nesa
national employment services association

ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26

NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICES ASSOCIATION LTD

A REGISTERED CHARITY
SINCE 1 JULY 2025



Opportunity for everyone
through employment and inclusion

ABOUT NESA

NESA is the national peak body for Australia's employment and related services sectors. We drive excellence in employment services through sector representation, development, support and connection.

Our members work every day with job seekers, helping them to find and keep a job. They work with people where they are at, whether they have a disability, are First Nations people in remote communities, parents returning to the workforce, young people starting out, or a person who has been looking for work for a long time.

We also represent our members to government, build the skills of the sector's workforce, support members through change, and bring the sector together to share what it knows.

> ***"Our vision is simple and ambitious:** opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion."*
>
> *Kathryn Mandla, CEO*



On 1 July 2025, NESA became a registered charity, affirming the purpose and commitment that have always defined our work. Our charitable purposes are to advance education in the employment and related services sector, and to advance social or public welfare through the wellbeing of unemployed, disadvantaged and marginalised people through economic and social inclusion and participation.

Acknowledgement of Country

NESA acknowledges First Nations Peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this nation and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We celebrate the cultures and wisdom of First Nations Peoples and acknowledge 65,000 years of custodianship and connection to lands, sea and country. NESA also celebrates the wisdom and lived experience of First Nations communities and their valued contribution in shaping NESA's work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

02 About NESA

04 The year at a glance

05 From the Chair

07 From the CEO

09 The year the sector changed

12 Our purpose and our plan

13 Speaking up for the sector

21 Building workforce capability

23 Standing with members through change

25 Bringing the sector together

28 Recognition: the NESA Awards for Excellence

32 Our members

33 Financial performance

34 Governance and our people

35 Our industry stakeholders and sponsors

"If we keep the people this system exists to serve at the centre of every decision, we will always know which way is north."

Kathryn Mandla, NESA CEO

THE YEAR AT A GLANCE

The year fell into two distinct periods. The first was invested in transition priorities, as Inclusive Employment Australia and the Remote Australia Employment Service came into operation. The last weeks turned sharply to reform, as the Australian Government opened consultation on the future of employment services.

Behind every number on this page is a conversation with a member, a session with a group of frontline workers, or a problem that needed solving.

REPRESENTING THE SECTOR

123 **advocacy issues formally raised** with Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), Department of Social Services (DSS), and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the Department of Finance

78% of those **issues closed** during the financial year

365+ recorded **advocacy interactions** with members including 22 formal meetings

16 **member focus groups** and Special Interest Groups including two with frontline workers and CEOs

10 Employment services **reform consultation sessions** with members in June 2026, drawing 277 participants

1 seat at the table of the **Minister's Employment Services Reform Advisory Group**

BUILDING CAPABILITY

1,550+ people registered to learn with NESA Academy, as at 30 June 2026, up from 1,051 a year earlier

76 modules available in the Academy as at 30 June 2026

938 staff with **LEARN Subscription access** as at 30 June 2026

SHAPING THE CONVERSATION

4 **thought leadership papers** delivered through NESA Next

100k+ **Australians reached** through CEO interviews on national television and radio

11.9% **LinkedIn engagement**, more than double the industry benchmark of 2–5%

SUPPORTING AND CONNECTING THE SECTOR

130

providers supported through the transition from Disability Employment Services to Inclusive Employment Australia and National Panel of Assessors

~900

attendees at NESA events, from the Youth Summit to the Frontline and National Conferences

79

nominations for the NESA Awards for Excellence in 2025



FROM THE CHAIR

I took on the role of Chair in March 2026, part-way through a year that asked a great deal of everyone in this sector.

In 2025–26, our members stood up two major new programs, Inclusive Employment Australia and the Remote Australia Employment Service, while others closed services they had delivered for many years. Rising costs pressed on every budget. In May 2026, the Australian Government announced reforms that will shape employment services for the next decade.

"Registration as a charity did not change who we are.

It affirmed what NESA has always been here for."

Through all of it, NESA's role was clear: to bring members' experience to the decisions being made, and to support them to keep services running for the people who rely on them.

It was also the year NESA became a registered charity on 1 July 2025, under the Constitution members adopted in June 2025. Registration as a charity did not change who we are. It affirmed what NESA has always been here for, and it holds us to standards of governance and transparency that our members and the wider community are entitled to expect.

The Board's focus this year was on three things.

The first was reform. The Board oversaw NESA's position on implementation of the new disability and remote employment programs, and NESA's response to the employment services reform consultation, informed by the largest member consultation program NESA has run in a single month. We also welcomed CEO Kathryn Mandla's appointment to the Minister's Employment Services Reform Advisory Group in April 2026, which gave members a direct channel into future system design.

The second was financial sustainability. Stronger financial systems and disciplined management returned NESA to a healthy surplus in 2025–26, giving us a sound base for the work ahead.

The third was the future. With the Strategic Plan 2024–27 entering its final year, the Board has begun work on NESA's next strategic plan, grounded in our vision and shaped by what members and stakeholders have told us.

On behalf of the Board, I thank Rebecca Nicholls, whose tenure ended at the 2025 Annual General Meeting after nine years of dedicated service on the Board, including two years as Chair. I also thank Mark Hoffman-Davis, who ably chaired the Board from November 2025 to February 2026 and very capably led the strengthening of NESA's financial systems and thank Matthew Levy OAM and Karen Rainbow for their contributions to the Board in 2025-26. I also welcome James Muller and Sotir Kondov to the Board and thank my fellow Directors Olga Merryfull and Steve Wyborn for their contributions and commitment through a year of change.

My thanks to Kathryn Mandla and the NESA team, who spent this year going above and beyond to support sector transitions and never lost sight of the people the sector serves. Thank you also to our members, partners and sponsors. Your work is the reason NESA exists, and your voice is what gives it strength.



Robert Marshall
Chair

In 2026–27, the Board's priorities are to:

- ensure members' experience continues to shape the detail of reform, from assessment and streaming to funding and administrative burden
- complete and publish NESA's next strategic plan
- continue to strengthen NESA's financial sustainability and governance as a registered charity
- grow the value NESA offers members through the NESA Academy, our events and the evidence we publish and use for advocacy.





FROM THE CEO



There is a moment I come back to often. Someone walks through the door of an employment service. They might be a young person who has never had a job, a parent returning to work, someone living with a disability, or someone who has been looking for work for longer than they care to remember. They come with a story, and they come with hope.

Everything we do begins there.

