Disability organisations in the New South Wales community service sector

Natasha Cortis and Megan Blaxland

This research summary provides information about community sector organisations that provide disability services, their experiences of operating in New South Wales, and their relationships with government. Data is drawn from a survey of not-for-profit community service organisations in NSW commissioned by the Council of Social Service of New South Wales (NCOSS) and conducted in February 2014. The survey was completed by leaders of 576 organisations and had a 38% response rate.

Of the 576 responding organisations, 208 (36%) reported that they delivered disability services. More than half of these organisations (119) were primarily focussed on delivering disability services. Given the large number of disability organisations that responded, the survey provides an opportunity to profile disability organisations in the NSW community sector, and to examine their experiences of operating in NSW, their relationships with government, and their priorities for the future. This can help us understand some distinctive features of disability services, and can provide a basis for tracking their experiences of the funding environment and working with government in the transition to a consumer-centred operating environment.

Disability organisations in NSW

Organisations that provide disability services tend to be larger than other community organisations, in terms of both annual revenue, and staff numbers. Figure 1 (see page 2) shows how organisations providing disability services were concentrated in the higher revenue categories. Indeed, 29% of disability services had revenues of more than 5 million, compared with 13% of other community organisations.

Because so many are larger organisations, a higher proportion of disability organisations are constituted as companies limited by guarantee (29%) compared with other organisations (20%), and a lower proportion of disability organisations are incorporated associations (65% compared with 72% of others). In addition, a higher proportion of disability organisations than other community organisations have Deductible Gift Recipient status (82% compared with 73%). This status is important as it enables donors to claim tax deductions for gifts to these organisations, which helps to facilitate the organisation's access to private revenue streams.
Service user involvement

Service user participation is a defining feature of organisations that provide disability services. As shown in Figure 2, disability service providers were more likely to involve service users than other community service organisations.

- More than seven in ten organisations reported that they involved service users through consultation meetings, focus groups or surveys, and high proportions of organisations reported that service users were involved in their management committee or advisory board (64%) (see Figure 2).
- Relatively high proportions also reported that service users were involved in taskforces or planning or steering committees (42%) or in fundraising (37%).

Perceptions of funding in NSW

Survey findings also offer insight into how leaders in disability organisations perceive the funding environment in NSW.

- Despite many reforms in disability policy and funding, over a third of disability organisations (36%) reported never having opportunities to influence funding reform. Only 8% reported having opportunities to influence funding reform ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’.
- Around a fifth felt funding models encouraged flexible service delivery either ‘all’ or ‘most of the time’ (21%). However, 17% felt this was the case ‘none of the time’.
- Less than a fifth (17%) felt funding models were sustainable ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’. Roughly the same number (15%) felt funding was sustainable ‘none of the time’.
Relationships with government

On most domains, disability organisations reported that their relationships with government had tended to strengthen, or remain unchanged, in the last five years:

- More than half reported relationships with government had strengthened with respect to funding for programs or services (59%). However, almost a quarter (23%) of organisations had the contrary experience, reporting that funding relationships had weakened.

- Around half of disability organisations (51%) reported relationships around reporting and compliance had become stronger over the last five years.

- Many reported that communication with government had strengthened (42%). However, one in five (21%) felt communication had weakened.

Further research could help unpack disability organisations’ experiences of the operating environment, the factors contributing to their mixed experiences of working with government, and ways to improve relationships.

Adjusting to service delivery reforms

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their priorities for the next five years. More than three-quarters of disability organisations (76%) reported that adjusting to service delivery reforms was a priority, reflecting the impact of consumer-centred approaches and individualised funding on these organisations. In contrast, 43% of organisations which did not provide disability services reported that adjusting to service delivery reforms was a priority.

Disability organisations were also more likely than others to report that developing their workforce was a priority. Indeed, workforce development was a priority for 43% of disability organisations compared with 31% of others. This reflects the need for skill development and appropriate recruitment and retention strategies in the transition to a consumer-centred environment.
Summary

This summary paper has provided some brief information about the characteristics, experiences and perceptions of disability organisations operating in NSW. The survey findings confirm that service user participation is a defining feature of community organisations that provide services to people with disabilities. While relationships with government have reportedly strengthened in recent years, there is considerable scope to improve disability organisation’s experiences of the funding environment, to ensure they have real opportunities to determine the direction of funding reform.