



Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme on the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021–2025

August 2021



Introduction

Around Australia, over 2,000 people with a disability and children and young people living in out of home care receive services and supports from Lifestyle Solutions. We provide support and care across the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Participant cohort, including high supports, forensic, nursing and behaviour support models.

We operate in every Australian State and the major mainland territories: in capital cities; major regional centres such as Newcastle and Alice Springs, regional areas such as the Pilbara, and remote locations that are as diverse as King Island and rural properties in western NSW.

We recruit approximately 1,000 staff per annum to enable the staffing levels we need.

This submission on the *NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021–2025* draws especially on initiatives we have taken in recent years to:

- establish a structure with clear accountability for achieving outcomes for the people we support, safeguarding, work health and safety, and evidence-based decision-making
- increase our investment in training of frontline staff
- increase collaboration with other providers

To inform the Joint Standing Committee's consideration of the *NDIS National Workforce Plan*, we have focused on dimensions of the Plan that are key from our strategic perspective.

1. Partnerships are key

The Minister for the NDIS, Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC, highlighted the key importance of partnerships in her opening message in the Plan. Lifestyle Solutions particularly encourages the Government to work in partnership with providers to:

- provide sector-wide approaches for training pathways, such as internships in allied health (related to Initiative 9 of the Plan)
- improve regulatory settings that are adding administrative cost without benefiting quality and safeguarding of Participants and workers
- improve cost structures in rural and regional areas where workforce attraction and retention are particularly challenging

As a provider we are actively partnering with organisations that can help us to attract and build our workforce and are exploring many new options with other partners. For example:

- Regarding Initiative 5 of the Plan (to “Better connect NDIS and care and support providers to employment and training providers and workers”), we maintain connections with employment and training providers, including First Nations organisations. A sector-wide approach with government support and enablement would increase scale and efficiencies for this type of connections.
- Similarly, regarding Initiative 6 of the Plan (to “Develop micro-credentials and update nationally recognised training to improve the quality of supports and enhance career pathways”), a more cohesive approach to credentials, training and skills development will improve cost efficiencies and worker access. It offers strong potential in regional and remote areas especially, where workers and potential workers can frequently relocate, for example when other family members change jobs.
- We collaborate with academic researchers as part of being an evidence-based and research-informed provider. We would be interested to work with government agencies and universities on research activities and to improve entry pathways and career progress.
- We are working with other providers on innovations in workforce recruitment and provision, and are keen to expand on these.

2. The NDIS workforce sustains local communities

Lifestyle Solutions greatly appreciates the point made in the Plan that a growing NDIS workforce will “make a much needed contribution to jobs creation across the economy” (page 13). We see first-hand how the income earned by the NDIS workforce multiplies its value through communities. This is especially evident in the economies of rural and regional areas, where each worker is supporting other local businesses through their purchases of goods and services.

This is part of the social impact that the NDIS is creating, through the activities of providers and their workforce.

3. Diversity expands the workforce and is important to Participants

The Plan rightly gives an emphasis to Participants having access to a workforce that reflects their diversity (pages 11, 20 and 24). We support the Plan’s focus on attracting culturally and linguistically diverse workers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to the sector.

NDIS participants are more diverse than the current NDIS workforce. There is potential for the workforce to engage more First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse, and LGBTQI+ people. Lifestyle Solutions looks at this through the lens of our Purpose as an organisation, which is: “To enable the people we support and their communities to achieve what’s important to them”. For many Participants, it is important for people providing them with support to respect and align with their diversity.

A greater representation of First Nations people in the workforce would provide Participants with access to services that are on Country, tailored to community needs, culturally relevant and appropriate, and which provide cultural safety and cultural security.

It would also increase the size of the workforce in rural and regional communities. Working in the disability sector would provide sustainable employment in communities and a flow-on to the local community from the workers spending the income they have earned from providing NDIS services.

