# State of the Disability Sector Report 2023

Disability service providers reported their worst financial year yet. With more organisations running a deficit and far fewer breaking even, keeping services going is getting harder than ever. Yet hope persists that current reforms will reverse the trend towards market failure. But time is running out.

## Cover art

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Untitled

Work on paper

About the artist:

Georgia Szmerling has been a regular studio artist at Arts Project Australia since 2003 and had her first solo exhibition in 2005. Covering ceramics, painting and drawing, her work is held in the National Gallery of Victoria’s collection and in private collections nationally.

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## The state of play

In statistical analysis, there is the signal and there is the noise. In our State of the Sector surveys over the past few years, the noise was COVID-19. As much as its disruption to services, the crisis brought a lingering din of COVID payments, grants and other relief for providers and workers that made it hard to make out underlying trends.

In our latest survey, with the noise fallen away to an echo, we heard the signal clearly. The data proves our worst fears. On our bar graphs for profit and loss, we can now draw a line from this year’s results to those before COVID and see a disturbing, clear deterioration.

We knew that the last three surveys, in which between 19 and 23 per cent of providers reported a loss, were not completely reflecting the underlying health of the sector. But we were taken aback by the 34 per cent of respondents reporting a loss last year and the 18 per cent just breaking even. This is the worst year for financial viability in the eight years of the survey.

And most providers would place the root of this problem in pricing, especially with the rising cost of doing business. Seventy-two percent of not-for-profit providers and 67 per cent of for-profit providers said they worry that they won’t be able to provideNational Disability Insurance Scheme services at current prices.

And yet demand for services keeps rising. Eighty-two per cent of respondents said they had received requests for services that they could not fulfil. The reasons they gave for turning down services include not enough staff (45 per cent), not enough qualified staff (21 per cent), or not enough organisational resources or money (15 per cent).

The workforce situation has eased a little since last year’s report, but it is still tough to find support workers (78 per cent reported extreme to moderate difficulty) and the availability of allied health professionals ranges from low to non-existent. Bad as finding staff is in the cities and major towns, it is much worse in regional and remote Australia.

So, providers are telling us there is plenty of work around, but either the pricing doesn’t make economic sense, or they can’t get the staff. These are classic signs of a failed market.

The survey uncovered other concerns. Just over a quarter of respondents were unhappy with National Disability Insurance Scheme policy reforms, up six per cent from last year when a new federal government gave many the glimpse of a silver lining. It isn’t surprising that enthusiasm has waned a little as we waited on the outcomes of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review.

Almost half of respondents did not believe that the Quality and Safeguarding Framework supported quality services or outcomes (48 per cent, up from 41 per cent in 2022). Indeed, regulation is a sore point with providers. They are bound by red tape in every direction.

More and more, registered providers are seeing the inequities of a two-tiered system in which registration brings scant compensation for their pains. Nearly a fifth of respondents (18 per cent) report they are thinking about dropping their registration altogether.

In disability employment, the findings are mixed. A majority of Supported Employment Services providers report more uncertainty in the operating environment (59 per cent). But there was an improvement in mood among Disability Employment Services, where last year only one of 33 respondents thought reforms were heading in the right direction. This year, after the updates to the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework in July, 11 providers (out of 28; 39 per cent) thought things were at least on the right track.

While our survey shows some anxiety about the reforms coming out the Disability Royal Commission recommendations and the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review, it still detects a reserve of optimism. However, this won’t last long if governments do not seize the opportunity of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review to reverse the trend towards a failing market with scarcer services, longer waiting times and lower service quality.

National Disability Services has proposed a way forward with our Ten Priorities for National Disability Insurance Scheme Reform on the following pages.

We need an independent pricing authority and pricing that reflects the real cost of support.

We need minimum standards for all supports and greater oversight for greater risk.

This means a disability workforce strategy that pays providers for training, support and supervision.

And the co-design of reforms must include providers and cover the costs they face to implement changes.

Sector reforms cannot be delayed — if this survey has one stark message it is that time is running out for many providers, and for the hundreds of thousands of people with disability that rely on their support.

## The way forward

Ten priorities for National Disability Insurance Scheme reform

### 1 Implementation leadership and co-design

The design of reforms should be led by a properly funded Reform Implementation Taskforce, drawing from the lived experience of people with disability and the wealth of practical expertise in the sector. The cost of reforms should be paid out of an Industry Transformation Fund.

### 2 Best practice pricing

To create a viable sector, we need an independent pricing mechanism that recognises the true cost of providing services. Only this will deliver value for money, ensure security of supports, and create incentives for best practice.

### 3 Strategies for workforce development

We need to attract, retain and develop the disability support workforce. This means a co-designed strategy for the care economy that includes properly funded training and professional development.

### 4 Regulatory reform

Too much of the sector has minimal oversight. A new quality and safeguarding framework should embed minimum standards and greater oversight where there is greater risk. Pricing and other incentives should reflect a provider’s commitment to quality.

### 5 Targeted and blended payments

Because transactional approaches to service delivery do not always lead to better services, we need targeted or blended payments to encourage innovation and better outcomes.

### 6 Improved planning and support pathways

Participant plans are often inflexible or do not meet their needs. The system should have holistic and targeted pathways that align support with best practice and the goals and preferences of participants.

### 7 A joined-up ecosystem of support

Since only a small proportion of people with disability receive National Disability Insurance Scheme support, there needs to be foundational supports provided for all people with disability. Providers should be able to easily deliver across systems whatever support people need.

### 8 A pathway to better housing

We need a commitment to co-designing affordable accommodation that addresses current issues and participant requirements, replaces or renovates old housing stock, and gives more choice for people with disability.

### 9 A focus on employment

With so many people with disabilities unemployed or under-employed, we need a cohesive vision for employment that brings together schemes and systems, identifies gaps and develops strategies.

### 10 A redesigned National Disability Insurance Scheme for children, young people and families

We need best-practice models to build capacity for children and their families. To integrate children early in education and other critical systems, we need to combine better pricing and planning with wraparound support.

## The state of the operating environment

The 2023 National Disability Services State of the Disability Sector Survey was conducted by the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at the University of Sydney. Footnote citation number 1. Footnote description: Note that percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. This can sometimes mean the totals do not always add up to exactly 100 per cent. End of footnote description.

### Respondent demographics

This year saw 432 organisations respond to the survey, 95 per cent of them registered National Disability Insurance Scheme service providers. Over two-thirds are classified as small (less than 50 people) or medium (50 to 199 people), with around a fifth classified as large (200 to 999 people). Only four per cent of respondents are either sole traders or very large (over 1000 people).

Of respondents:

• 69 per cent are not-for-profit organisations

• 30 per cent are for-profit organisations

• 21 per cent are classified as very small, in that they had an income of less than $1 million

• 27 per cent are small (income between $1 million and $5 million)

• 31 per cent are medium (income between $5 million and $20 million)

• 21 per cent are large (income over $20 million)

• 99 per cent are providing National Disability Insurance Scheme support (95 per cent registered and providing services, three per cent not registered and providing services)

• seven per cent are providing Disability Employment Services or Workforce Australia support

• 13 per cent are providing Specialised Supported Employment.

Table 1 Size of organisation (by headcount)

| **Year** | **2023** |
| --- | --- |
| Sole trader | 4 per cent |
| Small (<50 people) | 38 per cent |
| Medium (50 to 199 people) | 34 per cent |
| Large (200-999 people) | 21 per cent |
| Very large (>1,000 people) | 4 per cent |

This year, we asked respondents about where they provide services — with the answer being that 80 per cent serve clients in metropolitan areas and regional centre’s, 48 per cent in rural areas, 14 per cent in remote areas, and five per cent in very remote areas. There are only two respondents who provide services to very remote areas who did not also work in remote areas. Therefore, for some analyses, these categories have been combined. At a broad level, the demographic profile of respondents is generally reflective of the overall makeup of National Disability Insurance Scheme registered providers, Disability Employment Services providers and Supported Employment providers.

Once again, the majority of respondents are from New South Wales, followed by Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, and the Northern Territory.

Table 2 Responses by state and territory

| **State and territory** | **2023** |
| --- | --- |
| Australian Capital Territory | 2 per cent |
| New South Wales | 32 per cent |
| Northern Territory | 2 per cent |
| Queensland | 19 per cent |
| South Australia | 8 per cent |
| Tasmania | 4 per cent |
| Victoria | 22 per cent |
| Western Australia | 11 per cent |

### General operating conditions

Opinions about the general operating conditions in the non-government disability sector are relatively consistent with previous years, with 70 per cent saying that they have worsened in the last 12 months, while a stable eight per cent say they have improved. Though year-on-year changes are minor, when viewed across the last ten years, the situation does appear to be worsening.

Table 3 Operating conditions in the non-government disability sector

| **Year** | **Improved** | **Worsened** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2014 | 10 per cent | 45 per cent |
| 2015 | 14 per cent | 40 per cent |
| 2016 | 22 per cent | 36 per cent |
| 2017 | 19 per cent | 46 per cent |
| 2018 | 11 per cent | 55 per cent |
| 2019 | 22 per cent | 38 per cent |
| 2020 | 12 per cent | 61 per cent |
| 2021 | 9 per cent | 65 per cent |
| 2022 | 8 per cent | 67 per cent |
| 2023 | 8 per cent | 70 per cent |

When asked about the wider Australian economy, 68 per cent say that conditions have worsened, while seven per cent think that they have improved.

Table 4 Operating conditions in the wider Australian economy

| **Year** | **Improved** | **Worsened** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2014 | 7 per cent | 39 per cent |
| 2015 | 7 per cent | 47 per cent |
| 2016 | 13 per cent | 23 per cent |
| 2017 | 18 per cent | 26 per cent |
| 2018 | 18 per cent | 25 per cent |
| 2019 | 14 per cent | 29 per cent |
| 2020 | 5 per cent | 74 per cent |
| 2021 | 11 per cent | 58 per cent |
| 2022 | 7 per cent | 67 per cent |
| 2023 | 7 per cent | 68 per cent |

### National Disability Insurance Scheme operating environment

Discontent with the National Disability Insurance Scheme operating environment continues to grow. Dissatisfaction with National Disability Insurance Scheme policy reforms increased significantly from 20 per cent in 2022 to 26 per cent this year, though this remains much more positive than the 47 per cent reported in 2021. It is worth noting that the 2022 survey was conducted quite soon after the federal election and subsequent change of government. This may have generated a strong sense of optimism. However, in more recent times, this optimism may have tempered.

Perceptions of how the National Disability Insurance Agency is working with providers remain bleak and uncertainty continues about the National Disability Insurance Scheme policy environment. Concerns about operational risks and pricing appear to be increasing. The proportion of respondents who say that “The risks that the National Disability Insurance Scheme presents to my organisation outweigh the opportunities” and “We are worried we won’t be able to provide National Disability Insurance Scheme services at current prices” both increased in comparison to 2022. While the changes are relatively modest, the current levels of concern are similar to what we saw in much earlier stages of the National Disability Insurance Scheme rollout back in 2016 and 2017.

