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Things worth sharing in 2020

A major theme of the work done by the **Public Service Research Group** at UNSW Canberra is to not only undertake research but to use it to inform both policy making and implementation. As a consequence, we often publish in non-academic forums, including *The Mandarin*, *The Conversation* and blog-site *The Power to Persuade*. This short booklet presents some of the key contributions we have made this year to highlight the range and scope of the things we do.





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Markets in social care: outsourcing administrative burden to citizens and the third sector

By Ellie Malbon, Gemma Carey, **Helen Dickinson**, Megan Weier and Gordon Duff. Published online November 3, 2020 by **The Power To Persuade**.

*We know that the NDIS is a lot of administrative work for scheme participants, but the administrative burden isn't just borne by people with disability. Today's post comes from **Ellie Malbon** (Centre for Social Impact), **Gemma Carey** (CSI), **Helen Dickinson** (Public Service Research Group), **Megan Weier** (CSI), and **Gordon Duff** (National Disability Services), who have done some research on the administrative burden of the NDIS for service providers.*

Administrative burden is the costs incurred from carrying out social service administration – the bureaucratic processes involved in applying for and maintaining access to social services. This includes things like the paperwork involved in proving evidence of citizenship or employment, or the complex process of qualifying for social housing. As the conversation about administrative burden progresses, we understand more and more that the marketisation of social care outsources administrative burden to citizens (Herd & Moynihan, 2019), but something less often highlighted is that marketisation can also outsource administrative burden to the third sector and industry. Administrative burdens have very real consequences, shaping the effectiveness and outcomes of public programs (Herd & Moynihan, 2019).

We looked at the [way the marketisation of the disability sector through the National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\) was impacting administrative burden in the sector](#). The disability sector is made of up not-for-profit providers as well as for-profit providers, and we saw increased administrative load across both types of providers. Our work shows that administrative burden was one of the most commented on challenge for NDIS disability service providers.

Many providers commented on the fact that the NDIS is a complex system that can be difficult to navigate for providers. We would expect that a new system of this size and scope would be complex in nature. In the shift from block contracting to individually purchased plans there are understandably some additional transactional costs. However, providers expressed concern at just how much additional administrative work is being generated:

Most of our work involves cumbersome administration. In fact admin work accounts for 80% of hours. (P349)

Another provider explained why this situation has arisen:

Administrative burden now enormous—transactional nature of business, requirements to have service agreements with every customer, data capture huge to provide evidence, back office increase dramatically to be able to get paid and manage transactional nature of scheme, quality and safeguarding has added another layer of burden and additional cost (no funding for external audit process). (P203)

As this quote demonstrates, it's not just transactions that cause the extra administrative burden, but also the work of providing feedback to the NDIA and a lack of coordination between government agencies. Also, the NDIS has had a challenge to support NDIS participants to keep up with the administrative burden of the program, and because of their close relationships with people with disability, many service providers often step in to meet this challenge, distributing the burdens to the provider rather than the government:

There is too much reliance on disability organisations to do the work of the NDIA in terms of upskilling the participants, the public and their families. There is too much reliance on the goodwill of disability organisations to support participants [administratively] when things go wrong with the planning process. (P349)

The implications of increased administrative burden mean that many service providers have exited the NDIS, and more are considering exiting:

Many of my colleagues have dropped out of providing services to NDIS customers because the system is administration heavy and services more complex . . . Many of us will probably drop out once our registration is up because the process of maintaining registration seems expensive and administratively heavy . . . When things are working well the system is good—payment is easy and quick. But when things go wrong it is a large, faceless organisation that is difficult to talk to (but is getting a bit better). (P230)

Herd and Moynihan's (2019) work suggests that redistribution of administrative burden is "policy making by other means" (p. 2). What this means is that this shift in administrative burden is not an accidental result of systems of government, but rather this work is purposely redistributed in ways that meet political and ideological goals.

Although Herd and Moynihan (2019) are primarily concerned with redistribution of administrative burden to individual citizens, and understandably so, this insight also affects the third sector and for-profit providers. It's clear from our research on the NDIS that these new administrative burdens, and also the time providers spend helping their clients to navigate their NDIS-related administrative burdens, have put unprecedented pressure on some service providers.

We know that quality and safeguarding practices are essential for safety and respect in the NDIS, but in order to address these issues, additional administration around payments, quoting and adjustment to bureaucratic processes should be reduced for providers and NDIS participants alike.

References

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Will the work-from-home genie go back into the bottle?

By **Sue Williamson** and Linda Colley (Opinion piece).
Published online October 9, 2020 by **The Canberra Times**

Public servants working from home is once again in the news. This time, at the end of September, the Australian Public Service Commission [directed agencies](#) to start bringing employees back to their usual place of work.

The Prime Minister has urged public servants to return to work in city centres to help businesses. It is understandable that the Australian government wants people to eat at cafes in their lunch hour to boost the economy. The ACT Property Council and the Canberra Business Council have also recently [called for employees to return to work](#), as local city-based businesses are doing it tough.

The Australian government is not alone in calling for public sector agencies to recall workers into their regular workplaces. The South Australian government has also done so, as has the Queensland government. The advice from the SA and Australian governments is quite directive that employees are expected to return to their usual workplaces.

The Queensland government is, however, encouraging agencies to consider how remote working arrangements can be incorporated into ongoing and future working arrangements. This approach is sound, recognising that working away from the standard workplace can be beneficial for individuals and agencies.

Such an approach is also supported by our research. In June this year we [surveyed over 6000 APS employees](#) to find out more about how they worked from home during the pandemic. One of our most important findings is that two-thirds of employees want to continue to work from home for some days of the week. This aligns with two-thirds of managers indicating that they support continued working from home.

We found that the positives of working from home far outweighed the negatives. Over 90 per cent of managers told us their teams were just as productive, if not more productive, working from home than pre-COVID. Employees gained time from not commuting, and spent more time with their families.

Trying to go back to a traditional 9 to 5 day in the office may be like trying to put the genie back in the bottle.

Almost a quarter of respondents were people with disabilities, who emphasised that working from home enabled them to work more, and better manage their health. [Research shows](#) that employed people with disabilities are more likely to work from home, and many more could do so if given the opportunity. With an ageing population, it becomes even more imperative that working from home continues to be seen as a normal way of working.

Women respondents told us that they had increased their working hours while working from home. They were able to work more as they could better combine work, domestic and caring responsibilities. This is significant, and can potentially progress gender equality by reducing the gender pay gap, increasing women's superannuation balances, and helping them access development opportunities which are usually more available to full-time employees. The benefits of working from home may therefore extend well beyond the workplace, so to speak.

However, we did uncover some downsides. Almost a quarter of respondents said they were less able to contact or collaborate with colleagues as needed, and over a fifth stated that they were less able to maintain professional networks and access developmental opportunities. Men, in particular, had less access to professional development and networking opportunities. Over a quarter of respondents worked additional hours, giving rise to workplace health and safety concerns.

Employee preferences together with managerial support for working from home indicate that profound changes are occurring. We are in a transitional period where old ways of working are coming up against ways of working adopted during the pandemic lockdown. Some public sectors are recognising this transitional stage, and are continuing their own experiments with flexible working. The Queensland and Victorian governments are reportedly trialling remote working using decentralised hubs. These trials are to be welcomed as the public sector finds its "COVID-normal".

Working from home is not only changing how and where we work, but also bringing changes to the concept and usage of flexible working arrangements. Banking of hours, time off in lieu of overtime, changing employment from full-time to part-time and flexible start and finish times are all widely available. Changing the location of work seems to have been less accepted by organisations.

Similarly, [the majority of requests](#) granted by employers under the provisions of the *Fair Work Act 2009* related to working hours. A change to start and finish times was the most common request granted. Flexible working hours are obviously important to employees.

In 2019 [around 15 per cent](#) of APS-level employees worked from home for some part of the working week. Interestingly the usage was over twice as high amongst executive levels and senior managers. By August 2020, this figure had risen to around 64 per cent. While the pandemic has forced employees to work from home, the majority of our respondents would like to continue working from home for some part of the week.

As we move into "COVID-normal", we'd do well to recognise this transitional period. Working practices, office spaces, commuting and the way we communicate are all changing, and will continue to do so. Trying to go back to a traditional 9 to 5 day in the office may be like trying to put the genie back in the bottle.

Dr Sue Williamson and Associate Professor Linda Colley are authors of the recently released report [Working During the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution](#). The authors acknowledge the support of the CPSU, which partnered on this project.

Flexible working and the pandemic: more than just working from home

By Linda Colley and Sue Williamson.
Published online September 30, 2020 by The Mandarin

After six months of working from home, APS employees are now being urged to go back to the office. On 29 September, the Australian Public Service Commission [advised](#) agencies to bring employees back into their usual workplaces, in accordance with the appropriate workplace health and safety policies.

This does not come as a surprise. Last month we [published an analysis](#) of all Australian governments' responses to the pandemic and the timing of when they advised employees to work from home to avoid spreading the contagion. We found that the Australian government was one of the last jurisdictions to send people home. It was also one of the first to indicate that agencies should prepare for employees to return, [issuing advice](#) to this effect as far back as May 2020.

We predicted that working from home was unlikely to become the "new normal" in the public sector. Our reasoning was twofold. Firstly, [our 2018](#) research identified some resistance to allowing people to work from home, despite having the right policies in place.

Secondly, changes external to the public sector, such as the forced working from home during a pandemic, were less likely to stick than internal changes that the bureaucracy chooses.

Our most recent research, in a [report released today](#), indicates strong support from managers and employees for continuing to work from home. Many would like working from home for some of the week to become the norm.

There is a strong case for letting employees to continue to work from home. We surveyed over 6,000 APS employees, and managers told us that their teams were just as productive or even more productive when working from home.

Employees had extra time from not commuting, which meant they could spend more time on work and more time with their families. One in six employees were also more engaged with their work. This was a win for employees and employers.

Our survey results show that some women respondents favoured working from home as it enabled them to increase their working hours. They were better able to combine work and caring responsibilities. They also stated that they were able to get more done while working at home.

As one employee told us: "(I was) able to balance caring responsibilities with my husband while both at home. I was able to move to full-time hours, rather than (stay) part-time".

"If employees are enabled to work from home, or to continue working from home, this may lessen the need for women to work part-time."

If employees are enabled to work from home, or to continue working from home, this may lessen the need for women to work part-time. This has a series of positive flow-on effects, including reducing the gender pay gap, higher levels of superannuation accumulation and enabling women to access benefits sometimes only available to full-time employees, such as professional development opportunities.

Working from home then, may have far-reaching impacts beyond increasing flexibility, productivity and enabling a better work and family balance, to generate wider economic benefits.

Public servants have shown they're flexible and adaptable and [work hard when doing their job at home](#). We know that managers support working flexibly. As we all move into COVID-normal, continuing the flexibility of working from home for part of the week may yield ongoing benefits to employees, their families, agencies and the economy.

Associate Professor Linda Colley, CQUniversity and Dr Sue Williamson, UNSW Canberra discuss these and other findings in [Working during the Pandemic: From resistance to revolution?](#) The authors would like to thank the Community and Public Sector Union for partnering on this project.



Why ignoring biodiversity loss is an increasingly risky business

By **Megan Evans** (Opinion piece).
Published online September 24, 2020 by **The Canberra Times**

Last September, fires had already begun burning in Queensland and New South Wales.

The human, ecological, and economic impacts of Australia's Black Summer were unprecedented, and will continue to unfold in years to come.

Scientists have long warned that climate change compounds the frequency and severity of hazards like fire, flood and drought, as well as the spread of infectious diseases.

The erosion of natural supporting systems, like healthy forests and soils, exacerbates these risks.

Last week, the UN reported that for the second consecutive decade, parties to the international Convention on Biological Diversity - including Australia - had failed to meet any targets set to prevent further species extinctions, protect and restore ecosystems, promote sustainable agriculture and forestry, or reduce air and water pollution.

Although inextricably linked with climate change, biodiversity loss has received comparatively less attention from the business and finance sectors.

Yet a growing recognition of the financial risks stemming from the erosion of biodiversity is driving an explosion of interest in products and investments that directly benefit nature.

In July, an international partnership of financial institutions and environmental NGOs established the Task Force on Nature-related Financial Disclosure to develop a new corporate reporting framework for biodiversity loss.

Australian banks published the first national guidelines for climate risk disclosures last week. Its therefore reasonable to anticipate that mandatory natural capital risk reporting is on the horizon.

The federal government's plan to direct \$18 billion over 10 years to "priority low emission technologies" has already been criticised by climate experts.

But it also misses a huge opportunity to facilitate investment in natural technologies with biodiversity co-benefits, like plankton-based feed to reduce methane emissions from cattle, or reintroduction of tidal flows in marginal cane lands to enable restoration of carbon-rich mangrove forests.

Government leadership, including supportive policies and investment, is crucial to unlock the opportunities associated with halting biodiversity loss.

Modelling by Ernst & Young suggests a conservation and land management stimulus could create jobs and facilitate economic recovery, particularly in regional areas hardest hit by the effects of COVID-19, bushfires and drought.

We truly live in unprecedented times when finance, agricultural and environmental groups join forces to help solve these crises.

Governments must start actively working with, not against, this remarkable transformation.

Megan Evans is a lecturer and research fellow at the University of NSW, Canberra.

With management resistance overcome, working from home may be here to stay

By Linda Colley and **Sue Williamson**.
Published online August 24, 2020 by **The Conversation**

It has been almost 50 years ago since visionaries started predicting a digital revolution enabling many of us to work from home.

But that revolution has long been thwarted by resistance – crucially from management concerned about productivity and performance.

It was [the case in 1974](#), according to Jack Nilles, who led [the first major study](#) to evaluate the benefits of "telecommuting" (by a team from the University of Southern California). It was still the case in 2019, according to researchers from San Jose State University, whose studies showed [managerial and executive resistance](#) were the major perceived obstacles to the expansion of flexible working practices.

Our own research with Australian public service managers in 2018 found extensive managerial resistance to employees working from home.

Wondering how the enforced experience of working from home might change such attitudes, we surveyed 6,000 Australian public servants (including 1,400 managers) in June and July, and found the seeds for a revolution.

Only 8.4% of managers rated their teams less productive when working from home, while 57% thought productivity the same, and 34.6% believed it higher.

