

# AbilityOptions



## Strength in support:

ABILITY OPTIONS ANNUAL REPORT

22  
23





THOMAS SULLIVAN  
5-17-1992





# Acknowledgement Of Country

Ability Options acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we operate across the state of New South Wales and pay our respects to the elders and peoples of the Gumbaynggirr, Dhanggati, Biripi, Worimi, Darkinjung, Awabakal, Kuring-gai, Eora, Dharug, Bundjalung, Yaegl, and Tharawal nations.

Ability Options acknowledges that, no matter where you are in Australia, the land is, was, always will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land.

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# Who we are, our vision, mission and values

Ability Options is an inclusion and a human rights-based organisation. Our mission is to support people who need assistance to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community.

We do this guided by our values of Trust, Inclusion, Respect, Courage, and our ability to Lead, and by our vision to inspire and lead communities, creating opportunity and services for people to participate fully in society.

We are proud that more than 7,000 participants who choose our Employment and Disability Services can trust us to enable them to advocate for themselves and partner with them to get the outcomes they want, need, and have a human right to.

We have more than 1,300 passionate and dedicated employees driven to support people who need assistance to meet their aspirations at 104 sites and in communities across New South Wales, including Greater Sydney, the Central Coast, Hunter, Mid-North Coast, Illawarra, and Northern Beaches.

## OUR SERVICES

- Support people to live in their own homes;
- Provide active support for the activities people choose;
- Offer meaningful opportunities for inclusion in local communities;
- Offer work experience and employment opportunities; and
- Connect people to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services.

From our beginnings in 1976, Ability Options is a courageous sector leader and a strong advocate for participants and their families. We challenged perceptions and assumptions well before the conception of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

We have grown to be one of the largest and most well-respected providers in New South Wales because people continue to choose our services for the great outcomes we support our participants to achieve.

Our vision, mission and values remain as strong as ever. Supporting people to achieve their goals and inclusion in their communities has been a part of our story since Ability Options opened its doors more than 45 years ago.

# NSW locations map

MID-NORTH COAST

23

23

HUNTER

CENTRAL COAST

11

47

SYDNEY

# Supporting people to build their independence

About five years ago, Brad was in a serious motorbike accident that left him injured and with a neurological disorder which required specialist treatment. He spent a long time going between hospitals and for three years of his life was non-verbal, being peg fed, and was aided by specialist equipment to help him go to the bathroom.

Last year, he and his family sought more support to redevelop his communication skills, build his strength, and regain some of his independence. Brad and his family looked to Ability Options. Recently, Brad sat down and, with the guidance of his mum and Support Workers, shared his story with us. This is his story.

"About five years ago, I had an accident which changed my life. I was in an accident that left me non-verbal and with a brain injury.

I was in intensive care for nine weeks and received a ventriculoperitoneal (VP) shunt, which is a device that helps the body drain excess cerebral fluid when there is a flow obstruction or decreased absorption of the fluid.

After that, I moved into Royal Rehab's Brain Injury Unit for eight months.

I then went back to hospital for 11 months before moving again to Coffs Harbour, where I spent three years with Support Workers in a home by myself. This treatment was quite medically-based and I felt I wasn't reaching any of my goals.

I was having a really difficult time.

After more long stints in hospitals, and some accommodation arrangements falling through, I came into Ability Options supported living accommodation services last August as a different, and frustrated person to who I used to be.

I was very withdrawn with my communication and interaction skills, and I struggled to complete most tasks without assistance or input from my support workers.

I worked with two physiotherapists who helped me build my strength back up so I could do some of the things I love to do, and some of the things I used to do.

I started off focussing on rebuilding my core strength so I could sit upright on my own again without assistance.

Physiotherapy helped me a lot. I can shave my own face again, attend to my own personal care with little prompting, and feed myself meals. I can now sit on the side of my bed by myself and play games I like with staff.

This was the first step to meeting my goals. I next focussed on my communication skills.

It took some time, but with the help of my mum, my support workers, house manager Kaitlyn, and the physios, I worked through these challenges.

I have also received regular behaviour support which has helped me improve my communication skills and become more independent that way. I can now ask for time to myself and breaks in daily tasks without becoming upset and angry with my support staff.





I have been attending outings in the community with my Support Workers three times a week and have regular engagement and visits with my family every fortnight.

My support team came together to support me to grow my independence after my injury.

So, in July this year, I was supported to trial steering and controlling my wheelchair myself and received an iPad to assist with my communication.

I also started attending outings to the equine therapy centre in Port Macquarie to assist with feeding the horses and hopefully interact with people my age and make some friendships.

Without the support of my Ability Options support network, my mum, and the team at my home, I would not have been able to achieve any of my goals."

Brad's mum, Karen, said she has seen her son make amazing progress since coming into Ability Options' care.

"I would say since Brad came to Ability Options, he has made amazing progress and I couldn't speak highly enough of his Support Workers and everyone involved in his care," she said.

"Everyone is so professional and respectful, and it gives me peace of mind knowing my son has a safe and happy environment to live."



# A message from our Chair and CEO



**Dr Robert Lang - Chair**

**The last financial year had its share of high points, where we delivered on Ability Options' mission to support people who need assistance to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community. It also had some challenges.**

As always, our participants have achieved great outcomes in the last 12 months, and we are privileged to have enabled those in partnership with them and their families.

This Annual Report showcases our participants' successes. On behalf of the Board and Executive team, we could not be prouder of them, or of the staff who support them each day through their programs and services. We continue to be inspired by our participants and our people with each year that passes.

This year, we remained committed to extending the voice of our participants by contributing to the NDIS Review, the Disability Royal Commission, Government review and consultation processes regarding the policies for supporting people to work, and to our peak bodies – Disability Employment Australia (DEA), National Disability Services (NDS), and National Employment Services Association (NESA).

We were also recognised for our best practice in a broad range of compliance and registration audits. We are proud of our work to focus on human rights, improve participant and family engagement and work to their goals, needs, and wishes; and



**Julia Squire - CEO**

this, alongside the Employee Value Proposition, ensures we recruit and retain the best people to deliver great services. Our employee turnover rates remain low overall, despite an increasingly competitive environment.

Despite the uncertainty provided by the changing economic environment, services continued with their usual focus on quality, safety and outcomes. We planned for, and implemented, some substantial changes which have laid the foundations for continuing and improved success in meeting our mission.

These changes included significant investment in projects and in our two acquisitions — R&R Care and CHESS Connect. These acquisitions mean that participants retain their choice of provider and continuity of services in their communities, whilst opening up greater opportunities in the future for them and others. Both organisations share our values, and we are pleased to welcome them and their participants into the Ability Options community.

## **IN FY23, OUR INVESTMENTS INCLUDED:**

- **Project Upskill:** ensuring our employees are upskilled to meet the current and changing needs of the participants we serve.
- **Leadership and culture change:** ensuring we have the best possible leaders working in a way which consistently aligns with our vision, mission and values.
- **Expanding the Board of Directors:** ensuring we have access to the best available commitment to mission, skills and expertise in governance, risk and strategic advice.



- **Our growth strategy:** we acquired two not-for-profit providers. These acquisitions enable Ability Options to meet our mission and ensure services on the Mid-North Coast continue to thrive with ongoing choice for participants.
- **Our partnerships with Specialist Disability Accommodation Providers:** we worked with our partner to open a new home for participants with complex needs in Sydney with more homes in progress.
- **Increasing our partnership with CoAct:** we decided to grow our partnership with CoAct by joining them in providing Disability Employment Services as well as WorkForce Australia.
- **Improvements to policy, services and overall operation** as trends, themes and outcomes started to emerge from the Disability Royal Commission.
- **Investing in a new leadership and participant support structure** in both employment and disability services, responding to the views of our participants and our employees.

From an efficiency perspective, like the rest of our sectors, we faced ongoing downward pressure on funding and upward pressure on the increasing costs of operating. The cost-of-living pressures we are all seeing and feeling at home are also being experienced by organisations like ours. Added to that is the growing cost of governance, regulation and compliance. The insurance and workers compensation industries, together with energy costs and suppliers like building maintenance, cleaning and supermarkets, have all increased their costs significantly.

When people choose our services, they are investing in getting the outcomes they want, need and have a right to. So, it is important that their investment and confidence in us is recognised and delivered on. For example, we improved our efficiency and productivity further by reducing overheads including for property leases. These measures will be solid foundations for our long-term productivity.

The year had some low points including the reallocation of some DES contracts to other providers. In light of the Department of Social Services' acceptance of errors in the Star Ratings, we think two of these reallocations was done in error.