Table 5 Perception of the National Disability Insurance Scheme environment

| **Statement** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme policy reforms are heading in the right direction | 26 per cent | 36 per cent | 37 per cent |
| The National Disability Insurance Agency is working well with providers | 64 per cent | 23 per cent | 13 per cent |
| The National Disability Insurance Scheme policy environment is uncertain | 7 per cent | 12 per cent | 81 per cent |
| The risks that the National Disability Insurance Scheme presents to my organisation outweigh the opportunities | 32 per cent | 32 per cent | 36 per cent |
| We are worried we won't be able to provide National Disability Insurance Scheme services at current prices | 18 per cent | 13 per cent | 69 per cent |
| We are confident that the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguarding Framework supports the quality of services and or outcomes | 48 per cent | 23 per cent | 29 per cent |
| The National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission is working well with providers | 50 per cent | 30 per cent | 19 per cent |
| The systems and processes in the National Disability Insurance Scheme are working well | 71 per cent | 23 per cent | 6 per cent |
| There is sufficient advocacy for the people we support | 70 per cent | 15 per cent | 15 per cent |
| Helping people understand and navigate the scheme is taking us away from service provision | 9 per cent | 14 per cent | 76 per cent |
| There are too many unnecessary rules and regulations my organisation has to follow | 16 per cent | 23 per cent | 61 per cent |
| Our staff are exhausted by ongoing changes in the National Disability Insurance Scheme | 9 per cent | 19 per cent | 72 per cent |
| My leadership team spends too much time on dealing with changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme | 8 per cent | 18 per cent | 74 per cent |

Concerns about policy uncertainty and pricing is more pronounced in some organisation types. Older organisations (established before the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme) and larger organisations tend to report higher levels of uncertainty about the policy environment and concern about their ability to deliver services at the current prices.

The opinion of National Disability Insurance Scheme systems and processes remains poor, with over two-thirds of respondents reporting that they are not working well. Seventy per cent of respondents state that there is a lack of advocacy for the people they support.

In similar numbers to last year, respondents report that:

• helping people navigate the National Disability Insurance Scheme is taking them away from service provision

• there are too many unnecessary rules and regulations

• staff are exhausted by ongoing change

• leadership spends too much time dealing with changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Table 6 We are worried we won’t be able to provide National Disability Insurance Scheme services at current pricing

| **Category** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Not for profit | 14 percent | 14 percent | 72 percent |
| For Profit | 22 percent | 11 percent | 67 percent |
| **This header row is a replication of the first row in this table**  **Category** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| Established before 2014 | 13 percent | 14 percent | 73 percent |
| Established 2014 or later. Table footnote: this category was significantly different to other categories in that group. End table footnote. | 28 percent | 10 percent | 63 percent |
| **This header row is a replication of the first row in this table**  **Category** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| Very small < $1m. Table footnote: this category was significantly different to other categories in that group. End table footnote. | 32 percent | 15 percent | 53 percent |
| Small $1m to $5m. Table footnote: this category was significantly different to other categories in that group. End table footnote. | 17 percent | 17 percent | 66 percent |
| Medium $5m to $20m | 18 percent | 10 percent | 73 percent |
| Large >$20m | 7 percent | 10 percent | 83 percent |

A number of respondents describe the operating environment of the disability sector as confusing, fragmented and chaotic:

“There is often confusion about changes that aren’t provided prior to a roll out and this draws time away from our role as providing support to attempting to understand new rules or funding changes.”

**New South Wales large for-profit**

“The pace and amount of changing requirements has increased in the last year, as has the inconsistencies [and] lack of information from the National Disability Insurance Agency.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“The system is very fragmented between National Disability Insurance Scheme and state government or commonwealth funding; that is, there is a significant gap between people living with a mental illness who can access the National Disability Insurance Scheme and those that cannot.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

“It’s chaotic, unpredictable, worrying and very hard to operate in.”

**Victoria large not-for-profit**

### Quality and safeguarding

Opinions of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission remains quite negative, with 50 per cent of respondents disagreeing that it is working well with providers.

Overall sentiment about the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguarding Framework continues to decline, with 48 per cent of respondents disagreeing with the statement “We are confident that the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguarding Framework supports the quality of services and or outcomes,” compared with 41 per cent in 2022. Despite the declining satisfaction, opinions about some specific instruments within the Framework remain quite positive.

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents agree that the National Disability Insurance Scheme Worker Orientation Module (Quality, Safety and You) is leading to good outcomes (71 per cent last year). Seventy-nine per cent feel that the full worker screening requirements has positive outcomes (75 per cent in 2022). Seventy per cent think that the National Disability Insurance Scheme code of conduct is leading to good outcomes for participants.

Over half think that the New Worker — National Disability Insurance Scheme Induction Modules, practice standards auditing, complaints management and dispute resolution and incident management and reportable incidents are leading to positive outcomes.

Half report that the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission practice guides are leading to good outcomes, and 47 per cent feel that the behaviour support requirements to reduce and eliminate restrictive practices are leading to good outcomes.

However, only one-third of respondents (34 per cent) believe that the registered National Disability Insurance Scheme provider notice of changes and events is leading to good outcomes.

Though it is often assumed that larger organisations are better equipped to manage the various requirements and expectations of these regulatory instruments, the data does not support this. In fact, larger organisations report significantly lower perceptions of the benefits of “Full worker screening requirements” and “National Disability Insurance Scheme practice standards auditing”.

Table 7 Quality and Safeguarding Framework is leading to good outcomes for participants

| **Statement** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Full Worker Screening Requirements | 9 per cent | 12 per cent | 79 per cent |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme Code of Conduct | 9 per cent | 21 per cent | 70 per cent |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme Worker Orientation Module (Quality, Safety and You) | 11 per cent | 22 per cent | 68 per cent |
| New Worker - National Disability Insurance Scheme Induction Modules | 10 per cent | 26 per cent | 64 per cent |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme Practice Standards Auditing | 22 per cent | 22 per cent | 56 per cent |
| Complaints management and dispute resolution in relation to our service | 24 per cent | 24 per cent | 51 per cent |
| Incident Management and Reportable Incidents | 22 per cent | 27 per cent | 51 per cent |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission Practice Guides | 16 per cent | 34 per cent | 50 per cent |
| Behaviour support requirements, to reduce and eliminate restrictive practices | 24 per cent | 29 per cent | 47 per cent |
| Registered National Disability Insurance Scheme provider notice of changes and events | 27 per cent | 39 per cent | 34 per cent |

There were concerns about the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguarding Framework only applying to registered providers, a lack of resources to comply with the Framework and onerous reporting requirements:

“The Framework does not work when it only applies to 20 per cent of providers with the remaining 80 per cent only monitored by the complaints process.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“The ongoing challenge of unregistered providers continues to place some of our participants at risk.”

**Tasmania large not-for-profit**

“We are aware of many providers who are seriously considering ceasing to be accredited. We understand this is due to both the expense of accreditation audits (our reaccreditation audit which we have recently completed was over $50k) and the ongoing compliance costs.”

**Queensland large not-for-profit**

“If you want more compliant, registered providers, give us some actual support instead of demonising [us].”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“The process and the upkeep for maintaining the registration and the ongoing reporting is unrealistic.”

**Australian Capital Territory small for-profit**

### National Disability Insurance Scheme registration

Nearly one-fifth of respondents (18 per cent) are considering dropping their registration with the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission. When exploring these results by different organisational characteristics, some interesting findings emerge. The most striking is that over a quarter (26 per cent) of services established in the National Disability Insurance Scheme era (that is, 2014 or later) are considering dropping their registration. This is almost double the rate of organisations established prior to 2014, of whom only 14 per cent are considering dropping their registration.

Another significant difference is that smaller organisations (both by headcount and turnover) were more likely to report considering dropping their registration. For-profit organisations were also more likely to report considering dropping registration when compared with not-for-profit organisations.

When asked why they are thinking this way, many respondents raise concerns about administrative burden and costs, a perceived lack of benefit in registration and the apparent lack of accountability for unregistered providers:

“Registered and not registered services and the double standards that this cause.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“Continuous compliance regulations, inconsistent and ever-changing audit opinions of best practices as well as sustainability to the ever-rising cost of compliance.”

**South Australia large not-for-profit**

“We have only recently raised the question regarding the value of registration. There is a significant cost involved, audit fees and administrative costs in ensuring compliance is met in an ongoing consistent manner.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“Those unregistered providers … have no surveillance.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

“There is no benefit to registration.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

Of the non-registered providers to respond to the question “Is your organisation considering becoming registered with the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission?”, 65 per cent state they are considering becoming registered. Qualitative comments include demonstrating a commitment to quality and the belief that registration may create additional opportunities to provide a broader range of services. However, the process is also described as onerous:

“The ability to provide additional services. However, due to the ongoing demand of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, there has been hesitation.”

**Australian Capital Territory small for-profit**

“We have been through the audit process in [month] and have been approved by the auditor. It is now [8 months later] and we have not heard from the National Disability Insurance Agency regarding our registration despite multiple enquiries from us regarding our application status.”

**Victoria small for-profit**

As in previous years, the significant majority of respondents (77 per cent) report that “taken together, National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing and regulation are not conducive to providing innovative services that respond to participant needs.”

### Organisation strategy

Strategic priorities remain consistent with previous years, with most organisations continuing to focus on improving productivity (94 per cent), and actively growing their organisation (63 per cent). Reflecting findings elsewhere, over half (54 per cent) report that their board and leadership team find it difficult to develop strategy and set direction in the current environment. Fifty-eight percent have a clear vision of where they will be in three years. Many are worried about their ability  
to adjust to impacts from changes in policy   
(65 per cent), and a significant few are considering leaving the disability sector (nine per cent).

When it comes to plans for growth, 57 per cent are focused on increasing their client base, 45 per cent on increasing their workforce, 38 per cent are looking to increase the range of services offered and 28 per cent may open more service locations.

Areas where respondents feel they need to improve include costing and pricing (11 per cent), Human Resources strategy and workforce planning (11 per cent), data reporting and use (eight per cent), information, communications and technology (eight per cent) and employee learning and development (eight per cent). These areas of organisational development remain consistent with previous years and indicate clear areas of focus for the sector transformation fund proposed by National Disability Services.

### Data

Fifty-four per cent of respondents report that they have difficulty accessing disability data that they need to plan services, compared to 51 per cent in 2022. Similarly, 54 per cent also report trouble delivering evidence-based services due to lack of accessible and implementable research.

### COVID-19

Sixty-seven per cent think that the pandemic continues to have an impact. This is lower than the 93 per cent reported last year.

“We still have staff and participants either ill or worried. It has reduced but is still a factor.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“Lockdown has had a lasting mental health impact and this is playing out with the exorbitant WorkCover premiums.”

**Victoria large not-for-profit**

“We have yet to see a return to service levels being delivered prior to the pandemic.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

Many respondents, however, report little or no ongoing impact:

“We know how to manage risks, etc. when they occur, so it’s business as usual.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

“Our operations have returned to pre-pandemic expectations and assume a similar situation is occurring for other providers.”

**Western Australia medium not-for-profit**

### National Disability Insurance Scheme service provision

Table 8 Services provided

| **National Disability Insurance Scheme registration group** | **Currently providing services** | **Planning to commence** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Participation in community, social and civic activities | 70 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Daily personal activities | 66 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Development of daily living and life skills | 57 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistance with daily life tasks in a group or shared living arrangement | 48 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Group and centre-based activities | 46 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Assistance with travel and or transport arrangements | 45 per cent | 1 per cent |
| High intensity daily personal activities | 43 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistance in coordinating or managing life stages, transitions and supports | 42 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Household tasks | 37 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Specialised support coordination | 31 per cent | 5 per cent |
| Accommodation and or tenancy assistance | 31 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Innovative community participation | 30 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Therapeutic supports | 23 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Assistance to access and maintain employment or higher education | 21 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Specialised disability accommodation | 20 per cent | 5 per cent |
| Specialist positive behaviour support | 20 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Management of funding for supports | 19 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Specialised supported employment | 14 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Early intervention supports for early childhood | 12 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Community nursing care | 11 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Exercise physiology and personal well-being activities | 7 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistive products for personal care and safety | 6 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Assistive products for household tasks | 5 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistive equipment for recreation | 4 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Communication and information equipment | 4 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Personal mobility equipment | 3 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Home modification design and construction | 3 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Interpreting and translation | 1 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Assistance animals | 1 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Hearing equipment | 1 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Vehicle modifications | 1 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Vision equipment | 1 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Customised prosthetics (includes orthotics) | 0 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Hearing services | 0 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Specialised hearing services | 0 per cent | 0 per cent |
| Specialised driver training | 0 per cent | 0 per cent |

Much like last year, the most common services provided are participation in community, social and civic activities (70 per cent), followed by daily personal activities (66 per cent), development of daily living and life skills (57 per cent), assistance with daily life tasks in a group or shared living arrangement (48 per cent) and group and centre-based activities (46 per cent).

