacy Group to host Voice at the Table training in Morwell, Gippsland in August 2018. A local Voice at the Table project worker was engaged to recruit and support participants, develop relationships with potential partner organisations in the region and support the logistics of the training. The training was co-facilitated by a past VATT graduate who lives in the region and the VATT Project Worker.

Three professional development workshops were delivered in Gippsland:

- one for staff at the Tipping Foundation
- two for the South Gippsland Shire Council staff and local community organisations

As a result of the Voice at the Table Training, one VATT graduate has been appointed to the Latrobe Health Assembly Community Reference Group and two VATT graduates participated in consumer consultations in Melbourne.

Guided by a strong commitment to self-evaluation, important lessons have also been learnt about implementing the project on an outreach basis to regional centres in Victoria.

#### **Aim 6: Develop and document the Voice at the Table model for supporting civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities.**

The project has built on the strengths and lessons of the pilot project and has been able to draw on the support of the self-advocates and SARU staff involved in first developing Voice at the Table. Through the evaluation the Voice at the Table model has been developed, and it is hoped that this will be tested and contribute to the growing knowledge and evidence base around the engagement of people with cognitive disabilities in civic processes.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The central success of the Voice at the Table, identified by staff and the project steering group, is that the project is driven by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. At every level the project empowers and engages people with disabilities:

- ♦ as participants in the Voice at the Table training
- ♦ as co-facilitators of training for people with disabilities and for organisations
- ♦ as members of the steering group
- ♦ as members of committees, boards, project advisory groups
- ♦ as participants in various public consultative processes
- ♦ as contributors to the development of resources
- ♦ as guides to project staff.

The project is the embodiment of the principle *‘Nothing about us without us’*.

Anecdotally, there is strong demand from organisations for VATT graduates. Further, the Voice at the Table project is ideally placed to support future government and sector directions including supporting:

- ♦ the Victorian government’s commitment to *‘providing opportunities for people with a disability to lead and contribute to public debate and influence change within government and communities.’*
- ♦ Information, Linkages and Capacity Building activities aiming to influence change so that people with disabilities have the skills and confidence to participate and contribute to the community and protect their rights, participate in and benefit from the same community activities as everyone else and actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community.

The evaluation can only conclude with the recommendation that the project continues to receive financial support from the Victorian government given its many contributions to government and communities.

Recommendation 1: That the Voice at the Table receives continued funding from the Victorian government, to enable the project to continue to build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to engage in civic processes and to build the capacity of organisations to implement genuine inclusive practices and systems.

Recommendation 2: That funding for the Voice at the Table project acknowledges staff time required to deliver the project and provide appropriate support to people with disabilities and to organisations engaging people with disabilities as self-advocates.

Recommendation 3: That the Voice at the Table project is provided with funding to investigate opportunities for collaborative research, resource development and training.

Recommendation 4: That the Voice at the Table project is provided with funding support to explore opportunities for implementing fees for services and other self-sustaining models of operation in the medium to long-term.

Recommendation 5: That the Voice at the Table project continues to improve its operations and implements the suggested improvements identified in the evaluation.

*“Organisations want to change, but often don’t know where to start.”*

(VATT Organisational partner)

*“I’ve been a volunteer for a number of things, but I’ve always felt that I’ve been a token member of organisations. Voice at the Table has taught me that I’m not a token member, I’m actually someone who can give. That I’m actually worth something. And I should be asked.”*

(VATT graduate)



# Introduction

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The 'Voice at the Table' is a civic participation project that aims to identify and address some of the barriers that people with cognitive disabilities face in exercising their right to civic, social and political participation.

## Voice at the Table overview

*Voice at the Table* aims to build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to participate in a range of civic and decision-making processes and to build the capacity of organisations to support increased civic participation. People with cognitive disabilities includes people with an acquired brain injury (ABI) and people with an intellectual disability (ID).

The specific aims of the Voice at the Table project are to:

1. Increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes in order to:
  - ♦ Raise issues that are important to them
  - ♦ Influence policies and agendas that take in to account their interests
  - ♦ Become more aware of their civic rights
  - ♦ Play a part in creating a society that is responsive to their needs
  - ♦ Be recognised as members of the community and as equal citizens.
2. Build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes within government departments and community organisations by providing opportunities for mentoring, skills development, training and hands-on experience.
3. Build the capacity of organisations to develop inclusive systems and practices which ensure people with cognitive disabilities can participate in civic processes on an equal and valued basis.
4. Develop and promote a bank of civic and community participation and inclusive practice resources

5. Engage partners in order to deliver Voice at the Table in a local government/regional area
6. Develop and document the Voice at the Table model for supporting civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities.

## Project management and governance

The project is run by the Self-Advocacy Resource Unit (SARU). The SARU Management Group is made up of representatives from disability-led organisations: Brain Injury Matters, Reinforce Self Advocacy group, start Community Arts and Action for More Independence and Dignity in Accommodation (AMIDA).

Voice at the Table is a project of SARU, and AMIDA is the auspice body for the project.

The project is guided by the Voice at the Table Project Steering Group which includes two Voice at the Table graduates and representatives from:

- ♦ AMIDA
- ♦ Brain Injury Matters
- ♦ Reinforce
- ♦ SARU
- ♦ the Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability (VALID), and
- ♦ the Office for Disability, DHHS.

## Timelines

The project commenced in July 2017 and current project funding will conclude in June 2019.

## Project funding

The project is funded by the Victorian Office for Disability and the Department of Health and Human Services.

## Voice at the Table Evaluation

### Purpose

Effective Change was commissioned by SARU to conduct an external evaluation of the Voice at the Table project in early 2018. The purpose of the evaluation is to:

- ensure a process of continual improvement during the project delivery.
- create a model for best practice in relation to supporting real and equal civic participation for people with cognitive disabilities
- develop a final report for funding providers.

### Governance

The evaluation was overseen by the Voice at the Table Steering Committee who acted as the Evaluation Working Group. The Voice at the Table Coordinator provided day-to-day management of the evaluation.



# Project background and overview

This section sets out the project history and an overview of the elements and activities of the Voice at the Table project.

## Project history

The Voice at the Table pilot project was undertaken by SARU in 2016. The project aimed to increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities sitting on boards, committees and advisory groups with government, community and mainstream organisations. A consumer representative training course for people with cognitive disabilities - 'Voice at the Table' - was developed in the pilot project.

The course was delivered twice to a total of 21 participants with cognitive disabilities.

## Voice at the Table 2018

The Voice at the Table project builds on the successes of the pilot project and retains the aim of increasing the participation of people with cognitive disabilities in civic and decision-making processes. Funding of the current project has enabled SARU to:

- review and update the Voice at the Table training material and tailor the training for participants with an ID or an ABI
- develop refresher training for Voice at the Table graduates
- provide individualised coaching and support for graduates who want to develop their facilitation skills
- design professional development workshops for organisations, boards and committees on Inclusive Meeting Practice and Consumer Participation
- develop consumer participation resources for organisations, boards and committees to support meaningful participation of people with cognitive disabilities
- design and develop a website for the Voice at the Table project and resources
- engage with a regional partner to deliver Voice at the Table training in Gippsland.

## Project resourcing

The Voice at the Table team consists of a Project Coordinator and a Project Worker. A Regional Project Worker was employed on a part-time basis to support the Regional Voice at the Table Pilot in Gippsland. A part-time Inclusion Support Worker was engaged in late 2018 to support VATT graduates. SARU and AMIDA have provided supervision and administrative support to the project team. People with disabilities were engaged by Voice at the Table as consultants, presenters and peer advisors to assist the project.

## Project elements

The Voice at the Table project comprises four key elements:

- training and skills development for people with cognitive disabilities
- Inclusive Meeting Practice training for organisations
- resources for participants and organisations
- support for consumer advocates and participating organisations.

## Training and skills development

### Voice at the Table training

The Voice at the Table training course is a six-day training course, with some flexibility on days/hours per day. The course is tailored to meet the needs of participants with an ID or an ABI. The training is co-facilitated by project staff and a consumer graduate of the Voice at the Table training.

The course is designed in modules, and the content broadly covers the following topics:

Unit	Topics
1	You are the expert Nothing about Us without Us

Unit	Topics
2	Consumer Participation Ladder of Participation Consumer Representation
3	Social Model of Disability Making Change happen Meetings and having your voice heard First Steps: Deciding yes or no
4	Top Tips for before your first meeting Your first meeting Speaking up The good, the bad and the ugly of meetings Tool kit for managing emotions
5	Raising Issues Doing it for real! Meeting a politician
6	Advising and Consulting Networking Using the Media

### Refresher training and skills development

In addition to the Voice at the Table course, project staff developed and delivered the following series of shorter workshops and skills-based training sessions:

- ♦ Re-engagement Session
- ♦ ID Refresher Design
- ♦ Top Tips for before your first meeting
- ♦ Your first meeting
- ♦ Speaking up
- ♦ Story Telling
- ♦ Reflective Practice
- ♦ Facilitation Methods

### Training for organisations

#### Inclusive Meeting Practice and Consumer Participation training

Inclusive Meeting Practice training for organisations, boards and committees is a half-day workshop co-facilitated by a Voice at the Table graduate/consumer advocate and the Project Coordinator.

### Voice at the Table resources

The project has adapted and developed a range of inclusive practice resources for community, government and mainstream organisations including:

- ♦ Top Ten Tips for Organisations
- ♦ Consumer Participation Kit
- ♦ Video: Meetings - The Good, The Bad & The Ugly
- ♦ Video: Brain Injury Matters talk about Voice at the Table
- ♦ Video: Reinforce talk about why Voice at the Table is important
- ♦ Engaging Consumer Advocates
- ♦ Examples of Easy English Agendas and Invitations
- ♦ Videos: Case Study Videos

The resources are available from the Voice at the Table website, which also includes information about the project.

### Support for Voice at the Table consumer advocates and participating organisations

Voice at the Table project staff provide on-going and individualised support, coaching, mentoring and advice for participants and for organisations.

# Project evaluation

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An evaluation framework was developed to guide the evaluation, using a mixed method approach. A process and outcome evaluation was undertaken, to ensure that the project was continuously evaluated and improved during implementation.

## Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation is to provide an independent assessment of the Voice at the Table project and evaluate the effectiveness of the Voice at the Table activities: training for people with cognitive disabilities, the training provided for organisations, resource development and partnership engagement. In addition, the purpose of the evaluation is to:

- Support a process of continual improvement during the project delivery
- Create a model of practice for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities, in collaboration with SARU.

## Key evaluation questions

The evaluation has been guided by the following six key evaluation questions aligned with the Voice at the Table project aims:

- Has the number of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes increased as a result of the project?
- Has the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes been enhanced as a result of the project?
- Has the capacity of organisations to support increased civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities been enhanced as a result of the project?
- Have inclusive practice resources been developed and promoted?
- Has a regional partner been engaged to support the delivery of the Voice at the Table activities in a regional area?
- Has a model of practice for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with

cognitive disabilities been developed from the project and its evaluation?

A summary of the evaluation framework is provided as Attachment 1. The full evaluation framework (Attachment 2) sets out the evaluation questions, aligned with measures of success, the source of information to answer the evaluation questions and the data collection methods.

## Methods and analysis

The key methods for data collection for the evaluation include:

### Desk-based review

Desk-based review of Voice at the Table training material and resources, governance documents and other relevant literature.

### Surveys

Pre and post-training surveys were undertaken with Voice at the Table training participants. The survey was completed by 21 of the 30 training participants (including a mix of participants from the ID and ABI courses).

