

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 provide NDIS 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.

“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.”

The survey uncovered other concerns. Just over a quarter of respondents were unhappy with NDIS 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 NDIS 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 (SES) providers report more uncertainty in the operating environment (59 per cent). But there was an improvement in mood among Disability Employment Services (DES), where last year only one of 33 respondents thought reforms were heading in the right direction. This year, after the updates to the DES 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 NDIS Review, it still detects a reserve of optimism. However, this won't last long if governments do not seize the opportunity of the NDIS Review to reverse the trend towards a failing market with scarcer services, longer waiting times and lower service quality.

NDS has proposed a way forward with our Ten Priorities for NDIS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 NDS State of the Disability Sector Survey was conducted by the Centre for Disability Research and Policy at the University of Sydney.¹

Respondent demographics

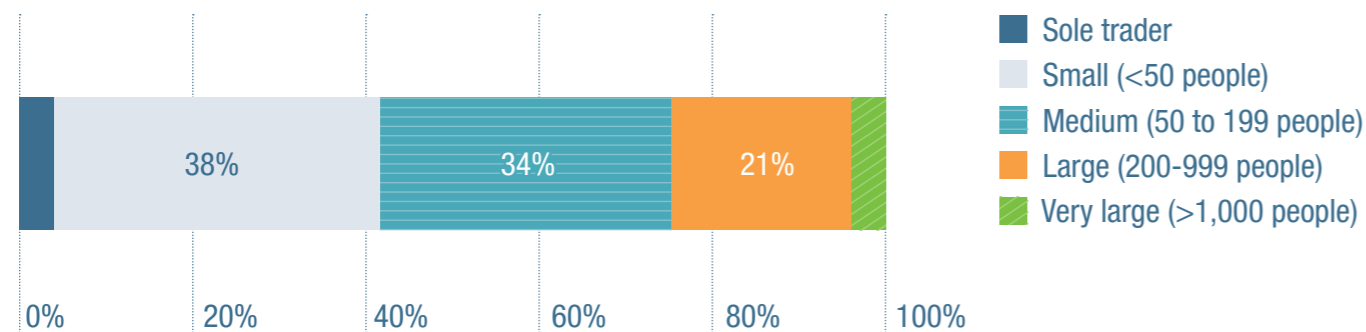
This year saw 432 organisations respond to the survey, 95 per cent of them registered NDIS service providers. Over two-thirds are classified as small (less than 50 people) or medium (50 to 199 people), with around a fifth classified as large (200 to 999 people). Only four per cent of respondents are 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 NDIS support (95 per cent registered and providing services, three per cent not registered and providing services)
- seven per cent are providing Disability Employment Services (DES) or Workforce Australia support
- 13 per cent are providing Specialised Supported Employment.

Figure 1 Size of organisation (by headcount)

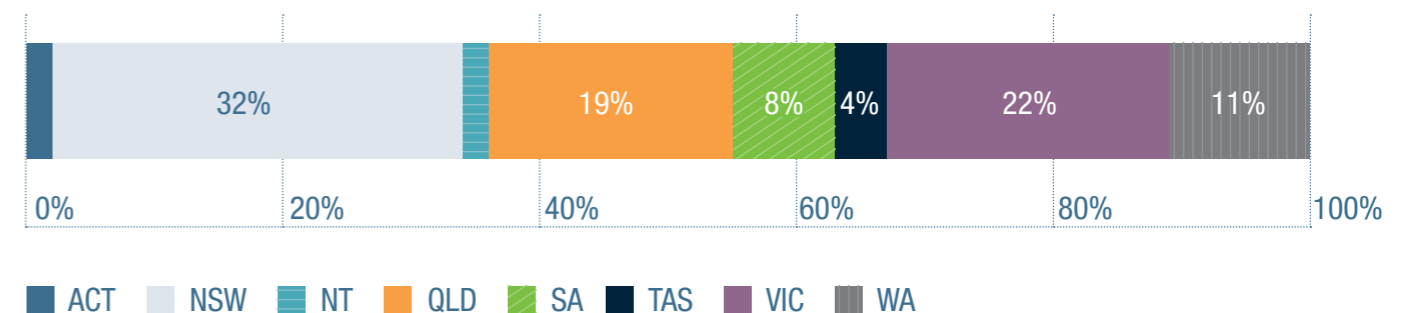


This year, we asked respondents about where they provide services — with the answer being that 80 per cent serve clients in metropolitan areas and regional centres, 48 per cent in rural areas, 14 per cent in remote areas, and five per cent in very remote areas. There are only two respondents who provide 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 NDIS registered providers, DES 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, ACT and the Northern Territory.