These findings, along with others, suggest working from home, at least for part of the week, may become the norm.

Negative perceptions

It is difficult to estimate precisely how many people had the option of working from home prior to the pandemic. Australian Bureau of Statistics data [published in September 2019](#) indicated about a third of all employed people regularly worked from home. But it is likely this number also includes workers catching up on work after hours.

In the public sector, about one-third of executives worked away from the office, but [less than 15%](#) of non-executive employees did.

Our 2018 research, involving focus groups with nearly 300 managers across four state public services, found extensive managerial resistance to allowing work from home despite supportive policies permitting it.

Public sector managers shared with private sector managers concerns about performance and productivity, and the difficulty of remotely managing workers. They often framed their resistance around concerns about technology or work health and safety.

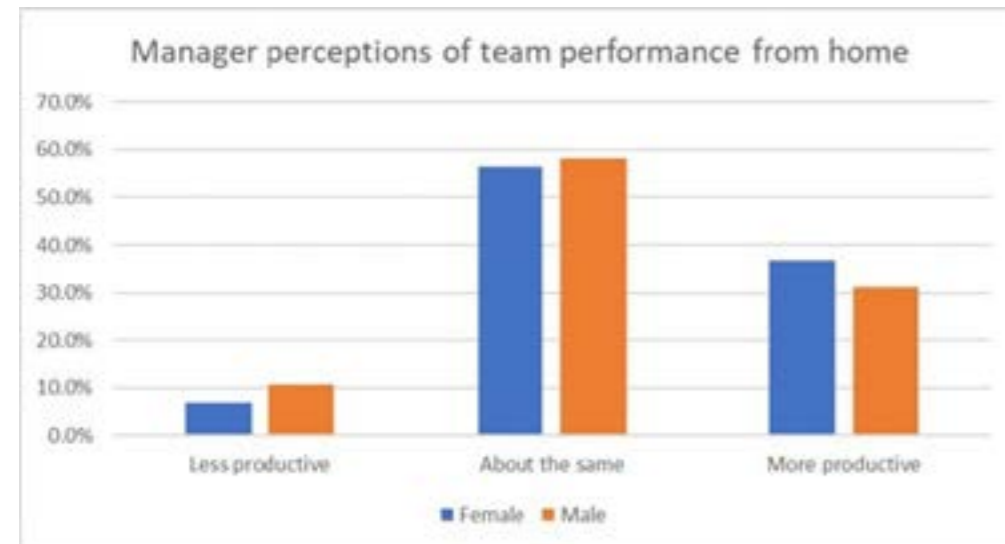
But on top of this, public service managers were sensitive about agreeing to any working arrangements that might feed community stereotypes about public servants having it easy.

Key findings

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered those objections irrelevant. By the end of May, [57%](#) of Australian Public Service employees were reportedly working from home.

To compile our findings we worked with the Community and Public Sector Union, which distributed the survey on our behalf. The 6,000 respondents included about 20% non-union members and 22% managers, across a broad range of occupations and agencies.

As noted, three times as many managers thought team productivity and performance had increased as those who perceived a decrease, with the majority neutral.



Manager perceptions of team performance working from home, by gender. The authors, [CC BY-ND](#)

Female managers were slightly more likely to perceive greater productivity (36.7% compared to 31.1% of male managers), as were managers of teams larger than ten employees.

One manager noted "people are either productive or not, and it doesn't matter where they work from". Others said it had changed their management style for the better, forcing them to realise they did not need to micromanage to get results.

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Nearly two-thirds said they intended to be more supportive of working from home in the future (though 2% said they planned to be less supportive). Male managers were the most swayed, with 68% saying they would be more supportive, compared with 63.6% of female managers.

One manager noted:

I had always accepted the department line that working from home is a privilege and not a real workplace. Also that working from home makes you unavailable and disconnects you from the workplace. Discovered that I couldn't have been more wrong."

Generally, our results show employees were mostly positive about working from home, with more than four out of five saying it gave them more time with their family, two-thirds saying they got more work done, and three in five enjoying having more autonomy over their work.

The downsides

There can be downsides to working from home, however. As one respondent put it: "I hate my house, it's cold, and the kids are annoying, the dog stinks."

The [key issues identified by research](#) are social isolation, lack of feedback and loss of separation of work from home life.

On the isolation and feedback front, our results were generally positive. Managers indicated communication technology enabled teams to stay in touch in multiple ways, from instant messaging to video conferencing. While just over 10% stuck to their usual meeting routine, the majority (about 60%) had increased their use of virtual meetings. This included scheduling social activities such as virtual coffee and drinks.

On the question of work-life balance, our results were more mixed.

Three-quarters reported they continued to work their usual work hours. But one in four reported working longer hours. Mostly this was due to increased workload, though almost 15% said they had been working more voluntarily because they were absorbed by their work. Many managers noted this increased motivation and mood.

Given the focus of the public service, this result is not necessarily one we can presume would apply across the entire workforce. That said, longer working hours do seem a feature of working from home during this pandemic. Based on data from more than 3 million in 16 cities, researchers found the average workday for those under lockdown [is about 48 minutes longer](#).

These findings on longer hours potentially offset some of the positive perceptions of productivity improvements. The emergency conditions in which both managers and workers have been prepared to go the extra mile cannot become the baseline for expectations permanently.

Despite these caveats, and the need to point out that organisations still have much to do to embed flexibility in their cultures, our results add to the evidence that the great working-from-home experiment of 2020 has broken the back of decades of inherited managerial resistance. The revolution may have started.

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Let's heed the warnings from aged care. We must act now to avert a COVID-19 crisis in disability care

By **Helen Dickinson** and Anne Kavanagh.
Published online August 21, 2020 by **The Conversation**

In Victoria there are nearly [80 active COVID-19 cases](#) linked to more than 50 disability accommodation sites. At least [two people](#) have died.

These don't sound like big numbers in the context of Victoria's second wave, and particularly when we compare it to the COVID-19 crisis in residential aged care.

But similarities between residential disability care and aged care — including vulnerable residents and a casualised workforce — give us cause for concern.

[Recent experience](#) in Victoria's aged-care sector shows the potential for the current outbreaks to escalate very quickly.

What is residential disability care?

When we talk about residential disability care, this includes group homes and respite services. Usually these have fewer than six residents.

We're also talking about larger facilities such as [supported residential services](#). These privately-run services accommodate between ten and 80 residents.

In Victoria, around [6,500 people](#) receive disability accommodation or respite services.

We've already seen COVID-19 outbreaks in group homes, respite services and supported residential services in Victoria. One notable example is [Hambleton House](#) in the Melbourne suburb of Albert Park, where 15 residents and one staff member tested positive.

The Victorian government recently [requested help](#) from the federal government following outbreaks at a number of disability accommodation sites.

An 'at risk' group

Australians with disability are at heightened risk during COVID-19 because many have [other health conditions](#) (for example, problems breathing, heart disease, diabetes). This makes them more likely to be sicker or die if they become infected.

People with disability are also more likely to be [poorer, unemployed and socially isolated](#), making them more likely to experience poor health outcomes during the pandemic.

People with a physical disability or an intellectual disability can be at higher risk from coronavirus.

Many people with disability, particularly those with complex needs, require personal support, which puts them in close contact with other people. Different workers will come through residential disability-care settings, sometimes moving between multiple homes and services, just as in aged care.

The potential for coronavirus spread is also high because some residents may have difficulties with physical distancing and personal hygiene. They may have trouble understanding public health recommendations and/or have behavioural or sensory issues that make these recommendations hard to follow.

Aged care and disability care

Federal NDIS Minister Stuart Robert has said disability and aged-care settings [differ](#) because aged-care settings tend to be larger than disability accommodation, and this is generally true.

But as well as their vulnerable residents, they share many important similarities — including communal living arrangements and a highly mobile, precariously employed workforce.

This is a significant risk factor because casual, low-paid workers have [greater incentive](#) to come to work when they're sick. Recent government moves to provide financial compensation or [paid pandemic leave](#) when workers need to take time off to get tested and/or self-isolate are welcome, but came too late.

The disability sector also lacks a "surge workforce" — people skilled in disability support who are able to step in and provide care in the event usual workers become sick. In aged care we've seen a lack of appropriate workers during the pandemic lead to [neglect](#).

A lack of planning and preparedness

Since at least April, disability advocates have been [warning](#) about the potential for COVID-19 outbreaks in residential disability care. But there's been little active work to develop preventative strategies or plans to deal with an outbreak.

A [national plan](#) has addressed the needs of people with disability in relation to COVID-19, and state and territory governments have also produced their [own plans](#). But these plans don't include effective strategies specifically for residential disability settings.

Our research found disability support workers feel inadequately prepared in the use of PPE.

Importantly, disability support staff appear to be be inadequately trained and prepared with regards to personal protective equipment (PPE).

We recently surveyed [357 disability support workers](#) from around Australia. More than one-quarter reported cancelling shifts because they feared they might contract coronavirus at work. Not all workers had accessed even basic infection control training, and of those who had, half wanted more.

Even those properly trained to use PPE can't necessarily access it. Distribution of PPE has been [beset with difficulties](#) and the disability workforce hasn't been a priority.

So the outbreaks we've witnessed among residents and support workers in disability accommodation are not particularly surprising. They indicate services, workers and governments weren't as prepared as they should've been to respond to this public health emergency.

What now?

Here's how we could prevent the current COVID-19 infections in residential disability care in Victoria from becoming more widespread, and avoid the deaths we've seen in residential disability services [in other countries](#).

First, we should reduce the number of workers who support people across multiple sites. Some states have [banned staff](#) working across multiple aged care sites to minimise contacts. This approach might be more difficult in disability services, but we should encourage it wherever possible within workforce constraints.

The federal government should update current guidelines for disability support workers around PPE and enhance their training in its use.

Where residents are suspected or confirmed to have coronavirus they must be separated from uninfected residents to prevent spread. If the facility they're in is too small to accommodate this, it may mean moving them to another appropriate location.

Finally, we need urgent action to create surge disability support workforce capacity and trained health staff who can be rapidly deployed to work alongside disability support workers if the situation deteriorates.

Public servants, pets and working hours during the pandemic — survey results

By **Sue Williamson** and Linda Colley.
Published online August 18, 2020 by **The Mandarin**

Public servants worked [long and hard](#) during the pandemic. But just *how* hard did they work? And *who* was doing the hard yards?

We surveyed almost 6,000 APS employees in July 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. One in four respondents reported working longer hours than they worked before the pandemic, mostly due to an increased workload. Employees also gained additional working time through not commuting, enabling longer working hours.

Executive Level staff worked longer, with slightly more women than men. More employees in the Fair Work Commission worked longer hours than in any other agency. This was due to disputes about JobKeeper entitlements, and an increased number of disputes relating to enterprise agreements and stand downs.

Half of the respondents in Treasury worked longer hours during the pandemic, and those in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) also put in the hours. DFAT staff working outside Australia overwhelmingly reported longer hours, as would be expected as they worked to bring citizens home. Not surprisingly, ICT staff across the APS also worked longer hours than employees in other jobs, closely followed by information and knowledge management professionals, and policy officers.

[Research has shown](#) that working from home can increase work/family spillover. Employees can find it more difficult to establish boundaries between work and home, as working time eats into home time. While some employees did tell us about this, almost three-quarters of respondents reported that they chose to work their usual hours.

This is an important finding, which suggests that for many employees, stability and regular working hours are preferred over flexible hours worked over a longer span of hours. Flexibility in *where* they worked was more important than flexibility in *when* they worked. Employees reported being more productive, in line with [anecdotal evidence](#). This additional productivity may have translated into completing their job in their usual hours, rather than needing to work outside core hours.

There has been much speculation that the pandemic will usher in an era of increased flexible working. Our data sheds some light on this idea. Working from home is definitely family friendly, with men, women and non-binary employees all stating that they were able to spend more time with their family (including pets), and to undertake caring responsibilities.

For some, however, additional time at home was not always welcome. We asked those who did not want to work from home their reasons, and one respondent eloquently stated: "I hate my house, it's cold and the kids are annoying, the dog stinks". Another respondent stated: "Our cat can be very demanding. I wasn't expecting him to nag me for food all day..."

Generally, however, employees found working from home to be a positive experience. Over three in five agreed that working from home gave them more autonomy over when they could work; almost two-thirds agreed that they achieved more working from home than when in their regular workplace, and over four in five employees agreed that it gave them more time with their families.

Employees enjoyed working from home so much, that fewer than 10% of respondents want to spend all their time in their usual, pre-COVID workplace. The issue for the APS then, is how to enable those who want to continue working from home, even as APS employees are [transitioning back into the office](#), whilst also meeting the needs of those who prefer an office environment.

Only one fifth of school students with disability had enough support during the remote learning period

By **Helen Dickinson**, Catherine Smith and **Sophie Yates**.
Published online July 24, 2020 by **The Conversation**

Only 22% of family members and carers of students with a disability agreed they had received adequate educational support during the pandemic. Many respondents in our [new research](#), and survey, on behalf of Children and Young People with Disability Australia ([CYDA](#)) reported being forgotten in the shift to remote learning, or being the last group to be considered after arrangements had been made for the rest of the class.

A number of parents and carers said the pandemic period gave them an insight into the level their child was working at. This occasionally came as a surprise, as parents discovered with adequate support their child could complete work at a much higher level than the school had recorded.

For others, this period illustrated how little progress their child had been making and the lack of support they were receiving at school. Several respondents said they were considering changing schools or home schooling their children as a result.

Still left behind

Our survey was launched on April 28, 2020 and remained open until the June 14, 2020 (nearly seven weeks). It asked questions on the experiences of students with disabilities and their families when schools across Australia had mostly closed.

It also covered the period of transition back to face-to-face teaching for the majority of students.

We received more than 700 responses and 1,145 text comments. The responses mainly came from family members of children with disability. Around 5% of respondents were students with disability, and of those most were high school or university age.

Nearly 80% of respondents said responsibility for education shifted from teachers and schools and onto parents during the survey period.

More than half of respondents said the curriculum and learning materials didn't come in accessible formats. Parents reported having to do significant work to translate learning materials into a useful format for their children.