In 2025–26, it would have been easy to lose sight of that person. It was a year of contracts awarded and contracts ended; of new programs, new rules and new IT systems; of caseload tolerances, payment models and procurement timeline challenges. These things matter. But the person walking through the door doesn't experience a policy setting. They experience a conversation with someone who gives them the time, the trust and the tools to help them. That is why our North Star is always the participant. Not a caseload, a stream, a payment or an outcome, but a human being whose life can change for the better when we get this right.

This year I saw what getting it right looks like, often in the hardest circumstances. Frontline workers stayed with participants while not knowing whether their own jobs would continue, and whether they could pay their mortgage or rent as they waited for results of government contracts to be announced. Providers in remote communities kept services running through a fuel crisis, new guidelines and new systems. Organisations leaving the market did so with care, making sure the people they supported were connected to someone new and gained employment elsewhere wherever possible. And at our Awards for Excellence in September 2025, I was reminded again that the people in our sector are, in every sense, 'public' servants, dedicated to supporting the public.

> ***"Our North Star is always the participant"***

When the government announced its employment services reforms in May 2026, we saw real potential. But potential only matters when it becomes reality, and policy is only as good as its implementation. So we did what NESA does best: we listened and we carried your voices to the highest levels of Australian Government. In the final weeks of the year, ten consultation sessions brought 277 people from across our membership into the conversation about how the reformed system should work. Their message was clear and consistent: fund the true cost of the work, protect services in thin and remote markets, get assessment right, and give frontline staff back the time that administration takes from them.

Every decision about this system should pass a simple test. Is it humane? Does it treat the person in front of us with dignity? Does it help the people serving them do their best work? Becoming a registered charity on 1 July 2025 put that commitment on the public record. It didn't change our purpose; it affirmed it. NESA exists to advance the wellbeing of people facing disadvantage through economic and social inclusion, and to build the capability of the sector that supports them.

My thanks to my talented NESA team – a small, passionate team doing important national work – for the care and energy they brought to every member conversation, consultation and event this year. Thank you to the Board for its incredible guidance and support, and to our members, whose experience directs everything we do.

Nothing worth doing is ever easy, and the year ahead will ask a lot of all of us. But if we keep the people this system exists to serve at the centre of every decision, we will always know which way is north.



Kathryn Mandla
Chief Executive Officer

"Policy is only as good as its implementation. So we did what NESA does best: we listened and we carried your voices to the highest levels of Australian Government."

THE YEAR THE SECTOR CHANGED

In 2025–26, four key developments shaped the year in employment services.

1. New programs, new market

Two major new programs commenced, and much in their design was welcomed. Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) brought greater flexibility in how providers work with participants and a clearer focus on the participant journey.

The Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) was built around community and participant engagement. It also recognised the higher cost of delivering services in remote Australia through the return of remote loadings (a position NESA had pressed throughout the design consultations in 2024–25).

Contracts were awarded and implementation began. For members, the announcements settled one uncertainty, and then other issues emerged.

130 **providers were supported by NESA through the transition from Disability Employment Services to the new Inclusive Employment Australia and National Panel of Assessors programs.**

For providers who continued, or entered the market, the difficulty moved from tendering to operating. IEA caseloads ran below contracted tolerance levels, referral patterns were hard to explain, and slow processing of capability fund claims put pressure on cash flow. In remote Australia, RAES providers took on new guidelines, new IT, increased administrative burden, and a prolonged pause on mutual obligations, with audit obligations from the old Community Development Program (CDP) dividing their attention from getting on with RAES.

2. Costs rising faster than funding

Financial viability was a continuing theme of the year across Workforce Australia (WFA), Career Transition Assistance (CTA), Employability Skills Training (EST) and IEA. DEWR's own analysis, completed in October 2025, confirmed that very long-term unemployed bonus payments had declined significantly since late 2023. Consumer price index (CPI) reached 3.8% in the year to January 2026 and 4.2% by April 2026. NESA argued for greater fairness, and indexation at twice CPI for the 16-month extension of DEWR contracts.

These issues were compounded further in rural, regional and remote Australia, where distance is a cost of service: staff drive to outreach sites and community visits, participants travel long distances to appointments and to work, and vehicles cover hard kilometres, often on unsealed roads. When diesel prices spiked during the fuel crisis in February 2026, costs ballooned in the places with the fewest alternatives, and freight pushed up the price of everything else delivered to remote communities.

NESA raised the impact on provider workforces with the DEWR, DSS and the NIAA, and each agency's fuel crisis factsheet acknowledged it. NESA had continually advocated during the design of RAES that remote delivery must be funded for what it genuinely costs and pressed for remote loadings to be returned under the new program. And they were. When the loading tiers were then calculated incorrectly, NESA identified the error and NIAA corrected it, reissuing contracts so that remote providers received their correct loadings.

With 123 advocacy issues formally raised with DEWR, DSS, NIAA and the Department of Finance in 2025-26, NESA kept members' voices at the table through every challenge.







3. The people doing the work

While programs transition, those trusted relationships that participants rely upon end when a provider's contract is not renewed. One of the most important features of an employment service is the relationship that the frontline workers have with participants. They know their history, have the employer's mobile number, and can judge when to probe a little deeper, and when to wait. Frontline workers kept their integrity and their commitment to participants through a year of transition, while facing uncertainty about their own jobs. That took considerable skill and courage.

However, long delays between tender outcomes and program commencement left staff with months of uncertainty, not knowing whether their position would continue, while their employers could not confirm staffing numbers or build teams. In remote Australia, where recruiting is harder and more expensive, roles stayed vacant for lengthy periods. Despite all this, the frontline workers in our sector continued to manage participants in genuine distress, all while the safety and wellbeing issues that come with that work remain unresolved.

NESA's work this year was aimed at making the job more sustainable. We argued through the IEA and RAES procurement delays that workforce instability was a cost of delay, not a side effect of it, and pressed for fair transition planning. We also represented members on DEWR's Challenging Behaviour Working Group and continued to press for staff safety to be treated as a funded responsibility rather than a local problem. We secured DEWR's agreement to review Managed Service Plan templates and processes and had mandatory Parent Pathways training narrowed to mentors and key managers rather than every staff member, ensuring training was targeted to the right roles.



Through NESA Academy, more than 1,550 people had access to training and accredited pathways that give providers something concrete to offer their staff. We also commissioned the 2026 Employment Services Workforce Survey, to build the evidence base on the status of our sector's workforce and its key issues.