Figure 2 Location by state

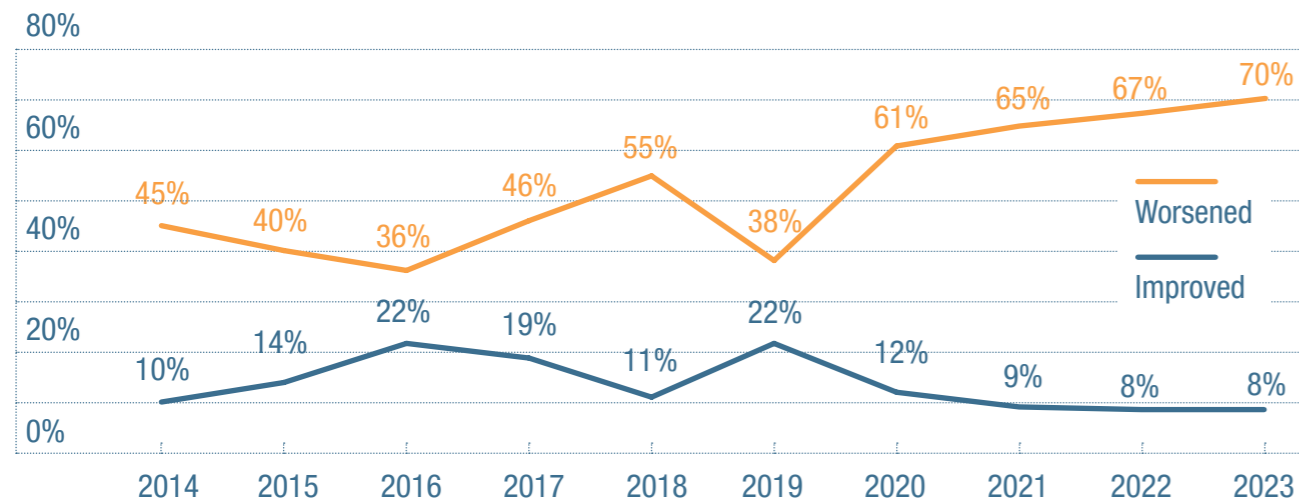


General operating conditions

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

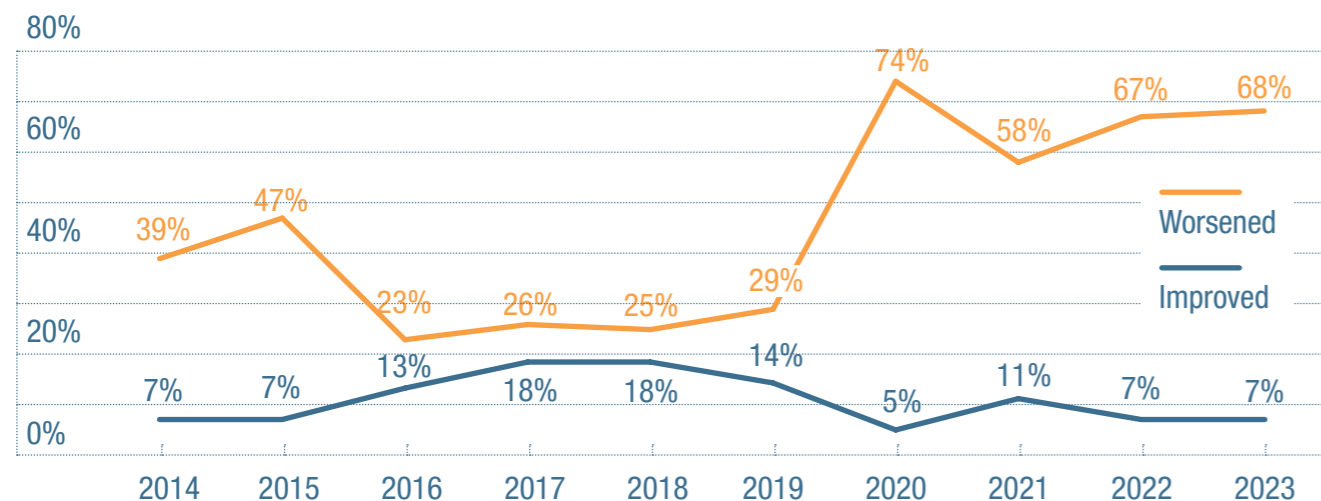
worsened in the last 12 months, while a stable eight per cent say they have improved. Though year-on-year changes are minor, when viewed across the last ten years, the situation does appear to be worsening.

Figure 3 Operating conditions in the non-government disability sector



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

Figure 4 Operating conditions in the wider Australian economy



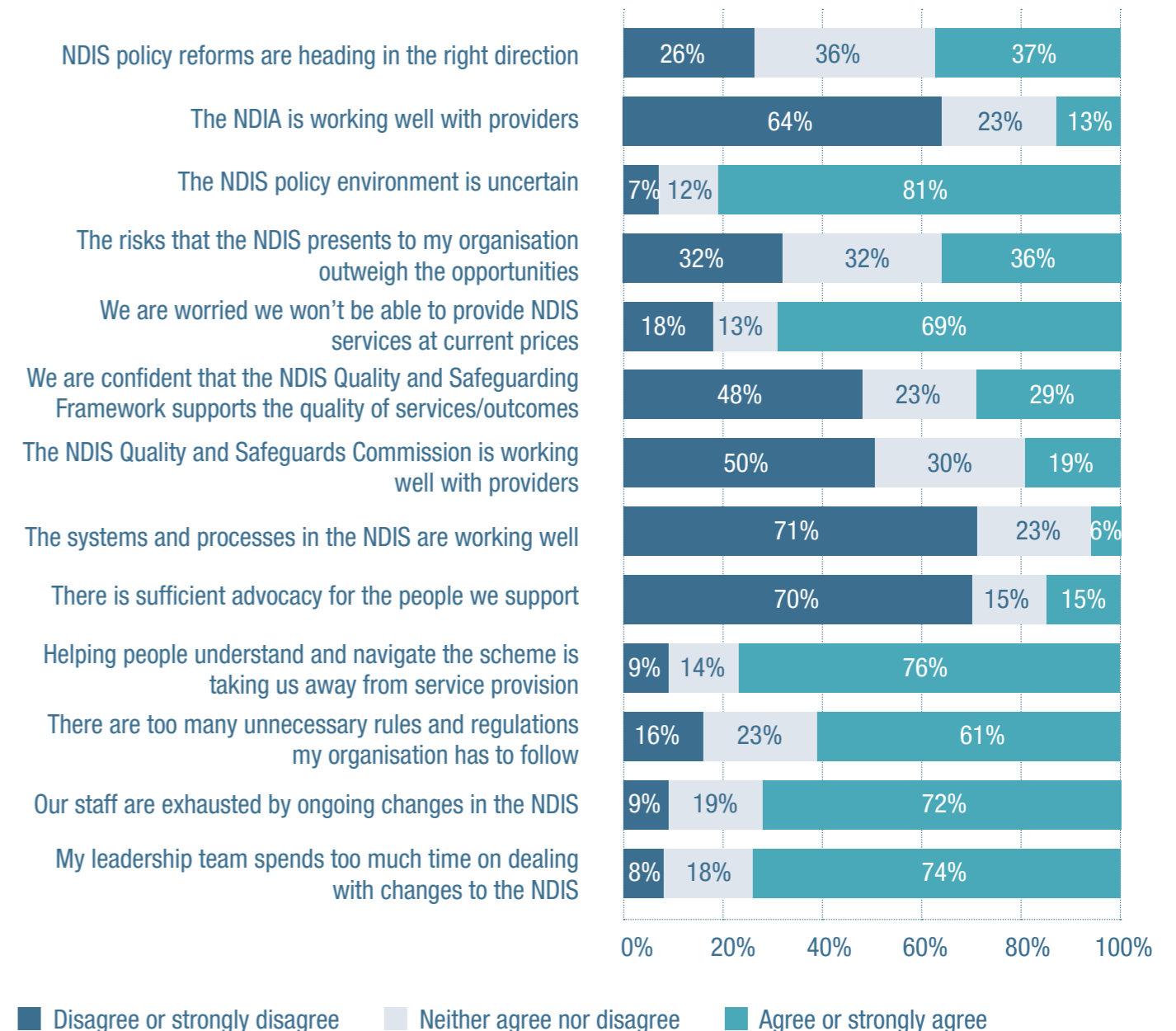
NDIS operating environment

Discontent with the NDIS operating environment continues to grow. Dissatisfaction with NDIS 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 NDIA is working with providers remain bleak and uncertainty continues about the NDIS policy environment. Concerns about operational risks and pricing appear to be increasing. The proportion of respondents who say that “The risks that the NDIS presents to my organisation outweigh the opportunities” and “We are worried we won’t be able to provide NDIS services at

Figure 5 Perception of NDIS environment



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 NDIS rollout back in 2016 and 2017.

Concerns about policy uncertainty and pricing is more pronounced in some organisation types. Older organisations (established before the introduction of the NDIS) 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS.

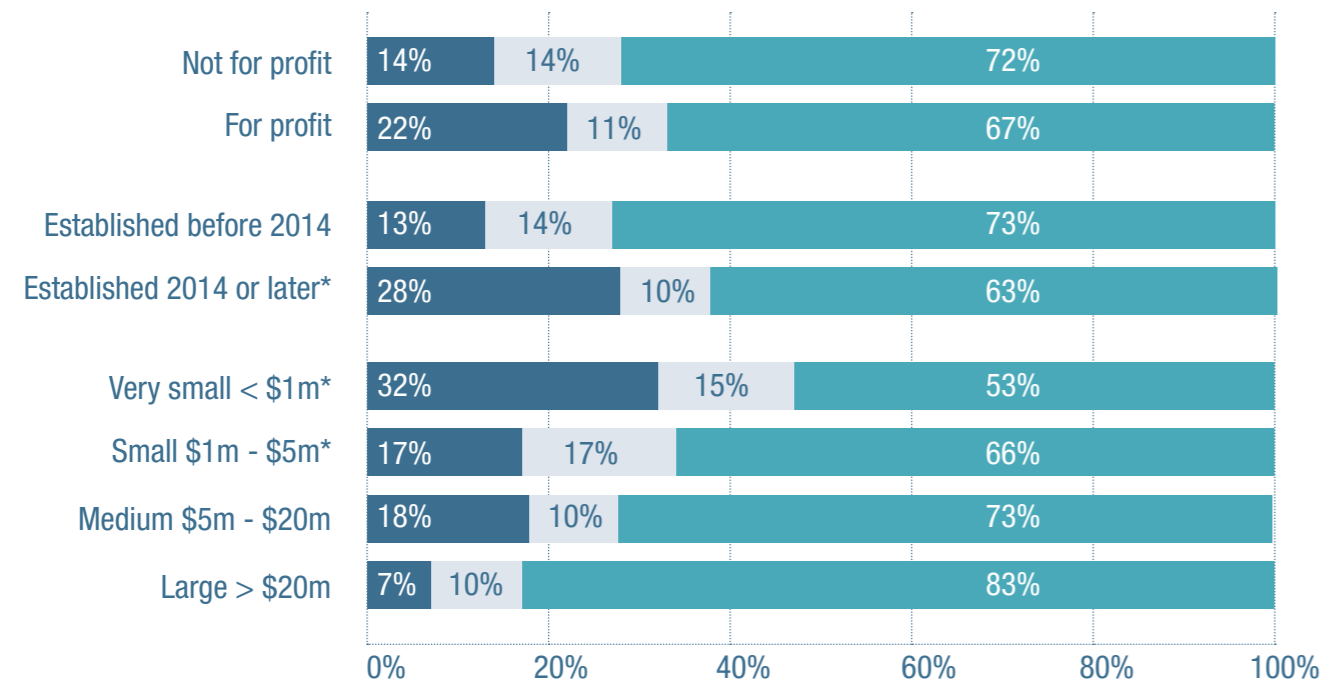
A number of respondents describe the operating environment of the disability sector as confusing, fragmented and chaotic:

