

Summary of evaluation of SSI's Ability Links



After finding Ability Links I've met more people and that's been magic like a great colour, because my Linker's done exactly what her name says she should do; she linked me to the community. And so now I have people and I can keep going.

[SSI Ability Links Participant]

Background

The NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) funds a range of non-government organisations to deliver Ability Links NSW (ALNSW) through a mix of generalist and Aboriginal staff called Linkers and generalist and Aboriginal Early Linkers for children aged 0–8 years.

Linkers support people with disability aged 9–64 years (with or without a diagnosis), their families and carers to identify their goals and connect with their community and mainstream services. Linkers also support community organisations, mainstream services and businesses to become more inclusive of people with disability (referred to as linked organisations). Ability Links is currently funded until the 30th June 2018.

A state-wide evaluation of Ability Links in 2016 established that the program was generating positive individual outcomes for participants and was increasingly generating community outcomes. The evaluation reported a 2.4 ratio of benefits to costs for Ability Links, not including community and intangible social benefits.

Settlement Services International (SSI) is funded for 58 generalist Linkers, working in 5 teams across several Local Health Districts (LHDs) in metropolitan, regional and rural NSW in partnership with Uniting and St Vincent de Paul.

SSI engaged ARTD Consultants to undertake an evaluation between August and November 2017 of SSI's Ability Links.

Methods

The main purpose of the evaluation was to benchmark the performance of SSI against the state-wide ALNSW program for all participants and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) participants, and help to identify how SSI works to generate positive individual and community outcomes. Ability Links providers across NSW collect data and report on individual outcomes (four categories) and community outcomes (three categories).

Given that a state-wide evaluation of ALNSW had been recently completed for FACS, the focus of this evaluation was on analysing and comparing SSI's outcomes data and carrying out individual and group consultations with SSI staff, linked organisations and a group of SSI Ability Links participants (mainly people with disability).

Two periods of program outcomes data were analysed: 2016 (as per the state-wide evaluation methods) and Quarter 2, 2017.

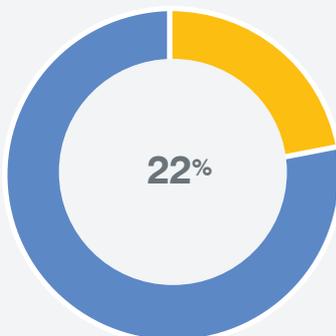
There was sufficient program data to identify key factors in how SSI supports outcomes for all participants and CALD participants. The consultations with linked organisations and consultations with SSI Ability Links participants were not intended to be representative, but to highlight key themes. In terms of the outcomes data, the analysis for 2016 should be interpreted with caution because there was some inconsistent data collection across the program, and potentially under-reporting by SSI. Quarter 2, 2017 data is more reliable, but is limited in that it may not be representative of the full year.

Findings

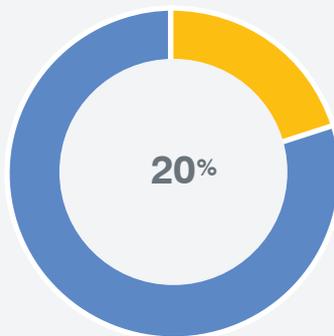
The findings from the evaluation are positive. The data shows SSI is performing well in terms of individual and community outcomes and operational efficiency and effectiveness. In terms of reach, in Quarter 2, 2017 SSI provided information to 750 individuals, and facilitated support to 1,254 individuals working towards an outcome. 424 people provided with support by SSI had achieved one or more outcomes.

SSI'S PROPORTION OF ALNSW INDIVIDUAL OUTCOMES

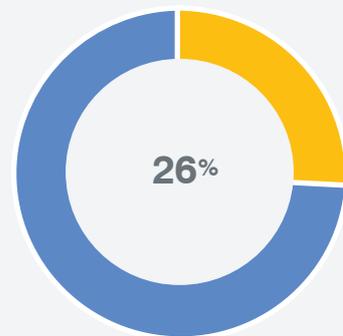
Available data suggests SSI is achieving outcomes in line with its proportion of state-wide ALNSW costs. In Quarter 2, 2017, SSI accounted for approximately 22% of Linker costs, and delivered 20% of the ALNSW's individual outcomes and 26% of the ALNSW's community outcomes.



