

# Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy

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## Contacts



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## About UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network and is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

We give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provisions.

We are the largest network of social service providers in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people every year across urban, rural, and remote communities.

We focus on articulating and meeting the needs of people at all stages of life and those who are most vulnerable.

# Introduction

UnitingCare Australia commends the Australian Government on its establishment of the Care and Support Economy Taskforce, recognising this as a significant positive step towards elevating the care and support economy to the fore of public policy consideration—a status that is overwhelmingly warranted and long overdue. We acknowledge the Taskforce’s efforts over the last six months to develop the draft Strategy, which is comprehensive in scope and recognises the myriad of interrelated issues at play across our sector.

The Strategy is a formative document in terms of its clear articulation of the view that Government investment in care and support delivers significant social and economic returns to our nation as a whole<sup>1</sup>. UnitingCare Australia has consistently advocated the need for investment in quality human services to improve individual and community wellbeing, and by extension, create economic systems that are sustainable and geared towards a better, fairer Australia<sup>2</sup>. We therefore concur with the Strategy’s view that investing in comprehensive care and support results in “reduced healthcare costs, improved quality of life and increased social cohesion within communities”<sup>3</sup>.

We appreciate the Strategy’s nuanced framing of issues impacting our sector and the characteristics that define our workforce. In particular, we highlight the important points that are made concerning the gendered nature of our workforce, the need for increased consideration of the value and wellbeing of individuals working in the sector, and the economic impacts and responsibilities for Government to prioritise in its policy and budgetary decision making, towards ensuring the sector’s viability and sustainability.

We strongly endorse the Strategy’s aim of providing a holistic view across the care and support economy, both within Government and beyond. This is essential in addressing the interrelated challenges and needs of workers, service providers and the individuals and communities receiving support.

A key challenge that we recognise for the Taskforce will be to effectively balance consistency with diversity—a careful approach is necessary to identify the themes that are core and common across all systems and services in scope for the Taskforce, while also ensuring diversity and acknowledgement of the specific needs relative to particular service streams and individuals accessing support.

The feedback that follows in this submission is provided in relation to each of the identified Goals of the Strategy. Responses to the survey questions are also included as a separate attachment to this document. Further, however, UnitingCare Australia asserts the following overarching statements and recommendations for the Taskforce’s consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, p.9

<sup>2</sup> UnitingCare Australia. 2023-24 Pre-Budget Submission – Funding What Matters.  
<https://unitingcare.org.au/submission/funding-what-matters/>

<sup>3</sup> Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, p.12

## 1. Connect all the dots

UnitingCare Australia recognises the significant number of government programs and supports already on offer that can assist care sector service providers in delivering the best possible support to individuals and communities. We note, for example, the availability of workforce development and training programs that are currently funded and delivered by Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments. However, many of these supports remain relatively underutilised by our sector. Time poor services often lack the capacity and resources needed to invest in exploring support options and applying for funding opportunities. We subsequently advocate the need for the Commonwealth Government to assume a more prominent 'concierge' role in assisting organisations to 'connect the dots' and leverage existing supports in an efficient and effective way. We recognise the potential for the Taskforce and its associated functions to assume a key role in this regard.

## 2. Collaborate through existing initiatives

We highlight the following existing Australian Government initiatives as particularly critical to link to the work of the Taskforce and implementation of the Strategy and Action Plans:

- **Australian Centre for Evaluation**, established through the Commonwealth Department of Treasury, to ensure programs deliver value for money and achieve best outcomes for all Australians. Testing the effectiveness of policy and program outcomes is essential in determining how Government can best direct its resources. UnitingCare Australia advocates the need for strong collaboration between the Taskforce and the Centre to determine how resources can be most effectively allocated to the care and support sector, and how effective programs can be scaled and replicated to deliver best outcomes to more Australians.
- **Measuring What Matters Wellbeing Framework**, currently being developed by the Commonwealth Department of Treasury, aimed at assessing Australia's progress on a broad range of social and environmental indicators alongside traditional economic measures. UnitingCare Australia considers the forthcoming Measuring What Matters Framework as an important step in shifting the narrative and highlighting the importance of providing for the services and supports that Australians need and expect. We identify significant overlap regarding the objectives of the Wellbeing Framework and the vision of the Strategy, and as such, strongly advocate the need for close collaboration regarding implementation of both initiatives.
- **Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community Sector Discussion Paper** and **Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint**, currently being developed by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, aimed at 'futureproofing' the sector and facilitating better support for community service organisations through improved policy and grant design. We highlight the shared objectives of these initiatives in relation to those of the Taskforce and advocate the need for close collaboration and information-sharing across agencies to enable the success of each process.