“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.”

NSW large for-profit



Figure 6 We are worried we won’t be able to provide NDIS services at current pricing



■ Disagree or strongly disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree or strongly agree

* denotes that this category was significantly different to the other categories in that group.

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

WA large not-for-profit

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

NSW large not-for-profit

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

VIC large not-for-profit

Quality and safeguarding

Opinions of the NDIS 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 NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework continues to decline, with 48 per cent of respondents disagreeing with the statement “We are confident that the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework supports the quality of services/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 NDIS 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 NDIS code of conduct is leading to good outcomes for participants.

Over half think that the New Worker — NDIS 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 NDIS 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.

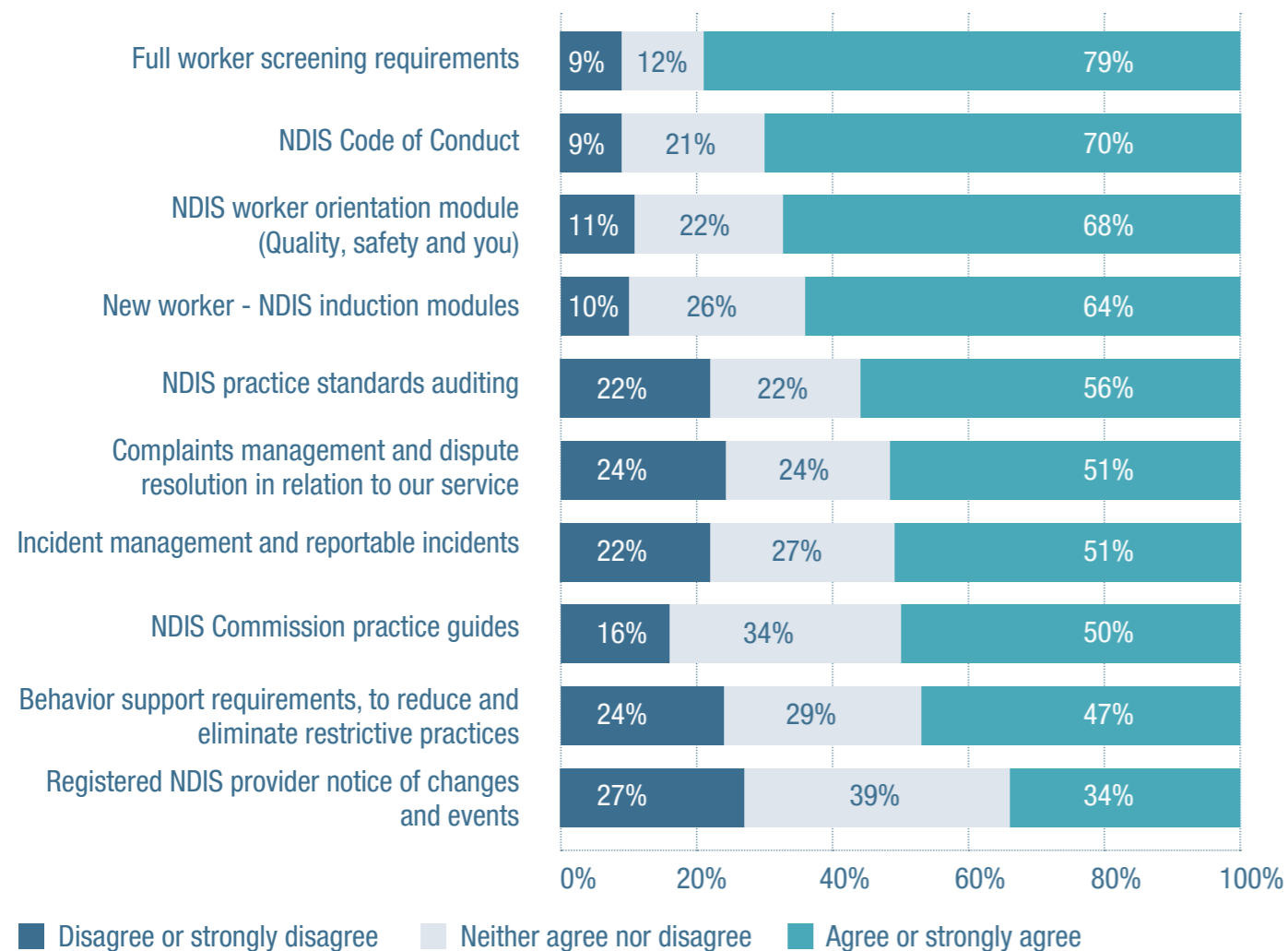
However, only one-third of respondents (34 per cent) believe that the registered NDIS provider notice of changes and events is leading to good outcomes.

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 “NDIS practice standards auditing”.

There were concerns about the NDIS Quality



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



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.”

NSW small not-for-profit

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

TAS 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.”

QLD large not-for-profit

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

QLD large for-profit

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

ACT small for-profit

NDIS registration

Nearly one-fifth of respondents (18 per cent) are considering dropping their registration with the NDIS 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 NDIS era (i.e., 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.”

QLD 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.”

SA 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.”

NSW medium not-for-profit

“Those unregistered providers ... have no surveillance.”

NSW large not-for-profit

“There is no benefit to registration.”

NSW large not-for-profit

Of the non-registered providers to respond to the question “Is your organisation considering becoming registered with the NDIS 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 NDIS, there has been hesitation.”

ACT 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 NDIA regarding our registration despite multiple enquiries from us regarding our application status.”

VIC small for-profit

As in previous years, the significant majority of respondents (77 per cent) report that “taken together, NDIS 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 per cent 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), HR 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 NDS.

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.”

WA large not-for-profit

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

VIC large not-for-profit

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

NSW 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.”