SSI as percentage of Linker costs



SSI as percentage of individual outcomes

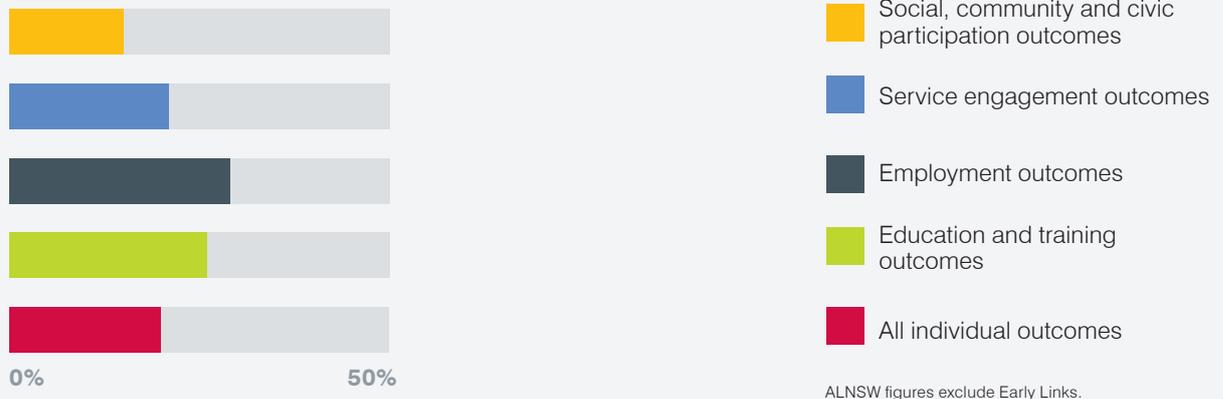


SSI as percentage of community outcomes

Across the categories of individual outcomes SSI has particularly strong employment outcomes and education and training outcomes: in Quarter 2, 2017, SSI accounted for 29% of ALNSW employment outcomes and 26% of education and training outcomes.

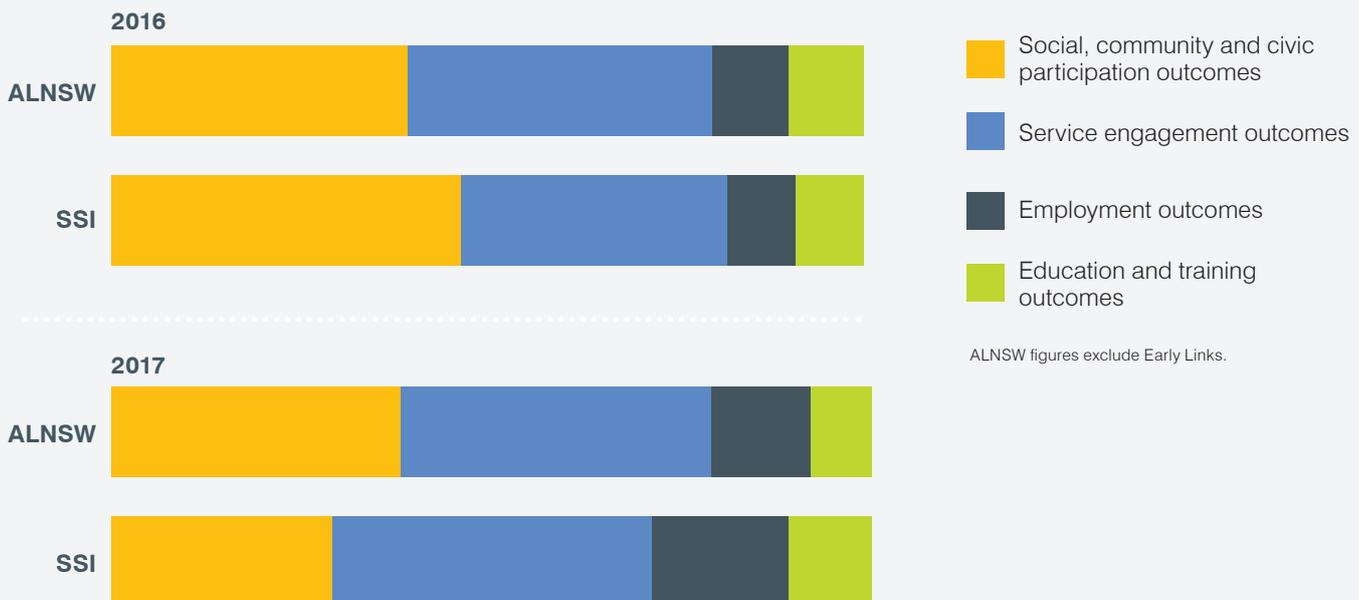
SSI's innovation in setting up the IgniteAbility Small Business Start-ups and EmployAbility pilots, and the establishment of a traineeship initiative are reportedly supporting strong employment outcomes.