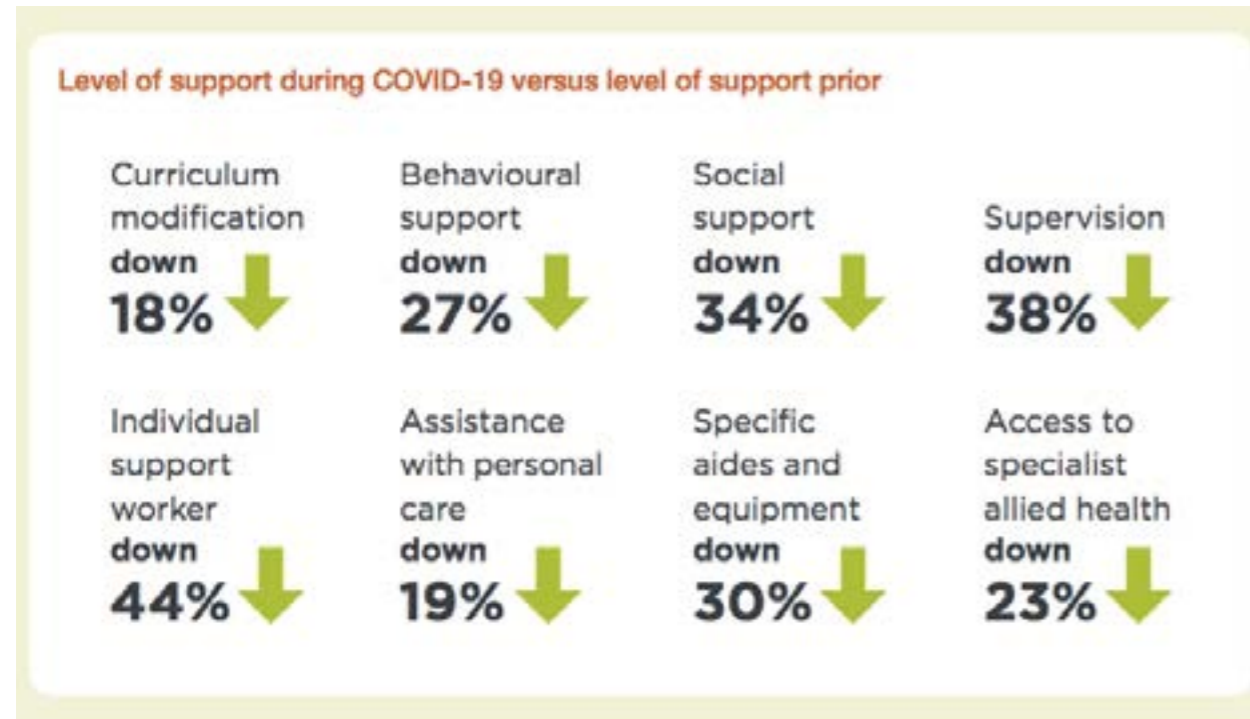
Some reported receiving exactly the same materials and support as those provided to students without disability, with the onus entirely on parents to make the necessary adjustments.

This caused some family members to feel they were letting students with disability down because they did not have the skills required to adjust the materials appropriately.

One young person said:

Only one special education teacher was modifying learning material and in regular contact and encouragement from the special education department in high school.

Some children were unable to engage online and so missed out on being part of a learning community. Others felt schools had not done enough to facilitate access to this. Many respondents said the usual supports they received dropped off, most notably in terms of supervision, social supports and individual support workers.



CYDA education report (screenshot)

Nearly three quarters of respondents said students with disability felt socially isolated from their peers. Many said this and other consequences of the pandemic were having a significant impact on their mental health.

Just over half of respondents indicated a negative impact on the mental health and well-being on either themselves or the child or young person with disability under their care.

Cracks in the system

Some families used funding from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to help support remote learning. They redeployed support workers from personal care into helping children engage in learning, risking they may not have enough support worker hours left at the end of their plans.

Others had requests for more funding turned down by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) on the basis education supports should be covered through mainstream services. Overall there was a lack of clarity about how the NDIS could be used to support remote learning.

As one parent reported:

I was lucky enough to have had funding to support in-home supports, which I used to assist with schooling during COVID-19. I am the sole parent of two children with disability, plus an essential worker. Without this support my children would have received no quality schooling at all during the school-closures.

Others felt the support was no worse during the pandemic, but this was mostly because they had not been well supported beforehand. Where support had been received, it was often in response to advocacy work done by parents who had contacted schools (sometimes repeatedly) and requested the materials and adjustments their children required.

What have we learnt?

We found children who received one form of support were 24% more likely to feel part of a learning community and 36% more likely to say they received adequate support in their education.

And the more support received, the better. For those who received two or more types of support, they or their parents were

- 88% more likely to say they felt part of a learning community
- more than twice as likely to report adequate support in their education
- 48% more likely to say report engagement in their learning
- 18% less likely to report feelings of social isolation.

Social supports had the strongest association with students feeling supported, part of a learning community, engaged in learning and feeling less socially isolated.

Our research shows that, with careful planning and effort by education systems and teachers, students with disability can thrive through the pandemic.

But the support should

- ensure students are made to feel part of a learning community through connecting them with their peers
- ensure learning materials are accessible and specific to the needs of students
- teachers provide reasonable supports in partnership with children and families – it should not be left to families or students to navigate
- ensure the support from the NDIS and the education system are complementary.

National cabinet just agreed to big changes to environment law. Here's why the process shouldn't be rushed

By **Megan Evans** and Peter Burnett.
Published online July 24, 2020 by **The Conversation**

Federal and state governments on Friday resolved to streamline environment approvals and fast-track 15 major projects to help stimulate Australia's pandemic-stricken economy.

The move follows the release this week of Professor Graeme Samuel's [preliminary review](#) of the law, the 20-year-old Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act. Samuel [described the law](#) as "ineffective" and "inefficient" and called for wholesale reform.

At the centrepiece of Samuel's recommendations are "national environmental standards" that are consistent and legally enforceable, and set clear rules for decision-making. Samuel provides a set of "[prototype](#)" standards as a starting point. He recommends replacing the prototypes with more refined standards over time.

By the end of August, the Morrison government wants Parliament to consider implementing [the prototype standards](#).

But [rushing](#) in the new law is a huge concern, and further threatens the future of Australia's irreplaceable natural and cultural heritage. Here, we explain why.

Semantics matter

Samuel's review said legally enforceable national standards would help ensure development is sustainable over the long term, and reduce the time it takes to have development proposals assessed.

We've identified a number of problems with his [prototype](#) standards.

First, they introduce new terms that will require interpretation by decision-makers, which could lead the government into the courts. This occurred in Queensland's [Nathan dam case](#) when conservation groups successfully argued the term environmental "impacts" should extend to "indirect effects" of development.

Second, there's a difference in wording between the prototype standards and the EPBC Act itself, which might lead to uncertainty and delay. Samuel suggested a "no net loss" national standard for vulnerable and endangered species habitat, and "net gain" for critically endangered species habitat. But this departs from [current federal policy](#), under which environmental offsets must "improve or maintain" the environmental outcome compared to "what is likely to have occurred under the status quo".

Third, the outcomes proposed under the prototype standards might themselves cause confusion. The standards say, overall, the environment should be "protected", but rare wetlands protected under the Ramsar Convention should be "maintained". The status of threatened species should "improve over time" and Commonwealth marine waters should be "maintained or enhanced", but the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park needs to be "sustained for current and future generations".

And fourth, the standards don't rule out development in [habitat critical](#) to threatened species, but require that "no detrimental change" occurs. But in reality, can there be development in critical habitat without detrimental change?

Mind the gap

The escape clause in the prototype standards presents another problem. A small, yet critical recommendation in the appendix of Samuel's report says:

These amendments should include a requirement that the Standards be applied unless the decision-maker can demonstrate that the public interest and the national interest is best served otherwise.

Which decision maker is he referring to here – federal or state? If it's the former, will there be a constant stream of requests to the federal environment minister for a "public interest" exemption on the basis of jobs and economic development? If the latter, can a state decision-maker judge the "national interest", especially for species found in several states, such as the koala?

Samuel says the "legally enforceable" nature of national standards are the foundation of effective regulation. But both he and Auditor-General Grant Hehir in his [recent report](#) found existing enforcement provisions are rarely applied, and penalties are low.

Federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley has already [ruled out](#) Samuel's recommendation that an independent regulator take responsibility for enforcement. But the record to date does not give confidence that government officials will enforce the standards.

Temporary forever?

Both Ley and Samuel suggested the interim standards would be temporary and [updated later](#). But history shows "draft" and "interim" policies have a tendency to become long-term, or permanent.

For example, federal authorities often allow a proponent to cause environmental damage, and compensate by improving the environment elsewhere - a process known as "[offsetting](#)". A so-called "draft" offset policy drawn up in 2007 actually remained in place for five years until 2012, when it was finally [replaced](#). And the federal environment department recently accepted offsets based on the [2007 "draft" rather than the current policy](#).

The best antidote is to ensure the first tranche of national standards is comprehensive, precise and strong. This can only occur if genuine consultation occurs, legislation is [not rushed](#), and the government commits to improving the "[antiquated](#)" data and information systems the standards rely on.

Negotiation to the lowest bar

According to the Samuel report, the proposed standards "provide a clear pathway for greater devolution in decision-making" that will [enable states and territories](#) to conduct federal environmental assessments and approvals. This proposed change has been strongly and [consistently criticised](#) by scientists and environmental lawyers.

Ley also appears to be wildly underestimating the time and effort required to negotiate the standards with the states and territories.

Take the Gillard government's attempts to overcome duplication between state and federal law by establishing a "[one-stop-shop](#)" approvals process. Prime Minister Julia Gillard [pulled the plug](#) on negotiations after a year, declaring the myriad agreements being sought by various states was the "regulatory equivalent of a Dalmatian dog".

The Abbott government's [negotiations](#) for a similar policy lasted twice as long but suffered a similar fate, lapsing with the dissolution of Parliament in 2016.

Samuel warned refining the standards should not involve "negotiated agreement with rules set at the lowest bar". But vested interests will inevitably seek to influence the process.

Proceed with caution

We have identified significant problems with the prototype standards, and more may emerge.

Ley's [rush](#) to amend the Act appears motivated more by wanting to cut so-called "[green tape](#)" than by evidence or environmental outcomes.

Prototypes are meant to be stress-tested. But if the defects are not corrected before hurrying into negotiations and legislative change, Australia might go another 20 years without effective environment laws.

Update: *This article has been amended to reflect the national cabinet decision.*

Communicating with trust: tips for managers

By **Sue Williamson** and Linda Colley.

Published online June 16, 2020 by **Apolitical**

This article is written by Sue Williamson, Senior Lecturer, Human Resource Management, UNSW Canberra and Linda Colley, Associate Professor, Human Resource Management/Industrial Relations, CQUniversity

The concept of "trust" is in vogue right now.

At the time of writing, [almost two-thirds of Australians](#) say they trust the government during this time of pandemic – and the number has been rising over the past few weeks. [Articles abound](#) on how to create trust: throughout a nation, and within organisations, stakeholders, and teams.

In the same vein, much information is available on how to create an organisational culture of trust. [This article](#), for example, explains that trust is based on logic (ie. an employee believes their manager's reasoning is sound), authenticity (the employee can bring their "whole self" to work), and empathy (the employee believes the manager cares about them).

During this time of Covid-19 where knowledge workers are working from home, trust is again being considered by managers and employees

While their perspectives on trust differ, these authors all share a common understanding, albeit implicitly, of the underlying psychological contract, which exists between a manager and an employee. This contract is unwritten and starts when an employee joins the organisation.

As Professor David Guest [explains](#), the psychological contract encompasses the perceptions of managers and individuals of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in the employment relationship. For example, an employee can expect to be paid for a fair day's work; and an employer can expect the work to be undertaken conscientiously and performed well.

Will managers trust their colleagues to work from home?

Trust is an important element of the psychological contract. During this time of Covid-19 where knowledge workers are working from home, trust is again being considered by managers and employees. Workers want to trust their organisation to provide a safe working environment. Managers want to trust their employees to successfully work at home.

In research examining how public sector managers enable flexible working, my colleagues and I identified a number of issues around trust and working from home. We conducted interviews and 40 focus groups with almost 300 managers. [Flexible work](#) arrangements, including working from home, featured prominently in these discussions.

While daily interaction between managers and employees is more cumbersome during the pandemic, the same principles and processes of performance management apply

We found that firstly, many managers did not trust employees they could not see. Managers voiced stereotypes that employees would be watching Netflix instead of working. [Research shows](#) that employees who work from home adopt different strategies. They work in either a "time-based" or "task-based" manner. Time-based refers to undertaking more transactional tasks – of just getting the job done. Task-based involves more autonomy and occurs when employees are engaged in their work.

The challenge for managers is to provide those working from home with meaningful task-based work and a level of autonomy, so they are engaged. If the tasks are more mundane, then other, extrinsic rewards are required (such as the promise of more interesting work or professional development). Additionally, lower-level employees who undertake time-based work benefit from more frequent communication with their manager than do employees who undertake task-based work.

Measuring performance

Secondly, many managers did not know how to manage the performance of those working from home. While daily interaction between managers and employees is more cumbersome during the [pandemic](#) due to a reliance on technology, the same principles and processes of performance management apply. Assess employees on the work they are producing. Adopt an outcomes-based approach, rather than focusing on the time employees may be putting in.

Many managers expressed concerns about enabling underperformers to work from home. This position stems from a belief that working from home is a privilege, not a right. In normal circumstances, this would be correct. But during a pandemic, the ability to work from home moves closer to becoming a right, due to the need to provide a safe workplace for employees.

Researchers have even concluded that a new psychological contract is being developed between a manager, the employee, and their smartphone

If an employee is underperforming, managers should use the same performance management processes they would normally use. A reluctance to manage underperformers who work from home is not far removed from a manager's reluctance to have the difficult performance management conversation.

Adjusting to a new schedule

Thirdly, the concept of core hours can be incompatible with working from home, especially as parents balance work, caring responsibilities and homeschooling. As well as spatial flexibility, working from home is also changing working hours.

Many of the managers we spoke with accepted their employees working very flexible hours – others were less supportive. Again, this goes to trust and the importance of adopting an outcomes-based approach. Anecdotally, some Australian public sector agencies are removing the requirement for all employees to record their hours, which is an important symbolic demonstration of trust.

