

# disability connect.

Impact Report

July 2023 - June 2024



*Image description: A young man is dressed in a Matariki themed outfit. He is holding a gift bag and a book called "The Seven Kites of Matariki".*

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# Foreword

## *by Colleen Brown*

As Chair of Disability Connect, I'm delighted to write the foreword to the 2023-24 Impact Report on behalf of the Board.

2024 has been a challenging one for us in the disability sector, starting with the government's 'pause' on disability support services on 18 March.

Disability Connect staff have worked hard to support families as they navigate through funding cuts and frequent policy changes. It is a very hard time to be a disabled person and to be supporting them.

Regardless, the Disability Connect team has provided important support in a timely manner to many diverse cultures, reflecting their needs and aspirations.

The Board is constantly impressed with the level of innovation demonstrated by our team. A case in point is the number of volunteers, including St Johns Rotary, sponsors Merkle and Mercury, I AM Mangere and local MPs who help us with events such as our Transition Expo.

While the Impact Report is a summary of the work carried out over a year, behind that lies the total dedication this organisation has for the wellbeing of the disability community, seeking to respond to its needs as creatively as it can.

We are grateful for the support we get from not only funding organisations, but also for the many treasured relationships with community groups, government agencies and the disability sector.

Ngā mihi nui,

**Colleen Brown, KSO**

Chair - Disability Connect



*Image description: Colleen stands smiling outside in front of a green bush. She has short blonde hair, and is wearing a black shirt with a green koru heart necklace.*

# Our Values, Vision, Mission and Activities

## **Our Values:**

To respect and support choice.

## **Our Vision:**

That people with disabilities and their families are able to lead the lives they want.

## **Our Mission:**

To lead and influence positive change for people with disabilities and their families.

## **Our Activities:**

- Influence national policy and decision making
- Provide information and advice
- Host presentations, forums and workshops
- Facilitate networking, collaboration and partnerships

## ***Removing barriers for families***

*Jiang is a single father who recently migrated from China. His autistic son Eric is seven years old and enrolled in a special school. Due to the language barrier, Jiang struggled to engage in services and had no knowledge on disability supports in New Zealand.*

*Jiang discovered us through our WeChat group for Chinese families. Following several conversations, we arranged a meeting with Taikura Trust to clarify the support packages on offer for Eric.*

*During the meeting, Jiang also shared concerns about his son's challenging behaviour at home, such as throwing dishes during meals. As their support package didn't include behaviour support, we recommended a referral via Taikura Trust to Explore's Autism Support Services.*

*Thanks to the communication in his native language, Jiang said he felt more informed and confident, and was very grateful for our thoughtful explanations. He later received more assistance for Eric from Explore, which made him very happy.*



# Our Impact - In Numbers



- 55 families assisted through pastoral care
- 500+ support group attendees
- 470+ seminar, workshop and collaboration event attendees
- 1K+ Transition Expo attendees
- 2.6K+ individual information requests
- 800+ volunteer hours
- 160+ WeChat group members
- 4.4K+ e-subscribers
- 25K+ e-newsletter readership
- 4.2K+ Facebook followers

*Every dollar invested  
in Disability Connect  
delivers an average  
850% return over the  
life of a disabled  
person.*

*- Impact Lab DIAS  
Collective report*

## *Capturing solutions*

*New Plymouth-based mum, Camille, has a 22-year-old son, Peter, with cerebral palsy.*

*Peter can drive and enjoys photography, but struggles with setting up his camera and taking pictures. These challenges were affecting Peter's mental health.*

*Camille got in touch with us for support. Our team investigated options for camera mounts.*

*We found a specialist who could attach the camera on to a gimbal or make a grip attachment for better stability. The camera specialist works in Auckland and was happy to video call the family to get the desired result.*

# People and Governance

## *For and by disabled whānau*

**Did you know 80% of our staff either live with a disability themselves or have a child with a disability?** For example, our CEO has a disability, is a parent and has a brother-in-law with a disability.