4. Reform back on the table

In May 2026, the Australian Government announced its employment services reforms, including a shift to three service streams. Members welcomed the principles of tailored servicing, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and want the detail settled based on the evidence of what works, and doesn't work, drawing from nearly 30 years of sector experience and knowledge.

DEWR's consultation on the design of the reformed system opened in the closing weeks of the financial year, and NESA moved quickly to ensure members were informed, engaged and central to the development of NESA's policy positions.

WHAT MEMBERS SAID REFORM MUST FIX

Members told us, consistently and in their own words, what they need from reform: contracts long enough to invest in people, funding that reflects the real cost and complexity of the work, a performance framework that measures what matters, an end to a compliance-first culture, and clear, fast approval processes for the technology, including AI, that could free frontline staff to spend more time with participants and local employers.

OUR PURPOSE AND OUR PLAN

NESA's Strategic Plan 2024–27 commits us to a sector that is represented, world-class, supported and connected.

2025–26 was the plan's second year, and the work against each goal remained on track.

OUR VISION

Opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion

OUR MISSION

Driving excellence in employment services through representation, development, support and connection

OUR VALUES

Authenticity · Trust · Integrity · Respect · Professionalism

Represented

The voice of our sector has impact and is reflected in government policy and service design

World class

Our sector accesses leading professional development aligned to its needs and future growth

Supported

Our sector has access to timely and effective support to help it thrive

Connected

Our sector shares knowledge and collaborates to forge its strategic direction

The Strategic Plan 2024–27 is available on the NESA website. With the current plan concluding in 2027, the Board has begun work on NESA's next strategic plan, grounded in our vision and shaped by what members have told us through this year's consultations and by the needs of the people and communities our sector serves. We anticipate its publication in the second quarter of 2026–27.

OUR FIRST YEAR AS A REGISTERED CHARITY

On 1 July 2025, NESA became a registered charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, following the new Constitution members adopted at the Special General Meeting on 27 June 2025.

Registration puts on the public record what has always driven this organisation. Our purposes are to advance education in the employment and related services sector, and to advance social or public welfare through the wellbeing of unemployed, disadvantaged and marginalised people. Everything in this report sits under one or both of those purposes: our advocacy, our training, our support through transition, our events and our Awards.



GOAL 1

SPEAKING UP FOR THE SECTOR

A SECTOR REPRESENTED

Advocacy is the work members value most, and it only works when it starts with them.

LISTENING FIRST

NESA's advocacy reflects what our members need and is built from our constant listening and engagement across executive and operational staff. Across 2025–26 we met members formally, ran focus groups, led Special Interest Groups, and took their calls and emails.

365+ recorded advocacy interactions, and in practice many more

We recorded more than 365 advocacy interactions, and in practice, many more. Every position in this report was formed from those interactions.



Frontline Remote and Regional Conference, Cairns, April 2026

The shape of that contact followed how we worked with members throughout the year. Through the first two quarters, almost everything was transition: what IEA and RAES meant for caseloads, staff, sites and cash flow, and how to keep services running while contracts changed hands. Much of the detail of the IEA transition sat in the market adjustment support project described later in this report. As the year went on, the conversation turned to the structure of the system itself, and by June it had become a full consultation program.

A key component of our engagement was meeting directly with members through focus groups. Three targeted IEA focus groups were held between November 2025 and March 2026, working through the detail of where providers needed more flexibility under the compliance framework, identifying what was driving the viability pressure, and how the IEA model could be improved.

Two separate focus groups ran at the Frontline Conference in Cairns in April 2026 on the broader employment services system: one with frontline workers on what is working and what is not, and one with the CEOs who joined their staff at the conference. A further session brought members together in Canberra on 27 May 2026, the day Minister Rishworth announced the employment services reforms.

The Cairns sessions mattered because they reached people who are rarely in the room when policy is discussed. Frontline workers described the daily reality of compliance requirements, evidence rules and participant behaviour, and their view of what reform should fix went straight into NESA's submissions and meetings.



The key issues members raised were consistent all year:

- Viability across Workforce Australia, related programs and IEA
- IEA and RAES transition problems, including caseloads below tolerance and administrative burden in remote delivery
- The need for reform of Commonwealth procurement rules
- Clarity on programs ending in June 2027
- Participant behaviour and staff safety, including Managed Service Plans
- Delays in DEWR's AI approvals
- Evidence barriers for outcome payments
- Performance measures that members believe measure the wrong things

MEMBER SURVEY 2026

In June 2026, NESA ran its annual Member Survey. Members told us that advocacy remains the most important thing NESA does for them, and that they value a consistent national voice during a period of significant reform. Feedback on our advocacy, events and communications was positive, with members highlighting the relevance of our updates and the value of connecting with peers.

> *"NESA plays an important role in ensuring the experiences and challenges of providers are recognised and reflected in national policy discussions."*
>
> *NESA member, NESA Member Survey June 2026*



The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, with NESA members

THE REFORM CONSULTATIONS: PUTTING MEMBERS INTO THE DESIGN

DEWR opened its consultation on the design of the reformed system in the final weeks of the financial year. With a short window and a great deal at stake for the whole sector, NESA's priority was to build its response from the operational and business experience of its members.

In the closing weeks of the year, NESA ran a program of ten time-limited consultation sessions, each built around key parts of the reform design. Together they drew 277 participants from across the membership, the largest consultation NESA has run in a single month.

The sessions worked through many issues including:

- funding and commissioning models
- mutual obligations
- service streams design
- the new assessment tool proposed to replace the Job Seeker Classification Instrument
- employer engagement, and
- the future of the complementary programs.

SIX THEMES MEMBERS BUILT INTO NESA'S REFORM POSITION

Six themes came through strongly, and consistently enough, to form the backbone of NESA's policy position:

1 **FUND THE TRUE COST OF DELIVERY**

Pay providers for the work they are required to do across the whole participant journey, rather than pricing to a budget envelope.

2 **RESOLVE THE CENTRAL DESIGN CHOICE**

between a prescribed service and a purchased outcome. The current model prescribes the method while paying only for the result.

3 **PROTECT THIN MARKETS, AND REGIONAL AND REMOTE VIABILITY**

A model that assumes competition between multiple providers does not work in markets that cannot sustain them.

4 **TREAT ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMPLIANCE BURDEN AS A REAL, UNFUNDED COST**

The case is for intelligent design, technology to support productivity, and an end to cost-shifting onto providers.