[Articles abound](#) on how managers should communicate with employees working from home. One aspect less considered, however, is that technology can influence the psychological contract. Researchers have even [concluded](#) that a new psychological contract is being developed between a manager, the employee, and their smartphone (or another device).

23 Working from home is changing the psychological contract

Organisations enabling working from home via technology carries an implicit assumption that employees will be constantly available. In order to avoid burnout and “technostress”, managers not only need to communicate with employees about work expectations and outputs, but also around expectations of employees’ availability and reachability. Maintaining a healthy psychological contract requires managers to ensure employees understand that they are not expected to be constantly available.

Working from home, and remote working is predicted to rise. [Up to 30%](#) of Australian employees may be working from home, and many of these employees will want to continue this working arrangement. After the pandemic, the technology and infrastructure will be in place, and the remaining resistance is likely to be behavioural, stemming from inflexible workplace cultures and individual managers.

Working from home is changing the psychological contract. How organisations, managers and employees navigate this emerging terrain will impact not only on how employees work, but also on the expectations of these different parties. — Dr Sue Williamson and Associate Professor Linda Colley

'I'm scared': parents of children with disability struggle to get the basics during coronavirus

By **Helen Dickinson** and **Sophie Yates**.
Published online May 28, 2020 by **The Conversation**

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all Australians, but there are very good reasons why the impact might be more keenly felt by people with disability and their carers.

Our [new research](#) on behalf of Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) provides insight into these issues, capturing the impacts at the height of the pandemic.

These findings throw the daily inequities people with disability face into sharp relief. Without urgent action, future emergencies will have similar impacts.

How have families found life in the pandemic?

As coronavirus reached crisis point in Australia, CYDA was concerned that we lacked a coherent national response to assist younger Australians with disabilities. So it launched a survey about families’ pandemic experiences.

This was designed to explore the specific impact of COVID-19, but also to help plan for future emergencies, including other pandemics, bushfires and floods.

The survey was launched in mid-March and stayed open for almost six weeks. Nearly 700 responses were received, mostly from family members of children and young people with disability.

Scared and uncertain

Our report, [More than Isolated](#), shows families were confused about how to handle the crisis.

More than 80% of respondents said they lacked information about coronavirus and how it related to children with disability. This exacerbated their distress and uncertainty.

Households reported feeling scared and uncertain about the best ways to act to protect themselves and loved ones, and this was having an impact on the mental health of all family members.

Respondents also reported a great deal of uncertainty about schooling and school closures. As one parent said

Should we be waiting for school to close or should we keep him at home? Should we keep our other kids home from school to protect him? How serious is this?

Missing out on supplies, medication

More than 60% of respondents were unable to buy essential supplies (such as groceries, special dietary products and hygiene products). Almost 20% said they were unable to buy essential medication.

While this was an issue for many Australians, often these products were especially necessary for the children and young people with disability.

As one parent reported:

Families with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] children don't meet criteria for special shopping times and so we have run out of essential items. In my spare time I'm running around all day looking for toilet paper and food that my child will eat. I'm exhausted.

The shortages also meant some children and young people went without food or continence supplies. Other families found themselves spending up to three times the usual budget on essential items, sometimes at the expense of paying their rent.

Less support, declining mental health

One in three respondents had to deal with the cancellation of support workers.

This was either because the family had to cancel because of concerns about people coming into the home, or the services themselves cancelled. This meant family members had increased support requirements, with some reporting they had to give up their own paid work to care for their kids.

Half of survey respondents reported a decline in mental health, either for themselves or for the child or young person with disability. This increased over the period of the survey.

As another parent reported:

I'm scared as a parent, I'm scared of failing my child, and I'm scared about the mental health impacts on me as a parent with absolutely no support.

Often the impacts were interconnected. For example, service cancellation led to parents' reduced ability to work, which put stress on obtaining essential supplies.

Some people were unable to access pre-existing support networks, and unsure of what would happen in the days and weeks ahead. Many respondents expressed heartbreaking distress and worry.

I am struggling significantly to meet my children's needs ... I am completely isolated from any therapies, support workers and family support.

Families are struggling: what needs to change

Many of those who care for children and young people with disability are constantly beset by difficult decisions - balancing work, play, care and education to provide the best possible lives for their kids.

Many people can only manage these things when the world is operating as it normally does. But this pandemic (which was preceded by a summer of horrific bushfires) has thrown these carefully balanced routines off to such a degree that families are struggling to cope.

There are lessons that we can learn from this pandemic that can inform future emergency responses.

Our survey findings point to the importance of information that is tailored to children and young people with disability.

The fragmentation of national and state/territory responsibilities (especially around education) made for [confusing messaging for these families](#), and this continues.

It is crucial the voices of children and young people with disability and their families are heard and responded to in emergency planning.

But improving messaging and ensuring a more coherent response will not solve many of the issues.

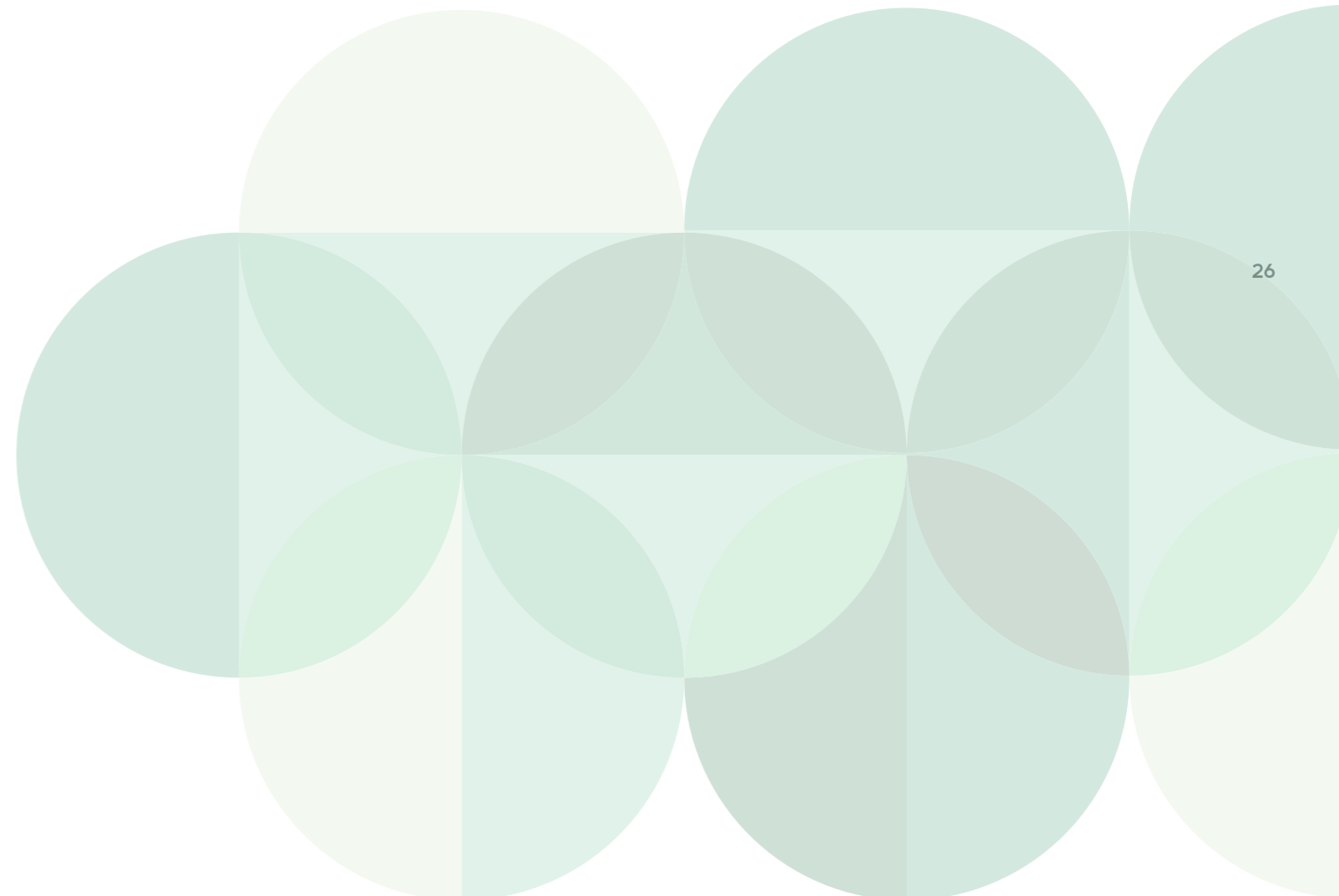
It is well established that people with disability face [significant inequities](#) in many facets of their lives (from health to work, education and social interaction). The only way we will prevent an impact like this again is to address the various inequities faced on a daily basis by children and young people with disability and their caregivers.

This is not a new observation, but it is also at the heart of the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) that Australia is a signatory to.

There is a richness in diversity and human experience and this needs to be valued and planned for.

During this period of the COVID-19 pandemic there was not enough recognition that some groups might require more support and intervention so that they can be viewed as equally valued members of society.

CYDA is a not-for-profit community-based organisation and [receives its core funding](#) from the Department of Social Services



Why it is "reasonable and necessary" for the NDIS to support people's sex lives

By **Helen Dickinson** and Catherine Smith.
Published online May 21, 2020 by **The Conversation**

One major theme of COVID-19 [media reporting](#) has been stories of individuals craving physical contact and struggling with loneliness.

But for some people with disability, this isn't just the byproduct of a pandemic, it's their everyday existence.

A recent [Federal Court ruling](#) has given hope to National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants that they might be able to use the scheme to access sexual support services.

But the federal government - which has been fighting this push - suggests it may keep trying to stop public funds being used in this way.

This is a worrying development for Australians with serious disabilities, who also have the right to a sex life.

How did we get here?

Last week, the [Federal Court ruled](#) the use of a specially trained sex therapist was a "reasonable and necessary" support to be funded under the NDIS.

The applicant in the case was a woman in her 40s who lives with multiple sclerosis and other health conditions, which means she cannot have sexual release without help.

This decision follows the woman's lengthy battle for sexual support since she was accepted as an NDIS participant in mid-2016.

Last year, her case went to the [Administrative Appeals Tribunal \(AAT\)](#), which also found in her favour, but the outcome was challenged by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Noting there is a difference between a [sex worker and a sex therapist](#) (who does not touch the client), the federal government has argued that funding for sexual services are not in line with community expectations.

Directly after the Federal Court decision, [a spokesperson for NDIS Minister Stuart Robert](#) told Guardian Australia the government was considering its response, "including possible changes to legislation".

While the government respects the court's decision, the government does not believe that use of NDIS funds to pay for the services of a sex worker is in line with community expectations.

On Wednesday, an NDIA spokesperson confirmed the agency was "considering its response to the decision".

What about human rights?

Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The [CRPD stresses](#) that people with disability have the right to enjoy the highest standard of health without discrimination, including sexual health. It also calls on countries to eliminate discrimination when it comes to relationships.

Disability advocates [also stress](#) that people with disability have the right to enjoy "rich and fulfilling lives equal to others in society".

The reality is people with disabilities face a wide array of different inequities across health, employment, education and other domains. And they also face significant inequities when it comes to accessing the right to a sexual life.

The woman at the heart of the Federal Court case reported that her disability makes it impossible to find a partner. This situation - also highlighted by the 2012 film [The Sessions](#) - is all too often experienced by single people with disability.

This case also highlights the physical limitations experienced by some people with disabilities. As the woman said in a written statement:

without the assistance of a professional sex worker I am not able to achieve sexual release and am effectively denied the right to sexual health, pleasure and well-being.

Other people with disabilities might seek similar services, not because they are single, but because they and their partner are [unable to achieve intimacy](#) due to their impairments and require support for this.

What is the NDIS here for?

The threshold for accessing NDIS funding is high, as participants must have a permanent and significant disability.

It is estimated that about [10%](#) of Australians with disability will receive individual funding from the NDIS at full roll-out. Then, having established a person's eligibility, the NDIS will only fund services and supports that are "reasonable and necessary".

Over the relatively short life of the NDIS we have seen a [number of debates](#) concerning the precise meaning of these terms.

But the [legislation](#) that underpins the NDIS would seem to support access to sexual support services.

People with disability have the same right as other members of Australian society to realise their potential for physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.

The NDIS was intended to be a way of providing people with disability better choice and control in terms of how they live their lives.

If individuals indicate that experience of sexual intimacy is an important priority for them, then this should be considered to be as significant a need for companionship and well-being as someone else's choice to go along to the football or a concert.

The community is more supportive than you may think

While the federal government has repeatedly said funding sexual services via the NDIS is not consistent with [“community expectations”](#), a recent survey suggests this is not the case.

The [2018 Victorian government study](#) of community attitudes found 76% of respondents agreed with the statement “people with disability have the right to sexual relationships,” with only 6.5% disagreeing.

Disability advocates also point to a history of [state-based schemes](#) (pre-NDIS) and [accident compensation schemes](#) supporting people with disability to have a sex life.

So what's the government's problem?

The government has also suggested that funding sexual therapy services could lead to a [financial blow out of the NDIS](#), prompting tabloid headlines about an “NDIS sex bomb”.

But both the AAT and the Federal Court dismissed the NDIA’s actuarial evidence here, saying it was based on a [“worst case scenario”](#).

There is also a strong argument that funding sexual support services could improve participants’ [well-being](#), reducing demand for other types of services and supports.

Countries such as [Denmark and the Netherlands](#), fund access to sex workers for people with disabilities on the basis that it is a human right and leads to better overall well-being.

It is hard to find a solid policy argument against expanding NDIS support to help people have a sex life. And it would appear the federal government’s opposition to sexual supports under the NDIS is more political than policy-based.

But if the government succeeds in blocking sexual supports as part of the NDIS, this could see some Australian citizens denied the right to live a fulfilling sex life.

Rationing resources in a time of pandemic: can ethical principles help us?

By Iestyn Williams, **Helen Dickinson** and Suzanne Robinson.
Published online May 15, 2020 by **Transforming Society, Policy Press**

Many health systems are struggling to equip clinicians, carers and citizens with the things they need to fight the effects of the coronavirus outbreak. As infection and death rates began to rapidly increase in the US and parts of Europe, attention is increasingly focussed on physical resource limits, especially in relation to diagnostic tests, personal protective equipment and critical care facilities.