A short, post-workshop 'reaction' survey was administered after the Inclusive Practice workshop. The reaction survey was completed by 92 participants from eight (8) workshops held at a range of organisations throughout 2018.

Longer, post-Inclusive Practice workshop surveys were undertaken with organisations partnering with Voice at the Table on specific projects. These surveys were completed by 21 participants from two organisations.

### Group discussions

Group discussions were facilitated with Voice at the Table graduates:

- ♦ Focus group discussions with six (6) Voice at the Table graduates with an ABI and five (5) graduates with an ID
- ♦ Focus group discussion with three (3) Voice at the Table graduates who have co-facilitated training
- ♦ Group discussion with the Voice at the Table Steering Committee

#### Key stakeholder interviews

Telephone or face-to-face interviews were conducted with the following staff from organisations engaging with Voice at the Table:

- ♦ Community Engagement Coordinator - Screening, Early Detection and Immunisation Program, Cancer Council Victoria
- ♦ Senior Research Associate, Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne
- ♦ Senior Learning and Development Officer, Disability Services Commissioner
- ♦ Client Voice – Lead, Transport Accident Commission (TAC)
- ♦ Project Coordinator - Strengthening Sector Resilience and Coordinator, Disability Advocacy Resource Unit, Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)
- ♦ Self Advocacy Project Worker, New Wave Gippsland

A face to face interview was held with the Voice at the Table Project Coordinator and Voice at the Table Project Worker.

#### Reflective practice diaries

The three project staff maintained reflective practice diaries throughout the year, with prompts and questions to address provided by the evaluator. The staff diaries were provided to the evaluator for review at the end of 2018.

#### Analysis

Data collected through all methods has been collated and analysed against the key and sub-evaluation questions.

### Report

This evaluation report provides the background to and context for the Voice at the Table project. The evaluation findings address progress towards achieving the aims of the project. The evaluation report is organised into the five evaluation domains:

- ♦ People
- ♦ Organisations
- ♦ Resources
- ♦ Regional Voice at the Table Partner
- ♦ Voice at the Table practice model.

The report concludes with a discussion of its overall contribution and recommendations for the future.

# Project rationale

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Historically, people with cognitive disabilities have not been provided with the opportunity to act as representatives, inform policy development or to have real input into decision making. This section sets out the human rights foundations for civic participation.

## Experiences of people with cognitive disabilities participating in civic processes

On the rare occasion people with cognitive disabilities have the opportunity to provide representation many express strong concerns about the process. They often find that meetings are not run in ways that support real inclusion, information is not accessible and their opinions, while listened to, are frequently not acted on leading to feelings of disenfranchisement.<sup>1</sup>

The voice of people with cognitive disabilities is often the least heard due to a range of societal attitudes fueled by myths and misconceptions. These attitudes often lead to exclusionary practices particularly when it comes to having an equal 'voice at the table'.<sup>2</sup>

### Barriers to participation

People with cognitive disabilities face multiple barriers to achieving equal and meaningful civic participation, including:

- information not available in accessible formats
- organisational attitudes and perceptions
- inaccessible meeting practices
- spoken and written language in meetings is inaccessible eg. jargon, acronyms
- staff attitudes and perceptions
- support needs not addressed<sup>3</sup>
- limited availability of training and resources
- few opportunities to practice learned skills

- limited understanding of the challenges faced by people with cognitive disabilities particularly in relation to civic participation.<sup>4</sup>

## Civic participation is a human right

Civic participation is a right that applies to everyone.

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states that '*every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity... to take part in the conduct of public affairs... vote and to be elected... and to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service*'.

Article 29 of The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) requires Governments to '*ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others*'.

Article 9 requires Governments to '*take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, ... and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public*'. It states that they must identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility.

Article 21 demands that we '*take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion... on an equal basis with others*'.

<sup>1</sup> <https://voiceatthetable.com.au/resources/consumer-participation-kit/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://voiceatthetable.com.au/resources/consumer-participation-kit/consumer-representatives/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://voiceatthetable.com.au/about-us/vatt-community-organisations/>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Parker Harris et al



*'Disabled people in the past, they've had government legislators and academics and people who claim to know all about it, pontificating and legislating, but really – 'Nothing about us without us'. Our opinion is so important.'*

VATT graduate (Pilot program)

## Civic participation is government policy

Civic participation of people with disability is policy both for the Australian government and the Victorian government. The *National Disability Strategy 2010-2020* endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments states: *'People with disabilities have lived experience of disability and must play a central role in shaping and implementing policies, programs and services that affect them.'*

The First Principle of the National Disability Strategy is: *'Involvement of people with disability—the views of people with disabilities are central to the design, funding, delivery and evaluation of policies, programs and services which impact on them, with appropriate support and adjustment for participation.'*

*Absolutely Everyone*, the Victorian State disability plan 2017-2020 states: *'Voting, running as a candidate in an election, and participating in political parties, interest groups and activist movements are examples of civic participation. Input into decisions and policy making by government at all levels is another key civic process. People with a disability, particularly people with an intellectual disability, are under-represented in these civic activities.'*

Action 24 of *Absolutely Everyone* states that: *'People with a disability have much to contribute to civic life, yet they are excluded from decisions that affect them and the broader community. We are committed to providing opportunities for people with a disability to lead and contribute to public debate and influence change within government and communities.'*

## The policy context – now and in the future

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is a new way of providing support to people with disabilities across Australia. It includes:

- Individual NDIS plans for eligible people
- Information, Linkages and Capacity Building – for all people with disability.

Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) will be implemented in Victoria in 2019 by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). The goals of ILC are that<sup>6</sup>:

- People with disability have the ability to achieve their goals
- People with disability are included in all aspects of community life.

Participating in civic processes is a key aspect to achieving inclusion in community life.

There is considerable alignment between the aims of Voice at the Table, and the activities of Information, Linkages and Capacity Building. For example, Information, Linkages and Capacity Building activities aim to influence change so that people with disabilities:

- Have the skills and confidence to participate and contribute to the community and protect their rights
- Participate in and benefit from the same community activities as everyone else
- Actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community.

*'People with disability don't just want to be present in the community – they want to be active agents in it. That will only happen when genuine partnerships are forged between people with disability and the community...'*

Source: About ILC <https://ilctoolkit.ndis.gov.au/about-ilc>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ilctoolkit.ndis.gov.au/about-ilc>



# Evaluation Findings

This section reports the findings of the Voice at the Table evaluation. The findings are presented against the aims of the Voice at the Table project.

## People

The first aim of the Voice at the Table project is to **increase the number** of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes

### Participation in Voice at the Table training and refresher training

Table 1 presents the details of Voice at the Table training delivered and the level of participation.

SARU delivered four Voice at the Table courses to a total of **30** participants with cognitive disabilities throughout 2018. Three courses were held in Melbourne at Ross House, and one course was delivered in Gippsland, working with New Wave Gippsland, SARU's regional partner.

Twenty-one people (21) completed the pilot Voice at the Table training courses in 2016. With the courses held in 2018, a further 30 people with a cognitive disability received training bringing the total number of Voice at the Table graduates to **51**.

The four refresher training sessions and workshops for VATT graduates were attended by 27 participants.

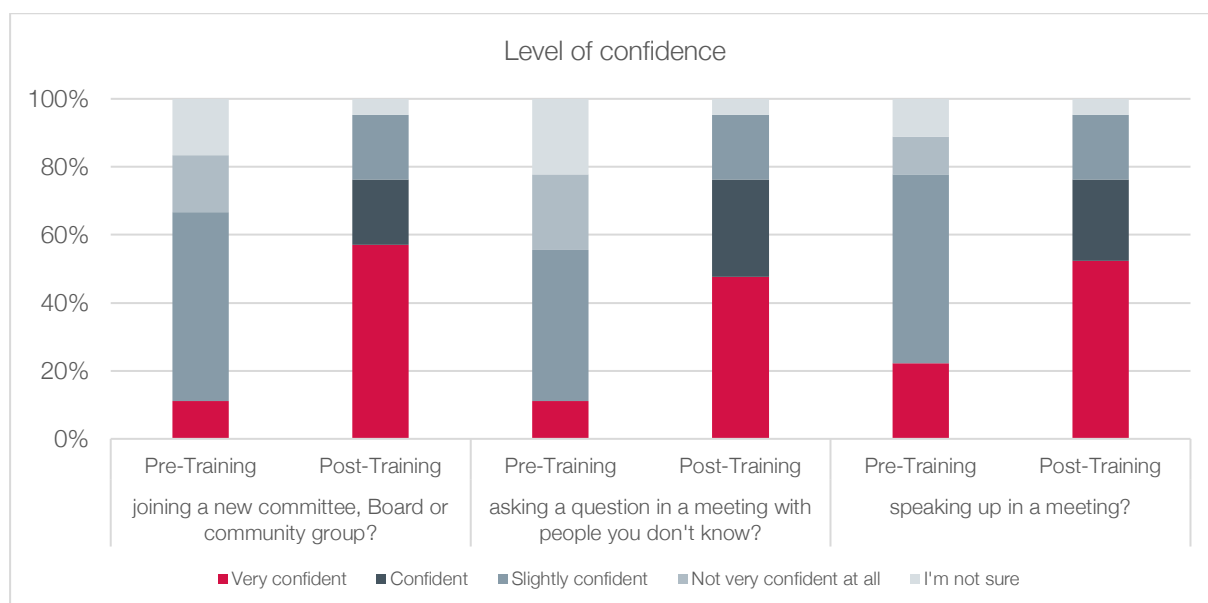
*\*Note:* As some graduates attended two or more sessions, the total number of *people* participating in further skills development was seventeen (17), comprising fourteen (14) graduates of the 2016 Voice at the Table training who were joined by three new participants.

Table 1: Voice at the Table: Training and workshops

Voice at the Table: Training and workshops		Number of participants
VATT training for people with cognitive disabilities		
May	Participants with an ID	7
August	Participants with an ID (Gippsland)	8
August	Participants with an ABI	8
Sept	Participants with an ABI	7
Total:		30
Refresher training for VATT graduates		
April	Refresher training for graduates with an ID	8
Mar	Refresher training for graduates with an ABI	7
Workshops		
April	'Reflective Practice for graduates with an ABI	4
April	'Facilitation' workshop for graduates with an ABI	8
Total:		27*

### Changes in confidence and knowledge

Voice at the Table participants were asked in their pre-training survey to rate their level of confidence to join a committee, speak up in a meeting or ask a question. They were then asked to rate their confidence on these same items after the training. Graph 1 sets out these results, and it shows that there is a clear increase in the number of participants who feel



Graph 1: Pre and post training levels of confidence

very confident or confident to participate in these activities after the training. Approximately 75% of participants felt confident after the training, compared to 10-20% before the training. Whilst confidence levels increased for almost all participants, there was still a level of hesitance for some. Around 25% of participants were 'slightly confident' or 'not very confident at all' after the training.

Table 2 provides the results to the post-training survey question – *What did you get from the VATT training?* A range of options were provided for respondents to select from.

Table 2: What did you get from the VATT training?

What did you get from the VATT training? (n=21)	#
Feel I can help the community understand more about people with an ABI/ID	21
Feel more confident to join a committee or Board	20
Meeting skills	19
Understand more about being part of a committee or Board	18
Understand how to speak up for people with an ABI/ID	18
Understand how committees, Boards and community groups work	18

Respondents self-reported gaining skills and understanding around how a committee works,

how to be part of a committee and meeting skills. Most importantly, as shown in Table 2, after the training all participants reported that they feel they *'can help the community understand more about people with intellectual disabilities or an ABI.'*

Graduates in the focus group discussions provided succinct examples of the practical things they learned in the training:

- *How to make your voice heard. For example, if you have a question, ask a question.*
- *Do your homework, be prepared.*
- *Liaise with the chairperson*
- *Build contact with others on the committee*
- *Let everyone have their say*
- *Stipulate what you need, eg. handouts in large print, timing, transport.*

Participants also learned, for example, that they:

- could request a support person to attend meetings with them
- could request payment to attend meetings.