We also asked which services respondents plan to begin providing in the coming year. The largest planned increases are in specialised support coordination (five per cent), specialised disability accommodation (five per cent), accommodation and tenancy assistance (three per cent) and therapeutic supports (three per cent).

Table 9 Changes in hours providing services

| **National Disability Insurance Scheme registration group** | **We provided less** | **No change** | **We provided more** | **Less than 1 year's provision** | **Don't know** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participation in community, social and civic activities | 17 per cent | 22 per cent | 57 per cent | 2 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Daily personal activities | 17 per cent | 28 per cent | 54 per cent | 1 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Development of daily living and life skills | 16 per cent | 34 per cent | 47 per cent | 3 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistance with daily life tasks in a group or shared living arrangement | 17 per cent | 28 per cent | 53 per cent | 2 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Group and centre-based activities | 22 per cent | 27 per cent | 48 per cent | 2 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistance with travel and or transport arrangements | 11 per cent | 34 per cent | 52 per cent | 2 per cent | 2 per cent |
| High intensity daily personal activities | 16 per cent | 39 per cent | 45 per cent | 0 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Assistance in coordinating or managing life stages, transitions and supports | 14 per cent | 28 per cent | 50 per cent | 4 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Household tasks | 16 per cent | 34 per cent | 48 per cent | 1 per cent | 1 per cent |
| Specialised support coordination | 19 per cent | 28 per cent | 42 per cent | 6 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Accommodation and or tenancy assistance | 22 per cent | 36 per cent | 37 per cent | 4 per cent | 2 per cent |
| Innovative community participation | 14 per cent | 46 per cent | 37 per cent | 2 per cent | 2 per cent |

When asked why they are considering adding particular services, respondents report reasons such as meeting market demand, ensuring organisational growth and viability, and retaining service participants:

“Provide an increased range of services to meet market need.”

**Victoria medium not-for-profit**

“There is demand for these services in our area.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“To grow the business, provide more financial stability.”

**New South Wales large for-profit**

“Specialist Disability Accommodation and Supported Independent Living is a logical step in our supports as we have current participants leaving us for these supports.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

Table 10 Anticipated 2024 changes in service provision

| **National Disability Insurance Scheme registration group** | **We plan to stop providing this service** | **We plan to reduce the volume of this service** | **No changes planned** | **We plan to increase the volume of this service** | **Don't know** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participation in community, social and civic activities | 0 per cent | 3 per cent | 27 per cent | 66 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Daily personal activities | 0 per cent | 4 per cent | 36 per cent | 57 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Development of daily living and life skills | 1 per cent | 3 per cent | 35 per cent | 58 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Assistance with daily life tasks in a group or shared living arrangement | 1 per cent | 2 per cent | 35 per cent | 58 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Group and centre-based activities | 2 per cent | 6 per cent | 25 per cent | 61 per cent | 7 per cent |
| Assistance with travel and or transport arrangements | 1 per cent | 6 per cent | 50 per cent | 40 per cent | 3 per cent |
| High intensity daily personal activities | 2 per cent | 5 per cent | 38 per cent | 52 per cent | 3 per cent |
| Assistance in coordinating or managing life stages,  transitions and supports | 3 per cent | 6 per cent | 35 per cent | 51 per cent | 5 per cent |
| Household tasks | 1 per cent | 5 per cent | 39 per cent | 51 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Specialised support coordination | 8 per cent | 8 per cent | 32 per cent | 45 per cent | 8 per cent |
| Innovative community participation | 2 per cent | 2 per cent | 33 per cent | 60 per cent | 4 per cent |
| Accommodation and or tenancy assistance | 3 per cent | 3 per cent | 40 per cent | 48 per cent | 6 per cent |

The core support services which appear to be growing fastest are participation in community, social and civic activities, daily personal activities and assistance with daily life tasks in a group or shared living arrangement. Footnote citation number 2. Footnote description: Questions about changes in service provision cover the most commonly provided services, ones that at least 100 organisations were providing. End of footnote description. Although it is less common for respondents to report a decrease in service provision, 22 per cent are providing fewer group and centre-based activities and accommodation and tenancy assistance.

Many respondents are also anticipating growth in the areas of participation in community, social and civic activities, group and centre-based activities and innovative community participation.

When asked about capacity, 82 per cent of respondents report they have received requests for disability services that they could not provide. When asked why respondents needed to turn participants away, the most common reason cited is lack of capacity, followed by the participant’s plan not covering the service and the services in question not being offered by the organisation. Thirteen per cent report the participants’ needs being too complex.

Respondents cite concerns about not being equipped to support high-needs participants, compliance and administrative burdens and the high expectations of service participants:

“We are a small business with limited backup, so we try to avoid participants who require complex services.”

**Tasmania large for-profit**

“Not having the capacity to provide appropriate training to staff working with complex participants.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“Increased compliance reporting example, reporting medication (prescribed by a doctor) as a restrictive intervention when a Behaviour Support Plan is not approved. On each occurrence an incident report needs to be written resulting in many reports.”

**Victoria large not-for-profit**

When asked about capacity issues, 45 per cent of respondents state they do not have enough staff, while 21 per cent report their workforce is not qualified to assist certain clients and 15 per cent report a lack of organisational or financial capacity.

Many respondents describe collaborating with other providers to meet the complex healthcare needs of service participants:

“Referrals to other providers where we do not have the capacity, capability or risk appetite.”

**Tasmania small not-for-profit**

“This happens all the time, mainly with allied health in regard to therapy programs.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“Use of external care workers and or allied health etc.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

However, some respondents also report not wanting to collaborate because of competition within the disability sector:

“Providers don’t want to work with each other as there is an ‘unspoken’ competition.”

**Victoria medium for-profit**

“We have tried on numerous occasions to work with other providers, but the atmosphere of competition created by the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the government policy means that we have significant difficulty working with other providers.”

**Tasmania medium not-for-profit**

### Organisation finances

Past concerns about future financial conditions have been realised in this year’s survey, with considerably fewer respondents breaking even (18 per cent) this year and far more making a loss (34 per cent). Only 43 per cent report a profit, down from 46 per cent last year. Once again, this is consistent with past projections, with the largest difference being that slightly more organisations (46 per cent) projected a surplus than the 43 per cent that ended up achieving one.

Table 11 In its most recent full financial year (year ending 30 June 2023) did this organisation make a loss, break-even or make a profit (surplus) in regard to its disability services?

| **Year** | **Broke even or close to break-even** | **Made a loss and or deficit** | **Made a profit and or surplus** | **Don't know or new entity** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2016 | 20 per cent | 21 per cent | 55 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2017 | 20 per cent | 23 per cent | 53 per cent | 3 per cent |
| 2018 | 18 per cent | 28 per cent | 48 per cent | 6 per cent |
| 2019 | 17 per cent | 24 per cent | 54 per cent | 5 per cent |
| 2020 | 12 per cent | 19 per cent | 67 per cent | 2 per cent |
| 2021 | 10 per cent | 19 per cent | 68 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2022 | 28 per cent | 23 per cent | 46 per cent | 3 per cent |
| 2023 | 18 per cent | 34 per cent | 43 per cent | 6 per cent |

Table 12 Do you expect your organisation will make a loss (deficit), break-even or a profit (surplus) on its disability services in this current financial year (year ending 30 June 2024)?

| **Year** | **Break-even or be close to break-even** | **Make a Loss and or deficit** | **Make a profit and or surplus** | **Don't know or new entity** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2015 | 20 per cent | 22 per cent | 55 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2016 | 35 per cent | 17 per cent | 40 per cent | 7 per cent |
| 2017 | 29 per cent | 24 per cent | 43 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2018 | 25 per cent | 23 per cent | 43 per cent | 9 per cent |
| 2019 | 25 per cent | 13 per cent | 56 per cent | 6 per cent |
| 2020 | 23 per cent | 16 per cent | 58 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2021 | 26 per cent | 23 per cent | 45 per cent | 6 per cent |
| 2022 | 16 per cent | 36 per cent | 46 per cent | 1 per cent |
| 2023 | 27 per cent | 26 per cent | 43 per cent | 4 per cent |

This is the lowest rate of respondents to report a profit (surplus) since this question was first asked in 2015.

Discounting the two COVID-19 years of 2020 and 2021, when pandemic funding created an anomaly, there is a consistent downward trend in the rate of providers achieving profits or surpluses over the past eight years, and a corresponding trend of more providers reporting losses. This year was the highest recorded rate of respondents reporting a loss since 2015.

No significant differences emerge between states and territories. However, respondents who provide services in metropolitan or larger centre’s are more likely to report a loss and less likely to report a profit. Additionally, not-for-profit organisations, larger organisations and organisations established prior to the implementation of National Disability Insurance Scheme are all more likely to report a loss compared to for-profit organisations, smaller organisations and organisations established after the implementation of National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Fewer respondents project a loss or deficit for the current financial year (26 per cent), resulting in an increase in organisations projecting that they will break even (27 per cent) and the proportion of organisations projecting a profit or surplus remained relatively stable (43 per cent). In past reports, projections have often proved accurate. If this holds true, then this change from over a third of organisations predicting a loss to approximately one quarter would be positive news for the sector.

Not-for-profit organisations, larger organisations, and organisations established prior to the implementation of National Disability Insurance Scheme are all more likely to predict a loss for the current financial year compared to for-profit organisations, smaller organisations and organisations established after the implementation of National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Despite the positive projections noted above, it’s worth noting that some free-text responses paint a bleak picture, with some respondents doubting their long-term viability:

“If you take out the one-off payment from the National Disability Insurance Scheme, we made a loss of $200,000.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“The National Disability Insurance Scheme price guide 2023to24 has not kept pace with the cost of doing business — Fair Work increases, superannuation, insurances, consumables and transport costs have increased significantly. With the small increase (5.3 per cent average) the National Disability Insurance Scheme prices make [it] difficult to remain viable.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“The general running of a business has become unsustainable.”

**Victoria large for-profit**

Other respondents however are more positive:

“A sound financial position through a combination of good business management and investments, our profit does not come from our funding although this does help greatly. Our businesses for example could be sold as good commercial opportunities in the mainstream. Having [a share portfolio] definitely helps our position as this generates funds for capital equipment.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

### Anticipating future reforms

When asked what outcomes they hoped to see from the Disability Royal Commission and the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review, respondents cited better accountability of the disability sector, requirement for providers to be registered, improvements to staff education and training and a review of pricing:

“Providers taking advantage held to account.”

**Victoria large for-profit**

“More accountability on the National Disability Insurance Scheme itself to provide accurate and informed advice.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

Provider registration remains a contentious issue, with respondent comments reflecting a number of related concerns around quality and safeguarding, the costs of compliance and the sector’s reputation. Comments include:

“All providers are required to become registered and be audited under the National Disability Insurance Scheme code of conduct and practice standards.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

“Incentives to have registered providers, this is honestly ridiculous that we are even having this conversation.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

Hopes for improvements in staff education and training include:

“Better support for service providers — including additional funding for increased training and education.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“Standards introduced around staff training and qualifications for support staff.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“Funds invested into training disability service staff, allowing the expansion of the core competence skills required for all workers.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

“Standards of support and management are increased, training such as incident management, person centered practices are mandatory.”