4. Career pathways need more structure

Lifestyle Solutions thoroughly agrees that the perception of the sector and its entry pathways should be enhanced. The potential pipeline of people into the NDIS workforce is large and there are many entry pathways.

- Many people are attracted to this sector by experiences in their lives, such as knowing someone with disability or themselves having a disability.
- People who work in sectors such as hospitality, travel and airlines have the understanding of customer service, quality and risk reduction that are essential in disability services. Many are also already trained in first aid, dealing with people feeling stressed or anxious, and assisting with the mobility of people with disability. Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australian economic activity, Lifestyle Solutions contacted a number of large hospitality, travel and airline companies to offer to partner with them to take on their workers who were being stood down or made redundant. This initiative brought a range of new recruits.

However, there are challenges in taking advantage of this broad pipeline. For example, our evidence indicates that people are currently attracted to be part of the NDIS workforce by the ability to make a difference for Participants but that the future workforce from other sectors may have different motivations.

The NDIS workforce needs flexibility, reliable income, adequate hours of work, meaningful work, mutual support and respect, an appropriate amount of autonomy, employment security and career progress. That will enable this sector to compete with the many other sectors that can employ people with similar capabilities – such as retail work and the mining industry in regional and remote areas – that offer greater reliability, pay, predictability of work and continuity in roles and careers. Lifestyle Solutions has been addressing these barriers through an innovative, flat, team-based structure and innovative employment

relations and human resources practices. Lifestyle Solutions, our staff and the Australian Services Union have implemented these practices under the 'new approaches division' of the Fair Work Commission. These practices include rewarding staff who improve their qualifications and skills.

The lack of secure employment is a key challenge in attracting and retaining disability support workers, as the Plan highlights in its consideration of casualisation (page 15). Lifestyle Solutions is encouraging a higher proportion of permanent staff because permanent staff undergo more training in our processes, procedures and systems, better understand our systems and are more committed to our values.

Formal and informal training within organisations is fundamental to career pathways and delivering NDIS outcomes. There is a need for investment in structured training. For example, every new starter at Lifestyle Solutions receives a minimum of two days formal training based on core knowledge. We also train agency staff in core training requirements. However, NDIS pricing and funding factors affect the cost of training as well as staff being able to spend time in training. The NDIS does not cover funding for training. Lifestyle Solutions has been increasing our investment in training, within our current funding envelope and using our own reserves. This reduces the funds we could apply to other aspects of our organisation. We believe that the Commonwealth Government should give preferences and support to organisations that are committed to developing workers and investing in practice and research, in contrast to labour hire firms.

5. Innovation requires investment

The Plan highlights a number of areas where innovation will expand and strengthen the NDIS workforce. In this submission to the Committee, we focus on three of these:

- First, cultural and service model transformation requires a long-term commitment. We embarked on a transformation of our culture and service model four years ago. It has been challenging at times and requires constant reinforcement, but we are seeing the rewards in the quality of our services, the skills and capability of our workforce, the scale of our service provision and outcomes for people we support.
- Second, investment in technology is needed to delivery high quality services, including for workforce training and teamwork. We have made extensive investments in technology over the past four years and we plan further significant investments in it. We can see that the greater use of telehealth, as part of Initiative 15, would address workforce shortages in rural and regional areas, especially shortages of specific skill sets such as in allied health. Technology-supported remote working has gained increasing attention not only to overcome the challenges faced in those areas but also because the COVID-19 pandemic has at times prevented staff from travelling around a state/territory and across state/territory borders.
- Third, there are exciting opportunities to adopt innovative service models that support appropriately skilled workers to work more seamlessly across multiple employers, as well as across sectors (as highlighted on page 13 of the Plan). We have been exploring these with other providers to meet the dynamic needs of the sector and to increase supply in specific areas.

Conclusion

Lifestyle Solutions would be pleased to provide the Joint Standing Committee with more information about any of the points it has made in this submission and about its efforts to strengthen the nation's workforce that provides support to people with disability.