

The Voice

Issue 14 - **SUMMER 2023**

Strengthening friendships

Bradley meets star musician

Celebrating IDPwD

Colour run fun



AbilityOptions



A Holiday Message

It's hard to believe summer is here. With the warm weather inviting us to head outdoors and enjoy the next few months, summer is an exciting time of year for many with plenty of activities to look forward to. I've enjoyed hearing so many stories about participants and their successes, and how we have supported them to fully participate in society throughout the year.

As we prepare to watch the fireworks and ring in another year, I'd like to reflect on the memories that made 2023 a great year.

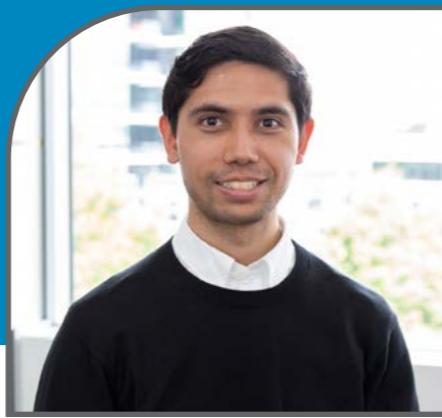
We saw participants grow and explore their interests with many exciting milestones happening in the community. One of my favourite stories in TheVoice is about a group who created memorable experiences after visiting Taronga Zoo. These visits are not just about meeting cute animals (although that is good fun) but about providing opportunities for participants to be included in society through a range of activities and support them in building their independence to live the life they choose.

Another highlight was learning about Thomas' passion for cooking and how Ability Options supported him to turn his hobby into a career. As a participant, Thomas worked hard in gaining valuable work experience in the hospitality industry. His determination paid off after Thomas secured a position as an apprentice chef at a top restaurant. It was a privilege to share Thomas' story.

So many of our participants achieved their goals this year. Our participant Bradley is a fan of Australian rapper, Kerser, and he recently had the opportunity to meet the artist at his concert in Sydney. Thanks to the support of staff from Ability Options and the Starlight Foundation, Bradley was able to organise a trip to attend the concert at Sydney's Enmore Theatre where he was thrilled to finally meet his idol.

I'd like to wish you all a great time over the holiday season and a happy New Year.

Rafael Sanchez-Bayo
Editor, TheVoice



Bradley's adventure to meet his Aussie idol

An NDIS participant on the Mid-North Coast had the privilege of meeting his favourite musician following a trip to attend a concert in Sydney.

Bradley, a participant supported by Ability Options, is an avid fan of Australian rapper, Kerser, and dreamed of meeting the artist in person. After finding out Kerser's Australian tour would be stopping in Sydney, Bradley travelled to Sydney so he could meet his idol.

For Brad, his support needs meant extra time and preparation were needed so he could enjoy his holiday with confidence. With support from Ability Options and the Starlight Foundation, Brad worked on crafting an itinerary that was tailored to his needs.

Once everything was organised, Brad, along with his mum and Support Workers, Steven and Michael, travelled to Sydney and settled into their accommodation.

Brad spent the next morning exploring Sydney where he was treated to his choice of lunch - KFC! That afternoon, Brad visited the Enmore Theatre to attend the concert and later joined a crowd of people who were all lining up to meet Kerser. When it was finally his turn, Brad was thrilled to walk into the backstage where he was greeted by his idol.

"I'm so happy I got to meet Kerser. Thanks to Ability Options' support, I could go on this trip and live my dream goal," Brad said.

Brad left the theatre satisfied and thanked Ability Options for helping him create a trip he will remember forever.

Michael is happy Brad enjoyed his trip and credits the Starlight Foundation for playing a big role in organising a successful trip.

"Thanks to the Starlight Foundation, Brad travelled to Sydney to meet Kerser. Overall, Bradley handled the trip very well. From a carer's perspective, it was a pleasure to be a small part of making Brad's wish come true," said Michael.



Reflecting on a historic year

As we get closer to the holiday season, I'm surprised how much quicker we seem to get to the end of each year. As usual in December, I have been reflecting on the many shifts we have seen in the disability sector this year, as well as the many amazing things Ability Options, participants, and our staff have all achieved.

I wanted to take this opportunity to talk about how 2023 is wrapping up for us and the sector.

Starting with Ability Options, we have been working hard on our goal to grow as an organisation. Our efforts to expand by connecting participants with more services have been many.