This will be an ongoing discussion with the Australian Government for us, as it is for a number of employment services providers.

Lastly, we want to acknowledge the Board and the Ability Options Executive team. The Board has retained its uncompromising focus on our vision, mission and values along with putting people (participants and employees) at the centre of their consideration and decision making.

The Directors govern our organisation. They do this in accordance with best practice, the law and our purpose. Their commitment to our mission and contribution to Ability Options adds value every day. As well as their governance at the Board and Committees, Directors have regular training and update their skills, their performance is assessed and they also contribute to staff recognition, undertake multiple service visits including meeting participants, families and staff and they lead by example.

The Executive team works cohesively together, sharing effort, skills and resources with our mission, vision and values at the centre of our work and an unrelenting focus on the human rights of our participants. Overall, we have faced every challenge with a strong commitment to our vision, mission and values which guide us in everything we do.

At the same time, we have delivered on our Strategy by supporting our participants to gain the high-quality outcomes they aim for ensuring they choose our services and by ensuring our employees are safe, trained and supported at work.

We would like to thank all our participants, families and partners for their support last year and in particular our incredible staff for their commitment to our vision, mission and values. We are so proud of their dedication to our participants and their unwavering hard work throughout the year. We look forward to an exciting year ahead, where we continue to deliver on our mission of supporting those in need, and growing because people trust and choose Ability Options to support them to achieve the outcomes they want, need, and have a right to.







# Growing opportunities to support communities

**In the 2022-23 financial year, as a part of Ability Options' Strategy 'Towards 2030', we have continued to grow steadily where people choose our services. As a result, we expanded our service delivery capabilities and footprint in NSW.**

During November 2022, Ability Options acquired R&R Care, a disability services provider on the Mid-North Coast (MNC). R&R chose us as its partner for this change because we are reputable, have a good footprint in our MNC communities and because we can offer participants, families, and employees a broad range of supports and opportunities.

Following the acquisition, the process of integrating R&R Care staff, participants and systems into the AO community began.

The teams from R&R joined the Ability Options community and continue to provide a range of social and recreational activities to support participants to engage with their community, strengthen their ability to live independently, and live the life they want. Many of their activities are group-based, but they also provide one-on-one therapy and support services. By joining Ability Options, our participants have access to a range of extra service options and employees can grow their careers supported by an organisation that has the means to invest in its people.

"Both organisations share the same values. Being

able to expand on the Mid-North Coast offering growing services for participants and families and great career opportunities for staff has been a good move forward," said Julia Squire, Ability Options CEO.

"Expanding on the Mid-North Coast is an exciting opportunity for us as a leading disability and employment services provider in New South Wales, but I hope even more so for the wonderful people we have welcomed to the Ability Options community."

Also, in FY22-23, Ability Options began the acquisition and integration of another employment, disability and mentorship services provider on the MNC, CHESS Connect.

With a rich history in multiple employment programs, NDIS Direct Supports, Recovery Coaching and Coordination of Supports, CHESS Connect has helped job seekers and employers for more than 25 years across the MNC and northern regions of NSW.

Julia Squire, Ability Options CEO said the opportunity to continue Ability Options' growth and welcome new faces to the organisations' community was exciting.

"Further expansion on the Mid-North Coast is an exciting opportunity to continue to provide exceptional support to the communities on the Coast and beyond and meet their aspirations as well as develop career opportunities for employees," she said.

## Embracing change:

# Mathew's journey from R&R Care to Ability Options

Late last year, R&R Care, a disability services provider on the Mid-North Coast, joined the Ability Options community. Mathew, who worked at CHESS Connect before moving to R&R Care about a year ago, shares his thoughts and experiences of the transition to Ability Options.

"My name is Mathew, and I was part of the Disability Employment team at CHESS Connect for two years as a Recruitment Partner.

In November 2021, I decided to make the jump into support services through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

I was lucky enough to be approached by a Team Leader at R&R Care asking me to apply for a Participant Support Officer position which, at the time, I had no idea what the position was. Not knowing only made me more excited for what was to come.

I worked with R&R Care for around 12 months, working closely with participants to reach their goals in life. Soon after, the rumour mill started spooling up and we were informed that R&R Care was joining a larger service provider.

Naturally, there were a lot of anxious feelings going around, sending us into a deep dive of uncertainty, wondering how larger disability service providers operated.

Once the due diligence was completed and our then CEO Daniela Shaw was able to inform the R&R Care team that we would be joining Ability Options, a lot of us started checking up on what Ability Options is.

This news led to the entire team checking the Ability Options website to see what services they offered. A lot of us were doing this to essentially see what jobs would be safe.

In March 2023, we had a visit from Julia Squire – the CEO of Ability Options – where a lot of those anxious feelings were calmed, and I personally became excited about the acquisition.

Julia was very open and honest about what was to come. She explained the transition was not going to be all rainbows and sunshine; she told us there were going to be some long hours and hard work involved to merge all our service agreements over to Ability Options' systems and learning new programs, policies, and procedures.





Although the transition seemed daunting at the time, and the fear-factor of losing the bonds we had created with our participants and their families, we soon discovered through this process we were able to create stronger bonds and incoming referrals had increased.

The face-to-face training we received from the Intake and Rostering teams – Caitlin, Beck and Chloe – really helped us feel like part of the Ability Options family.

I was able to see the potential for the new programs we were going to have access to, and the many benefits they have reducing time spent on admin tasks.

Ability Options is currently working on improving its systems to be better utilised to their full potential. I am lucky enough to be included in service development teams for future implementation.

Ability Options has many career development pathways. This encouraged me to explore the different opportunities and where I may be able to grow both personally and professionally.

In May, I was able to secure a position as one of the Practice Managers for Direct Supports here on the Coffs Coast. With this appointment, I have been given access to additional training and even been able to attend a two-day workshop with other Practice Managers and Senior Managers from all over the state to share ideas and learn more about the company we have just joined.

Ability Options is a wonderful organisation and now that we're growing our footprint on the Coffs Coast, we are going to be able to make some serious change to disability supports. Our core business is to support all our participants, helping them to achieve their NDIS and personal goals and after all that's what were all in this industry for."

# A hole in one for young jobseeker Jamie

In May 2023, Ability Options furthered its expansion efforts and acquired Mid-North Coast employment, disability and mentorship services provider CHESS Connect as a wholly owned subsidiary of the organisation. This story is about the success of CHESS Connect participant Jamie.

Patrons of a Golf Club on the Mid-North Coast will be familiar with Jamie, the young Club All Rounder who works with the crew and keeps the golf carts clean, fuelled and in tip top shape.

## **An opportunity to volunteer**

Living on the autism spectrum, Jamie was able to access NDIS School Leaver Employment Supports through CHESS Connect, which helped him engage in social activities and explore work experience opportunities after he graduated from high school. This led Jamie to his role at the golf club, where he began as a volunteer in late 2020.

Jamie, an avid train enthusiast and metal detectorist, loves all things motorised, so catching the bus to work and working with the golf carts in the club's workshop aligned perfectly with his passions.

"Jamie has always loved trains," said Jamie's mum, Lorraine, "It has been a life-long fascination for him. Our garage is full of model trains and the local newsagent knows to save a copy of the Hornsby Train magazine for him each month".

## **Building capacity to thrive**

Having found his interest, it wasn't long before Jamie was ready to take the next step. He was linked to the CHESS Connect Disability Employment team and together, they worked with Club Manager Mike to assist Jamie into supported wages employment. Supported wages are a

collaborative agreement between employers and employees with disability to build their capacity to work.

Mike had been involved in the hospitality industry for decades, but this was his first encounter working with a staff member with disability, and he has learned a lot.

"After all the natural disasters and the pandemic, one of the hardest parts of running the Club is finding staff who want to work," Mike said.

"We didn't realise the types of employment support we could access until CHESS Connect approached us. Jamie was keen and really wanted to be a part of the club, so it was great to have help to support him into work."

The club and a collaborative team of Disability Employment and NDIS staff devised a plan to implement tailored workplace practices. They created step-by-step routines for Jamie in his roles cleaning and maintaining the golf carts, making deliveries, and working in the club's public area.

This established framework and schedule allowed Jamie to gain confidence, build his skills and thrive in his new job.

"Jamie is very detail orientated," Mike said, "Understanding how he thinks helps. If you want something done, give him the detail and the specifics and he's away!"