**New South Wales large not-for-profit**

Lastly, hopes for National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing include:

“Improvement in National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing to help registered providers and avert market failure.”

**Victoria small not-for-profit**

“Pricing review conducted by third party (not National Disability Insurance Agency) and pricing frameworks to be detailed and transparent.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“Pricing that reflects the actual costs.”

**Victoria medium not-for-profit**

“A nuanced pricing structure for each sub-market. For example, registered and unregistered providers have different costs. Sole traders and organisations with operational overheads have different cost-bases. Unit pricing needs to be dynamic to reflect this.”

**Victoria large not-for-profit**

## Case study New South Wales

**Denise Heath**

Nepean Area Disability Organisation

Tell us about Nepean Area Disability Organisation Disability Services

The Nepean Area Disability Organisation Disability Services started in 1980 through the efforts of a local cohort of families who were seeking organised community-based activities for their adult children.

We have stayed in the Nepean and Blue Mountains regions ever since, growing as the community grows, with an ever-expanding range of supports and services.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

I am proud of the way that I’ve helped the Nepean Area Disability Organisation to grow over the years and generate so many warm and valuable connections throughout our community.

It’s evolved from a very small organisation in 2005, with not too many resources, to a medium-sized organisation with deep community connections and a staff with a diverse sets of skills.

One recent achievement has been the development of a community sensory activity centre called Share My Ability. It offers an accessible space for play, individual development, family gatherings, and all sorts of events and activities.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

More, in a sense, but only because we commenced a three-year strategic plan, which included a fairly ambitious set of targets (all of which we managed to achieve).

What are some of the major opportunities awaiting the sector?

Including people with disability in decision making and governance. The Nepean Area Disability Organisation has developed a Disability Advisory Board to challenge our thinking and processes in this area.

What are some of the major challenges?

I’d say: staying ahead of the curve. The sector is changing rapidly, with more and more providers for National Disability Insurance Scheme participants to choose from.

For us, providing the best services means constantly updating those services, and working hard to develop our workforce.

We’ve invested significantly in training and development in recent years, and the results have been worthwhile in terms of participant experience as well as the retention and attraction of staff.

There are always competing budgeting priorities, but maintaining a high-performing workforce clearly has to be one of them.

Another challenge can be finding the right Information Technology to support administrative efficiencies and compliance.

Sometimes the system you have might actually be the right one, but it’s not being used to its full capacity. Other times, you might have the system you need, but it doesn’t seamlessly link to other systems.

The coming year will require a balance of innovation and budgetary control. National Disability Insurance Scheme data continues to flag the need for financial controls to support the overall sustainability of the scheme, but this is going to be difficult in an environment where staff wages, insurance costs and other expenses are all high and likely to climb.

Given the realities of the current economic environment, our goal is to keep our staff trained, supported and engaged so that we have the freshest possible thinking and can continue to adapt to our participant’s service requirements.

### New South Walessector statistics

188,991 Active participants including Early Childhood Approach

6,071 Active Early Childhood Approach participants

8.6 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

10.9 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Workforce

Attracting and maintaining staff remains a major challenge for many New South Wales service providers, particularly in remote parts of the state. Key shortages continue in frontline support workers, Allied Health staff and behaviour support practitioners, which limits the sector’s ability to meet participant requests.

#### Red tape

Excessive administrative requirements are still a significant drain on time and resources for providers who have no time to spare. Dual reporting requirements from the New South Wales Government and National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission only add to this burden, and the loss of over-worked staff which too-often results.

#### Financial viability

Financial viability is a growing issue. Far too many providers don’t believe that they’ll be around in the future if present pricing arrangements remain as they are. The impact of rising costs — in particular, insurance costs — is very real and being felt every day.

## Case study Victoria

**Toni Stewart**

Focus

Tell us about Focus

What began as a modest initiative with a visionary group of families in 1972 and a single residence has blossomed into 22 homes across the Mornington Peninsula and Frankston LGA’s, with future expansion plans on the horizon.

But we aren’t just about providing accommodation supports. At our core, we prioritise having the people we support at the forefront of everything we do.

Our goal is to empower people, ensuring they have full control over their lives, and we’re privileged to be part of their journey.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

Witnessing the organisation’s transformation. It’s incredibly fulfilling to see so many individuals we support taking the lead, conducting workshops to onboard new employees, and delivering disability awareness training to aspiring students entering the disability sector.

Nothing is more impactful than hearing a person with intellectual disability articulating their expectations to new recruits, emphasising “if you want to work with me, this is what I expect”.

What does an average day generally look like for you?

There’s no such thing as an average day.

We are in the business of people, so being able to adapt, laugh, be resilient and acknowledge each other and what we do well certainly goes a long way to achieve a positive supportive culture. And that is what gets us through each day.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

In 2019 we stopped acknowledging what we thought of the prior year and suggesting that the coming year was going to be great one, because every year since has been a challenge.

We really need to stop saying we like a challenge, but with a Royal Commission and Independent Reviews, it’s inevitable that further change is coming our way, so the word ‘challenge’ is here to stay for some time yet.

What are some of the major opportunities?

There’s opportunity in everything we do. We want to see the people we support inform our practice, guide our services, and influence their experience of their support.

We endeavour to create strong public awareness and be known as a trusted organisation with lived experience of disability on the Mornington Peninsula.

We will continue our journey to build a strong vibrant future that can withstand and adapt to change.

What are some of the major challenges?

The goalposts of the National Disability Insurance Scheme keep moving and we wish they would stay in the same spot for a while — at least long enough for us to get some traction in what we do.

We’d welcome a different challenge, instead of feeling we are stuck on the National Disability Insurance Scheme merry-go-round of reinvention and administrative burden.

### Victoria sector statistics

166,833 Active participants including Early Childhood Approach

3,592 Active Early Childhood Approach participants

10.9 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

11.7 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### National Disability Insurance Scheme worker screening

In a state where workforce shortages are extremely significant, the processing of Victorian National Disability Insurance Scheme Check Worker Screening applications continues to be beset with delays.

The median time to process digital applications was 11 days in Victoria, and more than five weeks for manual applications. Frustration is deep and widespread.

#### Addressing occupational violence

Understanding the relationship between person-centred, high-quality support and safer worker environments is vital to keep everyone safe.

#### Customised employment

Customised employment is a major opportunity for disability employment providers, and more and more Victorians are looking to seize it. The goal of customised employment is to tailor a job to fit the skills, interests, strengths and support needs of a person with disability while meeting the needs of business.

## The state of the National Disability Insurance Scheme

### National Disability Insurance Scheme Review

The Independent Review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has been a source of hope and trepidation since its launch in October last year. The panel’s first step was to call for submissions from participants, families, providers and other stakeholders. They wanted to know what is and isn’t working in the National Disability Insurance Scheme, to help guide their thinking about how it could change.

Over 3000 papers were received in a relatively short time on topics ranging from workforce, pricing and payments, to safeguards and alternative commissioning. And why not? — when the stakes are so high. To paraphrase the Review’s co-chair, Professor Bruce Bonyhady, the National Disability Insurance Scheme may be a policy miracle, but that doesn’t mean it’s a magic pudding.

For our part, National Disability Services has made multiple submissions — every one of them driven by data and close consultation with members. We have identified the following steps as priorities for National Disability Insurance Scheme reform:

• the creation of a sector-led taskforce with funding to support sector transformation

• best-practice pricing for greater independence and transparency

• funding to attract, retain and support workers

• targeted payment reform that focusses on delivering outcomes and fostering innovation

• improved planning and support pathways

• regulatory reforms designed to even the playing field between providers and drive quality.

• a joined-up ecosystem that makes accessible and appropriate supports available throughout the community

• a pathway towards better home and living supports, via a clear strategy for reform over the next five to 15 years

• a focus on employment outcomes to increase employment opportunities for people with disability

• a redesigned National Disability Insurance Scheme for children and families that prioritises family-led and community-based early childhood supports.

Based on the issues raised, the Panel released an interim report in July 2023. On a broader level, it suggested that the Review’ will attempt to answer five important questions:

• What should be the role of mainstream supports in complementing the individual funding provided by the National Disability Insurance Scheme?

• How can decisions about access and planning can be more equitable and transparent?

• Why has the National Disability Insurance Scheme become the only option for so many young children and their families?

• What is the role and function of National Disability Insurance Scheme markets?

• What needs to change to ensure that the National Disability Insurance Scheme is sustainable?

As it has considered these questions, the Panel has indicated that its recommendations to government will include:

• making community-wide foundational services (formerly described as Tier Two or Information, Linkages and Capacity Building) available to all people with disability under an intergovernmental agreement

• refocusing the National Disability Insurance Scheme to be person-centered, culturally informed and supportive of participant decision-making

• strengthening access by placing a greater focus on functional impairment rather than a diagnosis

• setting reasonable and necessary budgets at an overall package level and providing greater flexibility for participants to plan how they use them

• a focused intermediary sector to help participants bring their plans to life and better connect with supports and services

• a return to delivering early childhood supports in natural settings based on best practice

• more transparent, consistent and holistic home and living funding decisions and scale existing innovative models

• increased oversight of who is delivering National Disability Insurance Scheme supports through a more nuanced approach to provider and worker regulation

• build a more responsive workforce through strategies such as portable training entitlements to help workers plan their careers

• continuing to set price limits, but with prices that better reflect the different participant support needs

• considering the range of safeguards needed across all disability supports and ways in which the quality of supports can be measured and improved.

Aimed, as they are, at ensuring the sustainability of the Scheme and improving outcomes for people with disability, some of these changes will be immediately welcomed by the sector. Others will need more detail before we can fully understand what their implications might be.

Either way, the Panel has been clear that, while it will provide considered proposals for a way forward, it will be up to governments to act on them. To that end, the eight per cent growth target set by National Cabinet in June could be seen as a commitment from all governments to work proactively together to address the long standing issues with the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme — as long as strategies to reach this target do not rely on changing the demand-driven nature of the scheme, cutting participant supports, or impact access to quality and safe services. After ten long and frustrating years, many are hoping that there’s blue sky ahead.

In the meantime, National Disability Services will continue to advocate for simple, sector-led solutions and the funding required to implement them.

### Annual Price Review

Viability remained an issue for providers throughout 2022–23, which once again put the spotlight on pricing. Constant adaptation and innovation is hard while providers are forced to operate on thin profit margins and limited cash reserves.

To support our submission to April’s Annual Pricing Review, National Disability Services undertook a thorough analysis of the true cost of service provision. Challenging economic conditions, workforce shortages, looming government reforms and the after-effects of COVID-19 all needed to be properly factored into National Disability Insurance Scheme prices, along with wage inflation and indexation.

Unsurprisingly, our analysis showed a glaring gap between National Disability Insurance Agency prices and real-world situations. These disparities (which, in Supported Independent Living core supports, were a staggering 23 per cent) underscored the urgent need for prices that ensure sustainability and support investment in quality, safeguarding and workforce.

The announcement of the 2023–24 pricing arrangements was therefore a bitter disappointment. For the fourth year in a row, prices for therapy supports, level two and three support coordination, and plan management were not increased, despite the significant impact of superannuation, Consumer Price Index and workforce shortages on these services.

With only wage-related cost increases being reflected in the disability support worker cost model, the new arrangements simply failed to reflect the day-to-day reality of life in the sector.

That’s why National Disability Services continues to advocate for an independent pricing mechanism — an approach which is widely regarded as best practice in similar sectors here and overseas. Current prices for essential supports don’t even cover the cost of doing business, let alone the cost of recalibrating those businesses in the wake of Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme Review reforms. Providers are ready and willing to change. But they need the resources to do so.

### National Disability Insurance Scheme regulation

The National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission launched three Own Motion Inquiries in 2022–23. It released an in-depth analysis of supported accommodation in December and continues to explore possible new standards for this service type. Providers were also consulted on the guidance being developed for active support. While the inquiries into support coordination, plan management and platform providers suggest that reforms are imminent.