*'I was always worried I wouldn't make myself understood. But in the training, you learn that it's ok to say, 'Could you please explain that to me because I don't understand.'*

VATT graduate

**Aim 2: Build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities** to actively engage in decision-making processes within government departments and community organisations by providing opportunities for mentoring, skills development, training and hands-on experience.

### Building the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities

Participation in Voice at the Table training alone does not signify that someone can effectively and fully engage in civic processes or that they want to do this. This is especially true for people with cognitive disabilities, as readiness to participate in civic processes may depend on a range of factors, such as the person's confidence and level of experience with formal committees, the nature of their cognitive disability, their physical and mental health, their continued interest, their mobility or access to public transport and their living and economic circumstances. People may also have undertaken the training out of curiosity and then decided it was 'not for them' or the opportunities available may not be of interest. For example, when contacted about re-engaging with Voice at the Table, one-third of the 2016 graduates were not interested or not able to re-engage for reasons such as moving interstate or a change in their circumstances.

#### Evaluation of capacity-building

The evaluation has measured whether the Voice at the Table project has contributed to building the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to engage in civic processes based on evidence of:

- ♦ engagement in a range of processes
- ♦ self-assessment of graduates
- ♦ the observations of organisations providing hands-on experience.

#### Engagement of Voice at the Table graduates

##### Co-facilitation of Voice at the Table training

An important focus for the Voice at the Table project was to provide further training, support and opportunities for graduates who were ready, willing and able to extend their skills.

These include:

- ♦ Ten (10) graduates were mentored and supported to co-facilitate Voice at the Table training courses
- ♦ Each of these graduates co-facilitated at least one course during 2018
- ♦ Six graduates have co-facilitated Voice at the Table training for organisations
- ♦ Four graduates have co-facilitated more than one course.

##### Engagement in civic and decision-making processes

Almost half of the VATT graduates (n=23) from 2016 and 2018 have participated in one of a range of civic participation options. (see Attachment 3) These include membership of council and community organisation boards and committees, project advisory groups, participation in consultations and roundtables, contributing to guiding the VATT project and presentations to conferences and forums. Four VATT graduates have registered their interest in board positions for various organisations.

Of the 23 VATT graduates who have been involved in various civic participation activities:

- ♦ Twelve (12) people have been involved in one to three activities
- ♦ Five (5) people have been involved in four to six activities
- ♦ Two (2) people have been involved in seven to ten activities
- ♦ Four (4) people have been involved in eleven up to twenty activities.

The VATT graduates involved in multiple activities have undertaken activities as wide-ranging as co-facilitating training, making presentations to conferences, industry forums and to groups of trainees, joining Advisory Boards and committees and participating in focus groups.

##### Feedback from VATT graduates

Voice at the Table graduates who participated in the focus groups reinforced the survey results that show increases in participants' skills, knowledge and confidence. Through the group

discussions, more detail and insight was gathered about how the training, mentoring and other support from Voice at the Table helped to build the capacity of participants to actively engage in decision-making processes.

A number of participants highlighted that through the training *'knowing what our rights are, what to ask for in meetings'* helped build their confidence to have a go and get involved.

On-going support from the VATT project staff was important in maintaining people's confidence and momentum - knowing that there was someone available to provide advice if needed.

The most important and valuable strategy for building capacity however was experience itself. Participants who were involved in various committees reported that each time they had a 'gig' on a board, committee or group, the experience and responsibility helped to build their confidence, and often led to 'other gigs' and opportunities.

As an example of her development, one of the Voice at the Table co-facilitators highlighted, that with the experience of co-facilitating several courses, she could now work without relying on reading from paper or the ipad. *'That's huge for me. I'm starting to remember the part.'*

Experienced facilitators provided a range of examples to demonstrate their skill development. For example, when explaining the 'ladder of civic participation' in training sessions, one participant *'used to have it all written down. Now I use stories from my own life.'* Another participant talked about learning to deal with difficult questions in a group by first of all repeating the question and checking on their understanding to 'buy thinking time' first. If too hard, the participant would pass it over to their co-facilitator.

Participants reported taking up opportunities independently of Voice at the Table support with groups such as neighbourhood houses, Ambulance Victoria, the Lost Dog's Home, and a support group for children with an ABI.

The quality of experiences, as well as quantity, is

important in sustaining and encouraging participants to get involved in civic processes. Knowing that their voice is important, and is being heard, is highly valued by participants, as the following comments indicate:

- *What I'm loving is that people actually want to hear what we have to say.*
- *It taught us, 'We are the experts. We are the ones to tell our stories.'*
- *For me, I found I was helping people – but I didn't realise I was doing that.*
- The (organisation) was *'lapping up the feedback'* (about how to deliver better service to people with disabilities).

#### Feedback from participating organisations

Stakeholders representing five organisations that had engaged a VATT graduate on a committee or advisory group were asked to comment generally on their skills, knowledge, confidence and capacity to participate in decision-making processes. In order to provide confidentiality for the VATT graduates, feedback from all stakeholders is combined. All feedback received about VATT graduates was positive. Comments on VATT graduates' specific skills and knowledge are provided below.

#### Meeting skills:

- Well-trained in meeting skills
- Well-prepared for meetings
- Very professional
- Experienced in the role of an advocate, with great networks and doing really interesting work with a range of organisations
- Great understanding of the role of a consumer representative.

#### Contributions to discussions:

- Shared her thoughts in a really positive and respectful way.
- Contributed 'lived experiences' in really relevant and important ways
- Came with clear issues to raise in the discussion – 'ready to roll' as soon as they joined the group
- Challenged us -in a good way. She had a really well-rounded way of giving feedback

### Skills and confidence:

- ♦ Good communication skills
- ♦ Really connected with the group.
- ♦ Able to state personal limitations, ask if anything was needed which made it really easy to work together
- ♦ Confident speaking up in meetings.

### What works and why?

#### Providing training specifically for cohorts of people with cognitive disabilities

Participants reported how important it was to be with a group of people with similar 'lived experiences' and that the training was facilitated by skilled trainers who 'understood their issues':

- ♦ *The way it was delivered took account of our issues – it wasn't rushed - plenty of breaks, time to chat and muck around.*
- ♦ *The training was informative, well-organised, inclusive and conscious of ABI limitations.*

#### Being in a group of peers is especially important for people with ABI

- ♦ *Being together as a group, with no judgement, and hearing other's stories and telling your story, is very empowering.*
- ♦ *Usually takes me ages to feel comfortable in a new group, but here it was instant*
- ♦ *Good meeting others with ABI – first time in eight years.*

#### Making it fun reduces stress

Participants reported that the training was 'fun and not boring' and that it was delivered with a sense of humour. *'We were all able to relax and enjoy.'* Some participants were socially isolated, so taking public transport to the city for training with a group of people they had never met was a daunting prospect. The trainers ensured that the training was engaging and relaxed, and this contributed to people attending across the four days, despite the challenges.

#### Creating a physically and psychologically safe space for participants

Tailored training material delivered by skilled trainers at the safe and often familiar space of

Ross House, provides a safe physical and psychological space for participants. *'Every person was considered and heard...'*

#### Providing 'small step' opportunities for practice and experience

VATT offers graduates a range of 'small step' internal opportunities, for example, reviewing new resources or training modules. It provides graduates vital practice in undertaking a group-based task, but it is in a safe group of peers in a familiar environment. However 'small' the opportunity, experience is gained and confidence built. Over time, they may be ready for external opportunities. If not, the advocate is still engaged in civic participation processes and working with an organisation which values their contribution.

#### On-going coaching and support is essential for VATT graduates taking the next step

VATT staff estimate that at least two hours of coaching and support is required for every hour of participation in a committee for a VATT graduate. The coaching and support activities can range from supporting the VATT graduate to prepare for the meeting, reviewing the agenda, considering who will be in attendance, reminding the graduate before the meeting, arranging transport and/or a support person. Similarly, VATT staff work with co-facilitator graduates to prepare before and debrief after training.

While the support tasks are similar for each graduate, the individual needs of each graduate needs to be considered – for example, one person may struggle with public transport, another with early meetings, reading, noise, crowded rooms, long days and so on. People with an ABI can be high-functioning, and if not linked to someone who understands their limits, their needs can be underestimated. As one participant reported: *'In theory, I am very confident, but in practice I have a tendency to feel very confused at times, so, in that I'm not that confident. The nature of my brain injury is that I'm very clear thinking, but I find it hard to clearly communicate.'*

VATT aims to provide this individualised support to assist all graduates taking up participation opportunities. The graduates who are being coached and mentored were particularly appreciative of the support they received from Voice at the Table staff. The staff were described as *'great – kind and gentle. When we go over something, it is suggestions rather than directions.'*

### The 'whole package'

The combination of elements described above - tailored training, on-going coaching and support of Voice at the Table project staff, the strong connection to SARU - are key to the Voice at the Table's successful outcomes.

### What could be improved or strengthened?

As participants were highly satisfied overall with the training, their suggestions for improvement were minimal.

ABI participants in particular would like more opportunities to come together as a group after the training and to have continued contact as a group, for example, every six months. Some suggested it could be through a client portal or closed group forum. *'As a group, the most powerful thing is solving problems together'*.

Suggestions for changes included:

- more use of reminders and resources in the training material
- preparing a curriculum vitae / biography as an exercise during the training
- receiving advice on dealing with pre and post-ABI work experience
- role-playing a meeting.

### Opportunities for the future

Participants felt that the training could be rolled out more broadly. They noted that a range of community and public sector organisations had linked with Voice at the Table, but they felt there were opportunities to link with the private sector (eg. banks, airlines) and hospitals and emergency departments.

## Organisations

**Aim 3: Build the capacity of organisations** to develop inclusive systems and practices which ensure people with cognitive disabilities can participate in civic processes on an equal and valued basis.

### Capacity-building with organisations

A range of strategies have been deployed to build the capacity of organisations to develop inclusive systems and practices. These include:

- Delivery of professional development workshops on Inclusive Meeting Practice and Consumer Participation (delivered with VATT graduates co-facilitating)
- Coaching and consultation for organisations (either considering engaging a consumer advocate or had engaged one or more consumer advocates, either for a one-off consultation, a time-limited committee or an on-going committee)
- Presentations at industry events by consumer advocates.

### Evaluation of capacity-building

The evaluation has measured whether the Voice at the Table project has contributed to building the capacity of organisations to develop inclusive systems and practices based on evidence of:

- engagement of organisations in professional development workshops
- feedback from workshop participants
- qualitative feedback from five organisations who received coaching and consultation support in the context of engaging consumer advocate(s).