5 **GET ASSESSMENT AND STREAMING RIGHT**

A trusted, human-led assessment should drive streaming decisions and avoid mis-streaming, recognising that there is no "easy", low-cost Stream 2.

6 **DELIVER STREAMS 2 AND 3 TOGETHER**

Integrated delivery should be the default, so a participant who moves between streams keeps the same provider or group of providers working together in a formal arrangement, rather than starting over: continuity is how progress happens.

That work was prepared inside the reporting year and carried directly into NESA's submission, Shaping the Future of Employment Services, lodged with DEWR on 30 July 2026. The consultation program also replaced the operational Special Interest Groups for that period.

TURNING WHAT WE HEARD INTO CHANGE

WHAT MEMBERS RAISED	WHAT NESA DID	WHAT CHANGED
DSS proposed recovering DES service fees where a participant had been suspended or exited	Raised directly with the Minister's office and DSS over successive meetings from July 2025	DSS is no longer pursuing the recovery
CDP providers were facing a final performance review while preparing to transition to RAES	Argued the review served no purpose in a closing program	The final review (PPR18) did not proceed, freeing providers to focus on transition
Parent Pathways guidelines required mandatory training for all staff	Raised the disproportionate cost and time for small teams	Mandatory training now applies only to mentors and key managers
RAES remote loading tiers and acquittal requirements did not match the Grant Opportunity Guidelines	Identified the errors and pressed NIAA to correct them	Contracts were reissued and the guidelines corrected
RAES providers faced tight deadlines for audits of the closed CDP program	Raised the compounding burden with NIAA	Deadlines extended and requirements clarified
IEA caseloads were running below contracted tolerance levels	Raised repeatedly with DSS and the Minister's office, with member data	DSS acted through auto-referrals and other mechanisms; NESA continues to monitor whether the correction is fast enough
DSS proposed flexible minimum contact options members did not support	Consulted members and presented their position	DSS is not pursuing the options at this time
Managed Service Plan templates and processes were adding to workload	Raised through DEWR forums and directly	DEWR agreed to review the templates and process
DEWR's AI approvals were slow and unclear, holding back productivity tools, and disconnected from DSS and NIAA	Briefed members of the Opposition and supplied evidence	The issue was examined at Senate Estimates. DSS and NIAA aligned their AI approach with DEWR's.
The fuel crisis was hitting provider workforces as well as participants	Raised the workforce impact with all three agencies	DEWR, DSS and NIAA factsheets acknowledged the impact on the provider workforce



The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP (centre) at the 2025 NESA National Conference in Melbourne, with then NESA Chair Rebecca Nicholls (left) and NESA CEO Kathryn Mandla (right)



The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP speaking at the National Press Club, Canberra, 27 May 2026

Where we did not get there

At the same time, not everything shifted. Indexation remains below what members say is needed to cover the cost of delivery. The future of some programs ending on 30 June 2027 is still unclear. Members continue to describe performance frameworks that do not reflect the work, and a compliance-first culture in the lead agency. NESA's position on each of these is unchanged, and our advocacy on these issues has carried forward into 2026–27.

A direct channel into reform

In April 2026, NESA CEO Kathryn Mandla was appointed to Minister Rishworth's Employment Services Reform Advisory Group, which has given members a direct channel into the reform design.



NESA CEO Kathryn Mandla (left) and the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Social Services (right) at the 2025 NESA Leadership Retreat in Sydney.

IN THE ROOM

This year has seen us central to the discussions where decisions are made. Over the year NESA met with:

- The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, (July 2025, with then Board Chair Rebecca Nicholls and then Convenor of the Audit and Risk Management Committee Mark Hoffman-Davis)
- The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Social Services
- Senator the Hon Jane Hume, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, and Shadow Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations
- DEWR Secretary, Simon Duggan PSM, and senior DEWR executives, meeting regularly on viability, licence extensions, the Workforce Australia Online platform, AI approvals, departmental culture and future reform
- NIAA's senior executives on RAES implementation.

We took our members' case to the Opposition and crossbench, including Senator the Hon Jane Hume, and we sat in the monthly peak body meetings with DEWR, DSS and NIAA, and weekly with DSS during the IEA transition.

WHERE PROGRAMS ARE BUILT

Much of the year's detailed work was done in the forums where programs are built. NESA:

- worked closely and collaboratively with DSS on co-designing the performance framework for IEA
- worked with NIAA and its consultants on the performance framework for RAES
- joined the advisory group for the Ongoing Support Outcomes Pilot
- took part in the quarterly Voice of the Participant group, alongside disability representative organisations and other peak bodies.

NESA also represented members on the:

- DEWR Challenging Behaviour Working Group
- DEWR Complaints Service Working Group
- DEWR Provider System Users Advisory Group
- DSS Disability Employment Services Stakeholder Working Group
- NIAA Remote Care Jobs Community of Practice
- Disability Health Sector Consultation Committee
- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) Employment and Skills and Small Business Committees.

SUBMISSIONS AND EVIDENCE

NESA's advocacy continued through formal submissions and engagement, including:

- a public submission to the National Economic Reform Roundtable, July 2025
- a submission on the draft CDP Closure Manual
- a submission on the IEA procurement process
- a submission to the Workforce Australia Performance Framework Review
- an oral submission on the IEA performance framework at the DSS peak bodies workshop, August 2025, and regular engagement through the DSS performance framework working group
- a pre-Budget submission, January 2026.

The year closed with the preparatory work for NESA's submission to the employment services reform consultation, lodged on 30 July 2026. NESA also circulated findings from the August 2025 Youth Summit to inform a youth policy platform to be developed in 2026–27.

NESA NEXT: PUTTING THE EVIDENCE IN PUBLIC

The strength of NESA's advocacy rests not only on the practical lessons and understanding of our members, but also on evidence of what works in policy, research and practice. In May 2026, NESA launched NESA Next, a public home for our policy insight papers, blogs and analysis, so that members, government, employers, researchers and media can read the evidence behind our positions.