CHESS Connect was able to procure tools to help Jamie in the workplace, including uniforms and workplace equipment - which has made work in the mechanic bay smoother and more efficient. Jamie was also supported to get his Responsible Service of Alcohol certificate so he can perform duties in the bar area of the club. So far, he's pulled two beers and is considering his options for a third!





After six months of on-the-job coaching, Jamie transitioned into open employment, just as the club expanded its fleet of golf carts – keeping Jamie and the crew busy!

"It's not just the work where we see Jamie developing," Mike said. "We're seeing a big change as he joins in with the rest of us. He's a real larrikin, so to see his personality come out and watch him interacting with the team is terrific."

### **A hole in one for Jamie**

Jamie now works two days a week at the club and keeps busy volunteering at a local museum, enjoying Thursday family dinner, a spot of golf and some solid negotiation with mum to move his model trains into the house.

We asked Jamie what his favourite part of his new job was. His answer: "Lunch".

Can't argue with that!



***This story was originally published on the CHESS Connect website.***





# How we supported our participants





# Double the fun with therapy group program on the Mid-North Coast

Our Disability Services support a wide range of people far and wide across NSW. As we travel north, we encounter our Mid-North Coast Therapy team, who have an ace up their sleeve in their ability to provide fresh, fun, and exciting group programs to our younger participants. Melina, who joined the Ability Options community from R&R Care, shares her experiences with these programs.

"As the Senior Manager of Therapy Services based out of Coffs Harbour, I've been lucky enough to work alongside fantastic colleagues across the business.

At the start of the July school holidays, our team was hard at work putting together two fantastic events for our group of younger participants. Our Mid-North Coast team is not only diligent, but creative, both in supporting participants and ensuring they have a fun time at our group programs.

## **Waltzing in a winter wonderland**

The first of our group program events was a 'Winter Wonderland' which was a bucket of fun and laughter. We set a snowy scene using shredded paper as ice and crash mats as icebergs. Participants played in the 'snow' and even made snowflakes out of Paddle Pop sticks, with an added touch of glitter.

Participants made a track in the snow and engaged in 'snow-sledding' using a scooter board and raced each other around the track. Other

participants engaged in crashing and jumping from the 'icebergs', further promoting their motor and core-strength development, all while having a great time.

## **Superhero time**

The second of our exciting group activities for participants was superhero themed. This fun-filled morning saw participants create and explore all things superheroes.

The team engaged participants in superhero training, developing their fine-motor skills by making their own superhero masks, using utensils like tongs and spoons to pick up 'Kryptonite' from the floor without using their hands.

They then navigated through their next challenge — the 'laser room' — where they ducked, weaved, and squeezed their way through a maze.

To finish off the session, participants played a game of 'the floor is lava', utilising pillows, crashmats, and yoga mats to make their way across the river and then assisting others to cross as well.

This exercise enhanced participants' opportunities to develop their motor skills in a safe environment and facilitated increased their social skills.

Ability Options' Therapy Services help you prepare for the NDIS and work towards your health goals. At Ability Options, we offer counselling and therapy services to suit all abilities and aspirations. We support you to identify your goals and work towards achieving them. Our services help you to live your best life."













**The day-to-day:**

# Supporting independence at ground level

**As part of Ability Options' long-term mission to support people to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community, we employ people who can deliver high-quality services for our participants. Ability Options Support Worker Shaun sat down with us to talk about his experiences in his role and highlight what makes his work so special.**

"My favourite thing about being a Support Worker is being able to help participants achieve independence, improve their wellbeing and help with the development of their skills.

My job sees me assisting participants with their daily routines. At ground level, I think being able to support people in their day-to-day can build a solid foundation for achieving goals.

Working in disability support is a very rewarding career path, mainly because you get to see the impact you have had on someone's life first-hand.

Ultimately, I would say the best part, though, is getting to enjoy the time with participants on their outings in the community and seeing them enjoy themselves.

A good example of this would be when a colleague and I organised a trip to the All-Ability Disco for two of our participants, Erica and Mel. Both love music and getting out and about, so it was a great chance for them to get out into the community. As it happens, it was the first time the local bowling alley had hosted an event like this, so we had to check it out.

We organised some support staff to assist Erica and Mel with their outfits for the disco so they could feel as included in the event as possible. We then supported them with their regular routines a little earlier in the day so we could get to the disco on time. We got organised onto the bus and headed out with some food and drinks in tow.

We assisted them to have a boogie to their favourite music. I think that was really the highlight for me, they were having a lot of fun. That, combined with some pizza and a couple of mocktails, rounded off the night.

I think they reached a couple of their milestones that night; they met new people and engaged in the community, got to enjoy some dancing and it helped them grow their independence a little more."

## Disability services:

# Developing for the future

**By: Luke Hughes,**  
**Chief Operating Officer –**  
**Disability Services**

**Resilience was the hallmark of the year for our disability services division during the 2022-23 Financial Year.**

While COVID-19 restrictions may have eased, the pandemic continued, and we were asked to do more with less again. Skilled staff became harder to recruit, particularly in our regional and rural locations, and non-NDIS registered providers multiplied, unhindered by the regulatory quality requirements we operate under.

Our teams thrived in the face of this adversity, embracing courageous leadership at all levels in pursuit of our mission, even when essential organisational changes added further operational complexity.

### **Restructuring for better service delivery**

One of Ability Options' largest changes in the last 12 months was the implementation of a more fit-for-purpose leadership model in response to participant and staff calls for additional frontline leadership, administrative support, and dedicated participant engagement officers.



Practice Managers, Senior Support Leaders and Participant Administration and Liaison Officers (PALs) have all been appointed. Together, these people will ensure our participants continue to receive the highest standards of disability support.

I became the Chief Operating Officer for Disability in January this year following the departure of my long-standing predecessor, Naomi McCorkell. Naomi had been with Ability Options since the introduction of the NDIS and had been particularly instrumental to our growth in the Hunter Region. CEO Julia Squire had assumed the COO-D responsibilities for six months prior to my appointment. It is my great privilege to lead a team of talented professionals committed to delivering high-quality support to our participants across accommodation – short and long-term, group activities and community access, day programs, and therapy services.

I am supported by Nathan and Krystal, General Managers for Sydney, Hunter, Central Coast, and the Mid-North Coast respectively. Our teams are now geographically aligned, and Coordination of Supports has transitioned to the Specialist Services division to create independence from Operations.



Chelsey has been appointed as the inaugural General Manager – Participant Liaison and Compliance. This structure will make our division more connected, thereby making it easier for our participants to access a greater array of services, all with the assistance of their Ability Options PAL.

### **Developing our people as leaders**

Our continuous improvement focus led to the largescale upskilling of our disability teams throughout the year. Our Disability Support Workers, Nurses, and Nursing Assistants flourished through participation in Project Upskill – a large scale face-to-face competency-based training initiative. Our middle managers became better leaders through a targeted development program.

Practice Managers and Senior Support Leaders attended the AO Academy – a new internal training and development initiative – undertaking in-depth training in disability services best practice. The Academy includes training in Active Support, delivered in partnership with La Trobe University, which has attracted contemporary best-practice recognition in disability services.

### **Investing in the future**

We have also spent the year investing and building for the future in other areas. We have focused on realising the benefits of digital transformation to support choice, control, quality and the effectiveness of services. Our customer relationship management system, weConnect, has become a business-as-usual feature. The system underpins our high-quality supports by housing participants' individualised support documentation in one place for ease of access and use by our frontline staff.

Our Specialist Disability Accommodation partnerships have begun to bear fruit. In April, our first participant moved into their brand-new home. More of our participants will soon be enjoying modern accommodation in numbers as more homes come into service. With partnerships as a strategic objective, we will continue exploring opportunities to engage organisations that share our values to deliver enhanced accommodation outcomes for our participants.

Our services grew as we integrated Mid-North Coast providers R&R Care and CHESS Connect into the Ability Options community. Our therapy services have gained considerable expertise and a client base we aim to expand along the eastern seaboard to offer services our existing and prospective participants want and need.

### **Looking towards FY2023-24**

While we have spent a lot of the year focussing on our internal development, we have also turned our attention outward. The Disability Royal Commission has concluded and released its final report, detailing over 200 recommendations on ways to improve our sector and make Australia a more inclusive society for people living with disability. We strongly support the Royal Commission and are looking into how its recommendations will impart positive outcomes for people with disability.

This Annual Report contains several inspiring stories of success throughout the last 12 months, which highlight the value of Ability Options' services, participants, and staff. The Disability division would be nothing without our committed staff and the participants they support directly and indirectly. Thank you all.