### Engagement of organisations in professional development workshops

Table 3 presents the details of professional development workshops delivered and the level of participation. In total, eleven (11) Inclusive Meeting Practice workshops were delivered to a range of public and community sector organisations. The workshops were attended by **135** staff, associates and volunteers of these



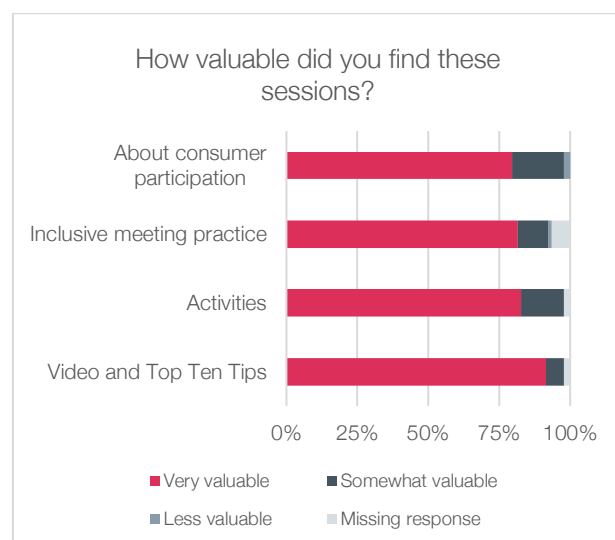
organisations. Most workshops were provided for the staff of the specified organisation with a number of network organisations included in the workshops, such as the workshops for Melbourne University, National Disability Services and South Gippsland Shire Council and community leaders. Other workshops for various Project Advisory Groups included members from a range of organisations, such as the workshops for the Disability Services Commissioner and for the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS).

Table 3: Organisations hosting Inclusive Practice workshops and number of participants

Organisation	Number of participants
Cancer Council Victoria and BreastScreen Victoria	11
Disability Services Commissioner	10
Footscray Community Arts Centre	9
Melbourne University	23
National Disability Services	16
Ross House Committee of Management	4
South Gippsland Shire Council	8
South Gippsland Shire Council and community group leaders	12
Tipping Foundation	16
Transport Accident Commission (TAC)	16
Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS)	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>

### Feedback from workshop participants

The reaction survey was completed by 92 participants. As Graph 2 shows, 75% or more of survey respondents found each session 'very valuable'. The session with *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of meetings* video and the Top Ten Tips was considered very valuable by 91% of respondents.



Graph 2: Workshop participant responses - How valuable did you find these sessions?

### Changes and improvements to the workshop

Participants had very few suggestions to improve the workshop. Approximately one-quarter of respondents reported that their only suggestion would be making the workshop longer, thus allowing more time for discussions, role plays and activities.

Other suggested changes included:

- more practical tips and information
- more activities
- more information about working with people with complex and profound disabilities.

Some minor suggestions were made around:

- improving the PowerPoint presentation and handouts
- adding a new handout on Easy English
- starting with a preferred language for discussing disability
- having a short break to aid concentration.

### Overarching feedback

Overall, the feedback from the 92 participants was overwhelmingly positive. Participants' commented on:

- the overall structure, facilitation, pace and mix of information and activities:  
*Fantastic facilitation and a lot of activities to experience the learnings in real time!*
- the VATT co-facilitators:

*Community presenters' lived experience made the workshop come to life.*

- the practical tips and information:  
*Thank you for giving me PRACTICAL tips to make tangible improvements.*
- new insights gained into the experience of disability:  
*I'm now conscious of everyday barriers for consumers and I'll be thinking about how we best include consumers in (our) work.*
- the 'safe space' created for learning:  
*Helpful to have such an open, responsive space to explore these ideas in.*
- the good humour of the session:  
*Loved the humour in the room and the playfulness of the presenters.*

One participant reported that *'This session inspired me to write a whole new chapter in my PhD!'* Others wanted the training taken further afield:

- *This should be rolled out to all service providers*
- *All amazing. I wish Parliament would do this training to talk to them about including everyone in decisions/policies/laws.*

*'You are doing important work very well. Thank you.'*

Inclusive Meeting Practice Workshop participant

*'Voice at the Table is changing the way professionals see people with cognitive disabilities. Great job!'*

Inclusive Meeting Practice Workshop participant

### Feedback from organisations

Five organisations were interviewed about their experience in working with Voice at the Table. These organisations were selected from the 27 organisations which Voice at the Table supported or worked with in 2018, as they were significant projects, with a high level of engagement of Voice at the Table graduates and they received high levels of contact and coaching support from VATT project staff.

### About the organisations and their contact with Voice at the Table

The organisations interviewed are listed below, with the project or purpose for engaging consumer advocate(s) through Voice at the Table.

Organisation	Project / focus
Cancer Council Victoria	Seeking consumer advocates for advisory group: <i>Increasing Participation and Access to Cancer Screening</i>
Disability Services Commissioner (DSC)	Seeking consumer advocates for research project advisory group: <i>Preventing abuse before it starts: Building safe and respectful cultures</i>
Melbourne Social Equity Institute	Seeking consumer advocates for two research project advisory groups: <i>Thanks a bundle: Improving support and access to online telecommunications products for consumers with cognitive disabilities</i> <i>Thriving Communities: Better support for consumers with decision-making impairments</i>
Transport Accident Commission (TAC)	Seeking consumer advocates for working group: <i>Developing the TAC 'Client Voice Framework' and resources</i>
VCOSS	Seeking consumer advocates for project advisory group: <i>Strengthening Sector Resilience</i>

The organisations approached SARU with a request to recruit consumer advocates for their project advisory groups through a range of pathways. Cancer Council Victoria, for example, was referred to SARU by DHHS. Others, such as VCOSS and the Disability Services Commissioner knew SARU through sector networks but were not as aware of the Voice at the Table project, and the availability of a pool of Voice at the Table graduates. All organisations were delighted that their request could be forwarded to a group of interested and trained consumer advocates. Projects such as the Melbourne Social Equity Institute research projects and the TAC Client Voice work also involved consumer advocates recruited through other pathways.



Each project was undertaking research or service improvement work which had significant implications for the future of service provision to people with disabilities.

### Organisational support provided

All organisations received the 'Top Ten Tips' resource and undertook the *Inclusive Meeting Practice* training. Most organisations undertook the training before their project started or treated the training as the first meeting of their project/advisory group. With Melbourne Social Equity Institute, the Inclusive Meeting Practice training was held as an open training event for Melbourne University, and thus included staff from a range of disciplines and schools.

### Impacts

#### Inclusive Meeting Practice Training

Organisations reported that it was of great benefit to start their project with Inclusive Meeting Practice training. TAC, for example, reported that there was a 'real shift' in staff thinking about running inclusive meetings after the training. The training, facilitated by VATT graduates and the VATT Coordinator:

- was informative and provided the organisation with practical tips and ideas
- allowed the group to establish inclusive meeting practices from the outset
- provided the group with an understanding of how Voice at the Table works.

#### An inclusive practice approach is both unifying and equalising

Organisations reported that some of the most important impacts of the training were on a human level. Meeting the co-facilitators '*made it personal. We could put faces to the communities we're working with.*'

As the training provides an opportunity to meet individual group members, everyone started with a personal connection. One organisation reported that it meant that members connected on a personal level – 'the lady with the dog' rather than 'the Deputy CEO'. The TAC reported that it gave members the skills to 'get out of

*TAC-land and just meet people as you would at a social occasion*'.

These impacts not only allowed the group to 'form' through personal connections, it also helped to address some of the unspoken and possibly unconscious power imbalances in the group, by putting everyone on an equal footing.

*'Because we know what we're talking about and I mean, if you're talking about us, why not include us?'*

VATT graduate

#### Adopting inclusive practices changed the way meetings were conducted

All organisations reported making a number of changes to their meetings:

- minutes and agendas were kept simple - written in Easy English or plain language, avoiding jargon, acronyms, too much written information or complicated ideas
- agendas were restricted to a limited number of items
- the meetings included more conversation than usual
- the set up and pace of the meetings were kept relaxed
- the key staff contact usually met with the VATT community advocate before meetings to review the agenda and after meetings to debrief and check that the meeting and actions were understood.

#### Accessibility benefits everyone

Organisations reported that they found running accessible meetings not only ensured that the community advocate was genuinely engaged in the process, but the approach was of benefit for all members. Meetings were less bureaucratic and more personable, changing the tone from the start and improving the quality of the conversation. Reducing some of the stress often associated with meetings, and cutting down the amount of information, was perceived as a benefit for all. One organisation reported that: *Inclusive meetings are good for everyone, especially busy people. One of our members*

remarked that it was *'The best meeting I've ever been to...'*

### SARU's involvement gives confidence to all parties and improves the quality of the work

Organisations reported that recruiting consumer advocates through SARU and the Voice at the Table project, gives confidence to:

- *the VATT graduate* to participate, knowing they will be supported by Voice at the Table
- *the organisation*, knowing that the VATT graduate has provided informed consent to participate and that they will be supported throughout the process
- *the organisation / committee* that their work will be informed by a process of genuine participation of people with lived experience.

The Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (DARU) representative on the VCOSS *Strengthening Sector Resilience* committee reported that not knowing if support would be available was often a barrier to participation for people with disabilities. Further, DARU reported that lack of appropriate support is often the reason people with disabilities resign from committees.

On the other hand, organisations reported that they were confident that the Voice at the Table consumer advocates were genuinely enabled to participate in their various civic processes. For example:

- Cancer Council Victoria reported that the involvement of the VATT graduates *'gave us in-built checks and balances that we were doing it right'*
- Melbourne Social Equity Institute reported that because of the involvement of VATT graduates *'We felt more confident about the work we were doing.'*
- TAC reported that through SARU, they were able to access a group of six VATT graduates to come with 'fresh eyes' to test the Client Voice framework they were developing. *'It was a great thing to do, and getting the feedback really gave us confidence that we were on the right track.'*

If they had not engaged consumer advocates through SARU, the alternatives for the organisations consulted was advertising the role, usually through the assistance of various disability organisations or, in the case of the TAC, through their client base. The key difference in recruiting advocates through Voice at the Table is that graduates have received training to participate as an advocate and receive continued support to participate from SARU. All stakeholders observed that recruiting self-advocates who understood their role as a representative, were well supported and were confident and capable of contributing to the group was of particular benefit to their work.

*'Everyone brought such great expertise to the project...The VATT graduates added so much value to our projects.'*

Senior Research Associate  
Melbourne Social Equity Institute  
University of Melbourne

### Contributions of VATT graduates can take committees to unexpected places

A number of organisations reported that the contribution of Voice at the Table graduates nudged their projects and committees in unexpected directions. VCOSS, for example, changed the title of their Project Advisory Group to the 'Ideas Group' on the suggestion of VATT graduates. While a seemingly inconsequential change, it illustrates how a change suggested by a consumer advocate led to a change from a generic and bland title for the group to one which is concrete, descriptive of its purpose and easily understood by all members.

Cancer Council Victoria had planned to run a grant program but changed to a partnership project approach on the advice of the VATT graduate, as a more collaborative approach was seen to be more beneficial.

The involvement of Voice at the Table graduates in the DSC project fundamentally influenced how their research project was approached. The DSC held an information session for Voice at the Table graduates interested in participating on the *Preventing abuse before it starts* Advisory

Group. One graduate indicated that rather than participating on the Project Advisory Group she would like to be involved in the research component of the project. The DSC had not planned to recruit community researchers, however prompted by this suggestion, the research team agreed it would be a fruitful approach. Two interested VATT graduates were recruited as community researchers. They were paired with DSC staff also acting in the role of community researchers. The research team provided training for all community researchers. The pairs of researchers then undertook consultations with the target groups: people with disabilities, their parents and staff. The DSC reported that the engagement of community researchers with lived experience has been highly significant. Firstly, the approach models best practice in disability research. When people with disabilities, their parents and service provider staff are research subjects and they are interviewed by a researcher with lived experience, the DSC noted how *'empowering it is for everyone'* and how it demonstrates respectful, research relationships. The academics managing the project have observed that the information collected by the community researchers is *'so rich and deep'* largely as a result of involving people with lived experience in the research process.