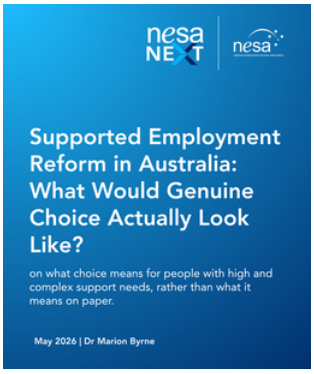
NESA Next opened in May 2026 with three papers on disability and employment, each published with an accompanying blog:

- *Why Employers Hold the Key to Closing Australia's Disability Employment Gap* on the demand side of the equation, and what actually shifts employer behaviour.
- *Supported Employment Reform in Australia: What Would Genuine Choice Actually Look Like?* on what choice means for people with high and complex support needs, rather than what it means on paper.
- *Why Disability Employment Outcomes Depend on More Than Good Programs* on the interface between Inclusive Employment Australia and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

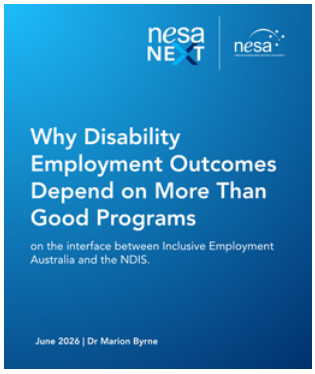
In June 2026, as the reform consultation opened, NESA published *Employment Services Reform: Should Streams 2 and 3 Be Delivered Together?* The paper follows the participant journey and asks what happens to someone who moves between streams as service transitions "can become points of disengagement when participants are required to repeatedly retell their story, rebuild relationships and reconnect with services". That question went on to shape one of the six positions NESA took into the reform consultation.



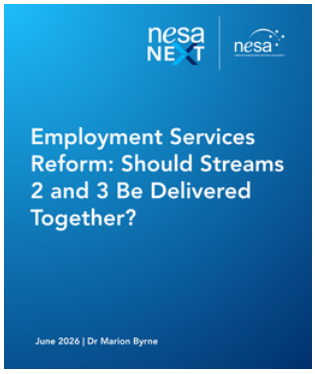
READ MORE



READ MORE



READ MORE



READ MORE

NESA Next is a deliberate step in how NESA drives thinking, innovation and improvement in our sector, giving the sector's arguments a form that others can read, cite and challenge, and it is where our research, thought leadership and policy analysis will be published from here on.

COUNTING THE WORKFORCE: THE 2026 EMPLOYMENT SERVICES WORKFORCE SURVEY

NESA's advocacy regarding workforce pressures is stronger when backed by evidence. The sector's last workforce survey was conducted in 2023. In 2025–26, NESA commissioned the Centre for International Economics to design a new one. Acting in our role as the sector's peak body, we secured funding from DEWR for an updated survey. This investment will give the entire sector access to robust workforce data, strengthening our collective voice with government and industry for 2026-2027.

DEWR funding means participation in the Workforce Survey is free and accessible for every provider, not funded by members alone.

The design work was completed within the 2025–26 year. The survey was modernised to cover workforce size and composition, remuneration, skills and capabilities, recruitment and retention, safety and wellbeing, and the other factors that shape service delivery.

The findings will give the sector current evidence on the workforce it depends on, and will inform NESA's advocacy, workforce policy and the reform discussions ahead. They will be published in next year's annual report.

In the media

NESA issued a media release in August 2025 on the IEA contract announcements and our appointment to the market adjustment work, and another in May 2026 on the reform announcement.

Kathryn Mandla was also interviewed on ABC News at 5pm and ABC Radio National's Life Matters, reaching an estimated 100,000 or more Australians nationally.

100k+ Australians reached through NESA's advocacy on ABC News and Radio National's Life Matters.

GOAL 2

BUILDING WORKFORCE CAPABILITY

A WORLD-CLASS SECTOR

Employment services is a skilled job. It calls for judgement, relationship-building and a working knowledge of deeds that change regularly.
Nesa Academy exists so that people doing that job can learn without having to leave their desks or their communities.

1,550+
registered learners as at 30 June 2026, up from 1,051

+47%
growth in registered learners in the Academy's first full year

76
modules mapped to deed and grant agreement requirements

938
individuals with **LEARN Subscription access** as at 30 June 2026

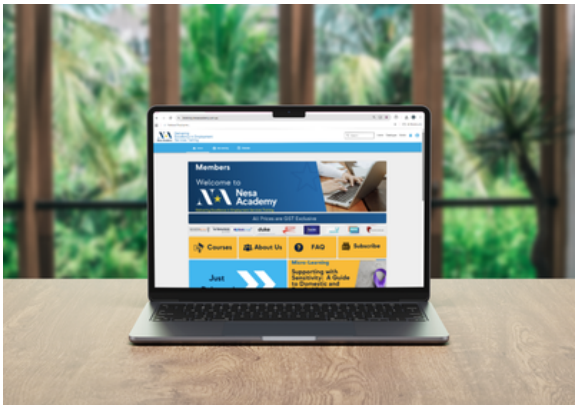
10
training providers selected against NESA's Training Partner Principles

8
Live Learning Sessions, all recorded for on-demand access

Nesa Academy is a one-stop training platform built for the sector. It connects learners with a curated network of vetted and reputable training organisations and up-to-date professional development tailored to the employment and community services sectors.

In its first full year, the Academy grew from 1,051 registered learners at 30 June 2025 to more than 1,550 as at 30 June 2026. Much of the new interest came from organisations entering IEA, who needed content aligned to compliance, performance and certification requirements while they were standing up new operations.

By 30 June 2026 the Academy offered 76 modules mapped to the skills, knowledge and evidence requirements in deeds and grant agreements. Eight Live Learning sessions ran during the year. Each one was recorded, so staff with participant commitments at the time, or those wanting to revisit the content, could access it at any time.



A subscription built for the sector

At Nesa Academy we listen and build our services to fit providers' needs. In 2025-26, we undertook targeted consultation to identify the services and benefits valued most by our learners. This feedback directly informed the development and launch of a new Nesa Academy subscription service in September 2025: LEARN Subscription. Since this time, our subscription service has been accessed by 938 individuals across multiple organisations, demonstrating strong support for a flexible, affordable and accessible learning environment.

Qualifications, not just training

For staff who want recognised qualifications, NESA has widened the pathways: Certificate IV in Community Services and Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work through Duke Education, and seven qualifications through Open Colleges from November 2025. All are aligned with the Australian Government's Priority Hiring Incentive program. NESA worked with skills authorities in New South Wales and South Australia to speed access to these programs.

Interest came from beyond our membership too, with non-employment services organisations and government agencies purchasing content directly or through third-party arrangements.

Learning from others

In October 2025, Dr Marion Byrne, NESA Head of Advocacy, Communications and Media, gave a virtual presentation to the First Work Futures 2025 conference in Ontario. It focused on Australian employment services and the lessons ahead of further reform, completing the reciprocal arrangement made with First Work the previous year.