NSW large not-for-profit

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

WA medium not-for-profit

Figure 8 Services provided



NDIS service provision

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

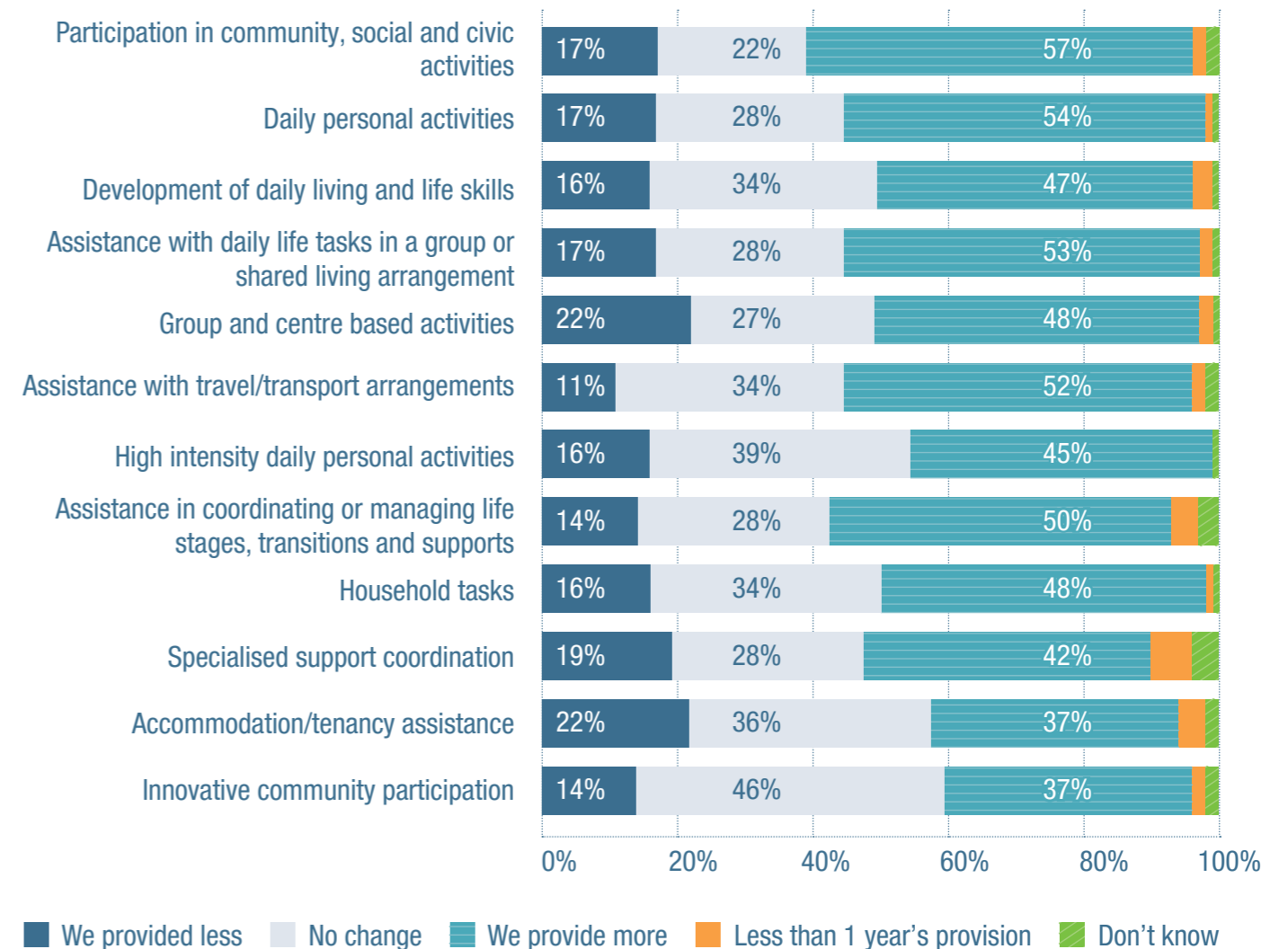
support coordination (five per cent), specialised disability accommodation (five per cent), accommodation and tenancy assistance (three per cent) and therapeutic supports (three per cent).

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.”

VIC medium not-for-profit

Figure 9 Changes in hours providing services



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

QLD large for-profit

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

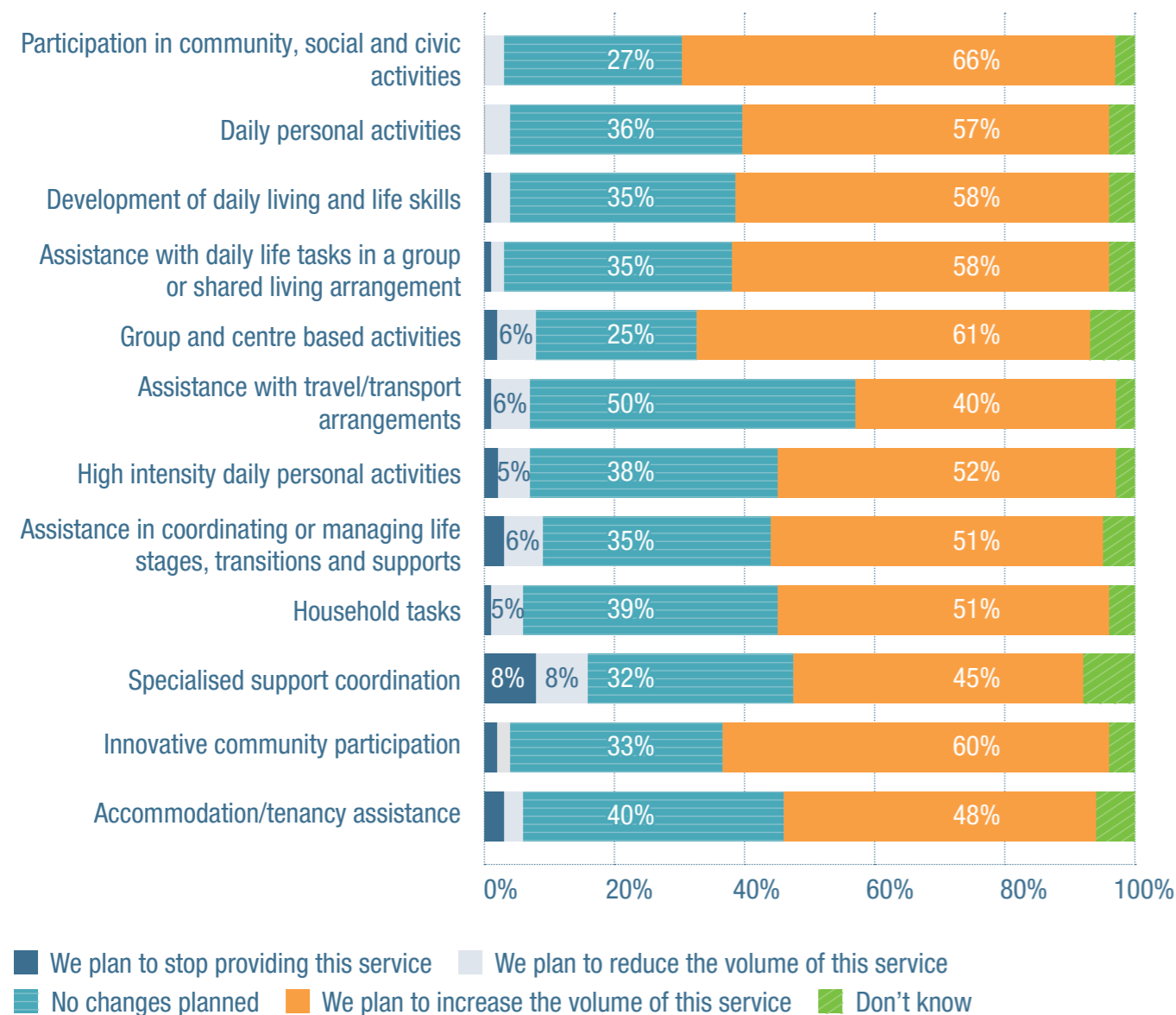
NSW large for-profit

“SDA and SIL is a logical step in our supports as we have current participants leaving us for these supports.”

