



Summary: Empower Project Symposium

21st August 2025

Mission Statement: A Queensland where all people with disability can participate in sport and recreation in ways that are meaningful to them.

The Empower project symposium brought together leaders across disability, health, sport and recreation to explore current data barriers and plan ways to improve inclusion and participation of people with disability in sport and recreation.

Key Messages –

- The **Empower Project** is the **first Queensland Government funded Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Legacy Project** and is **being co-designed for and by people with disability** to explore and address their sports and recreation participation in Queensland.
- The project is a partnership between Jamieson Trauma Institute (JTI), Metro North Health and Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN).
- Empower is developing a long-term data framework (Empower Atlas) to collect, understand and analyse participation rates, barriers, opportunities for people with disability and guide lived experience, evidence-based solutions.
- **“Count Me In”** for the Empower project is about inclusion, health and wellbeing, and creating a legacy that extends beyond Brisbane 2032 for all communities in Queensland.

Next Steps – “We need everyone to be part of the Empower journey and the movement for change” Matthew Ames, Empower Project Director

- If you would like to contribute to the project with information about your organisation or register your interest to be involved with the Empower project, please contact Luen Pearce, Empower Program Manager: empower@health.qld.gov.au Or empower@qdn.org.au or visit: <https://qdn.org.au/empower>.



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Acknowledgement of Country – Uncle Willie Prince was born on Wakka Wakka Country in Cherbourg and has a cultural and spiritual connection to the Kalkadoon clan group in Mt Isa. He is a strong voice and advocate for people with disability, particularly Aboriginal people with disability. Uncle Willie has had a distinguished career in disability sport, representing Queensland, carrying the Paralympic torch in 2000, and carrying the Queen's Baton for the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

Introductory commentary - Assistant Minister to the Premier Dr Christian Rowan

- The 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games provides a once in a generation opportunity to progress infrastructure, transport, tourism and sport and is also a chance to showcase to the world that Queensland is a leader in inclusion, diversity and accessibility. This includes social inclusion and economic participation and opportunities for people with a disability and accessibility as well.
- Data is key - robust evidence underpins policies and programs that truly make a difference and have a translational benefit in communities across Queensland.
- The Queensland Government also acknowledges the importance of making sure that people with lived experience lead the way.
- The Department of Sport, Racing and Olympic and Paralympic Games is currently working on a new sport strategy which will set the direction for the next decade of sport in Queensland with a focus on maximising the benefits of the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This strategy will also share a focus on improving participation in sport and recreation for people with disability.

Matthew Ames, Project Director Empower -

“It's about all of us, and looking forward to Brisbane 2032, we have an amazing opportunity and a deep responsibility to create a legacy for the world, a world in which sport is truly accessible to all. But this isn't someone else's job. This is our home. This is our state. This is our country. We have the opportunity to define what comes next. The goal of this project, which is simply to participate, is powerful. It's about when people with disabilities turn up and say count me in, that all of us will be there to support them, to guide, to include, so that they will belong. But we know that this isn't going to happen in isolation. We need to do this together. That's why co design is at the heart of this project. We're not building something for communities, we're building them with communities, with people with lived experience of disability and with the rest of the community, with you.”



Image 1 – Matthew Ames (Empower Project Director) and Michelle Moss (CEO Queenslanders with Disability Network)

Key messages from Empower project team –

Professor Michael Schuetz, Director of the Jamieson Trauma Institute at Metro North Health.

Michelle Moss, CEO Queenslanders with Disability Network

Matthew Ames, Director, Empower project

We see the Empower project bringing:

- Empathy and curiosity in data collection and analysis to understand barriers from all stakeholders e.g., Sporting organisations, Govt, individuals with lived experience.
- Inclusive representation across all disability types in all Empower project phases and outcomes.
- Broad promotion and engagement across Queensland communities to build momentum for data collection and engagement for Empower project.
- Breaking down silos between sectors to enable holistic participation for all Queenslanders.
- Embedding inclusion and accessibility in strategic planning across sectors at all levels of Government and industry.

Introducing the Empower Co-design team

- The Empower co-design team, made up of Queenslanders with diverse disability, together with Empower Director Matthew Ames, shared their stories and perspectives on inclusion, opportunities and legacy.

“Disability should never be being left on the sidelines” Kim Abbott, Empower Co-designer

“When the leader or the head coach said, “You know what, I may not have experience in para sport or training someone with a disability, but I’m willing to learn and work with you and find a solution together, and I can research and I can reach out to people to learn”, that kind of set the tone for everyone else in the club. Everyone else tended to follow suit and follow the attitude and it made a huge impact on how included I felt.” – Sara Ashlee-Tair, Empower Co-designer and Para-athlete

“Whether it’s through elite competitive sport or recreational sport or just learning through the joy of freedom and movement, and just having a space and find out what my true capability is, because no diagnosis should define your true capability.” – Amy Tobin, Empower Co-designer and Family Carer

“We’ve spent many years advocating and educating on access, equal opportunities and what true inclusion means. I also recognise that a lot of the sporting recognitions at heart really want to help, but due to a number of reasons have not been able to do so, and some of those reasons are a lack of staff, volunteers, funding, facilities, a lack of understanding of disability requirements and how to adapt a sport or equipment. The challenge we face with our son being



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profoundly deaf and in a wheelchair is that he doesn't always have access to what he needs in order to fully participate... What I'd love to see is a robust legacy that provides quality services and programs and best practice for participants and their families. – Jody van Heerden, Empower Co-designer and Family Carer

Symposium Presentations and Discussions included -

- **Professor Sean Tweedy (UQ)** presented findings from a recent paper on Australians with disability ([Tweedy et al, 2025](#)) – Need to increase physical activity participation of people with disability, not just sport.
- **Dr Mark Connick (QUT)** presented Phase 1: Beginning of the Empower Data Framework - developing a spatial data mapping tool, Empower Atlas, to support disability sport and physical activity opportunities, inclusive planning, identify participation patterns and barriers. This is the foundation of a broader framework aimed at improving visibility and accessibility.
- **Dr Matthew Moores (QUT)** presented that the QUT data science team is leveraging OpenStreetMap, a crowdsourced mapping platform, to identify existing sport and recreation facilities across Queensland.
- **Dr Kelsey Chapman, Griffith University**, presented data from the [Voice of Queenslanders with Disability 2025 Report](#) and noted opportunities for the Empower Project including:
 - Targeted initiatives, including focusing on 60–69 age group, people with multiple disabilities to boost participation, chronic pain and cognitive disability.
 - Community Inclusion programs that foster belonging and informal support networks could have a strong impact.



Image 2 - Picture of the Empower co-design team on stage presenting. Left to right: Amy Tobin, Kim Abbott, Brenton Koch, Ben Noonan, Sara-Tait Ashlee, Ben Haack, Matthew Ames, Janelle Colquhoun and Jody Van Heerden.



Image 3 - Picture of members of the Empower research team presenting. Left to right – Dr Matthew Moores, Dr Mark Connick, Professor Sean Tweedy with an Auslan Interpreter.