NESA also engaged with Beam in the United Kingdom, and with researchers including Professor Jeff Borland, Associate Professor Michael McGann and Professor Irma Mooi-Reci at the University of Melbourne and Professor Jo Ingold at Australian Catholic University, in exploring research and development opportunities.

NESA continued its involvement in the Building Agency and Trust pilot, led by System 2 with funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, which tested a person-centred approach to case management. Dr Marion Byrne represented NESA on the pilot Steering Committee, with the final report published in June 2026. She also represented NESA in March 2026 as a guest lecturer on influencing the policy agenda to University of Queensland undergraduates. NESA also mentored and supported four University of Queensland students who completed internships with NESA in 2026, developing research papers on key areas of employment services.

Nesa Academy

GOAL 3

STANDING WITH MEMBERS THROUGH CHANGE

A SECTOR SUPPORTED

The year asked two different things of providers: first implementation, standing up Inclusive Employment Australia and the Remote Australia Employment Service at speed, then reform, as the Australian Government turned to the future of Workforce Australia and the wider system.

NESA's role through both was to make sure members were heard and supported, so they could get on with the work.

THE TRANSITION TO INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT AUSTRALIA

In July 2025, DSS engaged NESA to deliver market adjustment support for the transition from Disability Employment Services to IEA, as well as support for the National Panel of Assessors program. The project, led by Head of Nesa Academy, Dianne Fletcher, ran from 18 July 2025 to 31 May 2026 and covered the whole market, not only NESA members. NESA set up a dedicated email address and a transition website, then worked through the transition in phases as providers needed it.

PHASE 1

Exiting providers

Workforce transition, site closures, returning records, connecting people to local support.

PHASE 2

New entrants

Establishing operations, meeting compliance and certification requirements, and building local networks. Support was more intensive than anyone expected.

PHASE 3

Continuing providers

Caseloads, participant communications, and understanding who else was operating in their area.

Throughout the project, NESA met DSS weekly and was in contact daily, passing on what providers were reporting so problems could be fixed early. DSS acted on multiple NESA recommendations, including running a series of provider workshops, and NESA's commentary was reflected in departmental guidance. By March 2026, providers had settled into the new arrangements and the work moved towards business as usual. The final phase was designed so that what NESA built would keep working after the funding ended.

Other support through the transitions

NESA also ran two RAES grant sessions for prospective and incumbent providers, monthly CDP/RAES catch-ups, dedicated IEA and RAES sessions at the National Conference, a check-in with NIAA for RAES providers on early issues after launch, as well as a leadership forum with DSS on 7 November 2025 for new IEA and National Panel of Assessors (NPA) providers. NESA also supported exiting NPA members with contract closure and the return of records.



Inclusive Employment Australia workshop

16 member focus groups and Special Interest Groups, and consultation sessions

677+ Member Representatives attending focus groups, SIGs and special consultations

10 employment services reform consultation sessions



Youth Summit, August 2025

Special Interest Groups

Over the reporting year, NESA ran 10 Special Interest Group meetings across six groups, with over 400 member representatives attending. Special Interest Groups are where members compare notes on the operational detail and take shared problems to government. This year they covered Data and Reporting, Workforce Australia Online for Providers, Cyber Security, Parent Pathways, Transition to Work (TtW), and Career Transition Assistance (CTA) and Employability Skills Training (EST). In January 2026, the CTA/EST group also worked up proposed improvements to the design and funding model to put to government.

In June 2026, the operational groups gave way to a program of ten time-limited groups convened to consult on the employment services reforms, which drew 277 participants and are described in *Speaking up for the sector*. Operational Special Interest Groups resumed in late August and early September 2026.

GOAL 4

BRINGING THE SECTOR TOGETHER

A SECTOR CONNECTED

People in this sector are spread across cities, regions and remote communities, often working in small teams. NESA events are where they find each other, learn from one another and connect. Our 2025–26 events program attracted exceptional participation, with ~900 attendees across the financial year.

~900

attendees at NESA events across the year

Youth Summit
21 AUGUST 2025
BRISBANE

Brought together members working with young people to share what works in youth employment. Findings were circulated to members to inform NESA's youth policy platform.

National Conference and Awards for Excellence
17–18 SEPTEMBER 2025
MELBOURNE

The sector's national gathering, with dedicated sessions on the IEA and RAES transitions, and the Awards for Excellence Gala Dinner celebrating the people behind the sector's work.

Leadership Retreat
11–12 NOVEMBER 2025
SYDNEY

Brought member CEOs and senior leaders together to explore how to lead through the strategic challenges of a year of transition.

Corporate Services Summit, with Aware Super
26 FEBRUARY 2026
MELBOURNE

Brought together CFOs, operational and people leaders on the latest developments, emerging risks and practical insights across risk, HR, industrial relations, cyber security, governance and other critical workplace issues.

AI Summit
20 MARCH 2026
SYDNEY

NESA's first AI Summit, exploring safe governance of AI and how AI and other technology can reduce administrative load and give frontline staff more time with participants.

Frontline Remote and Regional Conference
28–30 APRIL 2026
CAIRNS

Built for frontline staff in regional and remote Australia. Focus groups with frontline workers and CEOs fed directly into NESA's reform advocacy.

Virtual Leadership Forums
ONLINE · ACROSS THE YEAR

Three online forums giving member leaders timely updates on NESA's advocacy.

National Press Club member briefing
27 MAY 2026
CANBERRA

A briefing for members after the Minister's address on the employment services reforms, for which NESA secured 34 member seats.

Working with others

NESA worked alongside other peak bodies and organisations where our members' interests overlap: the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), the National Self-Employment Association, the National Australian Apprenticeships Association, National Disability Services, Disability Employment Australia, Amplify Alliance Australia, as well as disability representative organisations, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the Age Discrimination Commissioner and Economic Justice Australia.