QLD large for-profit

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.² 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.

Figure 10 Anticipated 2024 changes in service provision



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.”

TAS large for-profit

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

NSW small not-for-profit

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

VIC 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.”

TAS small not-for-profit

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

QLD large for-profit

“Use of external care workers/allied health etc.”

NSW 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.”

VIC medium for-profit

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

TAS 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.

Figure 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?

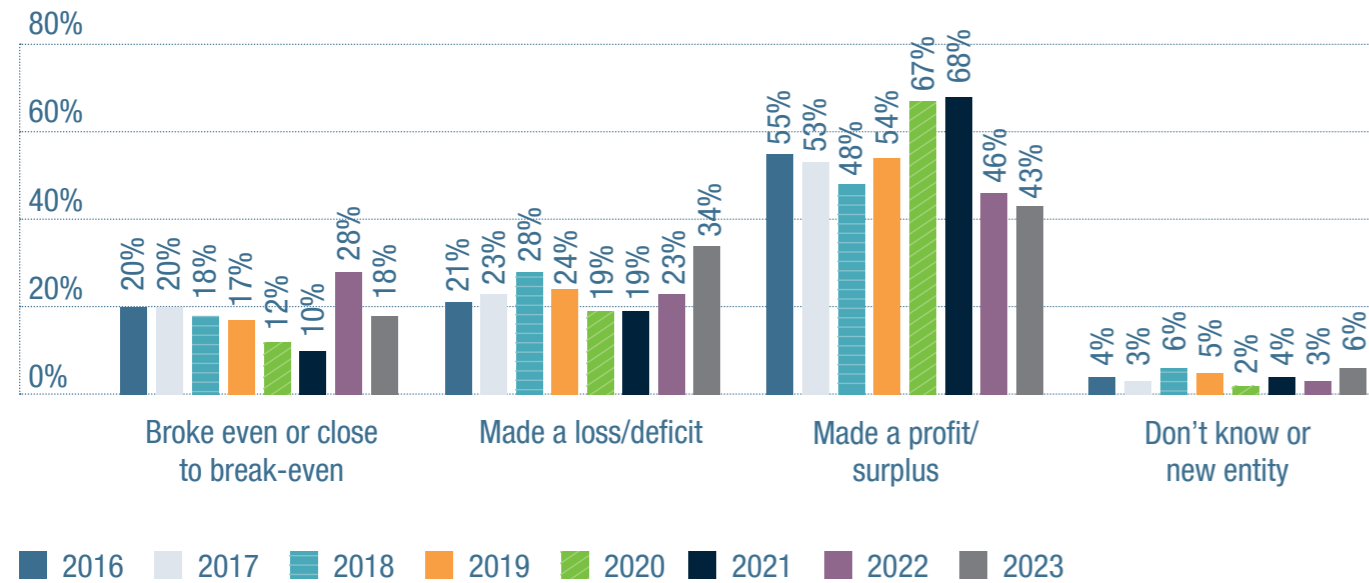
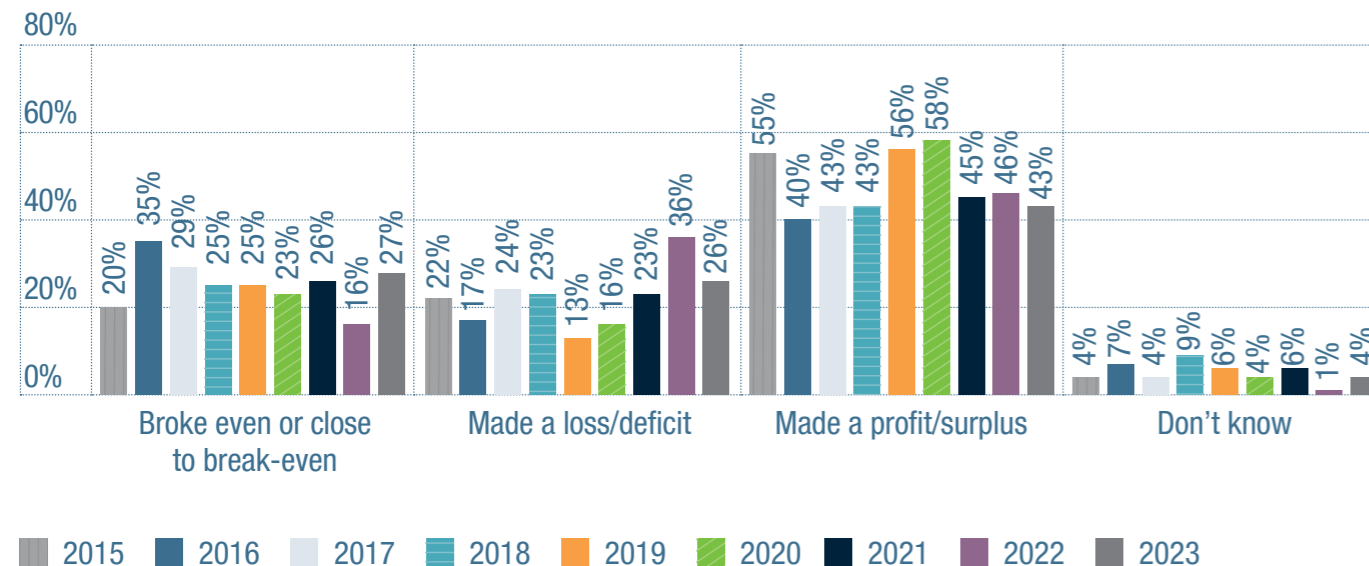


Figure 12 Do you expect your organisation will make a loss (deficit), break-even or a profit (surplus) on its disability services in this current financial year (year ending 30 June 2024)?



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 centres 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 NDIS are all more likely to report a loss compared to for-profit organisations, smaller organisations

and organisations established after the implementation of NDIS.

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 NDIS 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 NDIS.



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 NDIS, we made a loss of \$200,000."

WA large not-for-profit

"The NDIS price guide 2023/24 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 NDIS prices make [it] difficult to remain viable."

NSW medium not-for-profit

"The general running of a business has become unsustainable."

VIC 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."

NSW medium not-for-profit

Anticipating future reforms

When asked what outcomes they hoped to see from the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS 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."

VIC large for-profit

"More accountability on the NDIS itself to provide accurate and informed advice."

QLD 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 NDIS code of conduct and practice standards."

NSW large not-for-profit

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

QLD 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."

WA large not-for-profit

"Standards introduced around staff training and qualifications for support staff."

NSW medium not-for-profit

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

NSW large not-for-profit

"Standards of support and management are increased, training such as incident management, person centred practices are mandatory."

NSW large not-for-profit



Lastly, hopes for NDIS pricing include:

"Improvement in NDIS pricing to help registered providers and avert market failure."

VIC small not-for-profit

"Pricing review conducted by third party (not NDIA) and pricing frameworks to be detailed and transparent."

WA large not-for-profit

"Pricing that reflects the actual costs."

VIC 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."

VIC large not-for-profit

Case study

New South Wales

Denise Heath
Nepean Area Disability
Organisation (NADO)



Tell us about NADO Disability Services

NADO 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 NADO 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. NADO 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 NDIS 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 IT 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. NDIS 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.

Top three issues

Workforce

Attracting and maintaining staff remains a major challenge for many NSW 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 NSW Government and NDIS 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.

**NSW
sector
stats**

188,991

Active participants including ECA

6,071

Active ECA participants

8.6%

First Nations NDIS participants

10.9%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

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 NDIS 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 NDIS merry-go-round of reinvention and administrative burden.

Top three issues

NDIS worker screening

In a state where workforce shortages are extremely significant, the processing of Victorian NDIS 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.

Vic sector stats

166,833
Active participants including ECA

3,592
Active ECA participants

10.9%
First Nations NDIS participants

11.7%
Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

The state of the NDIS

NDIS Review

The Independent Review of the NDIS 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 NDIS, 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 NDIS may be a policy miracle, but that doesn't mean it's a magic pudding.

For our part, NDS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS?
- How can decisions about access and planning can be more equitable and transparent?
- Why has the NDIS become the only option for so many young children and their families?
- What is the role and function of NDIS markets?



- What needs to change to ensure that the NDIS 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 ILC) available to all people with disability under an intergovernmental agreement
- refocussing the NDIS to be person-centred, 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 NDIS 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 NDIS — 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, NDS 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, NDS 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 NDIS prices, along with wage inflation and indexation.

Unsurprisingly, our analysis showed a glaring gap between NDIA prices and real-world situations. These disparities (which, in SIL 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, CPI 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 NDS 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 NDIS Review reforms. Providers are ready and willing to change. But they need the resources to do so.

NDIS regulation

The NDIS 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 NDS workshops where providers were able to talk directly with the NDIS 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 NDIS Review and the Royal Commission present a real opportunity to reset the regulatory framework. But until then, change will be slow.

PACE rollout

The NDIS is currently introducing a new ICT business system called PACE. 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.

PACE 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 NDIA provided how-to guides on its website, along with a practice learning environment, the PACE 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 NDIS portal be accessible to all, including participants with specific communication requirements or limited digital literacy.

Done right, PACE has the potential to streamline service delivery for both participants and providers. That's why NDS continues to advocate for comprehensive training, real-time support and implementation funding.

Case study

South 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 admin 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 NDIS), 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.

Top three issues

Sustainability

Sustainability is the big issue in SA, 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 PSA 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 SA 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 NDIS 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.

SA sector stats

53,859

Active participants including ECA

1,358

Active ECA participants

6.4%

First Nations NDIS participants

7.1%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

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 ILO; 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 NDIS 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 focussed 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-centred services, rather than short-term profit.

So, amidst all of the NDIS 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 NDS and help each other succeed.

Top three issues

Workforce

In a highly competitive employment market, WA 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 NDIS Worker Screening Check would definitely be a big help.

NDIS Pricing

Prices need 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 NDIS.

Housing

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

WA sector stats

53,623

Active participants including ECA

1,172

Active ECA participants

8.0%

First Nations NDIS participants

8.0%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

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 NDIS Commission.

The final report contains few direct recommendations for the NDIA, 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 SCHADS 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.

NDS 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 NDIS. 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 NDIS, Australia's adoption of the UN 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 NDIS 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 NDIS will be delivered across Australia.

As part of the review of the NDIS, Review Co-chair Professor Bruce Bonyhady AM flagged the need for a new intergovernmental agreement to clarify the responsibilities for disability services across federal, state and territory governments. With the NDIS 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
CASSI



Tell us about CASSI

CASSI 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 NDIS 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 NDIS Review are desperately trying to achieve.

What are some of the major opportunities?

There are major opportunities within the Disability Royal Commission, NDIS 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 SIL 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 CEO 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.

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 NDIS 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.

**Qld
sector
stats**

134,962

Active participants including ECA

4,973

Active ECA participants

10.2%

First Nations NDIS participants

5.3%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

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 NDIS 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 ICT 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 NDIS 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 NDIS and its capacity-building supports.

What surprised you most (about the sector)?

My biggest surprise is how complex the NDIS 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.

Top three issues

PACE trial

PACE 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 SDA provider despite the existing in-kind arrangements ceasing on 1 July 2023.

Tas sector stats

13,487

Active participants including ECA

116

Active ECA participants

9.6%

First Nations NDIS participants

2.6%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants



The state of the workforce

Although the conditions affecting the NDIS 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 NDIS pricing limits:

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

NSW medium not-for-profit

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

VIC large for-profit

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

NSW small not-for-profit

“Difficult to recruit competent disability support workers.”

VIC medium not-for-profit

“People seem just not interested since COVID.”

NSW medium not-for-profit

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

QLD large not-for-profit

“Unrealistic salary expectations.”

VIC large for-profit

“Many experienced support workers have worked under an ABN 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!”

QLD large for-profit

“Some groups (allied health, finance, HR) expect far higher salaries than those we can afford under NDIS pricing.”

VIC 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.”

VIC 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.”

QLD medium not-for-profit

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

TAS large not-for-profit

“Access to professional development opportunities.”

NSW small not-for-profit

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

QLD large for-profit

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

NSW small not-for-profit

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

QLD large for-profit

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

NSW medium not-for-profit

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

WA large not-for-profit

“Adequate remuneration.”

NSW small not-for-profit

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

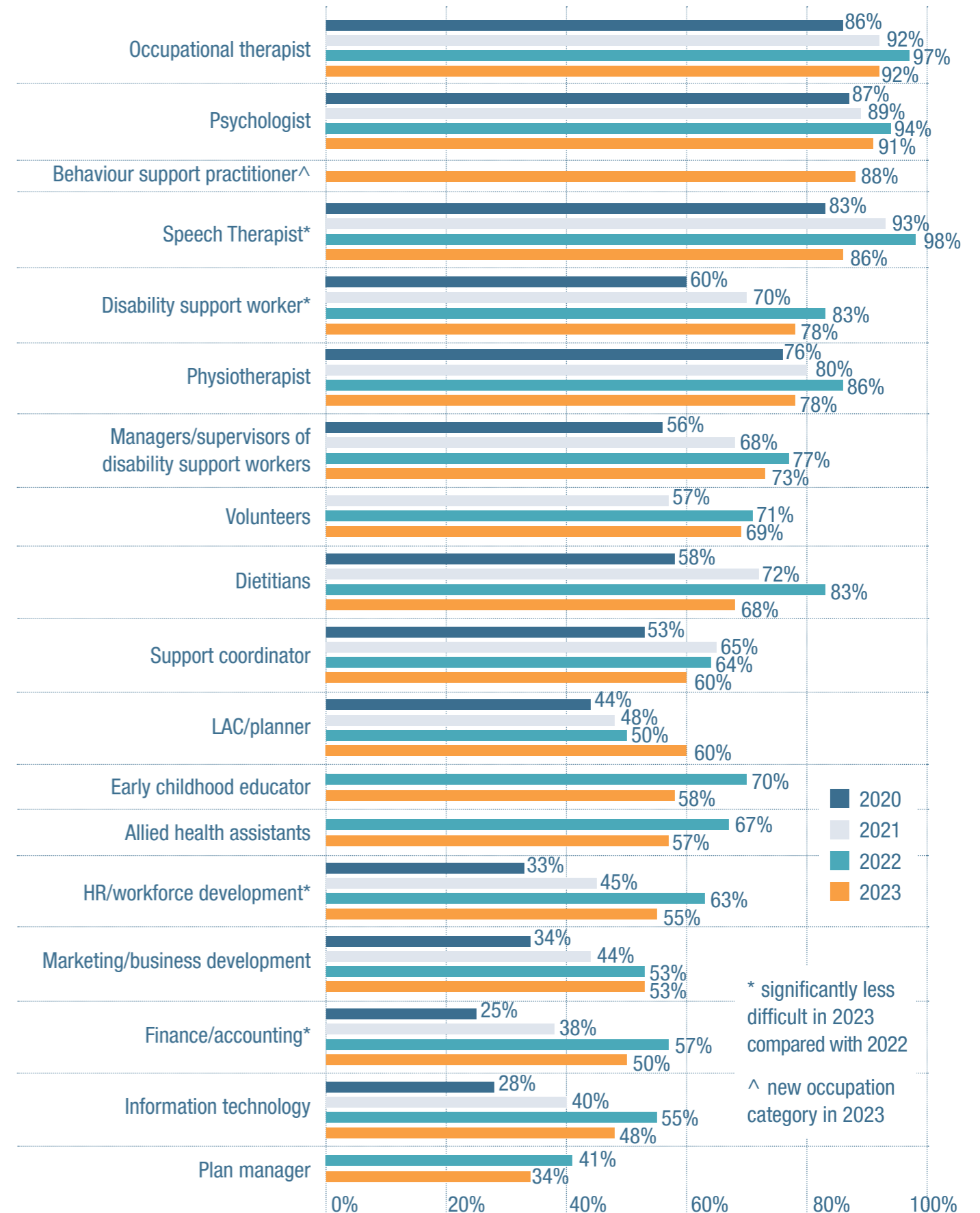
QLD large not-for-profit

“Our reputation in the community.”