*'I can't believe we didn't think of recruiting self-advocates as community researchers...Now that we have done this, we can't imagine ever doing this type of research any other way – it would be a backward step. Involving people with lived experience in the project has been amazing.'*

Senior Learning and Development Officer  
Disability Services Commissioner

Participants have been involved in projects with direct and significant impact to the community and in particular, improving accessibility

All projects involving VATT graduates had wide-reaching implications for the way organisations connect with people with disabilities or how services are provided to people with cognitive

and other disabilities. For example, VATT graduates contributed to:

- the development of TAC's framework for listening and responding to the 'client voice'
- improving support from telecommunication providers for people with cognitive disabilities
- improving access to cancer screening for people with disabilities
- preventing abuse in the disability sector
- providing support for disability information and advocacy services to transition to funding under the NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building.

Cancer Council Victoria reported that *'Our work with other communities has been better because of VATT.'*

When organisations take on inclusive practice and participation, the effects ripple within the organisation

Organisations reported that inclusive meeting practice training, and their experience applying this knowledge, also influenced the organisation's operations more generally. The VCOSS Ideas Group is chaired by the Deputy CEO, who now chairs every meeting using inclusive practice principles and approaches.

The Inclusive Practice Meetings training at Melbourne Social Equity Institute was an open session for staff working across Melbourne University. As a result, rather than one project officer developing inclusive practice skills and knowledge, it has *'embedded the skills and knowledge and connections across a range of disciplines in the university, which can then influence future research and teaching practice.'*

When the TAC undertook the Inclusive Meeting Practice training, in addition to staff who were members of the Client Voice Framework project advisory group, other staff were invited to participate, some of whom work directly with clients and others who do not have client contact, in acknowledgement that all TAC staff could benefit from knowledge of inclusive practice approaches.

### When organisations take on inclusive practice and participation, the effects ripple to the wider sector

The projects explored for the evaluation involved committee members drawn from organisations such as DHHS, the Office of the Public Advocate, the Transport Accident Commission, the National Disability Services and VALID. These organisations have the capacity and capability to influence and inform a wide range of organisations in their networks about inclusive practices and the benefits of involving people with cognitive disabilities in civic processes.

### The involvement of VATT graduates has often led to people with cognitive disabilities reaching a wider audience

A range of the projects provided direct examples of VATT graduates contributing to communicating information to wider audiences, such as:

- making a co-presentation on '*Cervical screening for women with disabilities*' to a forum of Victorian nurses
- emcee-ing at Melbourne Social Equity Institute's '*Thanks a Bundle*' project launch event. The report was launched by Australia's Disability Discrimination Commissioner, Alastair McEwin, and was prepared to assist the telecommunications industry improve access to online telecommunications information for consumers with cognitive disabilities.
- presenting to the 'Having a Say' conference about undertaking the community research on *Preventing abuse before it starts: Building safe and respectful cultures* for the DSC.

### SARU is a bridge between organisations seeking consumer input and consumer advocates

All organisations reported that they had built a positive relationship with SARU and the Voice at the Table project, and they would return to SARU in the future for relevant projects. Melbourne Social Equity Institute is involved in community-engaged, inter-disciplinary work and could envisage a strong, on-going relationship

with SARU. Further, they reported that the connection with SARU had enabled the Institute to build relationships with a range of other advocacy organisations such as Brain Injury Matters and VALID.

The Cancer Council Victoria also envisaged an on-going relationship between SARU and Cancer Council Victoria as a result of the project, for future relevant work.

The TAC has developed a strong relationship with SARU and envisages other opportunities will arise in the future. TAC also noted that they could refer TAC clients with an interest in advocacy roles to the Voice at the Table.

The DSC strongly hoped that the VATT project would continue and would definitely recruit more consumer advocates through SARU for any suitable projects in the future. However, the DSC will wind up operations from July 2019 upon full rollout of the NDIS in Victoria when their responsibilities will be transferred to the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission.

### Learnings

Organisations reported that they had learned a lot through their partnership with Voice at the Table. Examples of important learnings for organisations included:

- The importance of engaging and involving people with lived experience, and allowing time to develop relationships and understand what the organisation may need to do to ensure their meeting and other practices were inclusive
- The importance of engaging early with advocates in the process
- The importance of bringing the staff team or project group along on the journey, particularly in establishing inclusive practices
- Ensuring that the Top Ten Tips sheet distributed to their committee and that the Inclusive Meeting Practice training was undertaken before the committee started its work
- How challenging it can be to write Easy English but what an important discipline it is.

*'We learnt that you need to slow down, step away from your work and realise you can really make things so much simpler.'*

Community Engagement Coordinator  
Screening, Early Detection and Immunisation  
Program  
Cancer Council Victoria

Organisations said that they sometimes 'got it wrong', but they realised making mistakes was an important part of their journey, as long as they learnt from them. A range of examples were provided such as arriving late to a meeting with an advocate, not having the appropriate technology at a meeting, sitting in a position at a large meeting which made it difficult for the advocate to hear and be heard, important documents not written in accessible language. However, as all organisations instituted a structured process for seeking feedback from the VATT graduate after meetings, they were made aware of the mistakes and were able to address them for the next meeting.

Having open communication with consumer advocates and SARU and being open to feedback were seen as key to ensuring that processes continually improved. As one interviewee observed: *'It's okay if you don't know what you are doing when working with people with disabilities, you just have to ask.'*

## What works and why?

Support provided by the Voice at the Table

All organisations reported that the support and assistance of VATT staff was critical to the success of the organisational partnership. VATT project staff fulfilled two critical functions:

- supporting the organisation, and
- supporting Voice at the Table graduates.

In all cases, organisations emphasised VATT staff's willingness to 'work with' organisations to ensure that the process was successful. Stakeholders noted that VATT staff went 'above and beyond' to provide support to them.

Examples of assistance provided to organisations by VATT staff included:

- Advising organisations on developing an Expression of Interest (EOI), eg.
  - ensuring that the EOI was accessible, provided a clear description of the task and was written in plain English
  - setting selection criteria that supported a fair and transparent process, eg. for Melbourne Social Equity Institute's telecommunication project, potentially interested self-advocates needed to have had experience of contracting services such as a mobile phone plan or utilities
- Promoting EOI opportunities to Voice at the Table graduates, through direct discussions, emails and text messages
- Inviting Voice at the Table graduates to participate in focus groups, consultations, and forums when organisations were seeking people with lived experience
- Providing advice and guidance to organisations on how to involve, seek feedback and best support a Voice at the Table graduate on a committee
- Providing advice to organisations on the accessibility of meeting agendas, minutes or other papers
- Organising Voice at the Table graduates to review and provide feedback on the accessibility of documents or the organisation's approach, eg. session plans for meetings
- Linking the organisation to the VATT website and resources

On-going support was provided to Voice at the Table graduates throughout their involvement with a project, and this support was tailored to the needs of each individual. Examples of support provided include:

- Organising a support person for the VATT graduate when required
- Organising taxi vouchers for the VATT graduate or supporting the graduate to take public transport, eg. accompanying them on a practice run



- Contacting the VATT graduate between meetings, providing reminders about time and place of meetings

Whilst the organisations working with a VATT graduate are encouraged to have preparatory meetings and to debrief after meetings, VATT graduates could also prepare for and debrief after meetings with the VATT project staff.

Through Voice at the Table, a pool of competent and trained consumer advocates is available to contribute to civic processes

All of the organisations consulted for the evaluation indicated that they probably could have sourced consumer advocates through conventional methods, including advertising and approaching various disability organisations. However, the major advantage of working through SARU and the Voice at the Table project, was having access to professionally trained VATT graduates, who understand the role of the consumer representative on a committee, who are confident and competent in civic participation processes. The fact that VATT graduates were well-supported by Voice at the Table staff, and that VATT staff could also support the organisation added further value to the process. The combination of these supportive factors is critical to the overall success of the Voice at the Table project.

### What could be improved or strengthened?

Organisations had a range of minor suggestions for improvement, including:

- Easy English templates and resources
- Hosting a community of practice for organisations to share information
- Developing an abridged (eg. one-day) version of the Voice at the Table training for experienced and high-functioning people, which could be appropriate, eg. for TAC clients with an ABI.

### Opportunities for the future

The five organisations consulted indicated that there is a strong demand for Voice at the Table

training for organisations and for Voice at the Table graduates to participate in a range of committees and consultative processes. Organisations indicated that they would wish to return to SARU to seek graduates in the future for new projects, or in the case of Melbourne Social Equity Institute, for future research opportunities. VCOSS indicated that anecdotally they were aware of interest amongst their membership organisations in recruiting Voice at the Table graduates, and also a strong interest from various disability agencies and from councils seeking consumer advocates for their disability committees.

The coaching and mentoring support provided by VATT project staff to organisations was highly valued. Some organisations suggested that this process could be more formalised, for example, scheduling regular monthly or bi-monthly coaching sessions, but were aware of the resource constraints on the project.

*'If they don't listen to us, then they are not going to learn what is important to us.'*

Susan Arthur  
Positive Powerful Parents Self-Advocacy Group

## Resources

Aim 4: Develop and promote a bank of civic and community participation and **inclusive practice resources**.

### Resource development

The Voice at the Table project has created a website and developed and uploaded the following resources:

- Top Ten Tips for Organisations
- Consumer Participation Kit
- Engaging Consumer Advocates
- Examples of Easy English Agendas and Invitations
- Videos:
  - Brain Injury Matters talk about Voice at the Table
  - Case Study Videos – Safer Care Victoria and VCOSS

- Meetings...The Good, the Bad and the Ugly
- Reinforce talk about why Voice at the Table is important

### Evaluation of resources

The evaluation has measured whether the project has developed and promoted a bank of civic and community and inclusive practice resources based on evidence of:

- the resources being developed, and the level of use
- positive feedback on the resources.
- engagement in a range of processes

### Development and use of resources

The VATT project reports that in 2018 there were:

- 1,011 users of the Voice at the Table website
- 5,473 web page views
- 150 copies of the Top Ten Tips distributed to the community sector
- 75 copies of the Top Ten Tips distributed to the public sector.

The Top Ten Tips were distributed as part of the Inclusive Meeting Practice training or on request.

### Feedback on resources

Feedback gathered from training participants and through the qualitative interviews about Voice at the Table resources was positive. Ninety-one per cent (91%) of the training participants reported that the session with the Top Ten Tips and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* video was 'very valuable'. All stakeholders interviewed mentioned these two resources and reported that they had been very useful. The Top Ten Tips was seen as providing sensible and practical advice to organisations, which could easily be implemented by the organisation. Stakeholders enjoyed *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* video because it allowed conversations to open up about inclusive and exclusive meeting practices. The video uses humour to make its points, which it does effectively and efficiently. By exaggerating bad

practice, it is disarming and prevents people from feeling defensive, while at the same time it is realistic enough for people to recognise the ways in which people with disabilities can be inadvertently 'shut out' of meetings.

Resources have been developed progressively throughout the year. For example, the VCOSS case study was completed in late 2018, so feedback is not available on this resource.

### Opportunities for the future

Current resources are viewed positively and are being used. There are two opportunities for future resource development:

- Easy English templates and resources
- Remuneration standards or guidelines.

#### Easy English templates and resources

The Consumer Participation Kit includes some examples of Easy English resources. Given that many organisations identified that writing 'Easy English' 'was hard', more resources would be welcomed on this topic.