# Brad's surprise celebrity encounter

**Brad, a participant supported by Ability Options, had the privilege of meeting Deb and Andy, his favourite celebrity TV couple from his favourite TV show, The Block, after a surprise visit was organised.**

Brad has been a fan of the show for a long time. For him, meeting his favourite celebrity couple has been a dream he has always wanted to achieve, and it is something that meant a lot to him.

With the help of his Support Worker Oliver and Support Coordinator Lauren, Brad wrote a letter saying he is a huge fan of The Block and how much he enjoys watching it.

"I wrote to The Block to say that, one day, I hope to meet Deb and Andy from the show in person," Brad said.

When Deb and Andy responded to Brad's letter asking when they could come and catch up with him, Lauren said Brad was so excited.

"I contacted Deb and Andy in secret," Lauren said, "Knowing how much this would mean to Brad, I arranged a meet and greet with them".

"I couldn't believe my eyes," Brad said.



Brad's wish became a reality when he received a surprise visit from Deb and Andy. His face beamed with joy; he was meeting his favourite celebrities.

"I had a great time chatting and getting to know the couple, as well as having some photos taken together," he said.

Lauren said she is very proud to have been able to help make Brad's dream come true.

"Watching Brad meet and interact with Deb and Andy was one of my favourite moments as his Support Coordinator," she said.

"He was over the moon, knowing that his goal has been fulfilled. I'm so glad I could help him with his wishes."

Brad felt surprised, yet excited to have met the couple. He thanked Deb and Andy for replying to his letter and for making his day so memorable. Brad said this encounter is something he will remember forever.

"I couldn't believe it was happening," he said, "It just didn't feel real".

"Meeting Deb and Andy in person not only made my day, but this encounter will live through my memory forever."

***This story was originally published in the Autumn 2023 edition of TheVoice newsletter.***



**Greener grass:**

# Growing independence again through support

Evan, who used to be a truck driver, came into Ability Options' services in 2018 after an accident left him injured and with an intellectual disability, which meant he could no longer work and needed support. With the aid of his Support Workers and family, Evan pens his experiences through Ability Options' services.



"I used to be an active person, but I had an accident that left me injured, unable to work, and diagnosed with an intellectual disability.

This really affected my mental health. I had a lot of highs and lows, mood swings, and felt very frustrated. I couldn't do the things I used to really love doing.

I got to a very low point where I was hurting myself mentally and physically, I would isolate myself, and have outbursts. It was clear I needed to push through as best I could and get some support to help me do this.

That's when I found out about Ability Options.

I initially started with them through their Community Supports program two days per week — the Out and Active group, which uses public transport systems to visit a destination that involves walking, and the Golden Memories group where I enjoy listening to old, soft music and watching movies with other participants.

I've started attending a Friday 'Fishing, Club and Pub' group that goes out at the end of the week near some water to play some outdoor games like cricket and soccer and do some fishing."

## Moving forward through change:

# Navigating uncertainty for better outcomes

After extensive employee consultation, Ability Options' 2023 'Leadership and Participant Support' restructure has seen the creation of new positions to improve leadership, ensure that we are well placed to meet the needs of participants, and remain a sustainable organisation for years to come. Joanne and Ramesh share their experiences moving through this change at Ability Options.

Working in Disability and Employment Services can be an intensive, but highly rewarding career path.

For many at Ability Options, it's a chance to help people in their communities live their lives with full support, or find meaningful employment.

Joanne has been working at Ability Options for 13 years. In her time, she has been able to support so many participants to achieve their goals.

Joanne has transitioned from her previous role as Accommodation Support Manager to Practice Manager and says going through restructures required her to have a positive attitude and patient approach.

"My initial thoughts of the restructure felt like it divided the Accommodation Services teams – having to go through a somewhat competitive process of applying for the new positions," she said.

"It was an emotional time for a lot of us."

"In my experience, when it comes to restructures, I have always tried to remain positive and go with the change, as I know it will be for the better of the organisation."

For Ramesh, a Team Leader, now Practice Manager in Marayong, the leadership restructure presented an opportunity for growth, but said many around him felt similar to Jo.

"I felt very positive and waited to hear more information about how the restructure would affect the Accommodation Services teams," he said.

"But, at the same time, my colleagues were worried about losing their current roles. That forced me to think a bit differently."

The changes to Ability Options' leadership model mean our leaders can be more on the ground at the front line of our service delivery. In turn, this would help our people feel more supported, but navigating through the process to get to this goal needed a considered approach.

Jo said moving through the restructure required a lot of her attention and drew attention to something she didn't quite realise.

"It took a lot to process, but for me personally, I don't feel I realised I was as unhappy as I was in my previous role until I settled in my new role and noticed myself driving to work smiling and quite excited."

Ramesh expressed he felt uncertain too, but extensive consultation along the way helped him understand what his next steps were.

"Having a Practice Manager prominently working at our sites is already giving frontline staff a very positive feeling as they feel more supported by their leaders.

Looking to the future, both Joanne and Ramesh said they were excited about what was to come.

"I can confidently say that Ability Options is my first choice of employer, and I am planning to retire with the knowledge that I have invested some of the best years of my career supporting the people who needed the best support I could give," Ramesh said.



**Behind the scenes:**

# Barinder's journey in HR

Working at Ability Options is not just about providing the best support possible to our participants, we provide the same level of support and development to our people too. Behind the scenes of frontline support, people, like Barinder in our Human Resources team, are always supported to develop their careers and skills as part of our community. Barinder shared her story about working at Ability Options with us.

"I started working with Ability Options in 2020 when I was offered the position of Human Resources Coordinator.

I couldn't contain my excitement, working in HR was an exciting path forward for me. It presented me with opportunities to help people in recruitment, HR projects, restructures, and to develop my skillset.

My first few days begun by assisting managers with their recruitment processes, which was quite fun to see how recruitment happens on the other side of the curtain.

When the pandemic hit, it became a very different world for so many people, not just personally, but in their work as well.

Frontline disability and employment staff dealt with so many changes and challenges to their work, and going through various lockdowns was a lot for everyone.



But in my role, I was on deck to help make a difference, even when it meant supporting when the team was short staffed.

It was a trying time for all of us. At the time, I was named a runner up in the STAR Employee of the Month awards, which really made me feel valued as a part of the Ability Options family.

As Ability Options expanded over the years by acquiring other companies, it created opportunities for me to grow personally and professionally.

In 2022, I moved into a new role in Talent Acquisition after a year and a half as a HR Coordinator.

In this role, I had opportunities to travel within NSW and build connections with people across the organisation.

My latest career move was earlier this year, with the opportunity to take up the position of Manager – Talent Acquisition.

In this role, I am working on a few talent projects including developing an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) to strengthen Ability Options' brand as an employer.

It is thrilling to be part of a company that is helping to transform our society, enabling people to achieve their aspirations and inclusion in the community. The most important thing I've learnt in my time with Ability Options is to approach work with a positive attitude, to be brave and accept new challenges as they arise."

# Celebrating our people

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, smiling and looking down, possibly at a podium or a small object in her hands. She is wearing a dark blue top with a silver necklace. In the background, there is a large, bright blue screen, likely a projection or a large monitor. The scene appears to be a formal event or a presentation.





# Celebrating our people at the 2022 STAR Employee Awards

On Friday, 2 December 2022, many of our colleagues gathered at Novotel Sydney Olympic Park to celebrate and congratulate each other's hard work all year round for the STAR Employee Awards.

A record-breaking 460 nominations were submitted in the lead up to what was an exceptionally special night where colleagues got together to celebrate and recognise each other's hard work in achieving our mission throughout the year.

This year's event saw a host of 14 refreshed awards covering every aspect of working at Ability Options. They were up for grabs to those employees who demonstrate Ability Options values day in and day out.

*[The STAR Awards] is a big 'thank you' to our employees, for the work they do upholding the rights and choices of people with disability in the community and the work done to support them to live the lives they choose .*

**– CEO, Julia Squire.**

## Karni

Karni Liddell hosted the 2022 STAR Employee Awards with a rousing call to action for the inclusion of people with disability in the community – something she said Ability Options are already 'STARS' at.



## Julia

This year was our fifth Awards Night but only the second time that we have been able to host the STAR Employee Awards in-person, due to the pandemic, and what a difference it made. CEO Julia Squire was quick to encourage the crowd to make noise, celebrate their colleagues and enjoy the night. The feeling in the room was electric; the excitement, and sometimes even tears, especially during the inspirational keynote address from our MC, Karni Liddell was truly special. We were grateful to be able to come together again and celebrate the achievements of our organisation after over two years of challenging times.