Governments are reluctant to admit it, but there is little doubt the pandemic response would have been greatly improved without these shortages. Difficult choices have been made in terms of which groups and individuals gain access to such resources in the face of limited supply. In our book, [Rationing in Health Care](#), we argue that, despite their importance to population health decision-making, ethical principles shouldn’t be applied to the allocation of resources at the bedside when individual patient lives are at stake.

International experiences vary

Many have compared the response of countries such as the US, the UK, Italy and France unfavourably with, for example, South Korea, where the response to COVID-19 seems to have been relatively unhindered by resource shortages. A recent [online conference](#) of the [International Society for Priorities in Health](#) suggests this was a consequence of earlier infectious disease outbreaks, and a resulting willingness to direct substantial resources towards development and manufacture of tests, distribution of personal protection equipment and designing of dedicated pathways for COVID-19 patients.

It is also notable that Germany has been able to ‘catch up’ more quickly than their European counterparts, perhaps due to manufacturing capacity and significant amounts of resource slack within the health system. Ironically, these inefficiencies have proven to be highly valuable, whereas leaner systems such as in the four countries of the UK have been forced to make difficult choices over access to critical care, as well as expanding capacity, to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

Difficult rationing decisions

Since the outbreak, there is no doubt that health systems across the UK have been hugely effective in maximising the resources available to deal with it, but this will have consequences for other aspects of health care demand and delivery which won’t be truly known for some time. As well as the impact on other patients, the system has, controversially, been triaging COVID-19 patients in the hope of avoiding the system becoming overwhelmed, as we saw [vividly play out](#) in Italy.

This is the most recent example of the rationing scenario, which has occurred many times before in health care systems across the world: how to decide who should receive treatment when not every need can be met. These decisions are even more fraught as, rather than assessing treatments, they pitch patient against patient, in the competition for potentially lifesaving treatment.

What can ethics tell us?

There is a tendency in such situations to search for the answer in the field of ethics, and for good reason as this can tell us much about how to weigh competing moral claims when distributing public resources. However, the ethical rights and wrongs of resource allocation are best debated in the abstract when planning services for whole populations, and not at the bedside where they translate into callous and unfeeling principles that violate the fundamental injunction to save lives. [Guidance](#) from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence suggests access to life-saving ventilation should be determined by the likelihood and expected extent of patient recovery. However, the unfettered implementation of this principle would inevitably [infringe the rights](#) of disabled people, among others, to treatment.

The failings of rational planning

The reality is that the need for such appalling treatment decisions represents a failure of rational planning, and recourse to abstract ethical principles will not mitigate the damage involved. In France, [‘ethical support units’](#) at least provide case-by-case support to clinicians, drawing on a range of perspectives and considerations. However, the purpose of population health priority setting, informed by ethics, is not to inform such decisions, but to remove the need for doctors and patients to make them in the first place.

Of course, these are exceptional times, and the coronavirus has unexpectedly redefined health care demand and taken systems to the brink and beyond. At this stage of the crisis, rational schemes for allocating resources are largely irrelevant as the priority becomes how to [‘muddle through’](#) using judgement, patient input and moral instincts.

In the longer run, the challenge will be how to ensure such terrible choices never need to be made again, and this will require a rethink of what constitutes an efficient and safe allocation of resources to health care. In adult social care, the acute shortage of basic protection for many service users and their carers has compounded their de-prioritisation vis a vis younger, healthier patients. This may finally be the moment when the funding shortfall for this service user population cuts through into public consciousness.

Where next?

The hope is that these extraordinary times won't return and that, as with countries elsewhere, this tragedy will engender greater future readiness. But this will be scant consolation to the current victims, their families and those making the sorts of decisions which none of us should ever have to face. And the need for some level of rationing ‘at the bedside’ may well be inevitable. In the short term, this means providing support for those making decisions which goes beyond offering ethical injunctions that are themselves likely to be contested. In the long run, the aspiration must be towards priority setting and strategic planning that is effective in reducing the requirement for rationing.

Bushfires, coronavirus... and a newborn. Living through 2020 as a new mum

By **Laura Davy**.

Published online March 27, 2020 by **The Power To Persuade**

2020 has been no ordinary year. Still reeling from the destruction of the bushfires Australians are now having to adjust to also dealing with a global pandemic. In today's blog post [Dr Laura Davy](#) gives her personal reflections on what it has been like to live through these unprecedented times at the same time as becoming a mother for the first time.

First there was fire, floods and ice, and then there was panic and pestilence...

It reads like something out of the Old Testament, but these have been the realities of the last few months, the months during which I also became a mother for the first time.

In the 3 months since my daughter Freyja was born into a hot and smoky December in our nation's capital, the ACT government has declared 2 states of emergency: the first in January in light of dangerous fire and weather conditions, and the most recent last week over the coronavirus pandemic. The last time a state of emergency had been instated was in 2003, 17 years ago.

Immersed in the world of caring for a newborn, I managed to avoid the wider existential angst about climate change that this horror bushfire season brought to many around me. Being around a newborn means being pulled into the now at every moment. The immediacy of learning settling techniques and breastfeeding holds on very little sleep leaves little time for reflecting on the path we're headed down as a species.

However, there was no avoiding the immediate crisis, even in Canberra which remained largely untouched by actual flame. My mother was stuck for hours on the Hume Highway because of a grassfire that struck one day when she was driving down to visit her new granddaughter. My sister was evacuated from her new apartment in the Blue Mountains when the Grose Valley fire spread out of control, her dedicated disability support workers working overtime to drive their clients to safety. Smoke haze from fires to the north, east and south hemmed in the city and penned us indoors for weeks on end. It first rolled in, appearing thick in the streets like a gloomy dark magic one Saturday night a week before my baby was born.

When Freyja was 4 days old, she was readmitted to hospital overnight for phototherapy treatment for newborn jaundice. As my husband and I walked through the special care nursery with our baby in my arms the smell of smoke had infiltrated the corridors. Out the windows was a sky of burnt orange and great rolling clouds of smoke smothering the horizon. I was crying. "You've always been the strong one I suppose", one of the nurses commented to my husband.

The smoke rolled in thick again the night before New Year's Eve, but this time it permeated every corner of our old-style rental home, creeping in through cracks in the windows and door frames. We packed up our baby bath, blankets and change mat and stayed in serviced apartments with reverse cycle air conditioning for the next few nights. We were lucky – not all families could afford to do this. We didn't return home until we could fumigate the house and set up a small air purifier next to the baby's bassinet.

In February came a period of relative peace. Heatwaves, flooding and hail storms occurred only at the edge of our awareness as we focused on getting to know our new baby. My husband returned to work. We started to get the hang of things. I got confident enough to take my baby out to the park, then to cafes, then to the baby-friendly movie screenings at my local cinema. We never quite forgot how good it was to breathe clean air or to venture outside without checking air quality monitoring websites.

But it felt like only weeks of this care-free existence before oppression set in again. The coronavirus epidemic became headline news. The outdoors was once again full of threat. Invisible contagions were amongst us, living for days on everyday surfaces and forcing us to distance ourselves from each other. Baby wipes, like toilet paper, were sold out at the supermarket.

At moments during the madness of the last months I wondered what kind of world I have brought my daughter into. Will smoke and hand sanitiser be the smells of her childhood? How long will our new lexicon – ‘beyond hazardous air quality’, ‘particulate count’, ‘self-isolation’, ‘social distancing’ – last?

Mothers have anguished in similar ways for countless generations. Bringing a child into the world is an experience intrinsically associated with both precarity – an anxiety about the innate potential for loss – and hope.

I may well be raising my daughter in a time during which our ways of being in the world are profoundly changing. Experts forecast a ‘new normal’ of smoky, devastating summers. People are increasingly connecting for work and recreation online rather than in person to avoid contagion. Juggling the public life of work with the private work of caring for family members is becoming both more visible and more widespread as people are required to work from home. But will all of this jump start our sense of responsibility to each other and the planet? Or only increase polarisation and mutual isolation?

There will likely be another pandemic after this one, but it will emerge gradually and it will be a long time before we understand its full extent. Months of anxiety, compounded by increasing social isolation, will take its toll on our nation’s mental health. From a personal point of view, social isolation is a major driver of postnatal depression amongst mothers after the birth of their child.^[1] I worry about keeping my baby and myself stimulated with all the baby friendly events cancelled and cafes and other public spaces closed.

For now, we are going on lots of walks in the autumn sunshine. Last Monday, the day the ACT government declared its second state of emergency this year, I sent my mother a photo of us adventuring out for the morning, Freyja happily strapped into the baby carrier at my chest. “She’ll be a warrior child of the apocalypse!” my mother texted me back, “strong and fierce”.

I only hope she won’t have to be.

Dr Laura Davy is a Research Fellow in the Equity and Diversity stream at the Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra. A political theorist and sociologist, her research focuses on disability and care theory and policy. Her current research analyses the range of influences shaping disability policy in Australia and internationally, such as the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the shift towards market-based social services delivery.

^[1] <https://www.panda.org.au/info-support/after-birth/contributing-factors-for-postnatal-depression-or-anxiety>

People with a disability are more likely to die from coronavirus – but we can reduce this risk

By **Helen Dickinson** and Anne Kavanagh.
Published online March 26, 2020 by **The Conversation**

The COVID-19 pandemic is terrifying for many of us, but people with a disability have more reason to worry than most.

People with a disability often have [underlying health conditions](#) that make them more susceptible to serious illness or death if they contract COVID-19. They may also be more at risk of contracting the virus if they have disability workers entering their home.

The federal government has made several policy announcements to protect older Australians in aged care facilities, hospitals and GP clinics, but we’re yet to see the same consideration for people with disabilities.

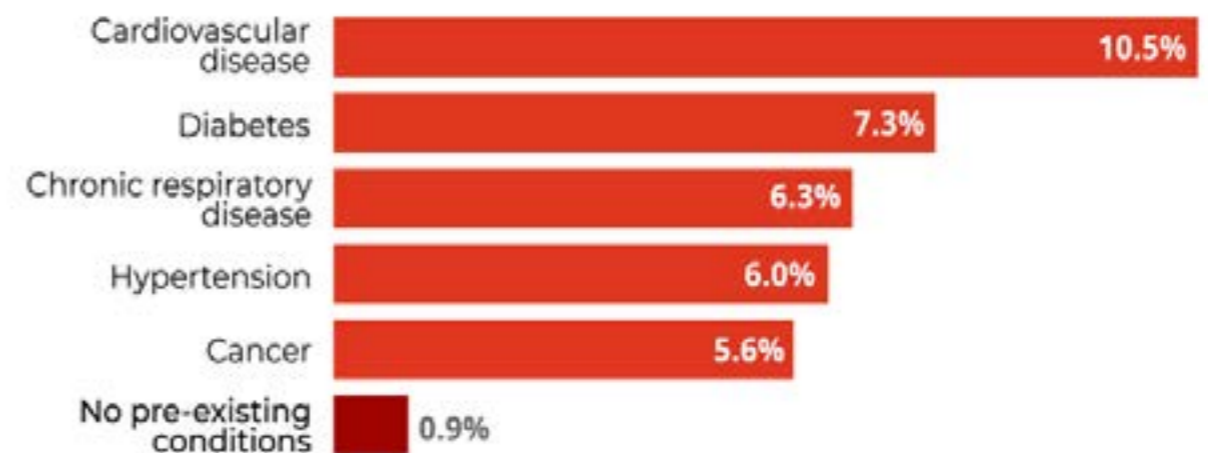
People with disability are already disadvantaged

[One in five people](#) in Australia has a disability. Of these, more than three-quarters report a physical disability, although many report multiple types.

People with disabilities are at higher risk of serious illness and death from coronavirus death due to [higher rates of co-existing health conditions](#) such as diabetes, asthma and [chronic pulmonary obstructive disease](#).

Pre-existing medical conditions and COVID-19

COVID-19 death rate by pre-existing medical condition



Source: Author provided

People with disability are more likely to be [poorer, not working and more socially isolated](#). This makes them more vulnerable to poor health outcomes during the pandemic.

Evidence for previous pandemics shows that [health inequities worsen during epidemics](#) as more marginalised communities have fewer resources (financial and social) and struggle to access necessary supplies and services.

On top of this, health information is rarely presented in an accessible format for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, such as Easy English (a style of writing that's simple and concise) and/or pictorial formats.

People with disabilities must not be de-prioritised

At a time when there is unprecedented demand for health services, we need to ensure people with disability don't miss out.

Health services can be [inadequate](#) for people with disability at the best of times because of barriers such as physical inaccessibility, lack of understanding of a person's disability, and cost.

We've already seen reports around the world that older people and those with disability have been de-prioritised in health services.

In Italy, the professional organisation that sets [guidelines](#) for intensive care has stated health resources should prioritise those with the [highest chance](#) of "therapeutic success".

If people with disability have pre-existing health conditions, or if their particular impairment means their chance of recovery is diminished, they may be de-prioritised for intensive care.

Last week the Australia and New Zealand Intensive Care Society [updated its guidelines](#) for doctors, acknowledging that when the coronavirus pandemic peaks, difficult decisions may need to be made.

It recommends doctors make decisions based on the probable outcome, whether people have underlying health conditions, and the "burden of treatment" for the patient and their family.

The guidelines don't mention people with disabilities, but it's easy to see how an assessment of the "burden of treatment" could include people with intellectual disability becoming upset by treatment, or taking more time to deliver.

Access to protective equipment and support

For people who require support with activities of daily living (dressing, bathing, meal preparation, and so on) it's likely they have one or possibly several care workers who will move in and out of their home every day.

Currently, many workers don't have access to [protective equipment](#), such as [gloves and masks](#).

Disability care workers' movement across multiple homes makes it likely that some of them will acquire and transmit COVID-19 to the people they care for.

Many of those working in care roles are among some of the [lowest paid](#) in our society and many are employed on a [casual basis](#). If they don't work a shift, they will not be paid.

This means we might be incentivising people who desperately need income to take risks with their health and the health of the people they're supporting.

Some providers are choosing to [cancel shifts](#) and not put their staff at risk. This is one way to protect staff, but will leave some people with a disability in real need.

Even before this pandemic there were disability workforce [shortages](#). This is likely to increase as the number of infections rises.

What should we do?