SSI's proportion of ALNSW individual outcomes



In the state-wide ALNSW program, the proportion of individual outcomes from each of the four categories remained fairly constant between 2016 and Quarter 2, 2017. However, for SSI outcomes pattern changed, and, in Quarter 2, 2017, SSI achieved a higher proportion of employment outcomes and training outcomes which have both been the focus of targeted pilot initiatives.

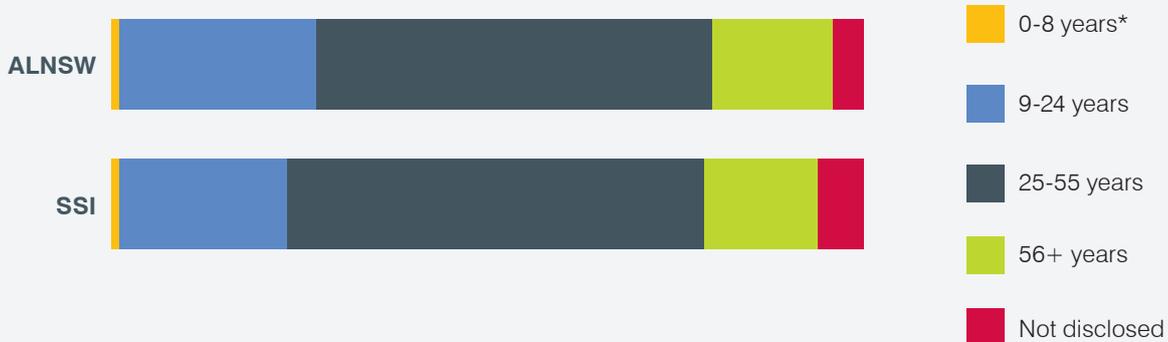
Overall individual outcomes patterns (ALNSW and SSI)