In a record turnout, our Board, Executive team, staff, special guests and sponsors celebrated our people doing what they do best.



# Our 2022 STAR Awards winners

## **STAR Employee of the Year: Tracey**

While there are 14 categories on the night, the big award of the night is the STAR Employee of the Year Award. It acknowledges an outstanding individual from within the organisation.

While 16 finalists were chosen for the title of STAR Employee of the Year, Tracey's leadership demonstrated throughout the year is something to aspire to. The way she leads is extraordinary. She has built a strong, supportive, and fun team who all strive to reach her participants' goals and expectations to a "T". Tracey leads by example.

She has taken on all changes and challenges involved with new ways of working and in the process her service continues to exceed all expectations. Tracey checks in with her team regularly and is always reminding them she is only a phone call away. This award is well deserved.

## **The Ability Options Values Champion: Leanne**

Leanne goes the extra mile for residents and stakeholders and has done for over 10 years. Each day, Leanne has demonstrated endless care and compassion for residents.

## **Stellar Safety Award: Katherine**

Katherine won this award for her awareness of the importance of work health and safety matters in all aspects of her job as well as ensuring visits with participants kept everyone all as safe as possible by following procedure.

## **The Customer Service Expert: Jessica**

Jessica was awarded for her stellar customer service. She always makes others feel welcomed and to have a purpose. As an exceptional leader and motivator, she is someone who demonstrates our values and inspires their team to be the best.

## **Standout Leader Award: Matthew**

Matthew is an inspiring leader to the entire Support Coordination Team. His ability to continue to service a complex caseload of NDIS participants, as well as recruit and train multiple new team members, all while providing professional supportive directions to the team during the most challenging of times, truly demonstrates his amazing leadership skills.

*\*Sponsored by Orchard Talent Group.*

## **Motivator, Mentor and Coach Award: Nick**

Nick is an outstanding leader who is committed to outcomes and the development of his team. He maintains regular contact with Team Leaders and ensures he is accessible and visible at the houses he leads.

## **The Self-Starter Award: Kadee-Lee**

Kadee-Lee is an incredibly skilled support coordinator who quietly achieves amazing results for participants. Her insight into the NDIS, along with engagement with stakeholders ensures she's able to answer any potential questions, offering the choices that enable participant choice and control.

## **Productivity and Efficiency Award: Aureen**

Aureen is always looking at ways to improve efficiency in weConnect. She recently investigated and implemented Quick Text for her own daily reports and has now implemented this across the Business Support Teams, saving a great deal of time for task checks organisation wide.

## **The Problem Solver Award: Daniel**

Daniel is a subject matter expert on all things NDIS and Support Coordination. His ability to connect with staff on all levels gives them the foundations they need to thrive and grow in their support coordination mission.

## **Team Player Award: Tarnee**

Tarnee was an essential contact point to the Customer Experience Team during our transition into Workforce Australia. She never fails to help with frontline questions and go over and above to help, guide and train those around them.

## **Peer-to-Peer Support Award: Anthony**

Anthony goes above and beyond to support his teammates. He actively checks in to see how everyone on the team is handling their workloads and balancing them with their personal lives.

## **The Extra Mile Award: Jayne**

Jayne epitomises the values of Ability Options every day. Faced with so many challenges, she strives to make everyone feel part of the big picture, building a fabulous rapport with people and will go above and beyond to ensure the needs of participants are met.

## **Most Valuable Team Award: Seventown Disability Employment Services**

Seventown has come so far with outstanding courage and passion for their sites. The team is a rather small one, but all work efficiently, and with care, striving every day for the best for participants and each other.

## **Champion Employer Award: Crown Sydney**

Crown's Disability Program CROWNability has continually presented a fantastic opportunity to the people we support.



## **Thank you to our 2022 sponsors**

We would like to extend our thanks to the sponsors of this year's event, particularly our Major Sponsor - Speak Your Language (SYL). SYL is an Australian owned and operated translation and interpretation company with the capacity to offer services for over 150 languages and dialects supported by NAATI certified quality interpreters and translators.

We would also like to thank sponsors Maxxia, Graphic Print Consultancy, Brennan and Bridge, Award Sponsors Orchard Talent Group and Canon, as well as Board Director Heather Scheibenstock and HESTA for their generous support of this year's event.



Recognising dedication to our sector:

# STAR 2022 employee of the year



In the lead up to the 2023 STAR Awards, we reflected on 2022, when many of our colleagues gathered at Novotel Sydney Olympic Park to celebrate each other's hard work from the year that was at the 2022 STAR Awards.

ParentsNext Manager Tracey was our deserving winner of STAR Employee of the Year, recognised by our colleagues for her extraordinary efforts throughout the year.

Tracey has had a substantial career with Ability Options. Having started with us in February of 2011, her 12 years of dedication to the organisation has taken her far.

"I definitely didn't think I'd stick around this long, my original plan was to return to the education sector, but I really enjoyed the mission and objectives of the employment division and our organisation as a whole," she said

"One of the best parts of my job, really, is hearing about the success of our participants through our services. It's wonderful knowing these programs are here to help people reach real goals in life."

"I am amazed every day at the work that my team achieve. Their hard work makes it easy for me to lead them. We've created a culture of support and recognition; I love coming to work every day to watch the program grow."

The leadership Tracey had demonstrated throughout the year was something to aspire to and the way she continues to lead is extraordinary. In her role, she's built a strong, supportive, and fun team who all strive to reach participants' goals and expectations.

"It was very overwhelming to be recognised as STAR Employee of the Year, as I know there were so many of my colleagues, who all do their absolute best for our participants, who are amazing and so deserving of the award," she said.

"To be recognised for something that I love to do is so special."

Our STAR Awards program continues to lay out a wide array of awards recognising those who consistently demonstrate our values in their work. The crowning of these is STAR Employee of the Year.

## Specialist services:

# Expanding opportunities through employment + specialist support

**By: Mark Chaffey, Chief Operating Officer**  
**– Specialist Services**

It's hard to believe it's been 12 months since I last wrote about our Employment and Specialist Services operations in our Annual Report.

We often talk about change occurring and having to adapt when it does. Lately, it feels like change is one of the few things that has remained constant. In the previous year, we have seen a number of highlights:

- Jobactive changed to Workforce Australia
- Our Disability Employment Services contract was extended for two years
- ParentsNext changed from a compulsory program to voluntary overnight.
- The quality framework and performance reporting were suspended and is being finalised soon
- Climate change has impacted all of us
- Technology has changed the way we operate our services.

Through those changes, there has been an underlying thread of excellence and care from all our staff.

In July 2022, we began the delivery of Workforce Australia services as a sub-contractor of CoAct, a

national collaborative partnership of for purpose organisations that believe there is strength in local knowledge and connections backed by a national support team. Our staff across Northern Sydney and the Central Coast were excited at the opportunities this new partnership provides.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the financial year in July 2022 we saw large parts of NSW impacted by major flooding, which caused our focus to shift away from engaging with participants in the search for employment to prioritising the health and well-being of both our staff and participants in affected areas. Many people were impacted by the floods, and some are still dealing with the aftermath more than 12 months later.

In October 2022 Ability Options was one of a number of DES providers that lost some contracts due to performance issues. There were just over 200 contracts that were reallocated and Ability Options lost four contracts across the Central Coast, Nepean and Illawarra. It was a difficult transition for both staff and participants. Karen, Shane and the whole DES team worked tirelessly to ensure that all participants were able to transfer to new providers as simply as possible.





In last year's Annual Report, I wrote about my pride in the effort shown by all Ability Options staff adapting to the changing needs of their participants on any particular day, I still hold that pride and share it at every opportunity.

While much has been made of the drop in the headline unemployment rate, there is still a significant gap between that headline rate and the rate of unemployment being experienced by our participants in the Disability Employment Services program.

Our team has been working hard to try and reduce that gap through a series of targeted activities that include:

- Engagement days brought together our participants, employers and registered training organisations to connect. They allow our participants to meet employers on an informal basis gaining an understanding of the basic job requirements. Training organisations also assist the participants to understand the commitment and time required to complete relevant training.
- Department of Employment and Workplace Relations Job Forums focused on bringing industry bodies and national employers together with providers like Ability Options, equipping our staff with greater knowledge of employer or industry requirements.
- Local Employment Facilitators brought our staff, participants, and local area employers together in a regular expo-style event, allowing participants to engage with employers and gain a much deeper understanding of both the individual companies and available roles.

In March, the government released the "Your Future Planning, Interim Report on ParentsNext" interim report, which made 30 recommendations relating to the operation of the program and, as a result, participation for people enlisted in this program became voluntary at the beginning of May.

Government and relevant departments called for submissions from interested parties around the design and delivery of a program that could replace ParentsNext when it concludes at the end of June 2024. Ability Options is currently developing a response to the call for submissions.

In late April, we integrated the operations of CHES Connect into our Disability Employment Services, increasing our footprint of employment services on the Mid-North Coast.

As I write this report, we have just received the news that there has been no increase in funding for the Co-ordination of Support (CoS) services we deliver for the fourth consecutive year.

This vital service is utilised by more than 1,300 participants and ensures they can access the full range of services available to them.

This continued lack of funding support has placed significant strain on all providers, including Ability Options. These concerns have been raised by the whole sector and our peak representative body National Disability Services (NDS) has, and continues to make, representations to both the Minister and the NDIA.

# Breaking barriers and securing employment

**In 2016, Jacqueline was struggling with anxiety and depression. Coming fresh out of school, she wanted to land ongoing employment, but had no luck. She came to Ability Options and enlisted the support of our Disability Employment Services.**

"I was young, just out of school, and looking for work, but I was also struggling with my mental health.

I heard about Ability Options (AO) and how they support people to find employment, so I joined their Disability Employment Services program.

I worked with AO throughout 2016 to look for employment, but had no luck, but at the time I didn't feel I was quite ready to find something.

I did keep trying to find and hold onto employment, but the state of my mental health was proving to be a bigger barrier than I thought.

In 2019, I re-enlisted the support of the Ability Options Disability Employment Services team more determined to find lasting employment.

In the second half of the year, through the efforts of my Ability Options consultant, I found a kind of joy in my new role working in retail.

There were hurdles, but what stopped me in my tracks was the pandemic.

COVID-19 had shut the world down to a stop. Loads of retail workers lost their jobs, and I lost mine 26 weeks after starting. Unfortunately, I had to exit Ability Options' Disability Employment Services program as a result.

I re-registered with AO in July 2020, gained employment a few more times, but lost them again due to a number of reasons including my mental health.

I went on extended medical exemption and, after some time to think, I decided to try a new strategy

to secure employment.

I went back to basics and did some online courses. These helped build my confidence and develop my ability to communicate more effectively with others.

This effort led me to my next round of employment, again in the retail sector. I set some goals and managed to overcome some challenges with my mental health and reached the 13-week mark.

Unfortunately, I had quite a big medical concern that resulted in serious surgery leaving me in hospital for a month.

I worked with my consultant on communicating with my employer to try and maintain my position in the business. While I was in hospital, I took some advice and accepted additional mental health support externally to help me with my return to work.

This was a huge success for me after years of not seeking mental health support and numerous referral opportunities to internal counselling.

After support with my mental health and some quite intense coaching, I returned to work after eight weeks off. I was in contact with my consultant on a daily basis for the first few weeks back at work so I could work through my barriers and prevent history repeating itself.

Throughout my time in Ability Options' services, I have received so much valuable and relentless support. It has helped me a lot.

After a month back at work, I have a completely new mindset. I was offered full time employment – a huge moment for me!

I am now also in a program at work to become a manager of the store and have been commended by my superiors and the company as a whole.

I reached my first 52-week outcome in June this year and am now working with my consultant to continue building my confidence and independence within the workplace."



## Beyond labels:

# Empowering minds, unlocking careers



The unemployment rate of working-age Australians living with disability has sat in double-figures for three decades – a disappointing figure that service providers like Ability Options work to change.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) says people living with disability often face more hurdles to gain meaningful and lasting employment than their peers. These include, but aren't limited to:

- Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours during recruitment, and in the workplace, from employers and others
- Low levels of awareness of rights at work
- Lack of availability of jobs
- Lack of assistance in finding, securing and maintaining employment
- Difficulty in accessing skills training and education
- Potential reduction or loss of the Disability Support Pension as a result of increased employment

As an employment services provider, Ability Options works directly with people with disability to provide support to meet their employment goals.

When Srinivas came to Ability Options in 2019, he was keen to find work in hospitality but, at only 21 and due to his intellectual disability, was very shy and tentative with people he didn't know.

But breaking barriers is something, that with the right assistance, Ability Options participants are supported to achieve.

Dual serviced by WorkReady and Disability Employment Services for more than 12 months, Srinivas said he received a lot of support learning the process of searching for and applying for jobs, commuting, interview strategies, and with building his confidence.

"I have appointments for both programs on the same day," he said, "which I think was the reason behind my success".

"I tried reverse-marketing myself to different businesses so I could build up my confidence to hunt for a job in everyday conversation with workers."

Reverse-marketing is a concept where a customer or in this case, a job seeker markets themselves to potential employers in order to obtain employment. So, after a work experience stint at a local Gloria Jeans café, Srinivas secured a job trial at Dural Country Club which led to a permanent role in the restaurant, bar and cafe.

"With regular on-the-job support, assistance with training and upskilling to new duties and interventions to overcome problems as they arose, my confidence grew and I matured in my new role," he said.

When the pandemic struck Australian shores, things changed for many people in the hospitality sector when it almost ground to a halt.

"When shifts became intermittent during the pandemic and lockdowns, I asked Ability Options to help me find more secure work and more hours per week because I wanted to save up for a car," he said.

Ability Options supported Srinivas to secure a permanent part-time role as a catering assistant in June last year, where he remains successfully employed.

"The support I have received from Ability Options to find work, and my experiences with the jobs I've had have really helped build my confidence," he said, "especially since I managed to buy my own car".

"I've gained a lot more independence and have been setting myself some new career goals to work towards."

# WorkReady superstar Thomas achieves employment goals through cooking

Since leaving school in 2018, Ability Options participant Thomas has been working hard towards achieving his employment goals. Through our WorkReady program, he has gained a range of real-world experience in the culinary industry and says he's fortunate enough to have worked in many places.

Thomas has been employed far-and-wide, from the Magpies Leagues Club in Waitara to earning his stripes at Love Fish in Barangaroo. Long before exploring his career options, Thomas always had a strong enthusiasm for cooking.

"I've always had a deep passion for food, whether at family gatherings or giving mum or my great grandmother a hand in the kitchen," Thomas said.

Cooking is not only a passion-turned-career for Thomas, but it also holds meaning close to his heart.

"For me, after losing my parents at a young age, I decided to keep on cooking. It served as a distraction, and I enjoyed making progress on my hobbies."

Through Thomas' culinary journey, we learned that food can be a shared passion. During the 2021 Sydney lockdown, Thomas started sharing his recipes amongst fellow participants through hosting fortnightly cooking workshops.

"I was blessed to see everyone asking questions. Getting involved reminded me a lot of myself as a young boy," Thomas said.

These workshops empowered fellow aspiring chefs to share their love of food, expand their growing cooking skills, and work on new ideas

collaboratively. This opportunity gave Thomas another purpose, which saw him grow in both his cooking skills and overall confidence.

After feeling like he needed something to focus on post-lockdown, Thomas started working as a kitchen hand at Love Fish, a high-end restaurant in Barangaroo. As Thomas showed promise and began to achieve more in his role, Love Fish recognised his passion and asked him to stay on as an apprentice chef.

As well as working in Barangaroo, Thomas has enjoyed giving back to the community through food. This was especially true during his time at Our Big Kitchen (OBK) in Bondi. OBK is a not-for-profit, community-run kitchen, that serves 250,000 meals each year to thousands of disadvantaged people across Australia.

In any young person's working life, it's crucial to gain a range of work experience to reach your employment goals, but more importantly, to find a purpose in your career. Working anywhere that is for-purpose, brings a feeling that is unmatched by any other.

"I aim to motivate people who have dealt with adversity to get out there and make themselves feel proud," Thomas said.

"Hopefully, my story can encourage others to pursue their own dreams in life."

Congratulations, Thomas! The WorkReady team are incredibly proud of how far you've progressed in your career. It's only onwards and upwards from here.

***This story was originally published in the Winter 2023 edition of TheVoice newsletter.***





# FY23: Investing for the future

**By: Mark Twomey,**  
**Chief Corporate Services Officer**



## Overview of the Group

This financial report covers the consolidated results of the Ability Options Group (the Group) and includes Olympus Solutions Limited (Olympus), R&R Care Limited (R&R Care), and Coffs Harbour Employment Support Services Limited (CHESS). R&R Care and CHESS joined the Ability Options community in this financial year.