On the Mid-North Coast, we saw the integration of two like-minded providers, R&R Care and CHESS Connect, into our community, as well as the purchase of locally-loved Privada Farm — it has been great to see a few of our regulars share their favourite moments from their skill building farm visits in this issue.

Many participants have achieved some wonderful outcomes through the support of Ability Options this year.



To name a few, we supported Bradley to meet one of his Aussie idols, a rapper by the name of Kerser; a cohort from our Mid-North Coast services got their petrol-head fix visiting a local vintage automobile festival; and many participants like Evan, who you will hear from in our Annual Report, grew their independence again through enriching support.

Across our employment and specialist services division, we enabled people like Jacqueline, also a feature in this year's Annual Report, overcome some difficult mental health barriers to secure a few of her employment milestones. Our WorkReady participant Thomas achieved many of his employment goals through his passion for cooking.

We really celebrated our people this year, too. Our annual STAR Awards saw many of our colleagues come together to toast their collective accomplishments and recognise the selfless and amazing work they do to support people in the community each day.

We also looked inwards to support colleagues joining the Ability Options community from R&R Care and CHESS Connect as they navigated that journey.

Looking outwards at the disability and employment sectors, we worked hard to keep delivering our services to a safe and high-quality standard as we saw three massive milestones reached and we continued to engage in the various reform agenda in Employment and Disability. Everything we do is currently under some form of Government or Royal Commission Review. It couldn't be a more important time for our sector.

The Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review have both released their final reports as has the Select Committee on Workforce Australia with the Employment White Paper prior to them. These reports provide recommendations on how we can improve the experiences of the people we serve to be included, achieve their aspirations and, most importantly to move towards a fully inclusive society.

We have been working towards a more inclusive Australia long before the Royal Commission and the various Reviews were put in place. We have worked alongside all of them to raise the bar for the supports people choose to ensure everyone is included in the community.

From its inception, we had welcomed, supported, and contributed to the work of the Disability Royal Commission, and we have already identified areas of improvement in our operations. There is more work to do, which we will update you on as we move into the New Year.

Similarly, there is much to be optimistic about in the recommendations of the Employment and NDIS Reviews. Whilst the devil is always in the detail you can be sure that our values, vision and mission won't change, and we will use the platforms we have available to us to keep participants alongside our amazing teams in all our services right at the centre of our work into 2024 and beyond.

If I could sign off with one final thought, I would say 2023 has solidified our commitment to supporting people to fully participate in the community. The reviews we have seen reflect our values, and we will do everything we can to ensure the promise offered by them is delivered.

There are many amazing stories to read in this edition of TheVoice. Please enjoy the read, and we look forward to seeing you next year!

Julia Squire
Chief Executive Officer
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Participants strengthen friendships at community festival

A group of NDIS participants on the Mid-North Coast were transported to automobile heaven following a recent outing to a motor vehicle festival.

Grant, Warren, Michael, and Ashley are four participants who share a passion for vintage cars, bikes and everything in between. Their shared interest was in motion after the men organised an excursion to the Wheels 'N' Wines Festival at the Sherwood Estate restaurant with the support of Ability Options.

Upon arriving early at the venue, the group, accompanied by Support Workers Michelle and Bec, were excited to put their car knowledge skills to the test.

Events like the Wheels 'N' Wines Festival are experiences that bring people together, creating an atmosphere for friendships. For Michael, this trip was the perfect opportunity to grow and step out of his comfort zone.

The event was jam-packed with plenty of attractions and entertainment on offer. During the event, the men enjoyed a range of activities from seeing their favourite automobile classics at the car exhibitions to travelling back in time inside a vintage caravan.

Seeing the participants having fun together is something that brings joy to Support Worker Michelle. She hopes events like the Wheels 'N' Wines



Festival will encourage people with disability to get involved in the community.

"It's a privilege to have played a part in supporting these men achieve their goals. I hope this experience will inspire others to get out into the community and develop their skills towards independence," Michelle said.

While there were many highlights throughout the day, wandering through the market stalls was everyone's favourite. This provided Grant and Michael with the opportunity to buy a hat and key ring.

Overall, everyone enjoyed the excursion and can't wait to attend the festival again. The group spent the rest of the day listening to live music while eating delicious food purchased from the food trucks.

"I've been a fan of cars for a long time. Going to the Wheels 'N' Wines Festival gave me the chance to make friends with people who share my interests," Michael said.