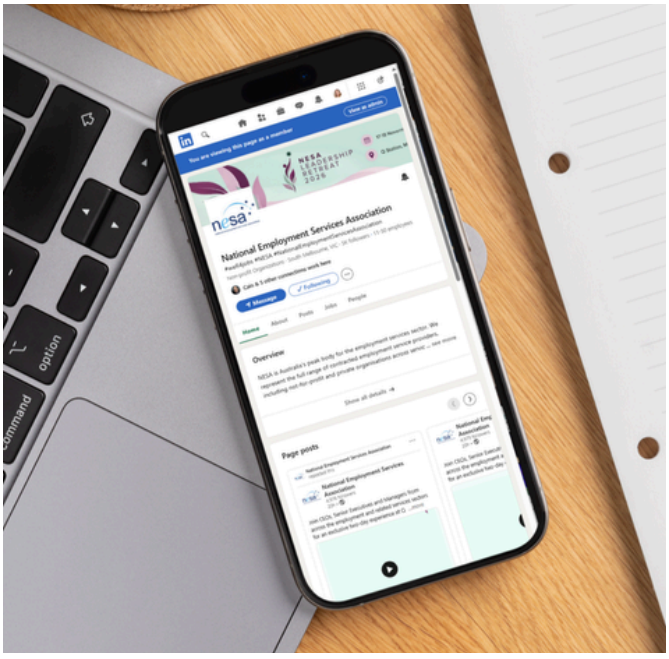






Keeping members informed

Members heard from NESA through CEO bulletins, professional development and events newsletters, consultation sessions, program-specific meetings and social media. On LinkedIn, NESA's 182 posts in 2025–26 drew 159,774 impressions and 19,082 engagements. Our LinkedIn engagement rate of 11.9%, more than double the typical industry benchmark of 2–5%, shows a highly engaged sector audience. The year's strongest reach came from advocacy: our response to the Australian Government's employment services announcement and the CEO's statement on the IEA contract outcomes. Our followers grew by about 900 during the year, to roughly 4,700.



4,700 LinkedIn Followers

159k+ LinkedIn Impressions

19k+ Engagements

11.9% Engagement Rate





RECOGNITION

NESA AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE 2025

The 2025 NESA Awards for Excellence demonstrated the continued value these Awards represent within the sector, with another record number of nominations received across all Award categories. The volume and quality of this year's nominations reflect our sector's strong, collaborative partnerships, committed frontline staff, and employers dedicated to building genuinely inclusive, diverse workplaces. We received 79 nominations across four categories: 30 for Employment Consultant of the Year, 19 for Achiever of the Year, 19 for Outstanding Service to the Employment Services Sector and 11 for Champion Employer of the Year. As always, participants were at the heart of the Awards and the true highlight of the celebration. From the inspiring stories of our Achiever of the Year finalists, through to the collective 'why' of our Employment Consultants, Champion Employers and Outstanding Service finalists, we were reminded why our work matters.

We extend our thanks to this year's judges, Katrina Mellick, Peter Laver and Karina Davis. NESA also thanks our valued Award sponsor, Alffie, for its continued support of NESA and the dedicated people working across our sector.



Left to right: 2025 NESA Awards for Excellence winners Mark Collis, Sanaa Petros, Ron Maxwell and Ventia representative Daniel Osgood

Alffie

THE 2025 AWARD WINNERS



ACHIEVER OF THE YEAR

SPONSORED BY ALFFIE

Nominated by AMES Australia

Sanaa Petros

Sanaa, 34, is a single mother who arrived in Australia as an Iraqi refugee in 2019 after fleeing violence and political unrest. Starting with no English, qualifications, or work history, she battled isolation and trauma while raising her son. With AMES Australia's support, she built her confidence through classes and mentoring and rediscovered her passion for nail artistry. Guided to register an ABN and access Employment Fund support, she transformed her garage into a nail studio, officially opening her business in March 2025. Today, Sanaa has steady clients, growing confidence, and plans to expand her services. She is no longer defined by her past or her barriers, but is a determined, capable woman building a better life for her family, one client at a time.

CHAMPION EMPLOYER OF THE YEAR

SPONSORED BY ALFFIE

Nominated by MatchWorks

Ventia



Ventia is a leading essential infrastructure service provider recognised for its excellence in supporting disadvantaged job seekers, particularly people with disability. Guided by its values of Fairness, Inclusion and Respect, Ventia sees employment as a pathway to confidence, purpose and belonging. The organisation partners with MatchWorks and over 45 employment service providers to create meaningful opportunities, while embedding inclusive recruitment and workplace practices. Initiatives include the Disability Invent Hub, JobAccess collaboration, and All-Abilities Community of Practice, which strengthen disability confidence and reduce barriers. Through programs like TRECCA and partnerships with Australian Spatial Analytics, Ventia has created sustainable pathways, achieving remarkable outcomes such as a 400% increase in disability employment on one contract.



EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANT OF THE YEAR

SPONSORED BY ALFFIE

Nominated by Asuria

Mark Collis

Mark joined Asuria's Albury team in July 2022 as an Indigenous Mentor at the start of the Workforce Australia contract. Since then, he has supported more than 120 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants through culturally safe mentoring, employment preparation, and community connection. Mark goes beyond his caseload, helping participants across programs and playing a key leadership role in coordinating the culturally tailored Skills for Life program in partnership with Elders, RTOs and local providers.

Known for his generosity, he contributes to a positive team culture by mentoring colleagues and sharing cultural knowledge. Widely respected for his commitment, Mark embodies care, leadership and a strong dedication to empowering his community.

OUTSTANDING SERVICE TO THE EMPLOYMENT SERVICES SECTOR

SPONSORED BY NESA

Nominated by VERTO

Ron Maxwell

Ron Maxwell has spent more than two decades championing employment inclusion in regional and remote Australia with quiet conviction and exceptional leadership. Since 2014, he has guided VERTO as CEO, growing it into a leading not-for-profit that now supports over 17,000 people annually across New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Queensland. Under his stewardship, VERTO delivers Workforce Australia, Inclusive Employment Australia (formerly DES), Transition to Work and other vital programs, transforming opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Nationally, Ron has shaped policy and practice through his roles with NESA, the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA) and the NSW Skills Board. His strategic vision and ability to connect national reform with local delivery continue to strengthen the sector and drive lasting impact.




nesa


NESA
2025
Awards for Excellence
nesa













OUR MEMBERS

Our members are at the heart of everything we do. Their work, every day, is how our vision of opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion is realised. We are proud to represent a diverse and committed network of organisations dedicated to supporting job seekers, employers, and communities across Australia. Throughout the year, our membership continued to demonstrate the vital contribution employment service providers make in helping people overcome barriers to work and achieve sustainable employment outcomes. Our members continued their operations across metropolitan, regional, rural, and remote communities, creating opportunities, strengthening local economies, and improving social inclusion.