### **3. Develop clear timeframes for action**

UnitingCare Australia commends the Strategy's adoption of 'horizons' that scope out immediate and longer-term priorities. We appreciate the Strategy's outlook to 2030 and the identified need for ongoing investment in, and attention to, issues arising across our sector. Acknowledging that Action Plans to be implemented through the Strategy are still forthcoming or only earmarked for development at this stage, we recommend the establishment of clear timeframes for action associated with achieving the goals outlined in the Strategy. The Strategy's effectiveness will lie in its ability to communicate with confidence to sector stakeholders that action is forthcoming and will occur in a considered and planned manner. The articulation of clear timeframes will also allow sufficient time for consultation to be planned and undertaken with diverse stakeholder groups, which will also be an essential element in identifying and delivering workable solutions to complex challenges.

### **4. Engage us – we are here to help**

We reaffirm UnitingCare Australia's commitment to working in partnership with government to deliver best outcomes for the care sector and the individuals and communities we serve. Our network stands ready to partner with Government in co-designing and delivering innovative initiatives that will flow from the Strategy and its Action Plans, towards improving outcomes for all stakeholders connected to the care and support sector.

## **Detailed feedback**

### **Goal 1: Quality Care and Support**

- UnitingCare Australia believes that every Australian is entitled to receive the highest quality of support and service available to them, and that neither location nor limited economic means should be a barrier to accessing the support that is needed and deserved. We appreciate the Strategy's endorsement of this view.
- We acknowledge the Strategy's recognition of interrelated workforce dynamics at play in our sector, and that attraction of workers to one sector inadvertently risks exacerbating workforce shortages in another. We do, however, recognise the portability of skills across care and support sector roles and acknowledge the potential for worker mobility as a workforce attraction/retention mechanism.
- We acknowledge the important role to be played by the Jobs and Skills Council in working with industry to ensure that training is designed and delivered to meet employer needs, and that individuals undertaking training are equipped with the requisite skills and experience to commence, and remain in, employment.
- We highlight the importance of providing non-accredited training alongside formal, accredited training programs to adequately prepare and support individuals for employment in the sector. Further, we advocate the need for wrap-around supports such as mentoring and pastoral care, particularly for new entrants to the workforce, to ensure they settle into their employment and receive the support and guidance

needed to thrive in their roles. There is an important role for Government to play in facilitating access to this type of wrap-around support through provision of additional resourcing to organisations implementing employment and workforce initiatives.

- We encourage training to be approached as a partnership between Government, Training Providers and employers. Government support for employers to take an active role in contributing to the training and development of new employees provides an opportunity for win-win outcomes for individual organisations and for the sector. Financial and non-financial support for employers to develop new members of the workforce through programs such as traineeships, graduate programs and professional transition to practice programs provides an incentive for employers to seek out and support early-career employees to join the care and support workforce.
- We acknowledge the Strategy's recognition of Labour Agreements, and more specifically, the Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement initiative, as mechanisms to assist employers in meeting workforce needs through temporary migration pathways. Several UnitingCare organisations, and particularly those delivering aged care, have expressed interest in exploring this pathway as a means to address critical skills shortages. This is particularly in the context of the introduction of legislative requirements regarding 24/7 nursing and care minutes and the resultant pressure that has been placed on the existing workforce. We caution, however, that such initiatives must be designed, negotiated and delivered for the benefit of all stakeholders, and particularly employers, in order that they deliver on their stated intention of addressing critical skills shortages. Agreements and negotiation processes that impose overly rigid restrictions and requirements upon employers will risk such initiatives not being utilised and thereby, being ineffective in their intention to overcome skills shortages and related workforce challenges. The UnitingCare network would welcome the opportunity to discuss issues identified with the current Agreement and negotiation processes and co-design workable solutions to address these.
- We acknowledge, as highlighted in the Strategy, that the significant complexity and diversity of care and support systems has resulted in a poor user experience for many attempting to access services. This is particularly concerning given the difficult the stressful circumstances that individuals are often faced with when seeking support for themselves, or on behalf of others. UnitingCare Australia believes that the delivery of person-centered services begins with a user-friendly front-end for access to support, and simple navigation of service offerings is essential. On this basis, we support the Strategy's assertion that there is significant scope for the Australian Government to take a leadership role in providing digital platforms that will better help people to navigate systems of care and support and provide reliable, trustworthy, and easy to understand information about the services they need.
- UnitingCare Australia in-principle endorses the concept of integrated commissioning, where providers are funded to deliver cross-sectoral services in thin markets. Many UnitingCare organisations are engaged in delivery of multiple (inter-related) services, including aged care and disability support, children and family services and emergency relief services. We would appreciate further information regarding the

trials that have been delivered to date and the opportunity to work with the government to deliver pilots through an integrated commissioning model in the future.