To be better equipped to serve our communities, all of our staff completed Humanly's Enabling Good Lives training in March 2024, and all of our advisors have completed or are enrolled in the Building Inclusive Communities course.

Our Board also includes a disabled person and six people who are or have been parents of disabled people.



*Image description: Staff member Cherie smiling behind her son Mitchell. Cherie has a blonde bob hairstyle and a blue top. Mitchell wears a fedora hat and has a nasogastric tube connected to his nose.*

We're deeply grateful for the valuable contribution our Board makes in guiding, supporting and encouraging the work we do to fulfil our vision and mission. This is due in no small part to the uniqueness and variety of their lived experience across education, business, communities and government, their networks and governance skills. Through their support, we're truly directed and led for and by disabled whānau.

### ***Discovering the real issue***

*Rachel's daughter Kerry is seven years old. As Kerry was acting out often, throwing tantrums and items, Rachel rang us for specific information on behavioural specialists.*

*After listening to her concerns, we supported Rachel to identify the real problem - lack of a reliable carer and communication system for her daughter.*

*We provided Rachel with suggestions on where she could advertise for carers, and how to use simple yes/no cards to communicate with Kerry.*

*We followed up by facilitating a meeting with her school's speech language therapist for further ideas to communicate with her daughter.*

# Awards and Recognition

## *Celebrating our successes*

**While the Federation of Disability Information Centres didn't host a conference in 2024, we did manage to win their only award this year - the Enabling Good Lives Video Challenge.**

Our video shared the story of what we do to Enable Good Lives, featuring our staff answering questions from families and our Transition Expo. [Scan the QR code to watch the video.](#)



**We're also incredibly proud of our Chair, Colleen Brown, who received the prestigious Companion of the Kings Service Order in June 2024.**

Colleen has served on our Board for 20 years, with the last 19 years as our Chair. But first and foremost, she is a remarkable mother and wife who has successfully navigated the system of supports in New Zealand so her disabled son Travers can have the best life possible.

Colleen has led with passion, empathy, great fortitude, and decisiveness to give parents of disabled people a voice, including as:

- the only parent representative for the New Zealand Disability Strategy 2016-2026 reference group, ensuring integration of the voice of parents, families and whānau
- a member of the Extraordinary Care Fund Expert Panel for the Ministry of Social Development in 2023.

Congratulations Colleen on this recognition!



*Image description: Mike Potter and Colleen Brown smiling together. Colleen is holding a bouquet of colourful flowers.*

**Here are some of the other accolades we've received over the last ten years:**

- Diane Rangi Innovation Award - Kai with Kindness (2017, 2021-22)
- Federation of Disability Information Centres Information Specialist of the Year - Asoka Gamage-Mendis (2021-22), Yoky Yao (2022-23)
- Federation of Disability Information Centres Student of the Year - Building Inclusive Communities - Yoky Yao (2022-23)

# Transition Expo 2023

## *Supporting school leavers*

**Transition (the shift from school to adulthood) is an incredibly important and often nerve-wracking period for disabled students and their families.**

To support those in Auckland preparing for, or in the midst of the transition journey, we host an annual free event showcasing the range of possibilities available for people to explore.

Transition Expo provides a one-stop-shop for young people and their families to meet providers in person. Areas we cover include housing, employment, tertiary education, sports, arts, social groups, activities, transport and services.

With more than 1,000 attendees, Transition Expo 2023 was our largest yet.



*Image description: A father and daughter at Transition Expo to explore opportunities. They are standing by a stall with brochures and items on it, and the daughter is smiling and making two peace signs with her hands.*

New features this year included a meet and greet opportunity with potential employers called ‘Conversations with Employers’, hosted by the NZ Disability Employers Network. Auckland Libraries joined us for first time with a spectacular exhibit, and Auckland Transport and ASB also had their own stalls for the first time.