Regulatory burden was also the subject of a series of National Disability Services workshops where providers were able to talk directly with the National Disability Insurance Scheme Quality and Safeguards Commission about its current settings for oversight and monitoring of service provision. The commission heard that the current settings don’t adequately support participant safety, or promote quality, and that the cost of compliance is not adequately covered. And they were told that many registered providers are starting to question the benefit of being registered in the first place. The National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and the Royal Commission present a real opportunity to reset the regulatory framework. But until then, change will be slow.

### Positive Action towards Career Engagement rollout

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is currently introducing a new Information and Communication Technology business system called Positive Action towards Career Engagement. The process is shining a light on several key issues providers are forced to face every day — including the risk of providing unfunded services, the risk of using funds not in line with approved supports, disruptions in revenue flow and protracted delays to payments.

Positive Action towards Career Engagement began in-house and partner testing in June 2022 and the Tasmania trial commenced in November 2022. Providers found adapting to the new system and training staff to use it to be a challenge, which makes the forthcoming national rollout a cause for concern. While the National Disability Insurance Agency provided how-to guides on its website, along with a practice learning environment, the Positive Action towards Career Engagement transition will be yet another large — and unfunded — administrative burden to add to the growing pile.

Without adequate support, participants also risk missing essential services. It will be vital that the new My National Disability Insurance Scheme portal be accessible to all, including participants with specific communication requirements or limited digital literacy.

Done right, Positive Action towards Career Engagement has the potential to streamline service delivery for both participants and providers. That’s why National Disability Services continues to advocate for comprehensive training, real-time support and implementation funding.

## Case studySouth Australia

**Wendy Warren**

EllieB’s

Tell us about EllieB’s

We’ve been in the developmental disability – or some might say, intellectual disability and autism – space for 45 years. In the last decade, we’ve just exploded in growth and become much more diverse and dynamic.

That said, we’re not an organisation that necessarily wants to be the biggest. I personally don’t think that’s wise in this environment.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

I’d say the decision to start outsourcing a lot of administration about 11 or 12 years ago, which has really served us well through the chaos.

We outsource recruitment and payroll and roster management. We have virtual CFOs who come in and coach teams. Basically, any sort of lower-level task that takes up a lot of time or distract us from our core work is a task that we’re happy to delegate. We’re not here to do complex paperwork. We’re here to help people live their best lives.

It’s fair to say that this is quite a brave model and not necessarily for everyone! But for us it’s been a huge success.

What does an average day generally look like for you?

When it comes to quality of care, I want to be very actively involved, so I watch everything like a hawk.

When you’re in the developmental space, there’s always something urgent to deal with. It’s like a crisis management model. I’m very big on escalating issues and coming together with a team at a minute’s notice to debrief and talk through the best approach.

Having a smallish core team and very flat line management structure without lots of layers and hierarchy means that our decision-making is fast and always focused on quality.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

We had our financial challenges at times but ended the year pretty strongly. I think the big challenge was people moving in and out of roles at short notice and being left to manage sudden vacancies.

What are some of the major opportunities?

Again, automation might not be for everyone, but I really think that more providers should look at it.

Having a flat management structure, minimal hierarchy and the right people in the right roles has delivered us a more resilient workforce, improved communication and generated a much higher level of teamwork.

What are some of the major challenges?

It takes time to build a resilient team that shares a common model of teamwork.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

I have lived experience. When you’ve grown up with someone with a disability, you know how challenging it can be for them, so that was really the driver for me.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

I was at the Salvation Army for many years and then I worked in the medical insurance space. Both of those sectors are a lot more innovative and adaptive than most people realise — but I’m not sure I would have said the same thing about this sector. I guess I just thought there’d be more work done on that initial transition (to the National Disability Insurance Scheme), and maybe a bit more enthusiasm.

I suppose people are just exhausted.

What impresses you most?

I love the human rights framework. I love that people with a disability finally have a voice.

### South Australia sector statistics

53,859 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

1,358 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

6.4 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

7.1 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Sustainability

Sustainability is the big issue in South Australia, just like in most other states. There is still very little room for innovation and growth, and way too much complicated and time-consuming red tape, particularly for registered providers. It’s also worth noting that insurance costs are blowing out — especially the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia insurance where, if providers are actually able to find an insurer in the first place, the premiums have increased as much as 40 to 50 per cent.

#### Training

Attracting and retaining workers are both obviously big issues — but training them can be a problem as well. Many South Australian members are raising the issue of inadequate funding to support key training requirements for staff and are very concerned about what impacts the Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme Review recommendations will have on training requirements.

#### Non-registered providers

Providers continue to compete on an uneven playing field. Non-registered providers are spared all sorts of complicated, time-consuming and costly requirements which registered providers have to face every day.

## Case study Western Australia

**Justin O’Meara Smith**

Interchange

Tell us about Interchange

We’re an individualised service provider, which to us means that we work with people one person at a time to help them to achieve their individual goals. We support about 500 people through a mix of rostered and informal supports through community participation and Individualised living options; we also provide intermediary services through plan management, support coordination and shared management.

What has been your proudest achievement?

The proud moments come when I see how great support can help people achieve their goals, not just the people we support but our staff — the people who walk alongside them every day.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

The big challenge for me was when the National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing came out: once again, we’re expected to be all about efficiency, instead of quality and engagement. After years of creating effective and efficient services, we’re being told that we need to find further efficiencies, because the pricing is just not sustainable.

What are some of the major opportunities?

We are very focused on our value proposition and how we can add the greatest value to the care sector as an employer and as a provider. And we think that the answer probably lies in a return to relationship-driven, people-centered services, rather than short-term profit.

So, amidst all of the National Disability Insurance Scheme change and uncertainty, we have made a significant reinvestment in service quality, risk management, culture, engagement and belonging. We believe that, as services become increasingly transactional, more and more people are going to value what we offer.

Basically, we’re not trying to train our staff to “support people with disability”. We’re training them to know and support a person. It’s a very different thing.

What are some of the major challenges?

The challenge is maintaining the hearts and minds of our people in a time of change fatigue. Our people want stability, but with imminent reforms major changes are going to continue for at least the next three to five years.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

Twenty years ago, I woke up and felt that maybe what I was doing wasn’t as important as I wanted it to be. I therefore looked for a place in which what I was doing was meaningful and valued by myself and others. And through my upbringing, through my faith, I valued social justice. I learned how privileged I was and how rewarding it was to look after not only myself and my family, but the wider community.

I do what I do because I value helping others; helping others makes me feel great!

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

What surprises me is that regulators seem to have so little confidence in us traditional services and put so much untested trust in unregulated ones.

Nobody works in our sector if they don’t care about people, and care about connection, belonging, inclusion and rights. But the constructs and language of the scheme makes providers appear as though we cannot be trusted. Registered, not-for-profit providers with boards and systems and controls continue to be tied up in more and more complicated regulations, whereas new and unregulated providers are largely free of regulatory burden — the balance just doesn’t feel right.

What impresses you most?

What impresses me the most is that, despite this supposedly competitive market, so many providers continue to help one another to shape the future through networks like National Disability Services and help each other succeed.

### Western Australia sector statistics

53,623 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

1,172 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

8.0 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

8.0 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Workforce

In a highly competitive employment market, Western Australia needs a lot more direct investment to attract and retain skilled workers and ensure adequate service delivery.

Providers are also keen to recruit people with disability and increase cultural diversity in their workforces but often lack the resources to do so. Reducing the cost and time required to receive a National Disability Insurance Scheme Worker Screening Check would definitely be a big help.

#### National Disability Insurance Scheme Pricing

Prices needs to reflect the operational realities of delivering the scheme and the true cost of service delivery. Many providers have concerns about the price limits and predict that they will make a loss. That concern is influencing an increasing number of providers not to register for the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

#### Housing

The housing crisis continues, with elevated costs and a lack of both rentals and properties.

## The state of the Royal Commission

The Disability Royal Commission’s final report represents a significant milestone in the journey towards a more inclusive and supportive future for Australians with disability. Clocking in at 5000 pages, this monumental undertaking provides a balanced assessment of systemic issues and failures and a compelling roadmap for reform. The 222 recommendations contained in the final report could and should be a turning point for the sector.

Throughout the Royal Commission’s four-and-a-half-year-long inquiry, it revealed harrowing instances of abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect. Such behaviour is unequivocally unacceptable, but the report has gone beyond merely recommending steps to address it. By also recommending a Disability Rights Act, the Royal Commission is looking to build a more inclusive society where the rights, dignity and autonomy of people with disability are placed front and centre.

### Promising practices

In the final report, the Royal Commission refrains from issuing recommendations directly to disability service providers. Instead, it highlights promising practices that can mitigate the risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation within disability services. This approach aims to inspire providers to proactively improve their services and so ensure the safety and wellbeing of people with disability.

### Debate on disability-specific settings

A notable point of divergence among the Commissioners is the future of exclusively disability-specific settings. Some argue that the separation of people with disability from their peers and the broader community — in the form of special schools, Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) and group homes — is a form of ‘segregation’ that should be phased out.

Other Commissioners suggest a more nuanced approach, on the grounds that there may be specific circumstances where separation may have a place. This debate has sparked significant discussions within the community and the sector.

Disability support organisations must not shy away from conversations about the future of exclusively disability-specific settings however complex they can and will be. Dialogue will be a critical step towards a safer and more inclusive environment and we all have a vital role to play in it.

### Systemic issues and failures

The Royal Commission has highlighted systemic issues and failures that must be addressed to ensure the safety, wellbeing and rights of people with disability. These issues encompass regulatory requirements, the quality and safety of services and the overall operation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission.

The final report contains few direct recommendations for the National Disability Insurance Agency, though it does point to a range of actions that the Agency could take to improve the experiences of First Nations people with disability. The report also contains some broader mainstream recommendations for health, advocacy and the way in which people with disability experience criminal justice.

One inference is that — just like the rest of us — the Commissioners are expecting the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review to prompt widespread reform.

### Workforce, registration and redress

The Royal Commission’s final report also addresses provider registration. But while it acknowledges the importance of registration for quality and safety, it falls short of recommending registration for all providers. The report identifies gaps and challenges in the current registration and auditing system that can expose participants to risks. But it also emphasises that people with disability have the right to choose their providers, whatever risks their choice may entail.

The report highlights significant issues in providing apologies and addressing complaints and investigations. The implementation of redress requirements, from apologies to financial compensation, will depend on how the government and the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission incorporate these recommendations into their powers.

While a National Redress Scheme wasn’t recommended in the final report, it suggested that a reliable and consistent approach to redress — including financial compensation — is clearly absent and, as such, required.

The main workforce recommendations involve the establishment of a national disability support worker registration scheme which includes mandatory worker screening and an improved screening process. The report also considers portable training and leave entitlements and suggests a joint application to modify the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Award to ensure more appropriate remuneration.

The Royal Commission emphasises the importance of a skilled and capable provider landscape but does not recommend mandatory formal qualifications for all disability support workers as a means of reducing the risk of abuse and exploitation.

### What next?

Everyone has the right to live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The final report of the Disability Royal Commission holds the potential to bring about important reforms and changes within the disability sector. Its findings create opportunities for providers to enhance the quality of their services, strengthen their practices and promote a safer environment for everyone.

Along with addressing abuse and neglect, the report also sets the stage for a more inclusive and accountable future. Careful deliberation, collaboration and co-design will be necessary to implement its recommendations effectively. The sector must work together to ensure high-quality, equitable and sustainable supports that provide choice, control and independence to people with disability.

The final report calls on the Australian Government to respond to the Royal Commission’s recommendations by 31 March 2024. How government responds will be a crucial step in the journey toward a more inclusive and supportive society.