Celebrating International Day of People with Disability

On Sunday, 3 December, Ability Options marked a significant date on our calendar, International Day of People with Disability (IDPwD).

With this year's theme being - 'United in action to rescue and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for, with, and by people with disabilities,' this year's IDPwD is asking everyone to work together to make the world a better and fairer place for people with disability.

2023 has been a big year for people with disability. Throughout the year, we have seen change and growth in our sector, including the NDIS turning 10 and the Disability Royal Commission laying down its 222 recommendations.

For Ability Options, there have been countless highlights throughout 2023 in supporting people with disability. Recently, Ability Options proudly purchased Privada Farm, a 20-acre

property that offers therapeutic support services on the Mid-North Coast and is a fun place for participants to connect to nature and socialise with the animals on the property.

So much of the work we do strives to continue supporting people with disability achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community. A prime example of this is our two-fold acquisition of Mid-North Coast service providers R&R Care and CHESS Connect in ensuring support services continue for participants while we grow our workforce.

While there are countless stories celebrating the achievements of people with disability and of the people proudly supporting them, we would now like to pose a question to our community as we look forward into the future. Whether you are an Ability Options employee, participant or external stakeholder, this question is **absolutely** for you.

What positive change would you like to see achieved for people with disability?

Write to us at Communications@abilityoptions.org.au or comment on our Facebook page.



Thank you for providing your feedback

Between 6 - 21 November, Ability Options conducted the 2023 Participant and Parent/Carer Satisfaction Surveys.

The objective of these surveys was to gain valuable feedback on how well we are delivering services, as well as identifying areas for improvement.

We received a total of 273 participant and 231 parent/carer responses, which is more than double the responses received during the previous survey in 2022.

Overall, participant satisfaction sits at 80%, while parent/carer satisfaction is 79%. Whilst these results are positive, we acknowledge there is still much to do.

We are pleased to hear participants and parents/carers agree that Ability Options' employees act respectfully and uphold the rights of people receiving support. However, we also note that we need to improve our communication, especially during times of organisational change.

Over the next month, Ability Options will review the results in greater detail. We expect to provide further updates in the New Year and hope to work with participants, parents, and carers to co-design an Action Plan to respond to the survey findings.

If you have any questions regarding your survey experience, please email practiceandoutcomes@abilityoptions.org.au

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who took the time to provide us with their feedback.



Ability Options hosts first annual Colour Run event for participants

Who doesn't love a bit of colour to brighten their day?

Recently, Ability Options staff in the Hunter region organised the first Colour Run event for participants using our short-term accommodation services.

In August, participants and staff gathered at our Raymond Terrace home to participate in the Run.

The event was filled with a mixture of colourful activities with everyone putting on their running gear and getting involved in the action.

Both children's and adults' races took place throughout the day, which saw participants and staff running towards the finish line while getting splashed on by the raining paint.



The event brightened everyone's day with plenty of laughter and colourful memories to take home. With the event being a huge success, the team at Raymond Terrace are planning to host the Colour Run every year.



Working Future – White Paper on jobs and opportunities

The Federal Government has released the *Employment White Paper, Working Future* – a roadmap to ensure Australians can make the most of the big shifts underway in the economy and our society over the coming decades.

Working Future presents a vision for an inclusive labour market where everyone has the opportunity for secure, fairly paid work so businesses and communities can thrive.

The Government's vision is underpinned by a new employment objective which aims to "create an economy where everyone can find a job without having to search for too long".

The document presents 31 future reform directions that will guide the work of industry, unions, the education sector and civil society.

Building on the foundation of last year's Jobs and Skills Summit, *Working Future* has been informed by extensive consultation and input from across government and more than 400 submissions from stakeholders in every state and territory.

As part of the White Paper, the Government will take nine immediate steps, including to:

1. work on a National Skills Passport to help workers demonstrate and promote

their qualifications and businesses to find more skilled workers.

2. turbocharge TAFE to begin working with states and territories and education providers to design and develop courses in 2024.
3. accelerate the take up of apprenticeships.
4. permanently extend the Work Bonus measure for pensioners and eligible veterans.
5. smooth the transition to work for income support recipients by doubling the period they can receive a nil rate of payment.
6. address labour market gaps to support policy development and program delivery.
7. back social enterprises to focus on the role they could play in providing employment services and in creating career pathways.
8. reform the Local Jobs Program to provide practical initiatives to better support jobseekers.
9. collaborate with First Nations stakeholders to scope an economic partnership.

The Government is also reforming the Disability Employment Services model and ParentsNext program to begin shifting the focus of employment services to building capacity.

Ability Options celebrates purchase of Privada Farm

Leading NSW disability and employment service provider Ability Options is thrilled to continue its work in supporting people with disability living on the Mid-North Coast achieve their independence, following its recent purchase of Privada Farm.

Privada Farm is a local property that provides farm therapy and capacity building experiences for people living with disability in the region. Owned and managed by Ability Options Support Worker Carla, the farm runs multiple programs that focus on supporting participants build skills for independence through a range of hands-on activities around the property.



For many Ability Options participants, visiting the farm has changed their lives for the better, giving them a sense of purpose and providing an opportunity to connect with the community.

"I've been going to the farm since last year. Being there has helped me make new friends," said Colin.

"Getting on the bus every Tuesday is awesome because I get to go and do gardening and spend time with the chooks," said Helen.

The decision to purchase the farm is one Ability Options CEO Julia Squire hopes will provide greater choice and control for participants in choosing services they want while continuing the organisation's mission to break barriers and advocate for the inclusion of people with disability.

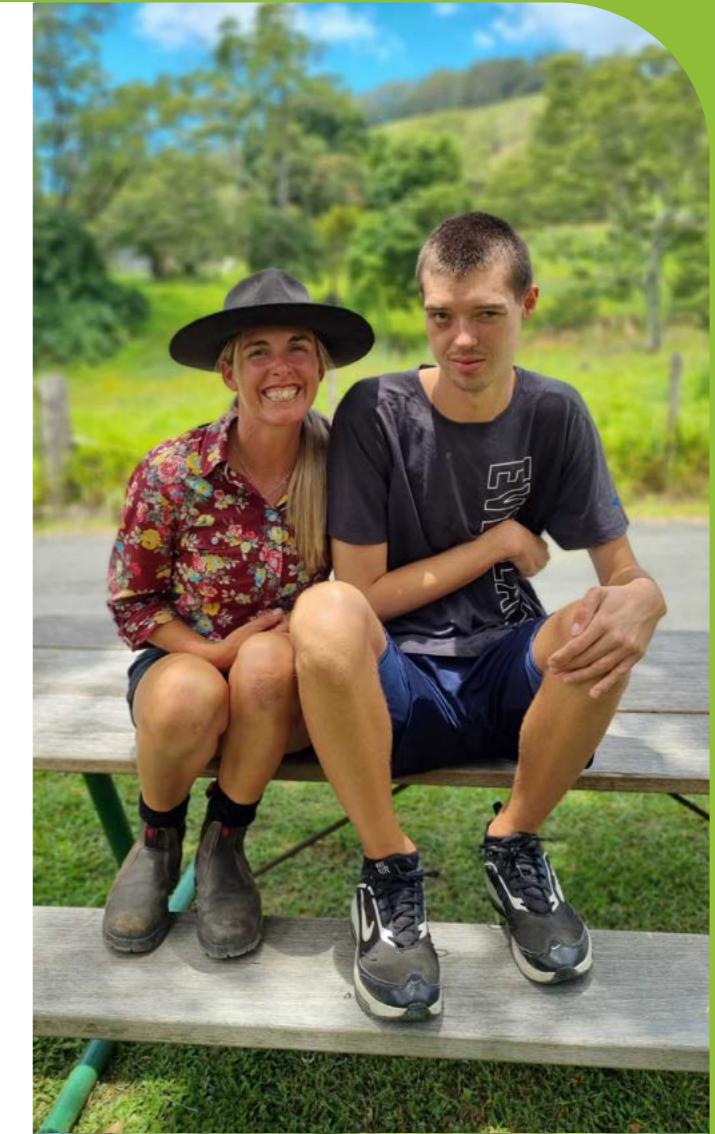
"Inclusion is at the heart of everything we do at Ability Options, and we're thrilled to be able to provide the Privada Farm experience to support local NDIS participants achieve their chosen goals and foster greater connection in the local community," Julia said.

"Our purchase also offers further employment opportunities to locals wanting to make a difference to people's lives."

Speaking on the purchase of Privada Farm, Senior Manager for Disability Services Daniela is proud of the work Carla and her dedicated team are doing in providing "a place where everyone feels happy and inspired".

"The farm is making us feel like we belong with everyone wanting to get involved," Daniela said.

"Each week, they look forward to visiting the farm and return with big smiles and plenty of great stories to tell."



The disability sector's historic two-step: reports and reform

The end of 2023 marks a significant milestone for our sector, following the release of two critical reports which provided recommendations for reform of the sector and to the scheme that supports people with disability.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme Review Panel released its final report on 7 December, providing 26 recommendations and 139 actions to improve the Scheme.

Actions focussing on four key areas are designed to ensure the Scheme has a sustainable future, and make sure it isn't the "only lifeboat in the ocean" for people with disability, according to Minister for the NDIS, the Hon. Bill Shorten MP.

The Review's purpose was to put people with disability back at the centre of the NDIS and restore trust, confidence and pride in the Scheme. It looked at the Scheme's design, operations, sustainability, as well as how to build a more responsive, supportive and sustainable market and workforce. The Review spent a year talking to and receiving submissions from thousands of participants, their families, providers and advocacy groups.

The government is considering its response to the Review, and we will hear more about that in 2024. The recommendations are far reaching and have the potential to return the NDIS to its original purpose.

We are optimistic that the Minister's commitment to co-design the response and future of the Scheme with participants, families, providers, and advocates will make sure that each recommendation is carefully considered, with an agreed way forward in the next few months.

Critical reform will also flow from the Disability Royal Commission's final report, which is being debated by stakeholders across the sector in advance of the six-month deadline for the Commonwealth government to officially respond.

It has been over two months since the Royal Commission published its final report, containing 222 recommendations for a more inclusive Australia for people living with disability.

We expect the government to respond to the Commission in March 2024 with its actions going forward from the final report.

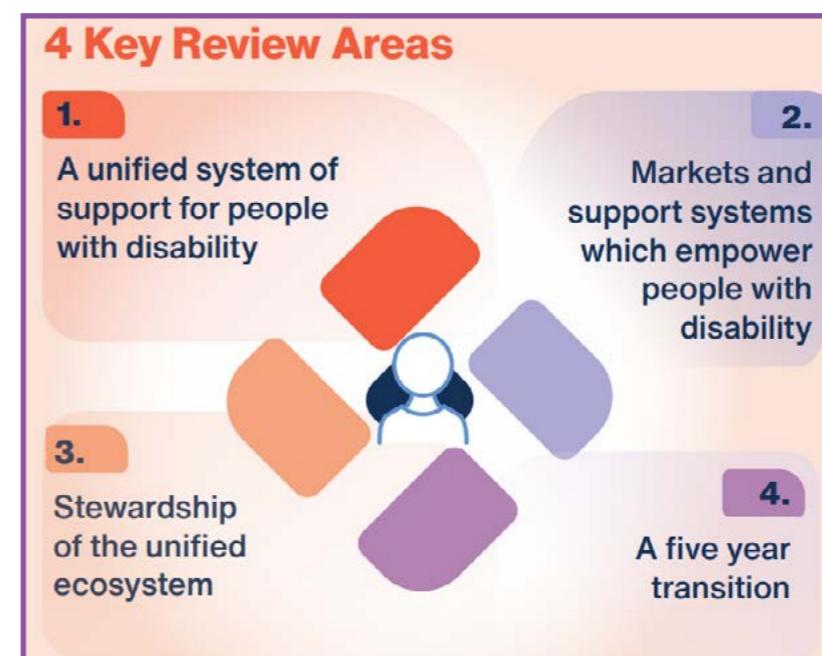
Following the government's response to these reports, we will have a clearer picture of our sector's future. As always we'll be advocating for the changes we think are necessary and encouraging participants and their families to share their thoughts with us and the government.

It's important to remember that we don't expect changes to happen quickly. We will ensure that, as decisions are made, we will update and involve our participants, their carers and families, and our staff at every opportunity.

Our organisation and people are ready and willing to play our part in continuing to build a more inclusive Australia for people living with disability.

For many NDIS participants and their families, six months to know the future of their supports does seem like a long time. Ability Options will be working tirelessly with participants, their families, and our staff to keep them informed of any updates on the Commission's recommendations and the government's response to them.

To read the full report, visit the **NDIS Review's website** or check out their **easy-read version**.





Office Closures

Our offices will close at
12:30pm on Friday, 22 December 2023
and reopen at 9am, Tuesday, 2 January 2024.

We would like to wish you a
happy holiday and a prosperous New Year
from all of us at Ability Options.

AbilityOptions



We really hope you enjoy reading TheVoice.

We are always open to suggestions, comments, and feedback of any kind to:
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