The [following actions](#) are urgently needed to protect people with a disability as the pandemic progresses:

- the establishment of an expert committee with members who have expertise in the disability and health sectors to advise government
- a new MBS item to develop COVID-19 health care plans with children and adults with complex disabilities, so they know how to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, and how to access tests and treatment
- a dedicated coronavirus information hotline for people with disabilities, families and disability services, staffed by people with deep understanding of disability issues and underlying health issues
- significant supplies of personal protective equipment (such as masks, gloves and gowns) for the disability support workforce to reduce transmission
- government guarantees of income for care workers who may be sick, have caring responsibilities or have their shifts cancelled
- the mobilisation of a broader disability workforce, for example by drawing on allied health students.

These actions won't address all the inequities people with disabilities face, but they will be a good start.

Study in Australia or teach in the Pacific?

By **Satish Chand** and Ryan Edwards.
Published online February 27, 2020 by **DevPolicy Blog**

The Australian Government, through its aid program, has introduced a new [Pacific Secondary School Scholarships Program](#) (PSSSP). The scholarship is marketed as ‘a prestigious Australian Government financial award’ that will provide an opportunity for the recipients to earn an international education at an Australian secondary school, thereby gaining ‘the necessary academic and leadership skills to pursue further education, training or employment pathways upon return to their home country or elsewhere in the Asia Pacific region’.

In return, the Australian Government is hoping to ‘deepen education links between Australia and the Pacific’ where the recipients of the scholarship will ‘develop lifelong connections with Australia and their fellow Pacific alumni’. These are ambitious goals, progress on which will probably be tracked as the program is rolled out.

Residents of Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu between the ages of 15 and 17 enrolled in school are eligible for the scholarship. Applications close on 1 March, and scholarships are to be awarded following assessment on the advertised [selection criteria](#).

The number of scholarships to be awarded through this [four-year, \\$66 million program](#) is unclear. It is, however, likely to involve hundreds of students, each one costing Australian taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars a year. Under the quantum of the initial announcement and assuming states and schools are not absorbing any costs, we are looking at \$82,000 per student if 200 scholarships are awarded per year or \$33,000 if 500 (many times what a teacher earns in Fiji). By contrast, the [Schooling Resource Standard base funding](#) for Australian secondary students in 2020 is \$14,761 per student. This aid, through the PSSSP, will likely provide additional income to host schools, enrich the cultural composition of the local community, and possibly link host families to their counterparts in the Pacific.

The recipients selected on the advertised criteria are likely to gain an international education funded by Australian taxpayers. Whether this will deepen the links between Australia and the Pacific or lead them to pursue higher education, with a view to returning home to take up leadership positions, remains to be seen. If indeed the case, then lifelong links to Australia by the educated elite in the Pacific are possible.

The question we ask is whether this is the best route to achieving the stated goals of these scholarships. Let’s focus on three specific issues.

1. Will Australia get new/additional students from the PSSSP?

[A trickle of Pacific islanders](#) has historically come to Australia and New Zealand for tertiary studies, usually on scholarships provided by the source or host nation. Those who come to pursue secondary education initially did so also on scholarships, but the approximately 6,000 Pacific island children currently studying in Australia are now nearly exclusively funded privately – mostly by their well-to-do parents. The question for the PSSSP is whether it will lead to a noticeable net increase in the number of places in secondary schools that will accrue to Pacific islanders. If a hundred places, as an example, are offered under the PSSSP, then would this lead to an additional 100 students from the Pacific islands in secondary schools in Australia? Yes, but only if none of those likely to come privately do not jump on PSSSP. At worst, if all the PSSSP places are taken up by the existing privately funded students, then the net gain to PSSSP would be zilch. Although the program says it will give preference to students from rural areas, an ‘independent, merit-based selection process’ will likely favour the rich and, with [weak income and poverty measurement](#) across the region, effective means testing or targeting is unlikely. The program could thus generate little additionality, subsidise the well-off, and exacerbate inequality.

2. What will the PSSSP cost?

The cost of the PSSSP can be measured in two ways. First, the financial cost of tuition, accommodation, airfares, and other program expenses for the recipient, likely tens of thousands of dollars each year. Second, the aggregate opportunity cost. As the aid budget is fixed in dollar terms, PSSSP must draw funds from other programs. We need to know what the PSSSP has displaced and the cost of displacement to assess the PSSSP’s value for money.

3. What are the non-pecuniary costs of the PSSSP?

PSSSP, if significant in size and effective in selecting the best and the brightest of the Pacific, will deplete local schools of their cream. This [could adversely affect the performance of students left behind](#) and the morale of local teachers. Placing children as young as 15 into a foreign country among strangers may also not be in the best interest of the child or their parents.

Teach for the Pacific as an alternative

We propose an alternative in the form of a ‘Teach for the Pacific’ initiative, not dissimilar to [Teach for Australia](#). ‘Teach for the Pacific’ could be run in tandem with the PSSSP with a view to testing the efficacy of the two programs in delivering the Australian Government’s stated goals.

While this is not the place for spelling out the full details of ‘Teach for the Pacific’, let us highlight just five key features.

- (i) The program would be a two-way exchange for the best teachers across the Pacific to teach abroad for three years. Pacific islander teaching graduates (possibly through Australia Awards) could apply for placement in Australian schools, and recent Australian teaching graduates and experienced (and retired) teachers could apply for placement in the Pacific. These two-way flows are likely to achieve the stated goals of the PSSSP, particularly strengthening leadership skills (with a view to training and mentoring future principals) and improving educational outcomes for more students. A proportionally higher flow to the region could alleviate any [‘brain drain’](#) concerns.
- (ii) Recruits would be selected on merit and required to return home for a period equal to their residence abroad, as is standard with other Australian scholarships.
- (iii) Remuneration would be that of a local teacher, funded from the aid budget.
- (iv) Benchmarks would be created with respect to student learning, placement, and the set goals of the PSSSP, to monitor progress over the life of the program and beyond.
- (v) Schools would be randomly assigned into ‘Teach for the Pacific’, PSSSP, and neither (i.e. the control group) to allow for evaluation of the programs.

Forging a new pathway to progress gender equality in Australia

By **Sue Williamson** and Linda Colley.
Published online February 25, 2020 by **The Mandarin**

The Australian community is once again talking about how violence against women and their children can be prevented, in the wake of last week's horrific murder of Hannah Clarke and her children. As [some have noted](#), this behaviour does not just happen, but develops from toxic perceptions about gender in our society and workplaces.

Amidst the horror of last week, the possibility of a new way to progress gender equality emerged from Victoria. On 20 February, the [Gender Equality Act was passed](#) by the Victorian parliament. This was an historic moment. It represents a new approach to reducing violence against women, by progressing gender equality, including in the workplace.

The [Gender Equality Act](#) will cover a range of public sector agencies that have more than 50 employees, including departments and agencies, universities and local councils. The legislation imposes a positive duty on organisations to progress gender equality – an approach successfully implemented in a range of countries, [including the UK](#).

These organisations will be required to conduct a workplace gender audit, develop a Gender Equality Action Plan every four years, and report to a newly-established Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner every two years.

Agency reports – which will include progress made against gender indicators – will be made publicly available. Transparency is a vital part of progressing gender equality. [Our research](#) has also demonstrated the importance of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, as without them the implementation of gender equality action plans can become mere gender window dressing.

Developing and implementing gender equality action plans is not new to the public sector. Australian Public Service (APS) departments have been implementing gender equality action plans for the last couple of years. These plans are offshoots of the overarching [APS Gender Equality Strategy 2016-19](#), which contains many good initiatives.

[Our analysis has found](#) that some of the plans are comprehensive documents which, if fully implemented, will progress gender equality. Other plans are shallow and do not contain meaningful targets. Very few of the plans contain robust performance indicators, and even fewer had the mechanisms to monitor the outcomes.

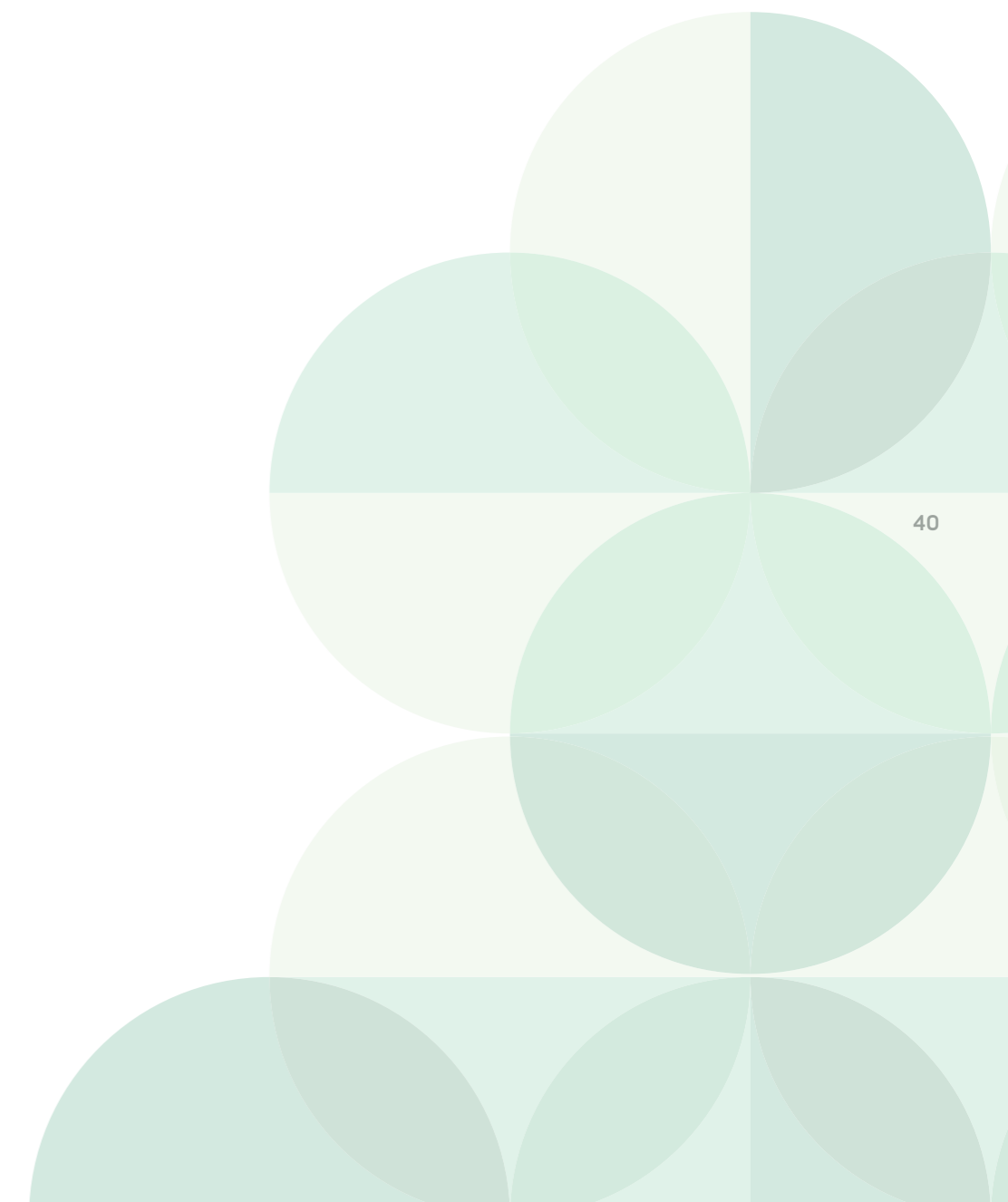
My colleagues and I [have analysed](#) all 18 APS department's gender equality plans and found that several of them aimed to be employers of choice, and to be recognised as such by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. This is a laudable aim, but one which may not be met by agencies due to a lack of accountability.

These limitations will be potentially overcome by the Gender Equality Act. This legislation will require Victorian agencies to report on their progress towards implementing initiatives to progress gender equality. This is similar to the requirements for larger private sector organisations to report to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

The Gender Equality Act will also embed new gender equality architecture, through a new Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner. While the Commissioner will largely have an educative role, the position also carries enforcement powers. Agencies that do not make "reasonable and material progress" on workplace gender equality can be served a compliance notice. They can be "named and shamed" if they are non-compliant – not a good look for a public sector organisation.

The reach of the new legislation is extensive, covering over 300 public sector agencies. These agencies have the opportunity to become employers of choice – not just for women, but for everyone in workplaces, with ripple effects across society. The Gender Equality Act provides a blueprint for other public sector jurisdictions to follow.

In a sad week that revealed ongoing pockets of misogyny and violence against women, it is heartening to see a positive pathway. We can't wait to see how this pans out.



Literacy in the Pacific: in danger of being sidelined?

By **Wendy Jarvie** (Adjunct).

Published online February 14, 2020 by **DevPolicy Blog**

The Pacific is a crowded policy space – inevitable given the wide range of challenges facing Pacific island countries. Most recently, with climate change being on everyone’s mind and the need for massively enhanced infrastructure in the Pacific to help deal with it, it’s difficult to get any oxygen and priority for discussions on education, including literacy.

But there are major education issues in the Pacific. While there are high enrolments of children in primary school, countries are struggling to achieve decent education outcomes. For example, the [recently released](#) 2018 Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) data shows that **only half of children in Year 4 are at the Pacific literacy benchmark** for their grade. (Compared to Australia where around 95% of Australian Year 3 students are at or above our literacy benchmarks.)

The literacy problem starts early in a child’s school life.

In Tonga, an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) done in 2014 found that literacy problems were apparent as early as Year 1 with, for example, 25% of students at the end of their first year of schooling recording “zero” for letter-sound recognition. These children did not know the sound for any letter. That means a basic building block of reading comprehension – understanding the sounds that are associated with letters – is missing for these children. Most Pacific island countries for which EGRA studies have been done show that reading comprehension is very poor for a large proportion of children in Years 1–3.

Part of the problem is that many children are not starting “school ready”. A World Bank [study](#) of three Pacific countries in 2013 found that parents did not value early childhood education, or see their role in providing cognitive stimulus. Preschool participation is patchy. While most children have good oral skills, and they have stories told to them and they sing songs, many live in households with virtually no exposure to books or printed words. A large proportion are not read to by their parents or other adults. They start school not being aware of the right way to hold a book, or how pages turn, or that those squiggles on the pages mean words. And all the evidence is that children who start school behind, stay behind.