National Disability Services stands ready to support the sector as it navigates the many changes ahead.

## The state of the broader policy environment

### Disability Services and Inclusion Bill

The Department of Social Services held consultations through July and August on the development of a new Disability Services and Inclusion Bill.

Designed to replace the Disability Services Act 1986, the Bill will provide the legislative authority for all new spending on disability-related programs and grant agreements outside the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Its development is timely, given that the previous Act predates many important milestones and the evolution of arrangements that support people with disability, including the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Australia’s adoption of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability (2008) and Australia’s Disability Strategy (2021–30).

The new legislation was introduced in the House of Representatives in September.

### A new intergovernmental agreement

As part of the launch of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in 2012, the Commonwealth and state and territory governments signed an intergovernmental agreement to establish a shared commitment for the rollout of the Scheme. This broader agreement was underpinned by individual bilateral and Heads of Agreements between the Commonwealth and each state and territory government, setting out in more detail how the National Disability Insurance Scheme will be delivered across Australia.

As part of the review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, Review Co-chair Professor Bruce Bonyhady Member of the Order of Australia flagged the need for a new intergovernmental agreement to clarify the responsibilities for disability services across federal, state and territory governments. With the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review being handed down at the end of 2023, the disability community will be closely monitoring developments on how services will be funded and delivered.

### First major milestones in Australia’s Disability Strategy

Focused on how all governments can contribute to Australia’s national disability policy framework, Australia’s Disability Strategy has great potential to coordinate and unify disparate policies and programs to support a more inclusive and accessible Australian community.

The Strategy’s first implementation report is due by the end of 2023, just in time to consider the recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission. The first major evaluation of the strategy kicks off in 2025.

## Case study Queensland

**Sharon Wrigley**

Community and Specialist Support Incorporated

Tell us about Community and Specialist Support Incorporated

Community and Specialist Support Incorporated envisions a society where everyone, regardless of their background, abilities or circumstances, can lead self-directed lives and actively participate in their communities. Our service began in 1989 through strong advocacy of individuals and families.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

Our strong culture is something I am incredibly proud of. We are committed in upholding the rights of the people who choose our service, and we are passionate about providing outcomes that are meaningful and supporting an individual’s agency. We believe in conducting ourselves with integrity, honesty and transparency, and we understand that trust is earned through consistent and reliable behaviour.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

I think the past year has been as challenging as ever. Our sector has experienced significant challenges and there are more on the horizon. With the introduction of reduced spending within the National Disability Insurance Scheme of $57 billion over 10 years and the National Workforce Plan requiring 128,000 new staff in our sector by 2025, I can see many unintended consequences arising. These may challenge the outcomes and intentions of what the Disability Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme Review are desperately trying to achieve.

What are some of the major opportunities?

There are major opportunities within the Disability Royal Commission, National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and Disability Services and Inclusion Bill.

What are some of the major challenges?

The lack of a nationalised approach across many areas. One such area is the lack of state and federal collaboration in addressing the need to have a shared Supported Independent Living vacancy management service that holds and shares vital data.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

I feel incredibly lucky to have entered our sector 27 years ago. As a young person I was always passionate about social justice and equality. I went for an interview quite young, and I wasn’t successful. It was only because the person who was successful declined that I was called back to commence. Since then I have been so fortunate to have key mentors who supported my development. While I have completed formal education throughout my career it is the connection with the people who choose our service that continues to inspire me.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

Being quite young when I commenced, what became acutely obvious was the need to be of service. While this wasn’t necessarily surprising, it clarified what was important very early on in my formative years and it is something that I carry with me now.

What impresses you most?

Our sector has brilliant pockets of collaboration, kindness and support. I have witnessed many reforms and the one thing that remains is a strong sense of community and willingness to share resources and support each other.

I am fortunate to be involved in some brilliant Chief Executive Officer groups who lead with this passion, where the focus is on the people who choose our services. It heartens me that this sense of support and community remains.

### Queensland sector statistics

134,962 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

4,973 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

10.2 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

5.3 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Workforce

Workforce shortages are a significant concern in regional and remote areas. In so many regions throughout the state, providers just can’t provide the kinds of services local residents require or have a long waiting list. With so many services thinning out as you head further west, many participants have to travel great distances.

#### Compliance

It often seems like providers have to spend more time on administrative requirements than on actually supporting participants. And so many of these requirements arrive out of the blue. For example, the National Disability Insurance Scheme Commission recently changed skills descriptors for high intensity supports.

#### Pricing

Just like providers all over the nation, Queensland providers are struggling to cover the actual costs of therapy supports, support coordination and plan management.

## Case study Tasmania

**Nigel Hill**

Multicap Tasmania

Tell us about Multicap

Multicap Tasmania has a proud history dating back to 1971. Today we provide a variety of National Disability Insurance Scheme services, including supported independent living, community access, in-home supports, social participation, behaviour support, practitioner services and support coordination.

We employ nearly 500 Tasmanians.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

A highlight has been working with families in planning for, and transitioning to, our fantastic new homes. I am really proud of the standard of housing that we provide and the quality measures we have introduced, as well as the growth of our services statewide.

What does an average day generally look like for you?

We are becoming a more complex organisation to manage.

Most days, I’m busy checking to see how we are improving the systems and services we provide. We are implementing extensive Information and Communication Technology systems to help us become more sustainable. Our teams are implementing new finance and payroll systems, and improving the reporting and data analytics that we can pull from existing systems.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

Over last few years it’s become much more challenging to maintain service quality, meet all the compliance requirements, and at the same time stay financially afloat. We are investing in training for key personnel in methodologies such as Lean to further streamline what we do.

Put simply, we need to get our systems and processes as efficient as possible to ensure we are still around for our clients in the years ahead.

What are some of the major opportunities?

I hope that the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and the Royal Commission will highlight the issues that have been created by a market that is much more unregulated and prone to unethical behaviour than many clearly expected.

As a provider of services to many complex clients who need high intensity supports, it would also be great to see some specific recommendations regarding the training and support of workers who require advanced skills.

What are some of the major challenges?

Travel can be challenging when you operate in a geographically scattered environment where public transport is more or less non-existent. The current arrangements (where costs can be recovered but require participant agreement) aren’t ideal, because participants and support coordinators are often reluctant to ‘sign up’. There needs to be a better way.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

My motivation for joining the sector came from a strong interest in improving the lives of people through skill development and training, so I love the scope of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and its capacity-building supports.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

My biggest surprise is how complex the National Disability Insurance Scheme has become, and the uncertainty that it has created for many families who are seeking the best for their loved ones.

Starting out, I was definitely surprised by the size of the sector. Our services are largely hidden from the public and don’t have the visibility of other industries. The contribution the sector makes to the economy is certainly not well-understood.

What impresses you most?

I am impressed with the genuine commitment to our clients that I see from our staff on a daily basis.

### Tasmania sector statistics

13,487 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

116 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

9.6 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

2.6 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Positive Action towards Career Engagement trial

Positive Action towards Career Engagement has created an additional burden, as providers have grappled with running two systems. It has not been easy or cheap for many providers to ensure that all their staff are able to handle both systems.

#### Workforce shortages

With lots of providers training up staff, who then leave to start their own (often unregistered) business, Tasmania is suffering from a severe staffing shortage — which is, in turn, leading to a shortage of services.

#### Housing

Many Tasmanians with disability are being forced to make do with very old public housing stock — often large five plus bedroom houses that are not fit for purpose. Even so, we understand that Housing Tasmania is yet to decide if it will become a registered Specialist disability accommodation provider despite the existing in-kind arrangements ceasing on 1 July 2023.

## The state of the workforce

Although the conditions affecting the National Disability Insurance Scheme workforce have somewhat stabilised over the past 12 months, there are several factors that are causing workforce attraction, supply and retention to remain challenging for providers.

### Recruitment

Recruiting staff remains a challenge, though the overall situation has improved since 2022.

It still is very difficult to recruit occupational therapists, psychologists, behaviour support practitioners and speech therapists. Physiotherapists and disability support workers are also hard to recruit.

There are no especially noteworthy differences in recruitment challenges according to whether organisations provide services to a metropolitan, rural or remote location. However, organisations with a head office in Queensland report fewer recruitment difficulties than respondents from other states. This is particularly the case for allied health professionals, allied health assistants and support coordinators.

Respondents’ perceived barriers to, and facilitators of, recruitment are summarised below.

**Barriers to recruitment**

• tight labour market

• lack of qualified or suitable staff

• allied health staff hard to find

• competition from other sectors

• pay expectations; rates cannot compete with other sectors

• lack of job security

• scarcity of accommodation, especially in regional and rural areas

• potential recruits do not want shift work or do not want to work out of usual business hours

• delays caused by employment checks

• short shifts, split shifts or part-time work

• do not want work stress or burnout

• preference for casual contracts

**Facilitators of recruitment**

• word of mouth

• reputation of organisation

• relationships with schools, TAFEs or universities

• offering student placements

• training and professional development opportunities

• relationships with local communities or community organisations

• fair pay

• advertising of positions

Respondents also raised concerns about a shortage of allied health professionals and disability service workers, as well as general deficiencies in the quality of applicants, workers who expect pay beyond their experience, and National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing limits:

“Qualified health professionals are almost impossible to attract to regional areas.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“Lack of enough allied health professionals — psychologists, OTs, Speech Therapists”

**Victoria large for-profit**

“Impossible to recruit to fill a speech pathologist position.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“Difficult to recruit competent disability support workers.”

**Victoria medium not-for-profit**

“People seem just not interested since COVID.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“Finding suitably qualified, committed and engaged support workers is near impossible.”

**Queensland large not-for-profit**

“Unrealistic salary expectations.”

**Victoria large for-profit**

“Many experienced support workers have worked under an Australian Business Number and expect very high pay, despite not being qualified or particularly skilled. Some people enter support work thinking it will be ‘easy money’ or just like ‘babysitting’. They are in for a rude shock!”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“Some groups (allied health, finance, Human Resources) expect far higher salaries than those we can afford under National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing.”

**Victoria medium not-for-profit**

“Allied health — very hard to find a good Allied Health employee who doesn’t want to be paid more than we would receive in revenue for the service.”

**Victoria large for-profit**

However, respondents also identify some enablers for recruitment:

“Disability support workers are happy to apply to work at our organisation as we prioritise training opportunities.”

**Queensland medium not-for-profit**

“We recruit for values and fit and train for skills.”

**Tasmania large not-for-profit**

“Access to professional development opportunities.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“We also have a cultural network where someone knows someone, so this works   
as well.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“Word of Mouth (particularly for Support Staff).”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“Advertising locally has been the primary focus and most successful.”

**Queensland large for-profit**

“We tend to use social media to recruit disability support workers and also use Seek.”

**New South Wales medium not-for-profit**

“Liveable wage by offering as near a full days or week’s work as possible.”

**Western Australia large not-for-profit**

“Adequate renumeration.”

**New South Wales small not-for-profit**

“Our reputation is a provider who provides human-centered supports does attract workers from time to time.”

**Queensland large not-for-profit**

“Our reputation in the community.”