WA small not-for-profit



Figure 13 Difficulties in recruitment over time



Retention

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

Perceived barriers and facilitators of retention are summarised below:

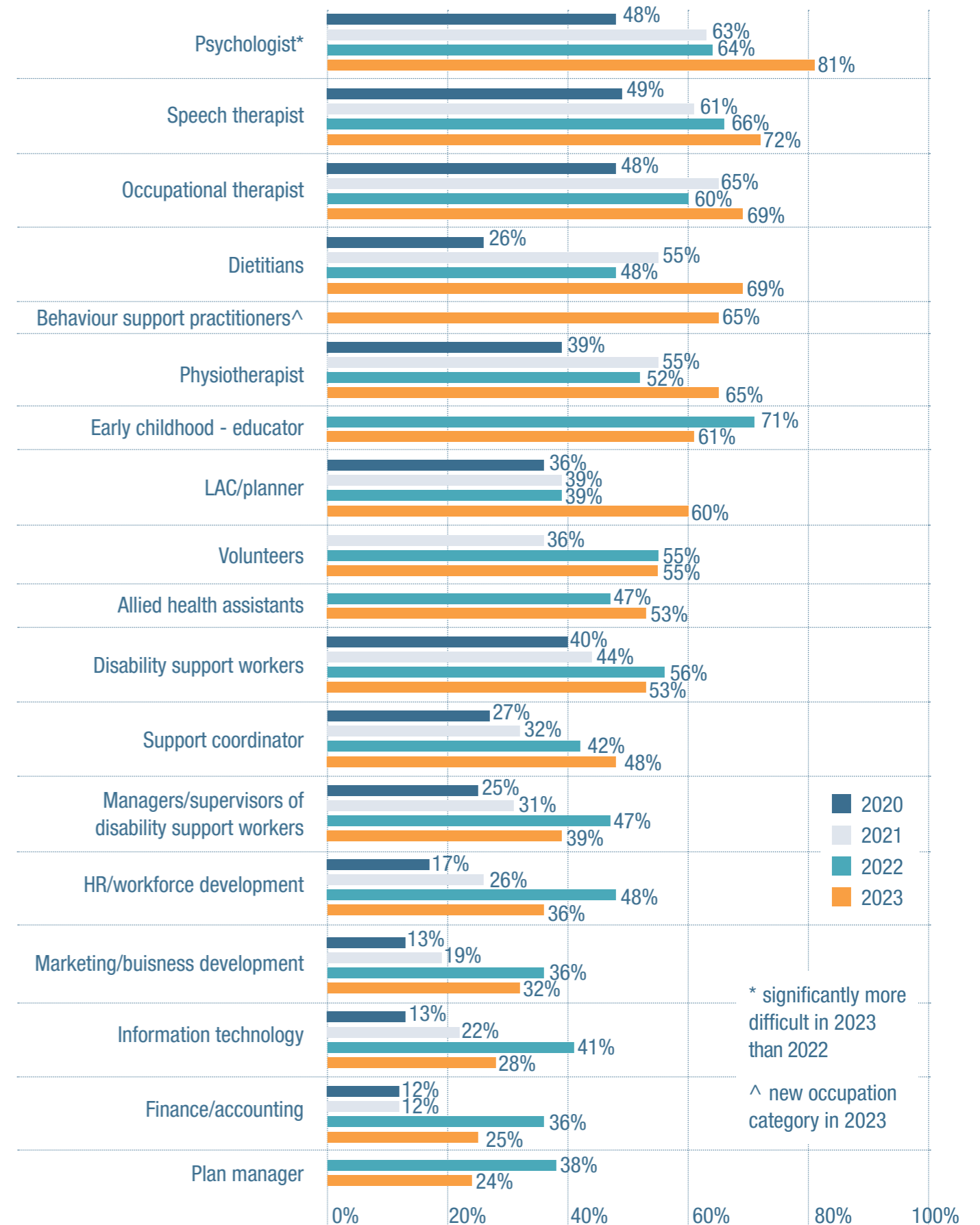
Barriers to retention

- competition and poaching
- low pay rates
- burnout and COVID fatigue
- attraction of solo practice or unregistered ABN 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
- NDIS 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

Figure 14 Difficulties in retention over time



NDS Workforce Census

The 2023 NDS 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 NDIS 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 NDIS altogether — such as through government jobs and skills training funding.

NDIS Workforce Strategy

In the seven years since the NDIS 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, NDS CEO Laurie Leigh spent 2023 co-chairing the NDIS Workforce Industry Reference Group. Comprising unions, providers and training bodies, as well as organisations representing NDIS 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 NDIS Minister Bill Shorten start to host a monthly NDIS Workforce Dialogue. It provided a regular a platform for providers, unions, NDIS participant advocacy groups and — of course — NDS to put their ideas and concerns to Minister Shorten and staff.

Many of the recommendations arising from the Disability Royal Commission and NDIS Review will affect the NDIS workforce, but, until then, NDS 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 NDIS Review, the Employment White Paper, the Workforce Australia Senate Inquiry and the Government's Principles of Supported Employment and Disability Employment Services (DES) 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 NDS 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.

NDS advocacy

NDS continues to work closely with members on our Industry Vision for Supported Employment, with recent work focussing on assisting providers implement the Fair Work Commission's (FWC) significant changes to the Supported Employment Services (SES) Award 2020.

Meanwhile, our Communities of Practice explored more modern employment support and commercial models, which could help to maximise NDIS participant funding while aligning with rising community expectations. We also provided a detailed submission in

response to DSS’s Discussion Paper on the Future of Supported Employment.

In Western Australia, through our role in the Transition Taskforce, NDS 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 NDS’s BuyAbility initiative.

To help promote the voice of supported employees, NDS 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 FWC’s new wage structure and our ongoing advocacy of a social wage that better meets community expectations.

Employment supports

The NDIA 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 NDIS pricing principles.

NDS continues to advocate that all NDIS 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.



DES

NDS supports the extension of the current DES contract until mid-2025 to provide valuable time to prepare for a new DES model. NDS has been consulting with DSS on the new model through the various reference and working groups and pilot projects.

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

DES 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 DES star ratings have now been abolished by the Government, and NDS 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 DES program. NDS 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.

NDS supports the phased introduction of the DES 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 DES program architecture to reduce the compliance and administration burden on providers.

DES 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 DES providers decreasing from 115 in 2018 to 89 in September of this year.³

However, the DES program has met the Government’s KPIs, delivering employment to

many thousands of people with disability. NDS considers it vital that the future DES 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 DES sector aligned with Australia’s Disability Strategy, delivering a wider range of employment for people with disability.