Pacific island country education ministers are well aware of the education challenges they face. They have developed a [Pacific Regional Education Framework 2018–30](#), and, with the help of development partners, have invested in measurement. PILNA – meant to be a one-off when first done in 2012 – is being done on a regular basis to help guide country education programs. Countries such as Vanuatu have undertaken major reforms in their curriculum and school systems. Fiji has been investing in early childhood education. Through the Pacific Early Age Readiness and Learning ([PEARL](#)) program, Tonga and Tuvalu trialled community play-based activities (playgroups) to lift school readiness. The playgroups in Tonga, evaluated through a randomised control trial, significantly increased pre-literacy of the most disadvantaged children. They were also inexpensive. Tonga, Kiribati and Tuvalu trialled new approaches to teaching reading and got impressive improvements in reading comprehension of children in Years 1 and 2.

There has been progress. The PILNA 2018 results were a significant improvement on 2015:

- 53% of students in Year 4 met or exceeded expected literacy standards – up from 43% in 2015, and
- 63% of Year 6 students met or exceeded literacy standards – up from under 50% in 2015.

But even if these impressive rates of improvement are maintained, it won’t be until the 2030s that 90% of Year 4 children are at acceptable literacy levels. There will also be countries that will lag.

The [World Bank](#) has recognised the fundamental importance of literacy, as part of a human capital development agenda, pointing out that investments in areas such as infrastructure and trade facilitation will not yield expected returns without human capital investments. It is obvious to all that infrastructure investments, such as cables, are a far greater boost to economies with healthy and skilled populations who can read, write and innovate to make the most of this infrastructure. At the 2019 DFAT [Education Forum](#) the Bank made [a strong case](#) for literacy investment, arguing that countries should aim to have all their children reading with comprehension by the age of ten.

While Australian development assistance has been provided to education, it has very little profile, with priority in the development budget going to economic development, infrastructure, security and private sector development. Of the education assistance allocated, much goes to older age children or school leavers – for example, to skills development through initiatives such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition, on labour mobility through the Pacific Labour Scheme, and most recently to a new [secondary scholarship program](#). There has also been support for improved data, such as PILNA. But these investments, while valuable, will not help with school readiness or early age reading, and indeed because of poor literacy, these programs run the risk of not achieving the outcomes Pacific islanders and their governments want and need.

Don’t get me wrong, I believe there is an important role for Australia to play in helping the Pacific to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to meet the challenges of delivering health, transport, energy and other services to small highly dispersed populations. Like most people, I love infrastructure – power poles, roads that withstand cyclones, and cables that bring Facebook to the Pacific and enhance trade linkages. And I want Australia to support these. But to be a good neighbour means helping to set the basic building blocks for strong peoples, communities, and economies. Literacy is at the heart of this.

Exploring ways to reduce Australia's reoffending rates

By **Caroline Doyle** (Opinion piece).
Published online February 13, 2020 by **The Canberra Times**

The recently released annual Justice Report on Australian Government Services reveals that while crime rates are decreasing, rates of imprisonment are increasing.

Expenditure on corrective services was almost \$5 billion, an increase of about six per cent. The national imprisonment rate is sitting at 220.2 per 100,000 people, an increase of 28 per cent in the last 10 years.

Almost 55 per cent of released prisoners returned to prison, with the ACT having the highest rate of prison return, at 71 per cent.

More needs to be done to address these rising incarceration and reoffending rates. However, there are some promising signs across Australia. The Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre recently became the first remand centre and the fourth women's prison in the world to host the 5km running event, parkrun.

Prison-run radio programs, such as Jailbreak in NSW, not only teach inmates new skills but also connect them to the community. There are similar radio programs in Victorian and Western Australian prisons.

In Victoria, Straight Talking provides mentors, who have lived prison experience, to individuals exiting prison.

One mentor has since gone on to become the operations manager of Fruit2Work - an organisation which provides employment opportunities for individuals exiting prison. In the ACT, the Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List is currently being trialled.

This program is designed to rehabilitate, rather than imprison, individuals whose criminal activity is associated with drug or alcohol dependence and is based on NSW and Victorian models.

Over the last year, I have been interviewing individuals who have spent time in the ACT prison - the Alexander Maconochie Centre - to hear about their experiences post release.

They have told me about the range of challenges they have faced, such as finding housing, finishing their year 10 certificate, repaying debts, addressing underlying health issues, finding employment with a criminal record, dealing with addiction issues and reconnecting with family and friends.

43 These individuals know that if they don't deal with these challenges, they may end up back in prison.

More needs to be done to address the rising incarceration and reoffending rates, and individuals with lived prison experience can offer policymakers crucial insights into the realities of life post release.

What drives problems with policy capacity in the APS? Have your say

By **Anne Faulkner** (PhD candidate).
Published online February 7, 2020 by **The Mandarin**

The ability of the Australian Public Service to "efficiently and effectively serve the government, parliament and the Australian public" needs to improve. This is the key message from the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service, chaired by David Thodey AO, which submitted its [final report](#) and 40 recommendations last December after 16 months of review. The report indicates that this will require development of APS capability in many areas, including policy advice and strategic policy capability.

Identified in the detail of the report are the strategies to achieve this, including changes to the way the APS learns, collects information, evaluates, reviews its performance, and manages the individual performance of its people.

As the Thodey report acknowledges, however, these problems, and many of the recommendations, are not new. They unsettlingly mirror those that have emerged from many administrative reviews of the past decade and are seemingly unachieved.

By way of example: enhancing policy capability, building expertise, using external partnerships and engaging with the public to improve policy advice and policy and improving performance management are areas of work that have been the focus of recommendations in each of: the Thodey report, the ***Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*** released in 2010, and some of the findings of the Secretaries' APS Reform Committee over the past few years. Critical to contemporary ideas about the public service is also the re-emergence in the Thodey report of ideas about accountability and trust in government that appeared in the Ahead of the Game report 10 years ago.

The Thodey review suggests that the reason for failure to achieve transformation in the past sits with poor implementation of recommendations, calling, this time, for stronger leadership and co-ordination, building greater capability and measuring progress, and the provision of sufficient and sustained investment and cultural change.

Could the repeated emergence of these findings in multiple reviews also suggest, however, the need for a closer look at the nature of the assumed relationships between some of the strategies and their goals? Assumptions made about how to build capacity and create cultural change in the public sector have attracted relatively little scrutiny, and choice of strategies may benefit from a closer examination.

44 By way of example: a critical relationship is often assumed to exist between performance and accountability measures and policy capacity. The assumption is that performance and accountability measures can, at least in part, drive policy capacity through enhancing personal accountability for work and increasing transparency. There is little evidence, however, of how this relationship effects the complex work of social policy, for example, which requires nimble thinking and innovative ideas to work closely and flexibly with communities and networks.

A new study led by [UNSW Canberra](#) is exploring the links between performance and accountability requirements for social policy capacity. This will examine the administrative conditions for policy workers that enable social policy capacity in Commonwealth public service agencies. To do this, the project is examining the APS performance and accountability framework and interviewing public sector social policy officers to understand how these frameworks and other administrative imperatives are interpreted by APS policy workers and influence their everyday policy work. The research will identify how policy capacity is affected by administrative demands regarding performance and accountability and how performance and accountability systems might better support social policy workers for better social policy outcomes.

If you are interested in being involved in this research as an active social policy worker at the Senior Executive Service level, Executive Level 2 or Executive Level 1, then we are seeking interviewees and would love to hear from you. Interviews are confidential and will discuss concepts relevant to policy capacity, performance and accountability frameworks and social policy making. Interviewees will be invited to describe how their environment and administrative imperatives interact with their policy work and how they feel best supported to work in ways that evidence policy capacity. As a participant in this study, you would receive an early summary of findings on which you may comment prior to publication.

[A disturbing understanding of gender equality](#)

By **Sue Williamson**.

Published online January 29, 2020 by **The Mandarin**

Australia Day has been plagued by controversies in recent years, and 2020 has been no different. Contentious issues include whether it is appropriate to celebrate on the day of mourning for our First Nations peoples and [whether a dress code](#) should be imposed on those attending citizenship ceremonies.

The latest controversy centres on who should receive an award. Bettina Arndt, sex therapist and proud anti-feminist was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to gender equity. Many have condemned this move on social media. Rosie Batty, a former Australian of the Year and domestic violence campaigner [has been reported](#) as being “shocked” and “dismayed” at Arndt receiving this award.

Australia Day awards not only recognise the contribution of individuals to Australian society, but also send a powerful message to the community about what is valued. Bettina Arndt’s questionable contribution to gender equality includes being supportive of convicted paedophiles [Nicolaas Bester](#) and [George Pell](#). Arndt [also claims](#) that sexual assault on university campuses is exaggerated, despite the findings of the Australian Human Rights Commission’s inquiry which found [over a fifth of students](#) had been sexually harassed at university.

Arndt has shown support to the misogynist men’s rights movement. Giving her an award therefore endorses and legitimises these beliefs. This toxic version of gender equality sees men as victims – the pendulum has swung too far, and women have gained at men’s expense.

This contrasts with the views of a recent Australian Government Minister for Women. In 2018, Kelly O’Dwyer stated that “gender equality isn’t about pitting girls against boys, or women against men [...] gender equality is recognising that girls and women deserve an equal stake in our society and economy”. Australia Day awards are part of this recognition.

Awarding Arndt, however, is a manifestation of [backlash](#). In essence, this action sends a message that gender equality has gone too far and men’s rights are to be valued above women’s and children’s rights. Gender equality benefits both men and women – it is not a competition which men have to win.

[Australia has slipped](#) from being 16th on gender equality in 2006, to now being 44th out of 149 countries. Clearly, Australia has some way to go before gender equality for Australian women is achieved. Awarding those who undermine genuine gender equality is unlikely to raise Australia’s status on global gender equality, or assist Australian women.

The awards process is opaque. Nominations are made to the Council for the Order of Australia, which consists of [19 members](#). Liz Broderick, former Sex Discrimination Commissioner is on this council, which makes Arndt’s award even more curious.

Nominations are considered twice a year, and assessed according to three criteria, including “demonstrated achievement at a high level”. The [website](#) does not state whether awards are awarded on a consensus or majority vote of the council. Transparency in the process would assist our understanding of exactly how awardees are chosen.

Arndt’s award should be revoked. Section 4(4) of the [Terminations and Cancellations Ordinance](#) enables the governor-general to revoke an award if the awardee has “has behaved or acted in a manner that has brought disrepute on the order”. In order to maintain the integrity of the awards process, and the validity of those awards already given out, this revocation should occur as a matter of priority.

Potential risks and benefits of using a 'family violence' frame

By **Sophie Yates**.

Published online November 27, 2019 by **The Power To Persuade**

For the 16 Days of Activism, today's analysis considers the importance of word choice in talking about gendered violence. Sophie Yates (@DrSophieYates) of the Public Service Research Group (@PSResearchG) at UNSW Canberra unpacks some of the pros and cons of using a 'family violence' rather than a 'domestic violence' approach. While there is concern that this phrase makes gendered inequalities invisible, there are also opportunities that this framing provides. This analysis is drawn from a new article which is freely available until January 2020.

If you live in Victoria, you might not know that 'family violence' can be a controversial policy term – it's just the term we use to talk about violence in families, and it's generally understood or implied that this violence is usually perpetrated by men against women and children. I certainly didn't realise there were deep disagreements over definitions and terminology until I started researching different ways of framing domestic and family violence in policy.

Family violence in Victoria is [defined](#) as behaviour by a person towards a family member that is physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically or economically abusive; or threatening, coercive or dominating. Exposing children to any of these behaviours is also considered family violence. 'Family member' is [defined](#) as current and former spouses and de facto spouses, relatives, dependent children, and people who are regarded as family members for cultural reasons (e.g. in Aboriginal extended families) or come to be regarded as being like family members (including family-like relationships that may develop in disability care homes and between carers and clients). So this is a very broad definition, which is quite different from how domestic and family violence (DFV) is defined in most other jurisdictions internationally.

Family violence, domestic violence, violence against women...?

The international conventions and treaties that have shaped global pressure for action on DFV since the early 1990s are all rooted in concerns about violence against women occurring in the context of gender inequality. These include the UN [Vienna Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#), the UN [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), which has violence against women as a key area of concern, and the EU's [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#). There are no comparable initiatives for *family violence*, the way it's defined in Victoria.

The policy term at the national level in Australia has traditionally been 'domestic violence', largely understood to be intimate partner violence perpetrated by men against women and children. Family violence tends to be used when people are talking about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as explained in the [National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children](#). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel that this term [better reflects](#) their experiences of violence and the way it reverberates around extended families and communities. However, Victoria has long used family violence as its main policy term, and the broad definition of family violence given above has been in effect since 2008.

Any framing of a problem brings with it advantages and disadvantages. While 'family' framing can be seen as inclusive, it can also work to obscure the strongly gendered nature of the problem. As the term family violence becomes more prevalent in Australian jurisdictions (and increasingly in New Zealand and Canada), some feminists remain uneasy about gender neutral terms decreasing the policy focus on men's violence against women and therefore leading to worse outcomes for female victims and their children.

My [recent article](#) on Victoria and the case of the Royal Commission into Family Violence underscores that a 'family violence' framing does not necessarily entail a gender-neutral approach to the problem. Due to a host of factors like a history of feminist activism, a vibrant women's NGO sector, individual gender equality champions, and the international context of activism on violence against women, Victoria's approach remains strongly gendered. But I took this opportunity to reflect on the risks and opportunities inherent in family violence framing.

Risks in family violence framing

One risk of family violence framing is that the inclusion of violence between all family members in the problem diagnosis will mask the gendered nature of the problem, as not all forms of family violence are as sex-asymmetrical as intimate partner violence. Outside the Australian and New Zealand contexts this term tends to be used in a [gender-neutral family conflict model](#) rather than a gender equality model, and usually signals a lack of attention to gender and power dynamics. One DFV expert I interviewed for my research explained that outside Australia 'family violence' is so associated with non-feminist approaches that she is careful not to use it in case she is misunderstood.

While family violence doesn't have a gender neutral narrative in Victoria, I still noticed that the Victorian Royal Commission did not use a gendered analysis to connect different types of family violence with a larger gender inequality narrative. The Commission's report justified its emphasis on gender inequality as a key driver of *family violence*, and a lever for family violence prevention, based on the role that gender inequality plays in *intimate partner violence* (the most common form of family violence). The report did not consider the influence of gender on other forms of family violence such as adolescent violence, sibling violence, family of origin violence against LGBT+ people, and elder abuse.

In other words, gender inequality was seen as important because it drives many cases of family violence (those comprising men's intimate partner violence against women) but wasn't understood as being related to *all* forms of family violence. So in some ways, the gendered nature of the problem was in fact masked even though there was much attention to the gendered drivers of family violence.

Another risk is the possibility that while it may be inclusive for some groups, certain communities won't feel that family violence includes them. People in LGBT+ relationships may feel that domestic violence captures their experiences of violence between intimate partners, while family violence does not. Also, the word 'domestic' captures the variety of home-like contexts that people with disabilities may live in, without necessarily being 'family' contexts, so domestic violence may better capture the experience of some people with disabilities.

Opportunities in family violence framing

While the risk of a degendered policy response within a family violence frame shouldn't be downplayed, there are also opportunities inherent in a family violence approach. In an immediately practical way, family violence framing can help marginalised groups such as Aboriginal communities, the elderly and people with disabilities feel included and valued, and have family violence resources directed towards their communities. A family violence approach can also better reflect the needs and experiences of children who are exposed to violence between adult family members, and whose experiences of violence are often [intertwined](#) with those of their mothers. The effects of intimate partner violence are rarely confined to just the perpetrator and the victim.

Importantly, family violence approaches can also offer insights into how gender matters across the various types of family violence. Combined with intersectional feminist analyses that are sensitive to many different structures that distribute power (such as race, class and disability), a broad definition of family violence can help us with understanding how gendered inequalities underlie many seemingly very different forms of violence. Gender is a pervasive social structure that distributes power unequally among more groups than just adult heterosexual men and women, and thus affects the perpetration and experience of family violence beyond heterosexual intimate relationships.

For example, norms of [compulsory heterosexuality](#), which are related to expectations of how gender is performed, disempower LGBT+ people relative to heterosexual people. This has implications for the violence that LGBT+ people experience from their families of origin when they come out, and also for the perpetration and experience of violence in their intimate relationships.

The violence that [some South Asian women](#) can experience from female family members is also closely related to gendered cultural expectations of the role played by young wives and the responsibility of older women to discipline and control them on behalf of male family members.

Further, what figures we have about adolescent family violence show that it's usually perpetrated by [teenage boys against their mothers](#), and the most common pattern of sibling violence is [brothers abusing sisters](#). Again, gendered inequalities underlie these statistics.

If these varied forms of violence come under the policy rubric of a *family violence* response, they can be considered together, as part of a set of similar phenomena involving imbalances of power in family contexts. An intersectional gender and power analysis shows that gender is one of the main determinants of these power imbalances, along with other factors such as race, class and disability.

In summary, the main risk of taking a family violence approach to the problem is the potential for de-gendering the problem frame. These are potentially balanced by a family violence frame's inclusiveness towards marginalised and disempowered groups – particularly children and Aboriginal peoples – and the benefits of understanding and combating the intersecting inequalities that underlie multiple forms of violence between family members.

[Access the full article here.](#)

The NDIS is changing. Here's what you need to know – and what problems remain

By **Helen Dickinson**.

Published online November 21, 2019 by **The Conversation**

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Minister Stuart Robert this month announced a number of "practical changes" to the scheme.

Acknowledging the NDIS is not consistently living up to expectations, he said these improvements will put it "[onto a business as usual even keel for the long term](#)".

While the proposed changes have promise, there remain some fundamental challenges plaguing the scheme that these reforms are unlikely to address.

A scheme under pressure

The NDIS represents a massive policy reform process, so it's [unsurprising it should face teething problems and challenges](#) during implementation.

Official figures show more than 310,000 people now have plans in place, with the scheme intended to reach around [460,000 by full roll out](#) next year. This has all been achieved at [significant pace](#).

Yet in recent months, we've seen continued criticism of the scheme and the agency that administers it (the National Disability Insurance Agency, or the NDIA).

Grievances relate to issues including failure to [pay service providers enough](#) to cover costs; [provider fraud allegations](#); the [inability of people with disability](#) to access services; and the [remuneration level](#) of the NDIA's new CEO.

Added to these are concerning accounts of abuse and neglect beginning to emerge from the [disability royal commission](#).

Delivering the last 20%

Minister Robert described the NDIS as "[about 80% there, with 20% left to go](#)". He acknowledged the last 20% is often the hardest.

The government's plan for the NDIS focuses on [six key aims](#) including quicker access and quality decision making, equitable and consistent decisions and better long-term outcomes for participants.

While critical of the "[jargon and gobbledegook](#)" in the recent announcements, consumer groups have welcomed a number of the minister's plans, identifying these as areas they have been advocating for over the last few years.

Some positive changes

Among the promises that should have a positive impact is the announcement people will be able to use their funding more flexibly. Currently funds are locked into particular categories of supports and activities and it's not easy to move resources between these.

The reality is people's lives do not fit neatly into administrative categories and the flexibility to use funds differently should make a big difference.

Further, from April next year people will be able to see a draft of their plan before it's approved. At present most participants see their plan for the first time when they formally receive it after the planning process. Any mistakes made typically require a full review, causing delays in getting services in place and adding to the planning workload.

Participants will also be able to make small changes to their plan without it undergoing a full review, which will be a relief to those who have become mired in endless plan reviews due to changes in their situation.

Soon people will also be able to request [longer plan durations](#), of up to three years. Currently most plans last one year. For people who have relatively stable disability – that is, their health and capacity isn't getting any worse or any better – this will be a relief. The move also cuts some unnecessary red tape and will reduce planners' workloads.

But it does require people to have a clear sense of their priorities and needs. It may be detrimental to people whose circumstances are more changeable – they could become locked into a plan that no longer suits their needs.

We will also see the roll out of independent assessments to be paid for by the NDIS. This should have a positive impact as people currently either have to pay for their own assessments or wait for a significant length of time on a public waiting list. In terms of equitable access this is a significant improvement.

Finally, plans will be made accessible in additional formats including large font, audio, e-text and braille. For many outside the system it will come as a surprise this is not standard practice.

The devil is in the detail

There's no doubt we've seen some real improvements in the scheme in recent months. The wait time for children to receive a plan halved over the last quarter ([to 48 days](#)). The number of people waiting for assistive technologies (like wheelchairs or communication devices) has reduced by [nearly two-thirds](#). This is good but around 5,000 people are still waiting.

So progress can be made, but these new promises come with little detail about how they will be delivered.

Meanwhile, the system is already creaking at the seams with little spare capacity.

In 2014, a staffing cap was placed on the NDIA, restricting the numbers employed to [3,000](#), though the government has committed to increasing the cap gradually to [3,400](#) in 2020-21. Although reducing the number and frequency of full plan reviews will reduce demand for planners, it's difficult to envision how this will free up sufficient spare capacity to support all these changes.

A number of organisations have also criticised the [quality of planners](#), who often have limited training and experience in disability services. There seems to be little in these announcements to tackle this.

It's also important to note having a plan doesn't guarantee being able to access services. In many parts of the country we're seeing significant waiting lists for even the most common supports (for example, occupational therapy).

A new report found nearly one-third of disability providers reported [a loss of income in the last financial year](#) and several were concerned for their long term viability. There is an urgent need to address issues of supply within the system before we see even greater gaps emerge.

While these recent promises edge the NDIS in the right direction, the scheme is still facing some fundamental challenges. These will need to be addressed if the NDIS is to live up to the aspirations of those accessing it.

Where are the women? A gender analysis of the APS Review

By Linda Colley and Sue Williamson.

Published online September 16, 2019 by The Mandarin

The [biggest review](#) of the Australian Public Service (APS) in 40 years is likely to herald significant changes, particularly for APS employees. As the APS is committed to progressing gender equality, we wondered: what might the review mean for women employees?

The short answer is, we don't know.

We have recently [conducted research](#) examining whether gender and issues of concern to women have been considered in the APS Review to date.

The APS is a female-dominated workforce and is committed to progressing gender equality. This is evident with the release of the [Gender Equality Strategy](#) in 2016. Agencies subsequently developed and implemented their own gender equality action plans, some of which are [very good](#).

This renewed focus on gender equality therefore led us to expect that the APS Review would also include a focus on women. We have examined key documents and submissions made by organisations to see how gender equality is being addressed.

The brief Terms of Reference did not mention gender or women. When the APS Review Interim Report was released in March 2019, we again found that gender was invisible. The focus on the workforce did not include any mention of women, gender or diversity. Similarly, no attention was given to those identifying as non-binary.

We examined the submissions to the APS Review, and analysed 77 publicly available submissions from organisations. Only two submissions considered gender equality issues in any meaningful way (from the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)). The remaining submissions were either gender blind or discussed gender in a cursory way, such as listing "women" as one demographic diversity group.

The most common manifestation of gender equality was in discussions about women in leadership. Five organisations cited the proportion of women in their leadership ranks or called for increased numbers of women leaders. As we have found in [our research on middle managers'](#) understanding of gender equality, a tendency exists to conflate numerical parity with equality. This can mask more subtle manifestations of inequality.

Very few organisations—apart from the CPSU and AHRC—considered working arrangements. Of those that did, one agency highlighted their flexible working arrangements, which included Activity Based Working. Another noted the lack of take-up of flexible working arrangements in their agency. Two others encouraged the use of flexible working arrangements to attract staff.

The discussions of flexible working in these submissions were not extensive, and an underlying assumption that flexible working is non-gendered was evident. Bottom of Form

Despite a commitment for the APS to be an employer of choice, to date the APS Review has not focused on the largest part of the APS workforce – women. Those submitting to the Review, or course, were under no obligation to do so. But given the importance of the APS Review, it is reasonable to expect those governing the APS review would consider gender issues.

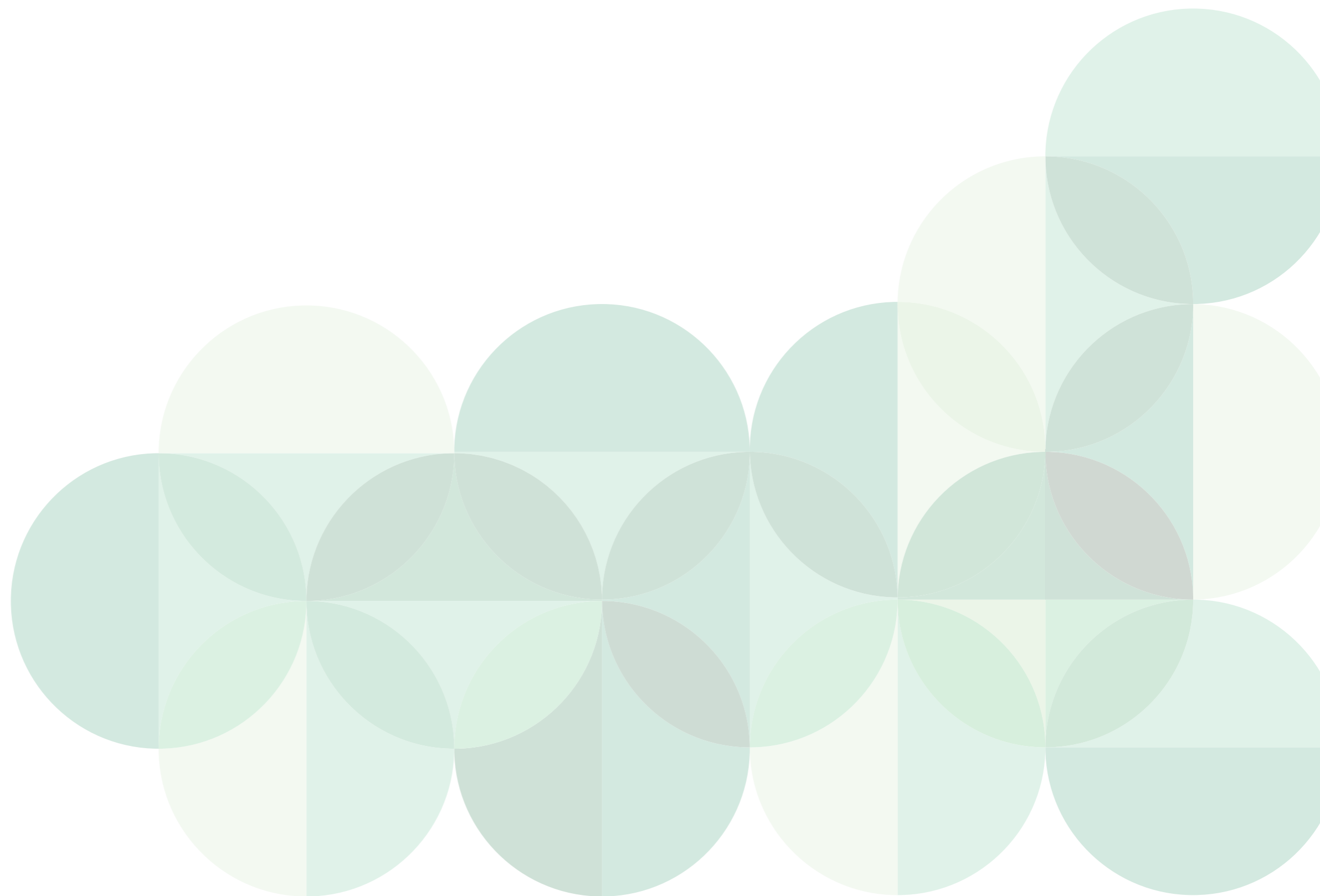
The APS Review is the latest in a long line of public management reforms, and [international research](#) has shown that public sector reforms are not renowned for their attention to gender equality.

We have seen an example of this. The APS *Gender Equality Strategy* was released around the same time as *Unlocking Potential*, which recommended major reforms that potentially conflicted with the aims of the *Gender Equality Strategy*.

A failure to incorporate gender equality in public sector reforms not only means that issues of relevance to women are ignored, but that progress already made could be reversed.

The *APS Gender Equality Strategy* will [expire at the end of this year](#). The APS Review team has an opportunity to not only align policies, but also to embed the initiatives commenced with the *APS Gender Equality Strategy*, and reinforce initiatives in any forthcoming APS gender equality strategy.

The full article on which this excerpt is based has just been published in the [Australian Journal of Public Administration](#).



FOR MORE INFORMATION



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