DEMOGRAPHICS

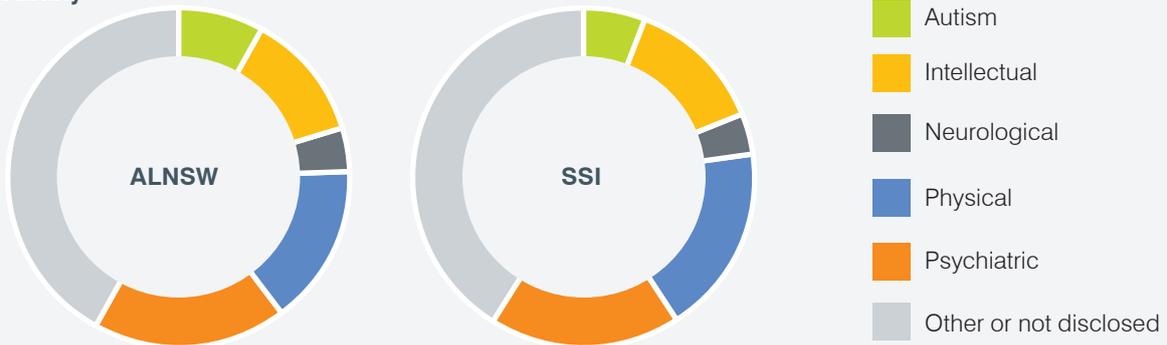
SSI Ability Links participants have similar profiles in terms of gender, age and disability categories, compared to participants of the ALNSW program. This indicates that SSI is delivering an Ability Links service that is comparable to that of other providers, in terms of these key demographics of participants.

Age of participants achieving outcomes



*There are few participants aged 0-8 years because they are supported by Early Links

Disability



Outcomes for CALD participants

SSI is performing particularly well with CALD communities. In Quarter 2 2017, 64% of SSI's individual outcomes were for CALD participants, which is in line with the proportion of SSI individual participants achieving outcomes in this quarter who are from CALD backgrounds. This suggests SSI is effectively supporting outcomes for CALD and non-CALD participants.

In the same period, SSI accounted for a substantial proportion (75%) of ALNSW outcomes achieved for CALD participants. The feedback indicates SSI's high level of outcomes for CALD participants reflects not only the high CALD population in many of the areas in which SSI delivers Ability Links, but the way SSI has been able to effectively work with and support CALD participants. This is particularly positive because CALD communities have historically been under-represented and underserved in the disability service system.

A lot of our staff members have lived experience, from a CALD background or have disabilities, it's more relatable with participants and builds more trust...

[SSI staff]

Proportion of outcomes for CALD participants 2017

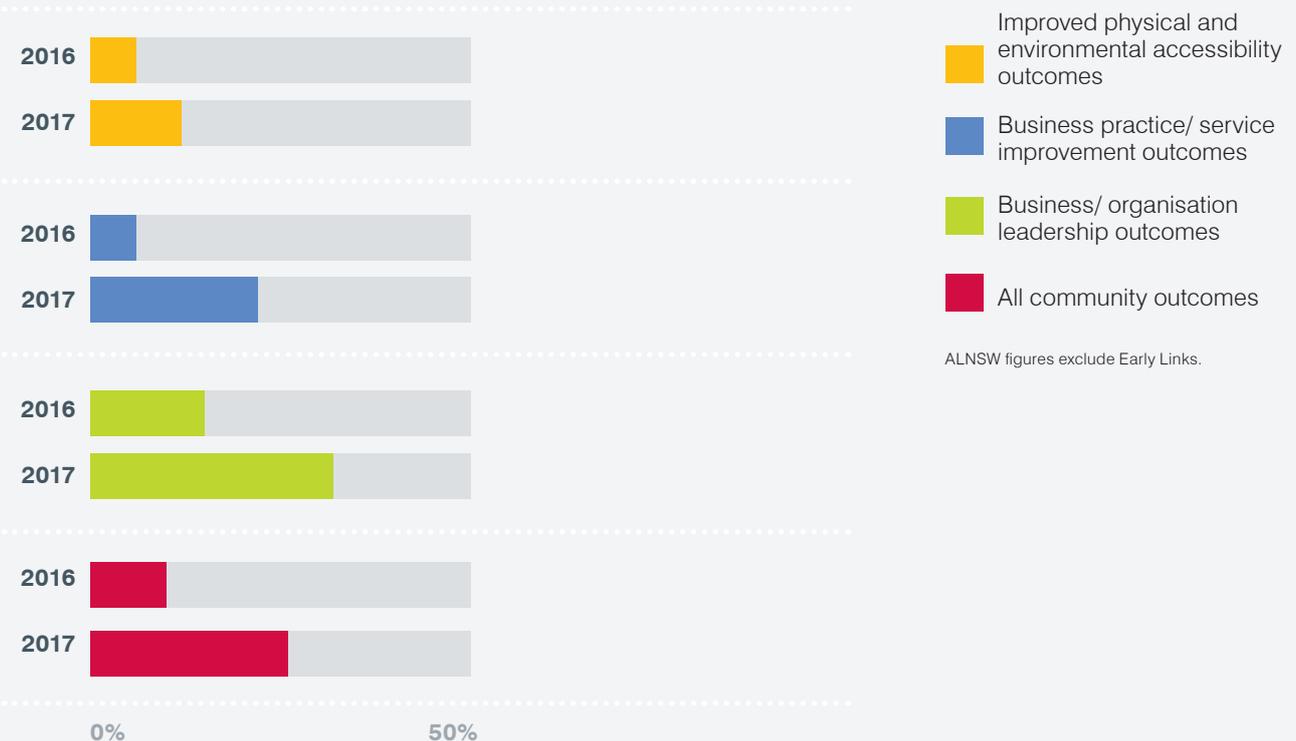
Outcome type	ALNSW % CALD	SSI % CALD	SSI % of ALNSW CALD outcomes
Social, community and civic participation outcomes	15%	64%	66%
Service engagement outcomes	18%	66%	78%
Employment outcomes	19%	52%	78%
Education and training outcomes	22%	73%	84%
Total	17%	64%	75%

ALNSW figures exclude Early Links.

SSI'S PROPORTION OF ALNSW COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

In Quarter 2, 2017, SSI accounted for 26% of state-wide ALNSW community outcomes (against approximately 22% of Linker costs), a substantial increase since 2016 (when SSI accounted for 10% of community outcomes) – likely attributable to better recording of data and an increased focus on community development. At the state-wide program level and within SSI, there has been a stronger emphasis on business and community leadership outcomes, compared to physical access outcomes. Linkers reported they were focusing more on attitudinal change and that certain physical access outcomes would take longer to achieve or would be costlier.

SSI's proportion of ALNSW community outcomes



HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The evaluation identified a range of factors at the organisational and program management level and in program philosophy and characteristics of Linkers that support positive outcomes for participants and communities. Some of these factors appear to be unique to SSI, while others extend across the broader ALNSW program.

Stakeholders identified SSI Linkers being bilingual, from diverse backgrounds and connected to their communities as key to supporting outcomes, as this means participants and Linkers have a shared understanding of issues, such as stigma, and Linkers are able to build trusting relationships and help participants overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.



[Linkers have] understanding of people in the right manner in all areas with different nationalities and how to approach people in the right manner and how to work with all people.

[SSI Ability Links Participant]

At the organisational level, staff emphasised the importance of SSI's valuing of diversity and promotion of innovation in the successful delivery of ALNSW, which is designed to promote inclusion and identify out-of-the box approaches to assist participants to overcome barriers and achieve their goals.

Examples of these innovative approaches include the use of surplus operating funds to deliver the IgniteAbility Small Business Start-ups and the EmployAbility pilots and the establishment of a traineeship, all of which are reportedly supporting the improvements in employment and training outcomes in 2017. Staff also value the way SSI listens to and supports its staff. This culture makes SSI an employer of choice, which supports Linker retention and satisfaction in their role, which in turn supports positive outcomes for participants. SSI's reputation and structure also support linkages for participants.



Whenever there is a gap or a weak place, there is always a negotiation, or a team trying to solve this problem and make it better. There are always small changes in the way we are doing something based on the need and whether there is any gap.

[SSI staff]

At the program management level, staff described the value of SSI's continuous improvement of the program structure; learning from evidence; innovative deployment of resources to create employment initiatives; and training and support for staff. There were some suggestions for further training in certain areas, involvement of people with disability in staff selection and increased employment of people with disability within the program.