#### Remuneration standards or guidelines

Organisations wanted more guidance on how to provide appropriate remuneration to consumer advocates. Sixty per cent of organisations (12 out of 20) in contact with VATT sought information on this topic. The Voice at the Table 'Engaging Consumer Advocates Best Practice Guide' includes some guidance on sitting fees and remuneration, there are gaps in terms of general information about remuneration standards. Organisations noted that this issue is possibly beyond the scope of SARU's remit. However, there may be an opportunity for a broader research project funded by the state government to assist organisations to implement the policies and principles of consumer participation by providing fair and appropriate remuneration.

## Regional Partnership

Aim 5: Engage partners in order to deliver Voice at the Table in a local government / regional area

## Regional partnership

VATT partnered with New Wave Self Advocacy Group to host Voice at the Table training in Morwell, Gippsland in August 2018. A local Voice at the Table project worker was engaged to recruit and support participants, develop relationships with potential partner organisations in the region and support the logistics of the training. The training was co-facilitated by a past VATT graduate who lives in the region and the VATT Project Officer.

Three professional development workshops were delivered in Gippsland:

- one for staff at the Tipping Foundation
- two for the South Gippsland Shire Council staff and local community organisations.

### Evaluation of regional partnership

The evaluation of the regional partnership was based on identifying evidence that:

- the regional partnership was established
- the regional partnership supported and participated in the delivery of VATT in the region.

## Engagement of a regional partner

SARU engaged with New Wave Gippsland as their regional partner. Gippsland was selected for the regional partnership, largely due to having an active self-advocacy group who was willing and able to partner in the project. New Wave is resourced by a support worker, who was engaged as a part-time VATT Regional Project Officer. The Regional Project Officer's role was to promote Voice at the Table in the region, engage with organisations with a potential interest and explore civic participation opportunities, as well as engaging with people with cognitive disabilities who may be interested in participating in Voice at the Table.

## Feedback on the regional VATT partnership

### Connecting with local organisations

The intention of the regional partnership was for SARU to work with a locally-based partner,

provide mentoring and support so that the organisation could implement the Voice at the Table model independently. Feedback both from SARU and the regional partner indicated that this aim was too ambitious to achieve within the project timelines and with each organisation's levels of experience. The VATT project team, based in Melbourne, was still learning and developing best ways to implement the evolving Voice at the Table model. Similarly, the Regional Project Worker was new to the team and had not delivered the training or observed at close range how to Voice at the Table worked. These factors created some initial challenges to making local connections. In addition, it was also challenging in the region trying to connect with fewer organisations, spread over a wider geographical area compared to making these connections in a metropolitan region.

The Regional Project Officer contacted a wide range of local organisations, including disability support-type services and local councils. At least seven organisations approached were either not interested or unable to participate due to various competing priorities, including NDIS implementation. A considerable amount of time and effort was therefore invested in pursuing organisations which were not able to engage. However, good connections were made with a smaller selection of organisations, including the South Gippsland Shire Council.

### Voice at the Table Training

Despite facing challenges, Voice at the Table training for people with cognitive disabilities was delivered in Morwell, attended by six participants. The training was co-facilitated by the VATT Project Officer working with a VATT graduate who lived in the region. As New Wave Gippsland is co-located with the Tipping Foundation in Morwell, the training could be delivered from their space.

An Inclusive Meeting Practice Professional Development Workshop was also delivered for Tipping Foundation staff. Two professional development workshops were also delivered for the South Gippsland Shire Council. In addition to staff from disability and inclusion teams, the



workshop was attended by council staff from a range of business units including Road Safety, Arts Development, Community Strengthening and Social Planning. A range of local community organisations attended the second workshop hosted by South Gippsland Shire Council, including a Neighbourhood House, Local Learning and Employment Network, a health network and a range of smaller disability agencies.

As a result of the Voice at the Table training, one VATT graduate has been appointed to the Latrobe Health Assembly Community Reference Group and two VATT graduates participated in consumer consultations in Melbourne.

### Learnings and outcomes

The Regional Partnership experience provided a range of learnings, which can be implemented in the future. The key learnings were around setting realistic and achievable aims and understanding the time and effort which needs to be invested in the establishing the foundations. There are clear advantages in working with a local organisation but the locally based person needs a sound induction with Voice at the Table and an understanding of the program. On the other hand, there are also advantages in the Voice at the Table Project staff engaging with organisations and promoting the Voice at the Table project.

Working in a regional context presents the challenges found in a smaller service system spread across a large geographical area. These pressures can make attending meetings or training challenging. Public transport limitations can sometimes prevent people with disabilities attend training or take up civic participation opportunities in other towns or centres.

Holding the Voice at the Table training at a disability service presented a different training environment compared to delivering the training at Ross House, where participants feel a sense of freedom and independence.

While the Regional Partnership experienced some challenges, important lessons were learnt which can be applied in future regional work.

The Regional Partnership also produced a range of significant outcomes, despite the challenges. Providing the Voice at the Table in regional Victoria has resulted in a cohort of people with cognitive disabilities graduating from the training who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to participate.

Some participants made links with SARU and with peers in Melbourne. Two regional VATT graduates attended consultations in Melbourne. One person travelled to the city for the first time and stayed independently in a hotel.

The local Member of Parliament was invited to attend a Voice at the Table session and later spoke in parliament about meeting with the self-advocates:

*'They are brave, they are courageous, they are articulate, and they did a wonderful job of expressing the challenges and opportunities that they face in everyday life.'*

*I wanted to give a big shout-out to Voice at the Table, to Yooralla and to the Tipping Foundation, and in particular (the participants) for talking about issues ranging from public transport to the receipt of goods and services and the way in which they encounter discrimination and differential treatment on the basis of intellectual disability in everyday life. Congratulations. Thank you so much. I cannot wait to keep working with you to assist you with the issues that you have identified..'*

Harriet Shing. Member for Eastern Victoria

Ms Shing later asked a question in Parliament to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety about a road safety issue raised by the VATT participants. The issue was the need to install a crossing or a pedestrian refuge which would allow clients travelling by bus to the Tipping Foundation to safely alight and cross the road. As a result of the advocacy of the VATT participants, the road safety treatments were installed by VicRoads in 2018.

## Voice at the Table model

**Aim 6:** Develop and document the **Voice at the Table model** for supporting civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities.

The final aim of the project was to develop and document the Voice at the Table model. The aim is to present the model for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities so that other organisations and group can understand and potentially implement the model. The Voice at the Table model (see: Figure 1) has been developed through the evaluation. It is informed by SARU's experience in implementing the Voice at the Table over two year but is as yet untested with other organisations.

The model presents the sequence of activities which need to take place.

**Foundations:** The Voice at the Table must be developed by or in partnership with a self-advocacy group and people with lived experience. The strong human rights foundation of self-advocacy and participation of people with disabilities in civic processes must be a founding principle of any organisation wishing to implement the Voice at the Table.

**Governance and resourcing:** The Voice at the Table project needs to be guided by a steering group, which includes self-advocacy groups and representatives.

The project requires sufficient resourcing to enable all essential tasks to be undertaken: project coordination, mentoring and support for VATT participants and for organisations offering civic participation opportunities, resource development, professional development training and the on-going administration and coordination of the project. The intensity of the mentoring and support functions should be not be underestimated. In addition, the viability of the project also relies on wide promotion across government, community and private sectors.

**Skills development:** The primary function of the project is to develop the self-advocacy skills of

people with cognitive disabilities and the inclusive practices of organisations engaging self-advocate. This is achieved through training, developed specifically for each audience. A key principle is that this training is co-designed and co-facilitated by people with a disability.

**Capacity-building:** The Voice at the Table model extends beyond simply providing training. The focus is on maintaining contact with training participants (individuals and organisations) to build their capacity through mentoring and support, combined with opportunities to safely put learnings into action. For graduates of the Voice at the Table training, this may mean participating in non-threatening activities, such as a group discussion with self-advocates or reviewing resources developed by the organisation, before taking the bigger step to join a Board or committee.

Capacity building is also supported by a range of resources. The Voice at the Table project has developed resources for people with disabilities and for organisations, and other resources, such as video case studies for all audiences.

As a result, the **outcomes** of the model are:

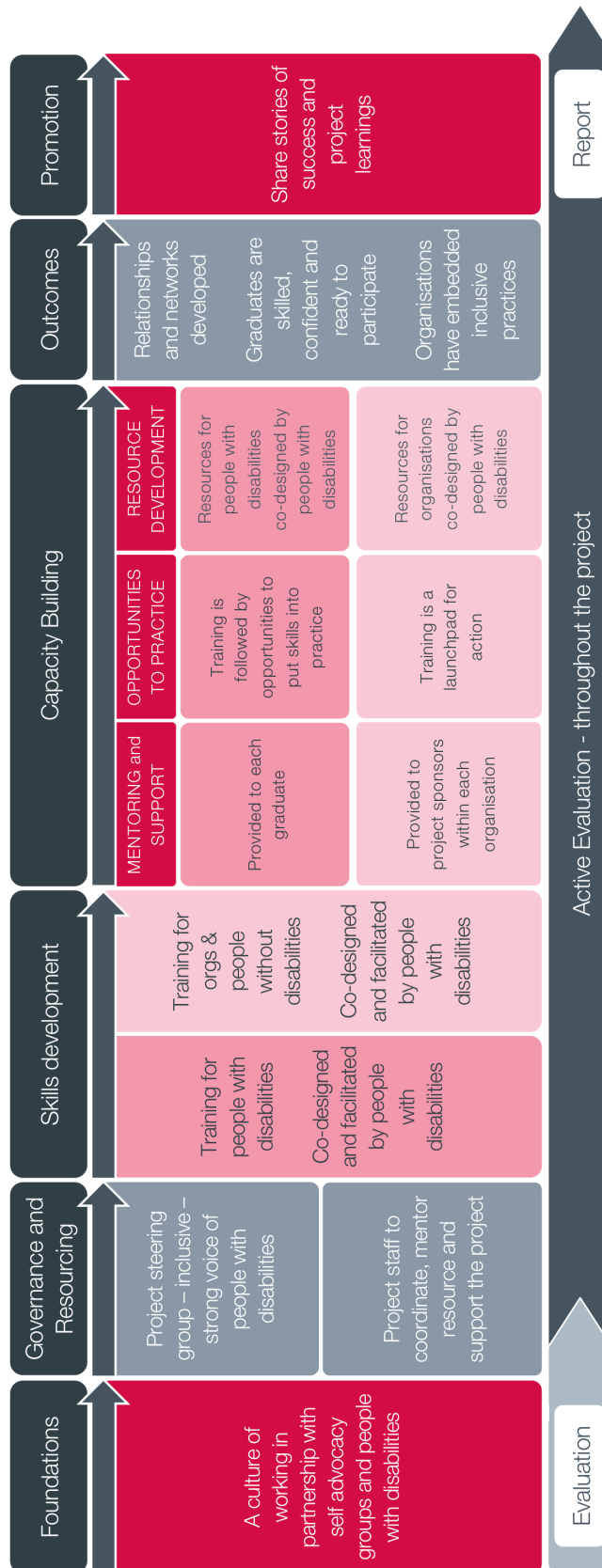
- the wide range of relationships and networks developed
- VATT graduates who are skilled, confident and ready to participate
- organisations which have embedded inclusive practices and are connected to self-advocacy groups.

In order to sustain the work of the model, there is a need to continue to **promote** the work and share the stories of success and learnings.

Implementation of the model should be supported by **active evaluation**, throughout the project, so that it can be continually improved.