**Western Australia small not-for-profit**

Table 13 Occupational Groups proving difficult to recruit competent staff

| **Occupational group** | **2020** | **2021** | **2022** | **2023** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Occupational therapist | 86 per cent | 92 per cent | 97 per cent | 92 per cent |
| Psychologist | 87 per cent | 89 per cent | 94 per cent | 91 per cent |
| Behaviour Support Practitioner. Table footnote: new occupational group in 2023. End table footnote. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 88 per cent |
| Speech Therapist. Table footnote: it was significantly less difficult to recruit competent staff in this occupational group in 2023 compared with 2022. End table footnote. | 83 per cent | 93 per cent | 98 per cent | 86 per cent |
| Disability support worker. Table footnote: it was significantly less difficult to recruit competent staff in this occupational group in 2023 compared with 2022. End table footnote. | 60 per cent | 70 per cent | 83 per cent | 78 per cent |
| Physiotherapist | 76 per cent | 80 per cent | 86 per cent | 78 per cent |
| Managers and or supervisors of disability support workers | 56 per cent | 68 per cent | 77 per cent | 73 per cent |
| Volunteers | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 57 per cent | 71 per cent | 69 per cent |
| Dietitians | 58 per cent | 72 per cent | 83 per cent | 68 per cent |
| Support Coordinator | 53 per cent | 65 per cent | 64 per cent | 60 per cent |
| Local area coordinators and or Planner | 44 per cent | 48 per cent | 50 per cent | 60 per cent |
| Early Childhood - Educator | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 70 per cent | 58 per cent |
| Allied Health Assistants | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 67 per cent | 57 per cent |
| Human Resources and or Workforce Development. Table footnote: it was significantly less difficult to recruit competent staff in this occupational group in 2023 compared with 2022. End table footnote. | 33 per cent | 45 per cent | 63 per cent | 55 per cent |
| Marketing and or business development | 34 per cent | 44 per cent | 53 per cent | 53 per cent |
| Finance and or Accounting. Table footnote: it was significantly less difficult to recruit competent staff in this occupational group in 2023 compared with 2022. End table footnote. | 25 per cent | 38 per cent | 57 per cent | 50 per cent |
| Information technology | 28 per cent | 40 per cent | 55 per cent | 48 per cent |
| Plan Manager | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 41 per cent | 34 per cent |

### Retention

Retaining workers, on the other hand, is becoming more complicated, with many organisations reporting difficulties retaining dieticians, Local area coordinators and planners, psychologists and physiotherapists, while it became easier to recruit plan managers, information technology staff, finance and accounting staff and Human Resources and workforce development staff.

As with recruitment, there are no noteworthy differences in retention challenges according to whether organisations provide services to metropolitan, rural or remote locations, but respondents from Queensland-based services tend to report lower levels of difficulty. The contrast is particularly marked when it came to speech therapists, psychologists, dietitians, disability support workers and Human Resources and workforce development staff.

Perceived barriers and facilitators of retention are summarised below:

**Barriers to retention**

• competition and poaching

• low pay rates

• burnout and COVID fatigue

• attraction of solo practice or unregistered Australian Business Numbers work

• lack of career pathway

• working for multiple agencies

• complexity of the work or it not being what staff expected

• leaving for ‘easier’ work in different sectors

• transient workforce

• casualised workforce

• workload

• headhunting by other companies

• inconsistent work hours

• staff training and development demands

• increased paperwork

• National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing model

• staff unprofessional or inflexible

**Facilitators of retention**

• culture of organisation

• flexible working arrangements

• competitive pay

• training and development

• supervision

• manageable workload

• rewards and recognition program

• support and staff wellbeing programs

• match between staff values and the work we do

• highlighting the impact staff make to the lives of participants

• communication

• strong leadership

• kindness

• public relations

• workplace programs

Table 14 Occupational Groups proving difficult to retain competent staff

| **Occupational group** | **2020** | **2021** | **2022** | **2023** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Psychologist. Table footnote: it was significantly more difficult to retain competent staff in this occupational group in 2023 compared with 2022. End table footnote. | 48 per cent | 63 per cent | 64 per cent | 81 per cent |
| Speech Therapist | 49 per cent | 61 per cent | 66 per cent | 72 per cent |
| Occupational Therapist | 48 per cent | 65 per cent | 60 per cent | 69 per cent |
| Dietitians | 26 per cent | 55 per cent | 48 per cent | 69 per cent |
| Behaviour Support Practitioner (New) | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 65 per cent |
| Physiotherapist | 39 per cent | 55 per cent | 52 per cent | 65 per cent |
| Early Childhood - Educator | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 71 per cent | 61 per cent |
| Local Area Coordinator and or Planner | 36 per cent | 39 per cent | 39 per cent | 60 per cent |
| Volunteers | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 36 per cent | 55 per cent | 55 per cent |
| Allied Health Assistants | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 47 per cent | 53 per cent |
| Disability Support Workers | 40 per cent | 44 per cent | 56 per cent | 53 per cent |
| Support Coordinator | 27 per cent | 32 per cent | 42 per cent | 48 per cent |
| Managers/supervisors of disability support workers | 25 per cent | 31 per cent | 47 per cent | 39 per cent |
| Human Resources and or Workforce Development | 17 per cent | 26 per cent | 48 per cent | 36 per cent |
| Marketing and or business development | 13 per cent | 19 per cent | 36 per cent | 32 per cent |
| Information Technology | 13 per cent | 22 per cent | 41 per cent | 28 per cent |
| Finance and or Accounting | 12 per cent | 12 per cent | 36 per cent | 25 per cent |
| Plan Manager | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. | 38 per cent | 24 per cent |

### National Disability Services Workforce Census

The 2023 National Disability Services Workforce Census attracted a record number of respondents, which provided a strong evidence base for its findings.

The main takeaway was a marked increase in casualisation — up from 31 per cent of support workers in the December 2020 survey to 39 per cent in 2023. Part-time employees also made up a slightly higher proportion of permanent employees, from 76 per cent in 2022 to 80 per cent in 2023.

Considered together, these figures may reflect a tightening labour market in both the disability sector and the broader care sector. Organisations may be responding to this economy-wide battle for talent by offering permanent (part-time) positions to retain workers.

### National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy

In mid-2023, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet invited submissions on the draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy. Encompassing adjacent sectors such as aged care, early childhood development and veterans’ care, the ten-year strategy aims to carve a path towards quality care, decent jobs and sustainable and productive support economy.

NDS’s submissions made a case for promoting workforce attraction, focusing on workforce retention, improving support for training and supervision, and harmonising discordant regulations.

We also called for a new approach to National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing arrangements that would allow more scope for training, supervising and developing workers. Some of the mechanisms could include an independent pricing authority, as well as a blended payment model where training is funded outside of participant plans and in some cases outside of the National Disability Insurance Scheme altogether — such as through government jobs and skills training funding.

### National Disability Insurance Scheme Workforce Strategy

In the seven years since the National Disability Insurance Scheme rollout commenced, we have not seen a single holistic strategy that responds to sector growth and delivers adequately trained workers who meet participant needs.

Towards that end, National Disability Services Chief Executive Officer Laurie Leigh spent 2023 co-chairing the National Disability Insurance Scheme Workforce Industry Reference Group. Comprising unions, providers and training bodies, as well as organisations representing National Disability Insurance Scheme participants and First Nations communities, the group has been hard at work developing just such a strategy, a new way forward that encompasses everything from recruitment, retention, training and safety to the challenges of service provision in rural and remote areas.

The year also saw National Disability Insurance Scheme Minister Bill Shorten start to host a monthly National Disability Insurance Scheme Workforce Dialogue. It provided a regular a platform for providers, unions, National Disability Insurance Scheme participant advocacy groups and — of course — National Disability Services to put their ideas and concerns to Minister Shorten and staff.

Many of the recommendations arising from the Disability Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme Review will affect the National Disability Insurance Scheme workforce, but, until then, National Disability Services will continue to bring the provider perspective to any new workforce initiatives through these two important lines of engagement.

## The state of disability employment

### Reform pressure

Disability employment is currently the subject of complex and wide-ranging reform. Drivers of change include Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021–31, the new Disability Services Inclusion Bill, the final report of the Disability Royal Commission, the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review, the Employment White Paper, the Workforce Australia Senate Inquiry and the Government’s Principles of Supported Employment and Disability Employment Services reform agenda. These policy drivers are intended reshape the provision of disability employment supports and better align the various service interfaces.

Recommendations made by the Royal Commission advocate significant changes to wage and employment settings. Should government accept these recommendations, careful implementation will be required to ensure that the jobs of employees with disability are not placed at risk, or compromise the viability of disability enterprises.

Taking place in a period of rising costs and economic uncertainty, many of these reforms will have the potential to place a significant amount of pressure on the financial and service delivery strategies of employment providers. That’s why National Disability Services continues to call for more clarity, transparency, consultation and co-design. It’s only by working together that we can have a vibrant and sustainable sector that delivers the best possible employment outcomes, in both the short- and long-term.

### National Disability Services advocacy

National Disability Services continues to work closely with members on our Industry Vision for Supported Employment, with recent work focusing on assisting providers implement the Fair Work Commission’s significant changes to the Supported Employment Services Award 2020.

Meanwhile, our Communities of Practice explored more modern employment support and commercial models, which could help to maximise National Disability Insurance Scheme participant funding while aligning with rising community expectations. We also provided a detailed submission in response to Disability Employment Services’ Discussion Paper on the Future of Supported Employment.

In Western Australia, through our role in the Transition Taskforce, National Disability Services was involved in the successful transition of around 550 jobs to Workpower from another supported employment provider. We also ran a well-attended and highly successful Jobs Expo for employees, jobseekers and their families and carers, allowing them to explore employment options.

Federally, we kept advocating for a comprehensive procurement strategy for disability social enterprises. The Australian Government should consider a similar model to the Supply Nation initiative, harnessing the existing branding and procurement infrastructure of National Disability Services’ BuyAbility initiative.

To help promote the voice of supported employees, National Disability Services supported a campaign called ‘My Job, My Choice’ by the parent and family advocacy body, Our Voice Australia.

We also conducted comprehensive research into the design of wage-setting in supported employment. This includes an analysis of possible policy settings, the impact of the Fair Work Commission’s new wage structure and our ongoing advocacy of a social wage that better meets community expectations.

### Employment supports

The National Disability Insurance Agency made some changes to supports for capacity building and ongoing support in employment. Its review of the pricing arrangements for employment transition supports is also likely to lead to these more directly aligning with National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing principles.

National Disability Services continues to advocate that all National Disability Insurance Scheme plans for participants of workforce age should automatically include employment supports, with an opt-out provision if the participant chooses to not explore employment options.

### Disability Employment Services

National Disability Services supports the extension of the current Disability Employment Services contract until mid-2025 to provide valuable time to prepare for a new Disability Employment Services model. National Disability Services has been consulting with Department of Social Services on the new model through the various reference and working groups and pilot projects.

Disability Employment Services indexation for 2023–24 was below the increase in operational costs. Other compliance requirements (such as Right Fit for Risk Information Technology accreditation) further stretched provider budgets.

Disability Employment Services providers were badly affected by errors in the Star Ratings, with 215 contracts subsequently discontinued. An investigation by Taylor Fry revealed serious coding errors that compromised the data methodology. After being initially suspended in 2022, the Disability Employment Services star ratings have now been abolished by the Government, and National Disability Services and the sector have now received the results of Minter Ellison’s formal investigation into the matter. The Minter Ellison report has highlighted the need for greater transparency, less complexity and stronger engagement with stakeholders in the co-design of the new Disability Employment Services program. National Disability Services considers that a fair and transparent process is required for recompense of providers unduly impacted by the Performance Assessment process, especially those that had contracts discontinued.

National Disability Services supports the phased introduction of the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework from mid-2023. We welcome its focus on improving the service experience of participants. But its effectiveness will be compromised without a review of the Disability Employment Services program architecture to reduce the compliance and administration burden on providers.

Disability Employment Services participant caseloads have continued to decline, from 293,206 on 31 July 2022 to 266,942 a year later (a decrease of nine per cent). The sector also contracted, mainly through mergers and acquisitions, with the number of Disability Employment Services providers decreasing from 115 in 2018 to 89 in September of this year. Footnote citation number 3. Footnote description: Department of Social Services, Australia (2023) Disability Employment Services – monthly profile, accessed 16 November 2023., [Disability Employment Services - monthly profile from the Australian Governments Department of Social Services](https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-e258b678-eb6b-4ebb-92d8-0fe7c1122c42/details?q=DES%20monthly%20data) website End of footnote description.