Stakeholders emphasised the philosophy of the Ability Links program as a whole – that it is flexible, holistic, independent and free. This evaluation also identified the value of similar Linker qualities to those identified in the state-wide evaluation, such as passion, empathy, compassion, respect, resourcefulness, responsiveness and persistence.

Participants were generally very positive about their Linkers and experience with the program, but there were some suggestions for improved participant-Linker matching and communications, particularly on follow-up.

The evaluation also identified the varying ways outcomes are supported for participants – depending on their starting points, needs and goals. In some cases, participants come with ideas and Linkers help to make these happen, while in others, Linkers help to turn participant interests into ideas for community connections.



My Linker has been great; supporting me in different ways I can make myself more employable or do better in interviews—but the truth is I know I have a lot of those skills on my own...What Ability Links is doing is helping me prove that again.

[SSI Ability Links Participant]

The program can build participant confidence in varying ways: through the encouragement of a Linker or through social connections. Linkers support capacity building by doing 'with, not for' participants. However, some participants may need more assistance than others in initial phases and there were some differing views among participants about the amount of follow-up support needed.



[It's] not about being ahead of someone dragging them, not behind them pushing them. It's standing with them shoulder to shoulder. You might point out some things on your walk, but you walk with them.

[SSI staff]

Linkers are from local communities and have established relationships or, if they are from outside the local area, they have the skills to establish these relationships. Linkers build on and maintain their networks by connecting with local organisations, businesses and support groups, and participating in interagencies. Linkers promote awareness of Ability Links in the community by reaching out to venues, such as libraries, schools, and shopping centres; and more targeted approaches for specific groups, such as attending a walking group to connect with people with schizophrenia, places of religion and ethnic community radio for non-English speaking communities.

Linked organisations generally noted the way Ability Links complements their service and supports participant outcomes. These organisations collaborate with SSI to address gaps in community needs and jointly deliver events and/or support each other's events.



We wouldn't have been able to run the forum financially ourselves and Ability Links wouldn't have been able to access the speakers we did.

[Linked organisation]

Conclusions and future directions

- SSI is clearly providing a valuable service that is supporting positive outcomes for people with disability, their families and carers, and local communities.
- SSI is achieving outcomes in line with its proportion of state-wide Linker costs.
- SSI is supporting particularly strong outcomes for CALD communities and in employment and education and training. It is also strengthening its community outcomes.
- Stakeholders identified SSI Linkers being bilingual, from diverse backgrounds and connected to their communities as key to supporting outcomes, as this means participants and Linkers have a shared understanding and are able to build trusting relationships and help participants overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.
- SSI's innovative use of surplus operating funds are reportedly supporting strong employment and training outcomes.
- Other particular strengths include the organisation's values and the program level commitment to continuous improvement.
- The program would have ongoing value in an NDIS environment because it supports participants with disability who will be eligible for NDIS plans and those not eligible, and effectively engages them at the local community level.
- The program has particular value for people with disability from CALD backgrounds, who would otherwise face barriers to participating actively in their community, education and employment and accessing services.
- Should the program continue, the evaluation identified some potential improvements that SSI could make to further strengthen the program. In particular:
 - increased promotion
 - involvement of people with disability in staff selection
 - further staff training, particularly in specific types of disability
 - further consideration of Linker-participant matching
 - the extent of follow-up required to meet varying participant needs.



Since starting going to the Ability Links community group, I have found friends much quicker rather than staying at home and seeing no one. When you make one friend you get lots, made it much quicker. I now have a community.

[SSI Ability Links Participant]



Ability Links helped me to understand and access NDIS and get it approved which has made a huge difference. Nothing would have happened without them because of the language barrier.

[SSI Ability Links Participant]

REFERENCES

- ARTD Consultants. (2017). Evaluation of SSI's Ability Links.
Urbis. (2016). Ability Links NSW Final Evaluation Report. Prepared for NSW FACS October 2016.
Urbis. (2016). Ability Links NSW Social Cost Benefit Analysis