## Voice at the Table Model - DRAFT



# Organisational reflections

This section presents the reflections of the Voice at the Table Steering Group and project staff about the project's successes, challenges and opportunities.

## Successes

The central success of the Voice at the Table, identified by staff and the project steering group, is that the project is driven by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. At every level the project empowers and engages people with disabilities:

- as participants in the Voice at the Table training
- as co-facilitators of training for people with disabilities and for organisations
- as members of the steering group
- as members of committees, boards, project advisory groups
- as participants in various public consultative processes
- as contributors to the development of resources
- as guides to project staff.

The project is the embodiment of the principle 'Nothing about us without us'.

## For people with cognitive disabilities

When reflecting on the successes of the Voice at the Table, project staff highlighted the many individual success stories – small and large for VATT graduates. These range from achieving employment to finding the confidence to speak up against workplace bullying to establishing themselves as a self-advocate to making independent choices for the first time. As staff spend time getting to know participants, they can track their growing confidence and capability and note the significance of someone speaking up in a meeting for the first time or taking on an opportunity to participate in a committee or making a presentation at a conference or forum. They have also observed the development of VATT graduates, who through training, mentoring and practice, have progressed as experienced facilitators, trainers,

peer mentors, ambassadors and spokespeople for Voice at the Table and consultants to participating organisations.

Participants are constantly observing role models, and this is a key strength of the project. Given the connections to SARU and other advocacy organisations, and the co-facilitation model, participants are constantly seeing experienced and mature advocates in operation, who can demonstrate the range of ways people with cognitive disabilities can participate in civic processes.

*'In their roles on committees and boards and running training, VATT graduates mentor 'able bods', which in turn flips power and empowers – it is inclusivity in action.'*

VATT Steering Group member

By creating a safe space for the Voice at the Table training and for peers to link with each other, and through the on-going mentoring offered by the training, Steering Group members observed that it *'keeps building confidence, keeps people engaged in VATT, creates opportunities for friendships and social support for people often experiencing social isolation.'*

## For participating organisations

The Steering Group felt that by providing training to organisations which is delivered by people with disabilities it *'enables people with disabilities to provide a role model to demonstrate that it can be done. Lived experience is so important. It challenges assumptions that people with disabilities have nothing to contribute or can't contribute.'*

The on-going mentoring provided to organisations was also seen by the Steering Group as a success of the project, as this

*'enables organisations to upskill, reflect on their practice and have the support to enhance bravery to make change. It flips awareness of disability to recognition of what can be learnt from lived experience.'*

Staff noted the importance of supporting organisations and providing them with 'permission to make mistakes'. Through mentoring, organisations get advice on how to deal with mistakes and how to avoid them in the future. Steering Group members noted that 'organisations want to change, but often don't know where to start'.

In addition to the training and capacity-building provided for organisations, the Voice at the Table also meets a very practical need for organisations wishing to engage self-advocates. Through Voice at the Table, organisations have an efficient and direct link to a pool of trained and skilled self-advocates, who are ready to engage in committees. The availability of skilled self-advocates saves organisations the considerable time and effort they would otherwise invest in locating advocates through other avenues. Coupled with the on-going mentoring support provided to graduates and organisations, it also assures organisations that they will be linked to capable and well-resourced self-advocates.

### The Voice at the Table training

The integrity and authenticity of the training curriculum is seen as a success of the project. The training is informed by and applies the principles of self-advocacy both in its development and its delivery.

### Location in Ross House

SARU is located in Ross House and the Voice at the Table is delivered at Ross House. This is a safe and familiar environment for training participants. It is also a place where VATT graduates are encouraged to 'drop in' and stay in touch. A range of other consumer advocacy groups are also co-located at Ross House.

The constant access to graduates, self-advocates and self-advocacy networks means that ad hoc calls to SARU for people with lived

experience to participate in meetings or consultations, or to review the accessibility of materials can generally be answered or responded to quite efficiently.

### Challenges

The Voice at the Table project has faced a range of challenges.

### Remuneration

Providing appropriate payment or compensation to VATT graduates for their participation was identified as an issue by the organisations consulted. This point was reinforced and expanded on by staff. While SARU has an absolute commitment to the principle of compensating an advocate for their time and expertise, there is not a 'one size fits all' approach available. For example, financial payment suits some advocates but not others, as it could adversely affect disability payments. Staff have seen instances when self-advocates face a difficult choice between undertaking their usual paid employment or participating in unpaid, self-advocacy development activities. Different organisations also operate under varying financial policies and procedures.

Organisations, working with the advice of SARU, have been able to provide remuneration to clients, but all parties, including SARU would appreciate some broad-based guidance on the matter.

### Finding a balance between implementing fair processes and responding to urgent timeframes

VATT project staff noted challenges in implementing fair and transparent processes for promoting opportunities to self-advocates. Ideally, opportunities are promoted to all self-advocates to consider but this process can take months, and organisations often approach VATT with a request for a self-advocate(s) which needs to be filled within a few weeks. These unrealistic expectations arise from a lack of understanding of processes. While some VATT graduates are always on-line or frequently popping into the SARU office, others are not and may need to receive messages multiple times and in multiple ways. At the same time,

the requests from organisations may need to be reworked or translated to Easy English so that they are accessible.

### Resourcing staff roles to allow for the essential tasks of coordination, mentoring and coaching organisations and self-advocates

VATT staff reported that the mentoring and coaching support provided to self-advocates and organisations can be very time-consuming, and the level of support required by all parties was not necessarily fully understood at the commencement of the year. An additional part-time staff member was recruited to the team in late 2018 and this assisted with their workload. With hindsight, the team acknowledged this member should have been recruited earlier as additional support is essential.

## Opportunities

### Fees for services

There are opportunities available to the Voice at the Table project. There is a steady demand for the 'services' of the Voice at the Table project. In the future, there may be the opportunity for the Voice at the Table project to be delivered on a fee-for-service basis, and to be self-sustaining. There would be pros and cons associated with this. It would require moving to a new business model, and would generate considerable work in the establishment phase, including marketing and promotion, costing services and developing a business plan.

There is also an opportunity for Voice at the Table to offer a consultancy type of service to organisations, for example, engaging VATT graduates to review the accessibility of documents (e.g. EOI, agendas, minutes, project reports). This type of request is often made to the Voice at the Table, and given the aims of the project, every effort is made to respond to this. However, if Voice at the Table could charge for this service, the funds could be invested in training VATT graduates for this role and having a team available to undertake this work.

### Collaborating with other organisations on key tasks

There could be opportunities for SARU to collaborate with like-minded organisations in Voice at the Table activities. For example, there may be an opportunity for Scope provide sessions on Easy English, as part of the Inclusive Meeting Practice workshop. There could be an opportunity for SARU to join with VCOSS or other organisations to research and develop guidelines for remunerating self-advocates participating in committees or a range of consultative options.

### Developing more resources

While the pool of VATT resources have been well-received, there are opportunities to produce more resources. Some examples include more Easy English templates and examples, and resources for parents to better understand the roles of self-advocacy, and to help them in supporting their adult children to participate.

### Developing stronger systems and processes

The VATT team experiences the advantages and disadvantages of operating in a small, nimble and responsive team. After the experience gained through running the project for the past year, some activities could be better systematised. For example, there may be a role for the VATT Steering Group to assist in promoting opportunities to graduates and assisting in selection processes.



# Conclusion

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The evaluation of the Voice at the Table demonstrates the successful achievements of its aims to:

- Increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities who can fully engage in civic processes
- Build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes within government departments and community organisations by providing opportunities for mentoring, skills development, training and hands-on experience.
- Build the capacity of organisations to develop inclusive systems and practices which ensure people with cognitive disabilities can participate in civic processes on an equal and valued basis.
- Develop and promote a bank of civic and community participation and inclusive practice resources
- Engage partners in order to deliver Voice at the Table in a local government/regional area.

The project has built on the strengths and lessons of the pilot project and has been able to draw on the support of the self-advocates and SARU staff involved in first developing Voice at the Table. Through the evaluation the Voice at the Table model has been developed, and it is hoped that this will be tested and contribute to the growing knowledge and evidence base around the engagement of people with cognitive disabilities in civic processes.

Guided by a strong commitment to self-evaluation, important lessons have also been learnt about implementing the project on an outreach basis to regional centres in Victoria.

A key finding of the Voice at the Table evaluation is the extent to which the mentoring and support provided to self-advocates and to organisations transforms the project from provision of training, to a sophisticated and quality-assured process which delivers significant benefits to individual participants and organisations and supports a process of genuine and authentic participation of people with cognitive disabilities in a wide range of civic processes.

The project is ideally placed to support:

- the Victorian government's commitment to *'providing opportunities for people with a disability to lead and contribute to public debate and influence change within government and communities.'*
- Information, Linkages and Capacity Building activities aiming to influence change so that people with disabilities have the skills and confidence to participate and contribute to the community and protect their rights, participate in and benefit from the same community activities as everyone else and actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community.

The evaluation found that anecdotally there is strong demand for the project. All organisations consulted indicated that they would wish to continue working with Voice at the Table on other projects, and that their networks were also interested in working with Voice at the Table. There is also a sense that with wider promotion, greater demand could be generated, including from the private sector. The evaluation can only conclude with the recommendation that the project continues to receive financial support from the Victorian government given its many contributions to government and communities.

# Recommendations

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## Recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: That the Voice at the Table receives continued funding from the Victorian government, to enable the project to continue to build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to engage in civic processes and to build the capacity of organisations to implement genuine inclusive practices and systems.
- Recommendation 2: That funding for the Voice at the Table project acknowledges the staff time required to deliver the project and provide appropriate support to people with disabilities and to organisations engaging people with disabilities as self-advocates.
- Recommendation 3: That the Voice at the Table project is provided with funding to investigate opportunities for collaborative research, resource development and training.
- Recommendation 4: That the Voice at the Table project is provided with funding support to explore opportunities for implementing fees for services and other self-sustaining models of operation in the medium to long-term.
- Recommendation 5: That the Voice at the Table project continues to improve its operations and implements the suggested improvements identified in the evaluation.