The year was marked by significant policy reform and sector change. During this period, our members relied on the association to provide timely information, practical guidance, and a strong collective voice in discussions with government and key stakeholders. Through regular member forums, consultations, webinars, and networking opportunities, we facilitated the sharing of knowledge, innovation, and best practice across the sector. Membership engagement remained strong, reflecting the value members place on collaboration and advocacy. Member feedback continued to shape our priorities, ensuring our activities and policy positions reflect the emerging challenges and opportunities facing employment service providers.

Our advocacy efforts were strengthened by the breadth and expertise of our membership. Together, we advanced evidence-based recommendations on employment services policy, workforce participation, skills development, and the support required for Australians facing disadvantage in the labour market. The insights provided by members were instrumental in informing submissions, stakeholder engagement, and sector representation. We thank our members for their ongoing commitment, expertise, and partnership. The strength of our organisation is built on the collective contribution of all our member organisations, and we remain committed to delivering value through effective advocacy, industry leadership, professional development, and opportunities for connection.

Joining NESA

Join NESA and be part of the voice that represents, supports, and advances Australia's employment and related services sector.

As we look ahead, the need for a strong, united voice for the employment and related services sector has never been more important. We invite organisations that share our commitment to improving employment outcomes for Australians experiencing disadvantage to join NESA and become part of a respected national community of providers, practitioners, and leaders. To learn more about the benefits of membership and how to join, visit the Membership section of our website at www.nesa.com.au/nesa-membership





FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

REVENUE

$1,820,220

up 11.5% on 2024–25 ($1,632,328)

SURPLUS

$215,561

from a deficit of $226,005 in 2024–25

NET ASSETS

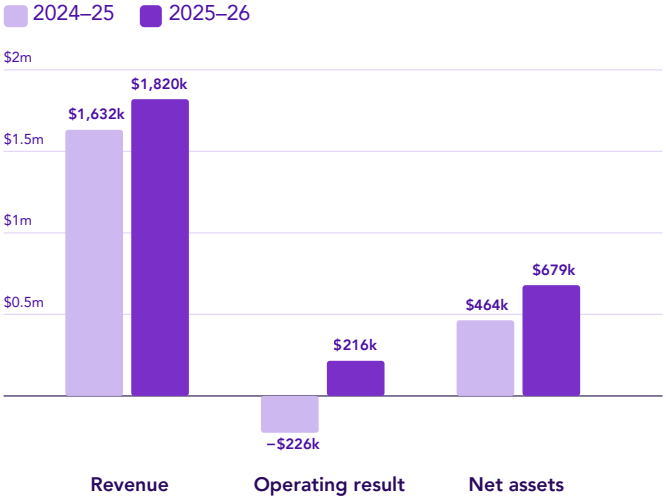
$679,438

up 46.5% on 2024–25 ($463,877)

2025–26 was a year of consolidation for NESA, with a strong focus on maintaining financial stability while continuing to deliver against our strategic priorities.

Our disciplined financial management and responsive adjustments throughout the year contributed to a stable and sustainable financial position. NESA achieved a strong financial result for the year, supported by sound financial planning, effective management of resources and a continued focus on delivering value to members and stakeholders.

TWO-YEAR COMPARISON



The Board and management maintained close oversight of financial performance throughout the year, enabling emerging opportunities and pressures to be appropriately managed.

Our results provide a sound foundation for the organisation to continue investing in its priorities, strengthening its systems and services, and positioning the organisation for sustainable growth in the years ahead.

In 2025–26, NESA recorded revenue of $1,820,220 (2024–25: $1,632,328) and a surplus of $215,561, compared with a deficit of $226,005 the previous year. Net assets rose to $679,438 at 30 June 2026 (2025: $463,877).

NESA's audited financial statements for 2025–26, which include the Directors' Report, are provided to members ahead of the Annual General Meeting and lodged with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

GOVERNANCE AND OUR PEOPLE

NESA's Board is made up of people who lead employment services organisations, and who know from their own work what the sector is carrying. As Responsible Persons of a registered charity, Directors are accountable to members and to the ACNC for how NESA is governed.

We thank former Chairs Rebecca Nicholls and Mark Hoffman-Davis, and former Directors Matthew Levy OAM and Karen Rainbow, who left the Board during the year, for their service. We welcomed James Muller and Sotir Kondov to the Board. Details of the current Directors' terms, qualifications and experience are available on the NESA website.

Our Board

The NESA Board at 30 June 2026:



Robert Marshall
CHAIR

CEO, MTC FutureReady · Convenor, Succession and Remuneration Committee



James Muller
DIRECTOR

CEO, APM Employment Services · Convenor, Audit and Risk Management Committee



Olga Merryfull
DIRECTOR

Chief Operating Officer, WISE Employment · Member, Succession and Remuneration Committee



Steve Wyborn
DIRECTOR

CEO, Help Enterprises (part of IntoWork Australia) · Member, Succession and Remuneration Committee



Sotir Kondov
INDEPENDENT DIRECTOR

Member, Audit and Risk Management Committee

Our Team

- **Kathryn Mandla,** Chief Executive Officer
- **Dr Marion Byrne**, Head of Advocacy, Communications and Media
- **Julia Fenech,** Head of Corporate Services, Company Secretary
- **Bianca Frankowski,** Head of Sponsorship, Marketing and Industry Events
- **Dianne Fletcher,** Head of NESA Academy and Business Development
- **Shirley Fisher,** Executive Assistant to the CEO, Board Secretariat, Member Services Coordinator
- **Su Vashith,** Finance and Operations Support Officer
- **Wendy Linsen,** Training Coordinator
- **Jemma Linsen,** Marketing and Administration Assistant



OUR INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS AND SPONSORS

NESA's industry stakeholders and sponsors make much of the work in this report possible, from hosting forums to supporting the Awards.

We thank our members and their staff, the job seekers and participants whose experience directs this work, the employers who create opportunities, Australian Government ministers and their staff, officials across DEWR, DSS and NIAA who engaged with us through a demanding year, and the NESA team.

DIAMOND SPONSORS

Alffie

GOLD+ SPONSORS

AutogenAI

wcc

GOLD SPONSORS

genU

aware SUPER

SILVER SPONSORS

altivio CONSULTING

populi solutions

SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

ENTERTAINMENT SPONSORS

duke

readytech

INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

Maguire Legal

nbn®

Gallagher

DELL Technologies

nesa
national employment services association

Opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion

National Employment Services Association Ltd

nesa@nesa.com.au · www.nesa.com.au · +61 3 9624 2300
Level 1, 20 Albert Street, Blackburn VIC 3130 · PO Box 452, Samford QLD 4520

A registered charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission