

Peter Reynolds, CEO, NZDSN 2024 Conference Address

[PRECEDED BY HEALTH AND SAFETY AND HOUSEKEEPING]

I'm often reminded of the quotation attributed to American politician, Frederic R. Coudert, in 1939: "May you live in interesting times". Usually one finds the quote used to describe more challenging times, where multiple things come at you, time-and-time again.

The disability support sector is certainly living in challenging times. But we have done so for many years now. And still survived to do what we do best – provide excellent and dedicated support for tens of thousands of disabled people throughout Aotearoa. Meeting many of these challenges where we can is a skill and an energy we have developed. Removing barriers and enabling disabled people, and their families and whanau, to lead a good life. This is what we do. This is why we have come together for this conference, to celebrate the things we have done to overcome the barriers. But also to send a very clear message to government not to take that effort for granted, and to include us in the thinking underway to meet the challenge of those barriers we cannot overcome alone.

I want to welcome to Minister Upston, Paula and your team from Whaikaha, members of our NZDSN Board and most importantly, our you, our members and guests.

You are all very welcome and I appreciate you all taking the time to gather. Thank you, and thanks to everyone that's travelled to Wellington.

The theme of our Conference is creativity and innovation – it's more important than ever - especially with funding so tight!

It sounds trite, but I firmly believe that pressure makes diamonds. Creativity, and the collective knowhow in this room and beyond will help get us through the tough times we're in now. When the upturn comes, and I believe it will, we will be better for it.

Influence the operating environment

You don't need me to tell you these are challenging times for many disabled people, and our members who support them.

Many providers are struggling to keep the lights on and provide a quality service, with the real value of Government contracts eroding thanks to high inflation that just won't go away.

A big focus is making sure members are heard through our advocacy work. We are a diverse organisation with a range of experiences, goals and challenges. There's no one-size fits all.

I hear from some members that our advocacy is too cozy, too soft on Whaikaha. Others say that at times that we're too strident. Hopefully we mostly land in the middle, but I look forward to hearing people's views on this important question.

It's about walking the right line – New Zealand is a small country and we are blessed in many ways to have the access and working relationships we have with Ministers and Ministries.

Our Board and I regularly meet with Paula and members of her team at Whaikaha – we're always grateful for the korero, but we're not doing our jobs if we can't offer feedback and even criticism where we feel it's warranted.

It's like any relationship, there are disagreements. For example, we were disappointed to have no advance notice of March's cuts to disability support, so that even if we disagreed with them, we could have at least tried to answer our members' questions in an informed way.

Whaikaha have apologised for the lack of communication, so I only raise it as an example.

It's entirely possible to disagree without being disagreeable. We can be strident without burning bridges.

Above all, we aim to be constructive and we hope these meetings are worthwhile for Paula and her team as they are for our Board and I.

Many people, including some in this room, have long called for a Ministry of our own, separate from MSD and Health, to truly understand the needs of the people we serve.

I realise Whaikaha is a relatively new Ministry, and some problems have become apparent in recent months, but we want you to succeed and be the best you can be, to serve our disabled community and our members.

My challenge to Paula - she's speaking next! ...is to stand up and truly lead our sector. Pull together the disparate groups into one cohesive team!

By its very nature, our disability sector is diverse, with a range of views, issues and challenges.

The danger is that addressing its different parts – people with disabilities, their families, advocates... and yes, providers, separately leads to a fractured, piecemeal approach.

Try and please everyone, you please no-one.

The challenge I put to Whaikaha is to bring these groups together. These problem we face are too great to solve on our own.

We're ready and willing to work together – by understanding each others' problems and goals, we have a far better chance than doing it alone.

NZDSN and member value

NZDSN is, as always, ready to help. The need for our network and for our members to stand up with a single, united voice is greater than ever. The Board and myself constantly evaluate whether we're adding all the value for members that we possibly can.

I want to acknowledge the members of our Board and our chair, Jonathan Mosen who unfortunately can't be with us for conference.

Their dedication and leadership has helped guide us through a challenging time. Serving on the Board of NZDSN is a challenge, but with many rewards - with elections coming up fast, I encourage people interested to put their name forward. Now, more than ever we need leaders to step up.

No one on the Board receives fees for their mahi. The reward comes from knowing that you've made a difference, which comes through driving change on our members behalf, and hearing their stories and feedback.

I'd like to introduce you to those Board members who are here at Conference today, so you can say hi and let them know what's on your mind.

Tania Thomas

Catherine Bennett

Richard Williams

Tony Marsden

Carissa Periera

Pip Stewart

Colene Herbert

Sarah Hillier

Samantha Lee

I also want to thank my small team, including Divya Reddy here in Wellington, and Kristi Shaw and Richard Irvine in Auckland.

We understand have no right to your subscriptions during these hard times, we must work to earn them.

I keep coming back to our purpose - An Aotearoa New Zealand where disabled people access the support of their choice, which is fully-funded and designed to make a positive difference to their lives.

It's simple, but there's so much there – everything we do is guided by these words.

I look forward to sharing our revised strategic plan with members tomorrow after lunch – and to hear your feedback.

Right now, much of the focus is advocacy, both behind the scenes and in the media, and working with members, or workshops and training to help you through the challenging times we're in.

As a network of providers, we have a voice that can't be ignored.

We used that voice in the lead up to the Budget – and retained our funding to keep the lights on, which unfortunately can't be said for many sectors.

Our current focus is on the Whaikaha review. As part of Whaikaha's CEOs Forum, we will be meeting shortly with the reviewers and will advocate strongly and honestly for our members.

The CEOs Forum has been given six weeks to do its job. Six weeks to understand our wonderful, complex, sector. The Minister tells us that she expects to get two sets of recommendations from the Reviewers. The first reflect the urgent decisions that need to be made now. The second set of recommendations are for the medium to longer term and involve issues where additional policy work needs to be done.

I do fear that the initial, urgent decisions will include further cuts and restrictions on support and on our sector, in order to get spending under control within current Budgetary limits. We

will watch for those decisions carefully and will be calling on you to join us in expressing the strongest concern about any that have an unfair impact of the lives of disabled people and on the viability of our services.

Here is the challenge I give the Minister. Take the recommendations from the review, add any issues not otherwise addressed and, with input from the wider disability support sector, develop a sector strategic plan. A document that lays out the plan for our sector – what has to happen to achieve the sector we all want. A plan that includes the phasing of actions necessary to meet budgetary constraints, that signals to the sector what future has in store for us all. This will address everyone's expectations and enable us all to have collaborative input and to otherwise get on with providing the support our people need.

Financial sustainability

High on the list of issues to address is funding. Its not all about money, but after over a decade of cuts, funding does tend to take one's focus. We've seen years of work put into residential pricing, with little or no movement to address the funding inequities. Other services throughout our sector continue to struggle every day. We are reliant on government funding. We do not have a system that enables user-part-charges or co-payments. Work needs to be done and completed on establishing the cost of support services provided today. Without that, we continue to quibble over government's role and contract pricing.

But – if you want to know where the challenges are in disability support, follow the money. We're gathering today with no less than four Pay Equity claims in play for disability support, three of them for our support workers.

It's crucial we get these resolved, for everyone in the sector. I firmly believe that a fast game is a good game, but this is dragging on too long. If they were a game of Monopoly, I'd have flipped the board and stormed off by now! Most recently, we have heard from the government's lead funder that they will not fully fund any settlement. That's 2017 all over again, and totally unacceptable. We're being asked to turn up to a gun fight with a knife. We must think carefully about our next steps in this battle. I assure you that NZDSN will continue to play a strong role in achieving an acceptable settlement to these claims.

The need for Pay Equity is greater than ever – and we need the government to step up and reassure providers the money is there. This is about fairness for support workers and the people who employ them. This afternoon, you will hear Minister Upston talk about fairness and equity. Well, here's this government's first challenge.

We only have so many hours in the day and resources to throw at them. The more time that's sucked into the Pay Equity saga is the less time we can spend on advocacy, regulation and the other mahi we do. Let's get it sorted, fairly, and get on with it.

Strategic outlook on disability workforce development etc

There's plenty to do elsewhere - we can't hide from the number of problems facing our sector.

We're really disappointed by the lack of progress on proper supported employment contracts and funding.

No offer to increase the value at all is a profound insult, no business can be expected to operate that way. Nearly a decade with no increase to match inflation or cost of living increases defies the government's stated interest in supporting disabled people into paid work.

The Government still has an opportunity to say "we believe in you" to disabled people – "we're investing in you", "we'll help employment service providers to not just help you into work, but to provide public education too."

Some disabled people are unable to enter into paid employment, and that's OK. We're more than a country of economic units, but if you can and want to work, we need to be removing barriers, not leaving them up.

Then there's the desperate need for workforce development – good people are leaving our sector, and it's hard to attract new workers. This is often hard, physically demanding and mentally draining work, and our workers deserve respect and recognition.

We are pushing for a workforce strategy that prepares us for the future and demonstrates leadership and investment by government. No disabled person should have their support disrupted because a provider can't find or afford a support worker. If we can't solve these issues, we all lose.

It upsets me there's still a massive disparity between housing access for disabled and non-disabled New Zealanders. For too long, this lack of access has undermined disabled folks' rights and affected their ability to have choice and control over their lives.

It's a big problem with big contributing factors like limited financial security, inadequate regulation and undersupply of houses – not to mention that accessibility factors are often an afterthought at best. This housing issue, we know, impacts on accessibility and on respite provision as well.

It will be clear to many people here that our regulatory framework is far short of world class. We've been saying for some time that what we have now isn't fit for purpose.

Why did we go it alone when we could have taken international examples and set them up here? Our current framework is an international outlier – there's no point reinventing the wheel when other countries are already getting this right.

Too much valuable time and resource has been sunk into the framework we have now, and it's still not doing what we need it to. It will mean admitting we didn't get it right first time – but to me this is a common-sense decision. There's no point throwing good money after bad, let's get it right and get on with it.

Closing

Making our voices heard isn't as easy for us as it is for others.

25% of New Zealanders have some form of Disability and yet in 2024, but you wouldn't know it from our House of Representatives, the Parliament of this nation, aren't representative of the needs, aspirations and historic neglect of disabled people.

I'll take a moment here to acknowledge Mojo Mathers and Tracy Martin and their trailblazing work in Parliament and since – we need more representation like yours!

Disabled people who have put their names forward for several political parties over the years, but too often, they've been placed in unwinnable party lists positions.

No matter how well-intentioned, how dedicated, and how well-briefed successive Ministers for disability issues have been, and many of them have made creditable progress in some areas, the fact that there is not a choice of capable disabled people vying to be Minister of Disability Issues is an indictment on how inclusive of disabled people this country truly is.

This matters to providers, because when there is not a disabled person who is respected as an advocate in the disability community around the Cabinet table, it is too easy for the impact of underfunding and neglect not to be communicated with full authenticity at times when it matters.

A society should be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable, those who can't speak for themselves. To truly feel heard and seen we need a seat at the table.

To our members, to tell this story to decision makers, we need you to be part of it.

We're a representative body – we literally exist to represent you. The NZDSN Board and I have some ideas on what we should focus on, but to tell clear and compelling stories the decision makers can't ignore, we need your engagement.

I get so much from meeting with our members, it's what drives us.

We believe the public supports our work. You only have to see the marches and media coverage when people's support was under threat with the purchasing guidelines announcement – thousands and thousands of New Zealanders and their families rely on the work you do to live with support and dignity.

It's hard sometimes to take a step back and appreciate the bigger picture, the lives you make better through your work.

I want to say thank you, on behalf of our Board and NZDSN team. It's an honour to have you here.

But now it's over to you – hopefully this sets the scene for the next two days' koreo and gives you a flavour of what's ahead.

Enjoy Conference and do take the time to introduce yourself to folks you don't normally get to speak to.

Again, to our honoured guests, thanks again for joining us – we're looking forward to hearing from you and hope you get something really valuable from your time here.

Together we are stronger – we'll be better for taking the time to connect today and tomorrow.