# Voice at the Table: Evaluation Overview

Attachment 1

	People	Organisations	Resources	Regional VATT Partner	Best practice model
What do we want to happen?	<p>Increase the number of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes</p> <p>Build the capacity of people with cognitive disabilities to engage in decision-making processes within Victorian government departments and community organisations</p>	<p>Build capacity of Victorian government departments to support increased civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities</p> <p>Build the capacity of Victorian community organisations</p>	<p>Develop civic and inclusive community participation practice resources</p> <p>Develop training</p>	<p>Train, support and engage partner to deliver VATT in LGA/regional areas</p>	<p>Create and document best practice model for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities</p>
What will we do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train people to effectively, fully and actively engage in decision-making processes</li> <li>• Mentor people</li> <li>• Develop skills</li> <li>• Provide opportunities hands on experience</li> <li>• Upskill VATT graduates to co-trainers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training, resources and professional development for key staff and committees</li> <li>• Work in partnership with Victorian government departments and community organisations to address barriers to participation</li> <li>• Support organisations to find opportunities for membership on boards, committees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and promote resources, training and speakers to support organisations to increase civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities</li> <li>• Develop a Train the Trainer program to upskill VATT graduates to become VATT co-trainers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote VATT to potential partners</li> <li>• Engage partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and document learnings from VATT to create a model for best practice for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities</li> </ul>
<p>What will tell us this worked?</p> <p>What will success look like?</p>	<p>People participate in VATT</p> <p>Participants tell us that they develop new skills</p> <p>Organisations provide opportunities to participants</p> <p>Organisations tell us that participants engage effectively</p>	<p>Organisations participate</p> <p>Staff tell us that their organisation's capacity to support civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities is enhanced</p> <p>Participants tell us positive things about their participation</p>	<p>Resources are developed and used</p> <p>We receive positive feedback on the resources</p> <p>VATT graduates participate in the TTT program</p> <p>Some VATT graduates become VATT co-trainers</p>	<p>Regional partner participates and delivers VATT in their area</p>	<p>We develop and document a model for best practice for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities</p> <p>Other organisations understand the model and feel able to implement it</p>
How can we collect this evidence?	<p>From participants</p> <p>From people who chose not to participate</p> <p>From organisations</p>	<p>From organisations</p> <p>From participants engaged with these organisations</p>	<p>From project records</p> <p>From resource users</p> <p>From VATT graduates</p>	<p>From regional partner</p>	<p>Through the evaluation and the continuous action learning process</p>

## Voice at the Table Project - Evaluation Framework

Key Evaluation Question 1:	Has the <b>number</b> of people with cognitive disabilities who can effectively and fully engage in civic processes <b>increased</b> as a result of the VATT project?			
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods	
How many people with cognitive disabilities have been supported to effectively and fully engage in civic processes through the VATT project?	Increase in the number of people with cognitive disabilities able to engage in civic processes	Project reports identifying number of people participating in training and/or receiving other supports, eg. mentoring to engage in civic processes	Desk-based research	
How many people have been supported through various methods of support (eg. training, mentoring)?				
How many VATT participants have had the direct opportunity to sit on committees, provide advice or act as consultants through VATT for:	Project participants have the opportunity to sit on committees, provide advice or act as consultants	Project reports identifying number of people participating in training and/or receiving other supports, eg. mentoring to engage in civic processes	Desk-based research	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Victorian government departments?</li> <li>- Community organisations, self-advocacy groups or service providers?</li> </ul>	Number, % of project participants who have the opportunity to sit on committees, provide advice or act as consultants for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Victorian government departments</li> <li>- community organisations, self-advocacy groups or service providers</li> </ul>			
Do participants who receive the opportunity to sit on committees, provide advice or act as consultants feel that they can effectively and fully engage in civic processes?	Project participants (number, %) who receive opportunities to sit on committees report that they feel able to effectively and fully engage in civic processes	Project participants	Group discussion	
What changes, improvements or enhancements to VATT support (training, mentoring) if any, do participants suggest?				
Do the organisations (government departments, community organisations) which provide opportunities for project participants to engage in civic processes report that they can do so effectively, actively and fully?	Organisations (number, %) report that participants engaging in civic processes are competent as new members to effectively commence engagement in civic processes	Organisations which have provided civic engagement opportunities for participants	Electronic survey	
What changes, improvements or enhancements to VATT support, if any, do organisations suggest?				

## Voice at the Table Project - Evaluation Framework

Key Evaluation Question 2:	Has the <b>capacity</b> of people with cognitive disabilities to actively engage in decision-making processes <b>been enhanced</b> as a result of the VATT project?		
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods
Did project participants report development of new or enhanced skills enabling them to actively engage in decision-making processes?	Project participants (number, %) report development of new or enhanced skills which enable them to actively engage in decision-making processes	Project participants	Surveys: Pre and post VATT training / support
What were the most frequently reported skills developed?		Project Coordinators	Group discussions
Did project participants report that their confidence to engage in decision-making processes increased as a result of participating in VATT?	Project participants (number, %) report increased confidence	Project Coordinators' diaries	Interviews
Did project participants provide general, positive feedback about their participation in VATT?	Project participants (number, %) provide positive feedback about their participation in VATT		Qualitative data analysis
Did project participants provide any negative feedback about their participation in VATT?	No, or limited, negative feedback from participants about their participation in VATT		
Did project participants report any unexpected outcomes (positive, negative or neutral) as a result of their participation in VATT?			
Did VATT graduates provide positive feedback on on-going mentoring and support received from SARU?	Number, % of VATT graduates providing positive feedback about on-going support received	VATT graduates	Group discussion
Did VATT graduates report that their skills have developed / are developing to the extent that they could become a VATT co-trainer?	Number, % of participants indicating that they could become a VATT co-trainer		
Key Evaluation Question 3:	Has the <b>capacity</b> of organisations to support increased civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities <b>been enhanced</b> as a result of the VATT project?		
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods
How many:	Number, % of organisations engaged with the project and providing opportunities for civic participation for people with cognitive disabilities	Staff representatives from organisations (government departments and community organisations) participating in VATT	Electronic surveys – pre and post VATT participation
- Victorian government departments			Stakeholder interviews
- Community organisations, self-advocacy groups or service providers	Number, % of organisations withdrawing from the project	Project Coordinators	Coordinator interviews

### Voice at the Table Project - Evaluation Framework

<p>are engaged with the project and providing opportunities for civic participation for people with cognitive disabilities?</p> <p>How many, if any, organisations have withdrawn from the project? Why?</p> <p>Did staff from participating organisations provide positive feedback on their experience of participation?</p> <p>Did staff from participating organisations report that their organisation's capacity to support increased participation of people with cognitive disabilities has been enhanced?</p> <p>In what ways?</p> <p>What aspects of the project participation did staff feel was most beneficial to supporting increased civic participation?</p> <p>What aspects of project participation did staff feel was least beneficial?</p> <p>From the perspective of participating organisations, what did staff feel could be improved or strengthened?</p> <p>Would staff recommend participation in the process to other organisations?</p>			
<p>% of participating staff reporting positive feedback on the experience</p> <p>Number, % of staff and number, % of organisations reporting that the organisation's capacity to support increased civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities was enhanced through VATT</p> <p>Number, % of staff who would recommend participation in the VATT process to other organisations</p> <p>Positive feedback from stakeholders on the usefulness of VATT inclusive practice resources</p>			
<p>Key Evaluation Question 4: Have inclusive practice resources been developed and promoted as a result of the VATT project?</p>			
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods
<p>What inclusive practice resources have been developed and in what formats through the VATT project?</p> <p>How have the inclusive practice resources been promoted and to whom (which sectors, peak bodies, organisations, government departments)?</p> <p>Are the practice resources reaching their target groups?</p> <p>Has training been delivered?</p> <p>Have speakers been trained? Are speakers being engaged?</p>	<p>Number, type of practice resources developed</p> <p>Promotion of resources reaches the target groups</p> <p>Use, uptake, participation in new practice resources</p> <p>Positive feedback from users of resources</p>	<p>Project records</p> <p>Project Coordinators</p> <p>Website traffic</p> <p>Resource users</p>	<p>Desk-based research</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Analysis of website traffic (# downloads, unique visitors, time on page)</p> <p>Electronic survey for those who download resources</p>

## Voice at the Table Project - Evaluation Framework

Key Evaluation Question 5:	Has a regional partner <b>been engaged</b> to support the delivery of VATT in a regional area as a result of the VATT project?		
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods
<p>Has a regional partner been engaged to support the delivery of VATT?</p> <p>Did staff from the regional partner organisation provide positive feedback on their experience of participation?</p> <p>Was VATT delivered in the region within the project timelines?</p> <p>How many participants were recruited for the regional VATT?</p> <p>What opportunities have been provided to VATT graduates to join committees, boards or other groups?</p> <p>From the perspective of the regional partner organisation, did the process work well?</p> <p>Did regional partner staff feel well-supported by SARU?</p> <p>Did the regional partner feel that VATT was well-delivered?</p> <p>What feedback did participants provide on this experience of VATT?</p> <p>Would regional partner staff recommend participation in the process to other organisations?</p> <p>How could the process be improved?</p>	<p>Regional partner engaged</p> <p>Number of potential regional partners declining partnership opportunity</p> <p>Positive feedback from regional partner</p> <p>Number of participants for the regional VATT program</p> <p>Positive feedback from VATT participants</p> <p>Regional partner would recommend the process to other organisations</p> <p>Number/type of opportunities made available to VATT graduates to join committees, boards, groups</p>	<p>Regional partner</p> <p>Project Coordinators</p> <p>VATT participants</p>	<p>Stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Surveys: Pre and post VATT training</p>
Key Evaluation Question 6:	Has a <b>model for best practice</b> for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities <b>been developed</b> from the VATT project and its evaluation?		
Sub-questions	Measures of success	Information sources	Data collection methods
<p>Have the findings of the evaluation informed the development of a model for best practice for supporting real and equal civic participation of people with cognitive disabilities?</p> <p>Has the model been documented?</p> <p>Has it been 'tested' with / feedback sought from 'critical friends'?</p>	<p>Best practice model is drafted, refined and tested</p> <p>Positive feedback received from critical friends</p>	<p>Evaluation</p> <p>Steering committee</p> <p>Literature</p> <p>Critical friends</p>	<p>Desk-based research</p> <p>Group discussion and reflective processes</p> <p>Electronic survey</p>

Opportunities for skills development, training and hands-on experience		Number
Guiding the VATT project:	Employed to assist VATT staff recruitment processes	5 VATT graduates
	Employed with one of the three VATT Steering Groups	7 VATT graduates
	Engaged in development of VATT video resources, website	18 VATT graduates
	Engaged to meet with partner organisations to guide VATT partnerships	4 VATT graduates
Positions on boards and committees:	Melbourne City Council - Disability Advisory Committee	1 VATT graduate
	Darebin City Council - Disability Advisory Committee	1 VATT graduate
	Yarra City Council - Disability Advisory Council	1 VATT graduate
	Ross House Committee of Management	1 VATT graduate
	Ross House Green Working Group	1 VATT graduate
	Latrobe Health Assembly - Community Working Group	1 VATT graduate
Membership / participation in advisory groups for time-limited projects	<b>Client Voice project for TAC</b> Project meeting, Working Group meetings, Reference Group meeting, Consultation (six events)	12 VATT graduates
	<b>Thanks a Bundle and Thriving Communities projects for University of Melbourne, Social Equity Institute</b> Advisory Groups, meetings and project launch	5 VATT graduates
	<b>Increasing Participation and Access Steering Committee for Cancer Council:</b> Meetings and consultation	6 VATT graduates
	<b>Preventing abuse before it starts: Building safe and respectful cultures, Project Advisory Group for the Office of the Disability Services Commissioner:</b> Information meeting, Project Advisory Group meetings Engagement of community researchers	6 VATT graduates
	<b>'Strengthening Sector Resilience' Advisory Group for VCOSS:</b> Project Steering Group	3 VATT graduates
Participation in consultations / forums / roundtables:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ambulance Victoria Community Discussion Forum Accessibility Action Plan</li> <li>– DHHS roundtable</li> <li>– Office for Disability – Disability Action Plan consultation</li> <li>– Safer Care Victoria Priorities Summit</li> <li>– VicHealth consultation</li> <li>– Victoria Alive consultation</li> </ul>	11 VATT graduates



Opportunities for skills development, training and hands-on experience		Number
Participation in other civic processes:	Ross House Annual General Meeting	1 VATT graduate
	Melbourne Uni - Citizen Group for Disability Inclusive City Project 2019	2 VATT graduates
Presentations to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ILC Forum, DHHS</li> <li>- VATT training</li> <li>- Ross House Committee</li> <li>- Conference</li> <li>- National Disability Services</li> </ul>	6 VATT graduates
Registrations/expressions of interest to join boards, committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants applied for Victorian Public Health Services Board Director positions</li> <li>- Registration with Disability Leadership Institute</li> <li>- Registration with Get on Board website</li> </ul>	4 VATT graduates