However, the Disability Employment Services program has met the Government’s KPIs, delivering employment to many thousands of people with disability. National Disability Services considers it vital that the future Disability Employment Services program architecture better supports participants with significant barriers to employment, more easily adapts to labour market conditions and better leverages employer demand for an underutilised pool of jobseekers.

This will ensure a stable Disability Employment Services sector aligned with Australia’s Disability Strategy, delivering a wider range of employment for people with disability.

Table 15 Policy reforms for Disability Employment Services performance framework (example the Disability Employment Services Quality Framework approved on 1 July) are heading in the right direction

| **Year** | **Number of responses** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** | **Don't know** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2018 | 30 | 50 per cent | 20 per cent | 23 per cent | 7 per cent |
| 2019 | 27 | 33 per cent | 26 per cent | 37 per cent | 4 per cent |
| 2020 | 38 | 58 per cent | 16 per cent | 18 per cent | 8 per cent |
| 2021 | 25 | 56 per cent | 32 per cent | 12 per cent | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. |
| 2022 | 33 | 48 per cent | 48 per cent | 3 per cent | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. |
| 2023 | 28 | 14 per cent | 46 per cent | 39 per cent | No percentage value supplied for this table cell. |

Table 16 Policy reforms for Workforce Australia are in the right direction

| **Year** | **Number of responses** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2021 | 25 | 36 per cent | 52 per cent | 12 per cent |
| 2022 | 33 | 42 per cent | 42 per cent | 15 per cent |
| 2023 | 27 | 26 per cent | 56 per cent | 19 per cent |

Table 17 The digital service model has enhanced employment opportunities for Disability Employment Services participants

| **Year** | **Number of responses** | **Disagree or strongly disagree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Agree or strongly agree** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 2021 | 25 | 56 per cent | 24 per cent | 20 per cent |
| 2022 | 33 | 67 per cent | 30 per cent | 3 per cent |
| 2023 | 28 | 68 per cent | 25 per cent | 7 per cent |

### Survey results

When it comes to the State of the Sector survey, this year has seen a huge jump in positivity about Disability Employment Services policy reforms. This is likely due to the new Disability Employment Services Quality Framework being phased in from 1 July and the removal of the Star Ratings.

In 2022, only three per cent of respondents believed Disability Employment Services policy reforms were headed in the right direction. In 2023, that number has jumped to 39 per cent of the 28 Disability Employment Services provider respondents. However, beliefs about policy reforms for Workforce Australia remain relatively unchanged, with only around a fifth of respondents believing they are heading in the right direction (19 per cent).

Attitudes about the usefulness of Disability Employment Services data are slightly improving, with 29 per cent of respondents believing that it provides comprehensive information that allows organisations to make business decisions.

Attitudes towards the digital service model for Disability Employment Services remain negative, however, with 68 per cent of respondents reporting that it does not enhance employment opportunities for Disability Employment Services participants.

Similarly, over half of respondents (54 per cent) report that they do not think the current Disability Employment Services model provides equitable job supports for people with disability, while 61 per cent do not think the right incentives are built into the operation of Disability Employment Services, Workforce Australia and Transition to Work in order to assist a range of people with disability into employment.

There is a slight change in beliefs about the administrative burden of Disability Employment Services, with 14 per cent of respondents believing that it is not onerous, while a stable 64 per cent say that it is. Respondents report that the required evidence collection and compliance audits are the most onerous administrative aspects of Disability Employment Services.

Finally, nearly half of respondents (46 per cent) state that the current funding structure should not be retained for the next Disability Employment Services contract after the current one expires in June 2025.

### Specialised Supported Employment

Among the 56 survey respondents who provide specialised supported employment services, 59 per cent report increased uncertainty in the operating environment. Negative attitudes about the National Disability Insurance Scheme’s capacity to provide employment opportunities fell to 29 per cent after peaking at 42 per cent the previous year.

When asked about impact of National Disability Insurance Scheme pricing on their ability to provide support, attitudes remain relatively unchanged, with 48 per cent of respondents reporting that they can provide the supports required and a little over a third reporting that they cannot.

Qualitative comments frequently highlighted the uncertainty in this sector, particularly in relation to potential outcomes from the Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme review.

“Deep uncertainty in the sector — makes it difficult to plan for the future.”

**Victoria Medium not-for-profit**

“Our supported employee numbers have declined and, consequently, so has revenue. It’s difficult to recruit supported employees. The number and variety of contracts has also declined. We need to market our business much better, but investing in that is risky with a business model which no longer appears to be financially viable.”

**Victoria Medium not-for-profit**

“The environment has never been more uncertain. It will be interesting to see what comes out of the Disability Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme review and how many businesses are able to innovate or continue to operate under supported wage system.”

**South Australia Large not-for-profit**

“The future for social enterprise and supported employment enterprises is as clear as mud. We are operating because our participants love and need their work. But from a policy point of view (Disability Royal Commission and National Disability Insurance Scheme), we don’t know whether we’ll even be allowed to keep operating beyond the next 24 months.”

**New South Wales Medium not-for-profit**

Although there were also some more positive responses:

“At least we have some control over our future: we can decide what commercial markets to chase, and at what price, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme funds the support for our employees.”

**Victoria Medium not-for-profit**

## Case studyNorthern Territory

**Anne Gawen**

Team Health

Tell us about Team Health

We are the largest community-based mental health organisation in the Northern Territory. We have close to 200 staff and support over 5000 participants every year.

It’s hard to summarise all our different mental health services in a sentence, but suffice to say, we’re focused on support, recovery and therapeutic services across Darwin, Palmerston and the Top End.

Our vision is for everyone to lead a full and valued life, whatever that might look like for them.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

We’ve really strengthened our programs for First Nations people in recent years. Our First Nations remote team has established trauma-informed healing work across the Top End.

What does an average day generally look like for you?

I’m not sure that I ever have an average day, but there’s always a lot of stakeholder engagement.

Our programs go across many sectors, so we have relationships with housing services, the aged care sector, health services, the Chief Minister and Territory families.

We also have extensive compliance requirements in each of those sectors, and I obviously like to keep us on the front foot when it comes to best practice and ensuring we are horizon-scanning.

Has the past year been more or less challenging than most?

I don’t say this lightly, because I’ve been in the sector for 25 years, but staffing shortages really are getting to a critical point. It’s really starting to impact our services. In the Northern Territory, we’ve always had a very transient population and a lot of employers who complain about shortages.

We — sort of smugly — have always said ‘that doesn’t affect us’. Well, I have to admit it does now!

What are some of the major opportunities?

The National Disability Insurance Scheme Review is the obvious one. Although for those of us work in the psychosocial space, it’s not necessarily a given that our voice will be heard. I just think that it’s a real opportunity to make sure that the National Disability Insurance Scheme does more to support people with psychosocial disability and not risk re-traumatising them and not supporting them appropriately.

What are some of the major challenges?

We’re very, very focused on looking after   
our wonderful staff, and have won national awards in this space, but being able to achieve a stable workforce is becoming harder as costs rise and funding and revenue does not keep up.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

I had a degree in early childhood and a Master of Business Administration, and could just see that it was a sector with all sorts of interesting opportunities to really support vulnerable people.

I was always interested in leadership too and it felt like there were possibilities and diversity in this sector.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

The people. They’re committed and resilient and focused on the big picture. They just want to make a difference and do really good work.

What impresses you most?

The collegiate nature of the sector up here. It’s actually a really good, tight, positive community.

### Northern Territory sector statistics

5,779 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

132 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

50.5 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

6.3 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Remoteness

Some Northern Territory workers report that the inconsistent quality of providers in remote areas seriously impacts their ability to do their work well. In some areas, the lack of a market reduces or eliminates choice altogether and enables poor practice to go largely unchallenged.

Bottom line: the current individualised funding environment makes it impossible for providers to spend the time, energy and resources required to establish themselves as a long-term option in remote communities.

#### Workforce

Northern Territory workers in remote areas (including Katherine and Alice Springs) are considerably impacted by anti-social behaviour and crime. It’s challenging enough to retain workers at the best of times, without them having to repair their windows or replace their vehicles.

#### Non-stop change

Members are concerned with the non-stop pace of change, and the complex obligations that it often entails. Positive Action towards Career Engagement, the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and the Royal Commission will each come with their own further challenges.

## Case studyAustralian Capital Territory

**Wayne Herbert**

Live Experience Access Develop

Tell us about Live Experience Access Develop

We’re basically here to help people achieve their potential, and become the greatest version of themselves. Part of that is about providing opportunities to be active in their chosen communities, but we’re about employment, first and foremost.

We want to ensure that all the people with disability that we have the privilege to support are not shut out of the labour market, but instead have every chance to experience success.

What has been your proudest achievement there?

I think I’m most proud of the fact that we invest very heavily in our people and have people with disability in leadership positions.

A lot of the work that we do is led by people with disability and we have a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion across the organisation. We value each other, our rich diversity, and our varied experiences.

I think it that shows the strong organisational culture we have within the organisation at Live Experience Access Develop.

What does an average day generally look like for you?

Well, one of the things I love about my job is that every day is different. We don’t have a typical hierarchy here. The way we work is   
very fluid.

What are some of the major opportunities?

Working habits have changed a lot since COVID: gone are the days of working nine to five in an office, five days a week.

I think this says a lot about how our workforce and labour market can change and adapt, and create new types of working models for everyone. It’s a unique opportunity to promote the experience and expertise of people with a disability.

We fundamentally believe that every person with disability can work. And not just work but have a fulfilling career. The only thing standing in the way is out-of-date systems and structures.

Tell us about your background. How and why did you get into the disability sector?

I was studying drama teaching and, as a person with disability, it really highlighted to me the importance of inclusive education.

I then went on to study in community services and I was really struck by a particular presentation from an employment service provider who was talking about just how much a fulfilling, well-paying job can change the trajectory of somebody’s life.

We would all end up benefitting from a better model, really, because I think we will all be a person with disability at some point in our life.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

I think my work locally, nationally, and internationally has shown me that we have one of the best models of Disability Employment Services, I think in the world.

I would also go further to say that, while our National Disability Insurance Scheme is certainly not perfect, it is the envy of the world.

Seeing people with disability at the centre — making decisions and choices about their own lives and working alongside other people with disability and many experts in our sector — has really made me value the diversity of experience we have across the country.

### Australian Capital Territory sector statistics

10,503 Active participants including Early Childhood Australia

175 Active Early Childhood Australia participants

4.5 percent First Nations National Disability Insurance Scheme participants

10.0 percent Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

### Top three issues

#### Pricing

Providers are facing a perfect storm of rising costs coupled with the reduction of the temporary financial support measures that helped the sector stay viable throughout the pandemic. With National Disability Insurance Scheme prices not keeping pace with inflation, the financial sustainability of registered providers is under serious threat.

#### Compliance

Australian Capital Territory providers continue to report unfunded compliance costs, such as the duplicate reporting requirements placed on Australian Capital Territory registered providers. Streamlining the national and local regulatory environments must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

#### Supporting Independent Living

Supporting Independent Living continues to cause issues in the Australian Capital Territory, with many providers concerned about the adequacy of funding in participant plans, complex processes and a lack of transparency in decision making.

## References:

### State and territory sector statistics

National Disability Insurance Agency (2023) Quarterly Report to disability ministers (30 June 2023) copyright National Disability Insurance Agency. [Homepage of the National Disability Insurance Scheme’s website](https://ndis.gov.au/), accessed 10 November 2023

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### About National Disability Services

National Disability Services is Australia’s peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing over 1000 service providers. Collectively, National Disability Services members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability.

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