### Consolidated Statement of Operations

For the year ended 30 June 2023

*in thousands*

	2023	2022
<b>Revenue and Income</b>		
Revenue from ordinary activities	111,635	111,741
Other income	984	4,635
Finance Income	1,668	66
<b>Total revenue and other income</b>	<b>114,287</b>	<b>116,442</b>
<b>Costs and Expenses</b>		
Employee benefits	(96,099)	(91,497)
Depreciation	(6,019)	(5,781)
Other expenses	(18,117)	(18,431)
Finance costs	(415)	(1,223)
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>120,650</b>	<b>\$116,932</b>
Gain on bargain purchase	3,150	-
<b>Net Operating Deficit</b>	<b>(3,213)</b>	<b>(490)</b>
Other comprehensive income	352	2,351
<b>Total comprehensive (loss) / income</b>	<b>(2,861)</b>	<b>1,861</b>



# Consolidated Statement of Financial Position

As at 30 June 2023.

<i>in thousands</i>	2023	2022
<b>Assets</b>		
Current Assets	41,147	47,892
Non-Current Assets	34,780	32,396
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>75,927</b>	<b>80,288</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>		
Current Liabilities	28,182	28,334
Non-Current Liabilities	8,763	10,111
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	<b>36,945</b>	<b>38,445</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>	<b>38,982</b>	<b>41,843</b>

## Review of operations and results

The range and scale of services delivered by the Group is broadly similar to the previous financial year, with a slight decline in overall operational revenues.

The Group reported a deficit of \$3.2 million (2022: restated deficit of \$0.5million due to adjustment in Workers Compensation premiums for prior years by EML).

The most significant changes compared to the prior year's results are the receipt of JobSaver funds (\$1.2 million) and a deed payment from the NDIS (\$2.1 million) to cover additional costs related to the management of additional expenditure due to ongoing COVID-19 requirements and infections in the previous financial year. This is partially offset by the gain on the integration of R&R Care Limited (\$2 million) and CHESS Connect (\$0.7 million).

In current year, the Group's result was impacted by the following significant events:

- Revenue in our Disability Employment Services operations declined by \$2.4 million due to the reallocation of four contracts during the year, which in turn impacted the Group's contribution margin by \$1.0 million. The reallocation of two of these contracts was done incorrectly according to a Government Review of Star Ratings, and is being followed up.
- Lower than expected caseload on the recontracting for Workforce Australia as well as the increase of suspended participants in this program saw income reduce. The suspended caseload was more than a third of the total caseload.

- Additionally, across all employment programs, revenue was impacted due to numerous suspensions of mutual obligations due to COVID-19 and floods in a large number of areas we operate in.
- In the Disability Group, expected increases in revenue and operating margins were impacted by a delay in the availability of new housing stock caused by construction industry issues.
- During the year, the Group expended \$1.9 million on priority projects designed to improve and streamline our processes and procedures as well as improving our service delivery to our participants and funders.
- The net result was also impacted by the operating losses of R&R Care and CHESS Connect recorded through the year of \$1.0 million.
- The Group restructured its leadership arrangements during FY23 and incurred expenditure on employee redundancies of \$0.5 million.

To address these issues, the Group reviewed its operations to improve performance and return the integration entities to a positive contribution by:

- Restructuring Disability and Employment leadership and support functions to allow for more streamlined operations with a focus on putting participants at the centre of these changes.
- Consolidating administrative functions and properties to reduce the overhead cost.
- Implemented a rostering project to improve working hours and costs.
- Continuing the review of operation through priority projects to improve quality and the contribution margin.



**Ability Options works towards a brighter sector**

# Human rights and the Disability Royal Commission

**By: Michelle Hodge, Chief Quality,  
Practice and Assurance Officer**

Members of Ability Options' Quality, Practice & Assurance team along with participants, families, colleagues and partners have been keeping a keen eye on the work of the Disability Royal Commission since its opening meeting in Brisbane back in September 2019.

The Ability Options team has focused on understanding emerging themes and reviewing findings to ensure we are learning and improving as an organisation to reduce any risk of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation.

Since 2019, we have attended hearings, reviewed papers and supported our employees to become involved, particularly in response to the pandemic and availability of vaccinations during the peak of the pandemic. We responded to issues papers, made statements and made our own submission to the Disability Royal Commission.

Our submission, 'Visible, Valued and Included', sought to bring attention to the following four themes:

- A strategic approach to the recognition, supply, training and funding of the Behaviour Support profession to help keep people safe.
- Improved training for healthcare professionals to ensure equal opportunity for improved health outcomes for people with disabilities.
- A review of current Accommodation Services models, funding and eligibility requirements to ensure all people living with disability are afforded the right to choose where they live and who with.
- A specific focus on the protection of people with a disability who utilise unregulated, unregistered or informal support who disclose allegations of abuse, neglect or exploitation.



We have also looked internally at policy, process and practice and undertaken comprehensive self-reflection activities, overseen by our Board's Quality & Outcomes Committee, to further improve our service delivery.

We have introduced an Ability Options Practice Framework to address a number of emerging themes, which includes five domains:

- Engagement
- Wellbeing
- Trauma informed
- Culturally responsive
- Human centric

To execute improvements in each of these areas, we have partnered with La Trobe University to implement Active Support and Practice Leadership. We continue to work with the Council for Intellectual Disability to embed supported decision making, and key personnel have completed training with the Blue Knot Foundation to further advance their understanding of Trauma Informed Care.

We continue to progress the work of our participant-led Human Rights Committee to ensure we have a co-design methodology to participant-facing policy and process review, and continue to establish accessible documentation through the translation of key documents into easy read format.

Human Rights awareness and education features heavily in our induction practices and ongoing training. The Ability Options Practice Framework is underpinned by a Human Rights based approach and a mapping exercise is currently underway to align quality of life indicators to our service delivery.

From a governance perspective, we are in the process of conducting a full and comprehensive review of our policies and processes to ensure they are underpinned by the Ability Options

Practice Framework with a particular focus on how we better engage participants and families in processes such as Investigations and Complaints management. We are considering how to include redress and remedial action into our processes as a response to many of the experiences of people living with disability shared at the Disability Royal Commission. We have improved accountability and address instances where a person's rights have not been protected or respected.

Our strategic objective to amplify the voice of our participants ensures we are providing them with the tools and skills necessary to self-advocate, engage independent advocates, or advocate on behalf of participants where appropriate to do so.

Our Board of Directors receives regular updates on our continuous improvement activities relating to the work of the Disability Royal Commission through the Quality & Outcomes Committee. A detailed action plan is presented, and we are well on track to achieving all the suggested improvements thus far. Directors often visit our services, talk to participants, employees and have attended family forums to understand the concerns in regional areas.

While much work has been completed to date, we anticipate that further action will need to be taken. The Commission's final report was released at the end of September with more than 200 recommendations to legislation, policies, processes, practices, and more that all aim to bring Australia forward to become more inclusive for people living with disability.

At the time of writing, we are in the process of understanding the recommendations, what they mean, what their impacts are on our sector, how we can move forward and how the government is to address them. While change is undoubtedly going to happen to achieve this goal, it will take time and we will be there to support our people every step of the way.

**From pitch to support:**

# **A budding career powered by passion and a drive for inclusion**

Teamwork, as it happens, really does make the dream work.

For a budding young footballer from Aotearoa (New Zealand), who ended up pursuing a dream career in Disability Support, team sports and team-based work really make the day-to-day something worthwhile.

Although Ability Options' Michelle Hodge was a footballer, the decision to play football – soccer, if you're that way inclined – over the national sport of New Zealand (rugby league) was influenced by a drive to promote inclusivity, equality and diversity.

"When I was young, my uncle was a mad Liverpool Football Club fan and used to bring me flags and scarves," she said.

"So, when I was told girls couldn't play rugby league after they turned 10, I thought I needed to change my sport. Football seemed to be the right game, even if it was a round ball, which most Kiwis aren't familiar with."

Taking that in her stride, she continued playing for local club teams to help drive up a few values close to her heart: inclusion, diversity and equality.

"I started playing when I was eight years old in one of the very few all-girl football teams in Auckland – Kelston AFC," she said.

"Unfortunately, in order to play in a female league, we had to play girls much older than I was at the time, and at just eight, I was playing in the under 14 (U14) division."

As a 16-year-old, Michelle was selected to trial for an Auckland U18 invitational team travelling to Sweden and Denmark to play in the Gothia Cup and Dana Cup.

She was then picked for U17, U18 and U19 Auckland teams for many years, played for New Zealand Secondary Schools at the Kanga Cup in Canberra in 1992, and then she made her way to donning the Silver Fern, playing for the national New Zealand U20 women's football team, and then the women's national team in 1998.

"I made my SWANZ (Football Ferns used to be SWANZ) debut against Germany on 26 May, 1998 becoming Fern #97," she said.

"I played two international games versus Germany in Germany and one international game against Japan at Sydney Football Stadium.

"I played in World Cup Qualifying tournaments as reserve goalkeeper but retired from football in 2000 and moved to Australia to pursue another career not long after."





You may be wondering where the connection between football and the disability sector comes from.

Well, much like in the disability sector, Michelle said diversity, inclusion and equality are critical in sporting environments and team sports.

"When I was at school, and while I was making a name for myself on the New Zealand football circuit, my mum, who already worked in the disability sector, would often rope me into being the DJ at the Friday night discos that her organisation hosted," she said.

"I was lucky enough to travel the world playing soccer, even before making the national team, to inspire a new generation of female soccer players," she continued, "travelling at such a young age, and experiencing so many different cultures, opened my eyes to the challenges minority groups face".

"This inspired me to be an advocate for human rights and transitioned into my passion for rights of people with disability."

So, to add another goal to the scoreboard for Michelle, she retired from football in 2000 and moved to Australia not long after.

"I am incredibly passionate about people having every opportunity to live their life the way they choose, to be connected to their chosen community, and to have an opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways," she said.

Having worked her way from being a Support Worker, nowadays, you'll find Michelle running the Quality, Practice & Assurance team at Ability Options. She's responsible for ensuring the services our participants receive are up to, and

above, the high standards set out by industry bodies, and for ourselves, and our staff are fully trained and supported to deliver the best support possible.

"Ability Options has always been focused on inclusion; this is a key value of mine that stems back to my soccer days.

"To have a dream and be able to achieve it is such a valuable experience on a person's journey. It is so important to know that anything is possible.

"To support people with disability to follow their goals, to achieve, to have meaningful engagement and to be truly included is the reason I come to work every day."

But reflecting back on her "stint", as she puts it, in football, Michelle said she never knew just how much she would come to enjoy what she does.

"When I made the New Zealand U20 team, I needed a job that would be flexible with leave and, at that time in NZ, disability support work was one of the few that allowed casual work. It allowed me to pursue my passion for sport to a point where I was playing internationally," she said.

"I had no idea at the time that working in the disability sector would become my lifelong career and a job that I love so much."



# Our Board

Our Board of Directors remain committed to empowering and supporting Ability Options and its staff to deliver high quality services and outcomes to participants in a safe, responsible, and effective way.

This year, in addition to our seven members, we welcomed Joanna Shulman, who joined the Board as a Director and is now a member of the Quality & Outcomes Committee.



## Dr Robert Lang Ph.D., B.E.(Hons), B.Sc., FAICD, FIE (Aust)

- Chair, Board of Directors
- Chair, Remuneration and Nomination Committee

During a 35-year career in state and local government, Dr Lang has gained experience in change management, community engagement, strategic urban planning, urban development, transport infrastructure, place management, arts, tourism, and energy. Dr Lang has been the CEO of Parramatta City Council, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority and Pacific Power and served on 21 Boards for not-for-profit organisations, private companies, and government statutory authorities. He has a longstanding interest in liveable cities, affordable housing, social inclusion, and the arts. He is also a Fellow of the Australia Institute of Company Directors and a Fellow of the Institute of Engineers Australia.



## Heather Scheibenstock GAICD FGIA

- Deputy Chair, Board of Directors
- Remuneration and Nomination Committee,
- Chair, Quality and Outcomes Committee

Heather spent 20 years as a Senior Executive in the hospitality industry. She is a firm believer in learning and development and has continued her post-graduate studies in business, leadership, and corporate governance. With experience as a non-executive director across a range of industries, Heather has a wealth of knowledge in leadership, strategy implementation and development, community, and stakeholder engagement.



## Patricia Biszewski M.Sc, GAICD

- Director
- Audit, Risk and Finance Committee
- Remuneration and Nomination Committee

Patricia has had an extensive executive career in the maritime and logistics industry, driving and enabling business growth and organisational transformation through strategy, finance, information technology and human resources practices. She has worked as a non-executive director, developing programs that empower socially marginalised women, children and communities to become sustainably independent. Patricia has lived experience of disability in close family.



## Claire Cavanaugh BCOMM

- Director
- Audit, Risk and Finance Committee

Claire has a broad range of business experience, through senior finance roles at Oracle Australia and Readers Digest, and more recently in running her family's medical practice. She also has lived experience and a keen interest in the disability sector; as the mother of 22-year-old Eddie, who has epilepsy and severe intellectual disability. Claire cares for Eddie, manages his NDIS plan and advocates for his inclusion and proper care in his chosen activities.



## Michael Maxwell MSocSci, GDURP, GradDipAdEd (VET), GAICD, MPIA

- Director
- Quality and Outcomes Committee

Michael has combined a career in the public and community services sectors with post-graduate qualifications in adult education, urban planning and social science. He uses his experience to create social and financial inclusion, enhance liveability and wellbeing, and support individuals and communities facing disadvantage to live to their full potential in safe, secure and empowering environments. Michael is currently a social planner, sessional academic and Fellow of the School for Social Entrepreneurs. He serves on national and international boards of organisations committed to creating liveable communities. Michael has lived experience as the father of Joshua, who has a disability.



## Owen Gilbert MAICD, CA

- Director
- Chair, Audit, Risk and Finance Committee

Owen has extensive experience driving effectiveness and efficiency in businesses, in Australia and around the world. In addition to holding functional roles including CFO, CEO, COO and director, Owen's experience includes business transformation, stakeholder management, strategy, business case development and implementation, organisational review and change, investment management, business start-ups, and new system implementation, in a range of industries. As a non-executive, executive director, and audit committee member of listed, private, and joint venture companies, in Australia and overseas.



## Matthew Levy GAICD

- Director
- Quality and Outcomes Committee

Matthew is an inspirational leader and someone who is passionate about inclusion for people with disability. Matt's career successes are many and varied; including working as a change analyst at Westpac, inspirational speaker, and author. He has competed at five consecutive Paralympic Games, winning three gold, one silver and five bronze medals. He has competed in five World Championships, won 22 international medals, held four World Records and have been awarded the Order of Australia Medal (OAM). He is an Ambassador for Australia Day, Westpac International Disability Day, Life's Little Treasures, Athlete Leader Swimming Australia, Telstra Paralympic Education Program and Vision Australia Speaking Program.



## Joanna Shulman

- Director
- Quality and Outcomes Committee

Joanna Shulman is a Human Rights Lawyer and Social Impact Specialist. She has significant experience in developing partnerships and leading systems change work in relation to disability rights, gender equality, First Nations Justice, migrant workers, homelessness, LGBTQIA+ rights, and domestic violence. She was the CEO of Redfern Legal Centre from 2010-2022 and the Principal Solicitor/Director of the Australian Centre for Disability Law from 2007-2010. She is currently consulting in social impact at Telstra and teaching human rights law at UNSW.



# Our Executive



**Julia Squire**

**Chief Executive Officer**



**Michelle Hodge**

**Chief Quality, Practice and Assurance Officer**

- Participant Engagement and Outcomes
- Disability Royal Commission
- Practice Support
- Audit
- Compliance



**Mark Chaffey**

**Chief Operating Officer – Specialist Services**

- Employment programs (WorkReady, Disability Employment Services, ParentsNext, Workforce Australia)
- Specialist Services (Support Coordination, Therapy, Counselling, Wellbeing, Low Intensity Mental Health)



**Ian Fuller**

**Chief Human Resources Officer**

- Human Resources
- Payroll
- Employee Experience



**Luke Hughes**

**Chief Operating Officer – Disability Services**

- Disability Services (Accommodation, Support, Community Involvement)
  - Sydney
  - Central Coast
  - Hunter
  - Mid-North Coast



**Greg Bergan**

**Chief Growth Officer**

- Business Growth
- Strategy



**Mark Twomey**

**Chief Corporate Services Officer**

- Finance
- ICT
- Property and Assets
- Marketing and Communications
- Business Analytics
- Risk



**See you next year!**

If you would like to share your experiences through our services,  
please get in touch with [communications@abilityoptions.org.au](mailto:communications@abilityoptions.org.au)



**1300 422 454**

**[abilityoptions.org.au](http://abilityoptions.org.au)**