Survey results

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

In 2022, only three per cent of respondents believed DES policy reforms were headed in the right direction. In 2023, that number has jumped to 39 per cent of the 28 DES

Figure 15 Policy reforms for DES performance framework (eg the DES Quality Framework approved on 1 July) are heading in the right direction

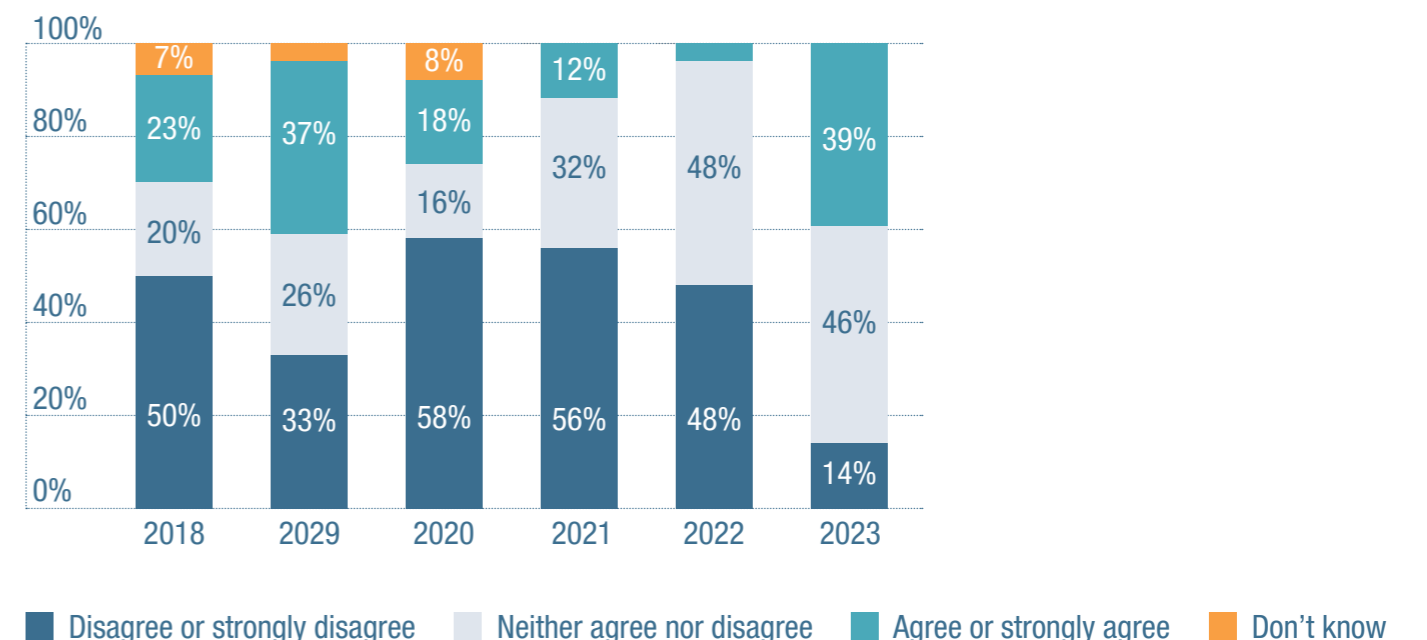
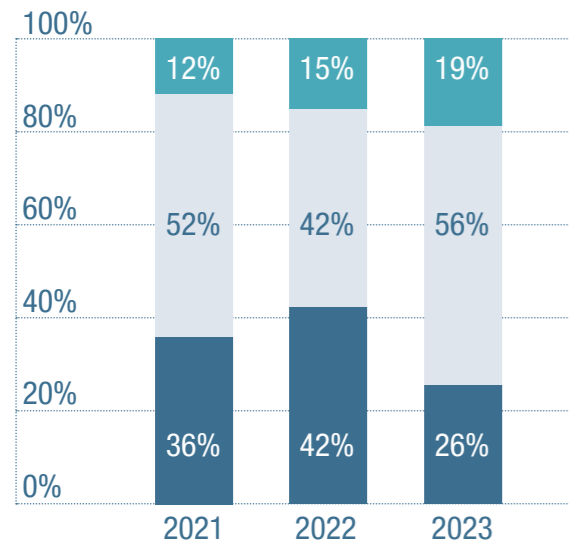
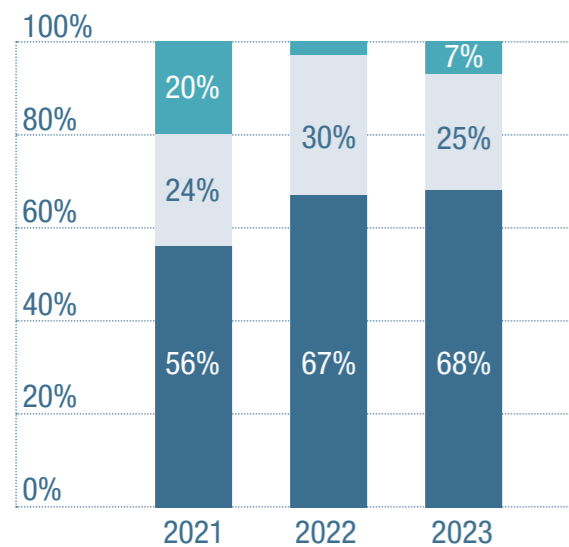


Figure 16 Policy reforms for Workforce Australia are in the right direction



■ Agree or strongly agree
■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Disagree or strongly disagree

Figure 17 The digital service model has enhanced employment opportunities for DES participants



■ Agree or strongly agree
■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Disagree or strongly disagree

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 DES 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 DES remain negative, however, with 68 per cent of respondents reporting that it does not enhance employment opportunities for DES participants.

Similarly, over half of respondents (54 per cent) report that they do not think the current DES 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 DES, 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 DES, 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 DES.

Finally, nearly half of respondents (46 per cent) state that the current funding structure should not be retained for the next DES 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 NDIS’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 NDIS 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 NDIS review.

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

VIC 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.”

VIC Medium not-for-profit

“The environment has never been more uncertain. It will be interesting to see what comes out of the DRC and NDIS review and how many businesses are able to innovate or continue to operate under supported wage system (SWS).”

SA 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 (DRC and NDIS), we don’t know whether we’ll even be allowed to keep operating beyond the next 24 months.”

NSW 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 NDIS funds the support for our employees.”

VIC Medium not-for-profit

Case study

Northern 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 NDIS 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 NDIS 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 focussed 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 an MBA, 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 focussed 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.

Top three issues

Remoteness

Some NT 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

NT 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. PACE, the NDIS Review and the Royal Commission will each come with their own further challenges.

NT sector stats

5,779

Active participants including ECA

132

Active ECA participants

50.5%

First Nations NDIS participants

6.3%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

Case study

Australian Capital Territory

Wayne Herbert LEAD



Tell us about LEAD

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 LEAD.

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.

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 NDIS prices not keeping pace with inflation, the financial sustainability of registered providers is under serious threat.

Compliance

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

SIL

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

ACT sector stats

10,503

Active participants including ECA

175

Active ECA participants

4.5%

First Nations NDIS participants

10.0%

Culturally and linguistically diverse participants

References:

1. (p.6) 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.

2. (p.18) Questions about changes in service provision cover the most commonly provided services, ones that at least 100 organisations were providing.

3. (p. 53) Department of Social Services, Australia (2023) Disability Employment Services – monthly profile, accessed 16 November 2023., <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-e258b678-eb6b-4ebb-92d8-0fe7c1122c42/details?q=DES%20monthly%20data>

State and territory sector statistics: National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) (2023) Quarterly Report to disability ministers (30 June 2023) © National Disability Insurance Agency. <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, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability.

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