## Goal 2: Decent Jobs

- We strongly endorse the Strategy's policy vision, aimed at enabling jobs in the care and support economy to become more attractive and competitive options for long-term, professionalised careers, and that jobs will support the wellbeing, safety and economic security of workers.
- We highlight the Strategy's assertion that "job design is driven by how programs are funded, regulation and relevant industrial relations instruments"<sup>4</sup> and note that issues related to each of these factors have contributed significantly to workforce challenges presently faced. Specifically, consistent underfunding of services across the care and support sector has meant that while demand for services has grown substantially, the capacity of services and their workforces to deliver them has diminished. We therefore restate the critical need to acknowledge the interrelated issues of service underfunding and workforce constraints and advocate that the latter can only be addressed through greater investment in, and resourcing of, the sector across its diverse service streams.
- UnitingCare Australia commended the Australian Government's commitment to fund a 15 per cent pay rise, over four years, for aged care workers in direct care roles<sup>5</sup>. We recognise this as a critical step in helping to attract and retain the skilled workforce needed to support older Australians. We also note the critical role that non-direct care roles play in contributing to overall care quality and outcomes in the aged care sector, and acknowledge the importance of the Government's commitment to further fund any pay increases awarded to this component of the workforce.
- We appreciate the Strategy's recognition of societal valuation of care and support professions as significantly influencing the culture of the sector's workforce and how it is perceived, both internally and externally. We strongly support the notion that Government, as the primary funder of care and support services, has a critical role to play in influencing public narrative about the sector, and that the manifestation of this is often in terms of the funding it publicly commits to resource care and support services. We agree with the view forwarded in the Strategy that currently, the commitment of funding towards the Healthcare and Social Assistance industry is typically regarded as a 'cost', rather than an 'investment'. We fully support the Strategy's position that "the wellbeing of people in our community – those receiving care and support and those enabled work because of it – can't be put down to a number in a government budget"<sup>6</sup>. This is a view that UnitingCare Australia has consistently advocated, most recently through our submission to Treasury's 'Measuring What Matters' consultation process, aimed at developing a national wellbeing framework. Through this process, we have argued that the lens through

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<sup>4</sup> Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, p.30

<sup>5</sup> UnitingCare Australia. 2023. Media Release: *It's time to care about aged care workers: UnitingCare Australia welcomes pay rise at last*. <https://unitingcare.org.au/media-release/its-time-to-care-about-aged-care-workers-unitingcare-australia-welcomes-pay-rise-at-last/>

<sup>6</sup> Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, p.32



which we consider ‘value’ must embrace both tangible economic outcomes as well as social goods, where these goods reflect our social values<sup>7</sup>.

- We appreciate the Strategy’s articulation of issues concerning professionalisation of the workforce and career pathways and agree with the assertion that career progression opportunities and enabling stronger professionalisation across all facets of the care and support sector are important in both attracting and retaining workers. We look forward to reviewing the Priority Workforce Initiatives Action Plan and the strategies being considered as part of this Plan to better support professionalisation and career development.

### **Goal 3: Productive and Sustainable**

- We strongly endorse the Strategy’s assertion that “Government investment [in the care and support economy] needs to be sustainable and ensure fairness both to current and future generations” and that “achieving this long-term vision requires Government investment to be both effective and efficient”<sup>8</sup>.
- We appreciate the Strategy’s acknowledgement that consumer choice needs to be coupled with consumer protection, and that effective regulation is a careful balancing act to ensure no adverse or unintended outcomes.
- We emphasise the need for careful recognition of the interplay between service provider viability and the availability of care and supports to individuals and communities in need. Whilst appreciating that the Government assumes a stewardship role in relation to the consumer-directed care service market, we advocate that competition and contestability in the market should not come at the expense of diminished service quality, particularly for those who are most vulnerable, have least means to purchase the supports they require, or for those who are situated in thin markets.
- We support the notion that future Government policy work must consider both the level of funding, and the relative financial contributions of Government and individuals needed to deliver the quality of care and supports the Australian community expects and deserves.
- We also endorse the Strategy’s view that opportunities for productivity gains should be pursued, and that increased adoption of technology and innovation will go a way to facilitating this. We highlight Government’s role to play in enabling greater uptake of technology-related innovation through the commitment of resourcing to support service providers to modernise and streamline their operations. We again note the importance of partnership between Government and Training Providers in ensuring that workforce participants and employers are supported to develop and maintain relevant skills in an environment of technological adaptation and evolution.

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<sup>7</sup> UnitingCare Australia. 2023. Submission to the Treasury – Measuring What Matters (Second Phase).

<sup>8</sup> Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, p.43



## Summary

We look forward to the release of the forthcoming Priority Workforce Initiatives Action Plan and the strategies this may include towards ensuring a sufficient pipeline of workers into the care and support sector to meet current and future service demand.

We also await details regarding the proposed new governance function to coordinate workforce planning across the care and support economy, and restate the UnitingCare network's willingness to partner with government to co-design and deliver initiatives that flow from the Strategy.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback to the Taskforce regarding this important body of work and would welcome the opportunity to provide any further feedback on the points raised in this submission.