Transition Expo is a safe place for government, employers, community and tertiary providers to engage with the subculture of disabled school leavers and their families. By our estimates, the information and conversations shared at Transition 2023 will provide approximately \$500,000 worth of impact over the life of disabled attendees.

***“Careers evenings and employment fairs simply don’t cater to the needs of all disabled school leavers. Standard ways of looking for work through CVs and job seeker programmes aren’t tailored to their needs.*”**

***Transition Expo helps disabled students prepare for an independent life of work, study, travel and participation in community, just like their peers.”***



# Seminars and Workshops

## Managing Support Staff

Families receiving Individualised Funding buy their own supports from the government through Disability Support Services. Parents can find managing this budget and staff lonely and challenging.

Our online workshop, Kāinga Kōrero, gave families an opportunity to hear from three parents who employ and manage support staff for their disabled family members.

Over 40 people attended to engage in topics such as recruitment, motivating and keeping staff on task, training, pay scale parity, challenging employee scenarios, taxation and insurance.

Families told us the tips they received were invaluable, helping them to save time and money and become better at recruiting and retaining good staff.

## Legal webinars with Nan Jensen

Our regular webinars with legal expert Nan Jensen provide legal information for families, professionals and community supports across the country, covering:

- Planning for Adulthood - PPPR Act, Welfare Guardianship and Power of Attorney
- Education Legal Issues - ORS declines, access to Special Schools and extra-curricular activities

## Relationships Are For Everyone

In October 2023, we hosted a free workshop on sexuality, sex education and relationships with Dr Angela Arnold-Saritepe (Senior Psychology Lecturer at University of Auckland), Kath Owen (Teacher) and Angela Walter (Social Worker).

This provided 10 families with information and practical strategies for relationship building, boundaries and sexuality education for family members with intellectual disabilities.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Families told us that there are few safe places to explore this topic with others, and this session grew their confidence to navigate relationship challenges with their teenagers and young adults.

***"[Your] newsletter is a great way to get quick information / links to what may be useful.***

***Always provide great workshops/seminars either for me as a professional or what I can encourage my families to look at further."***

# Support and Social Groups

**Our Support and Social Groups continue to play an important role in meeting the respite needs of families, by providing valuable information and a chance to build connections with others in the community.**

We're proud to offer a diverse range of topics based on the needs expressed to us, and at no charge to families:

Over the last year, we've covered:

- Sexuality and relationships
- Taikura Trust support packages
- Using Individualised Funding wisely
- DIY Halloween decorations
- Floral arrangements
- Residential care
- Choice in Community Living
- Yoga
- Understanding and supporting your child's behaviour
- Drumming
- Mindfulness and colouring
- Preparing for the summer holidays
- Oral health
- Mindfulness and resilience
- Beating the winter blues
- Dance therapy
- Mother's Day hand lotions
- Matariki storytime

Our free online Zoom Support Group continues to be a lifeline for families in our community. Hosted every Monday evening at 7pm, this group is promoted through our website, newsletter and social media.

Families with little to no spare time, including working parents with disabled family members, can talk through what they are facing, for example find the best place for their anxious son to get his hair cut and support others too.

Thank you Robyn for being so available for all our families, to listen and support everyone with your amazing knowledge.



*Image description: Zoom Support Group facilitator, Robyn. She has blue eyes, is smiling brightly, and wears a pink top and pink cardigan.*





### ***Music to our ears***

*Susan is a regular attendee of both our Parent Support and Social Groups. Her disabled adult son, Kevin, is a gifted pianist who wants to give back to the community.*

*However, he hasn't had an opportunity to share his talent. This is mainly due to the barriers of transporting a piano, or the availability of a piano at venues.*

*We advised Susan on using Individualised Funding to buy a portable keyboard. We also connected the family with a musician who lent Kevin a keyboard as he had not used one before.*

*To help him get started, Kevin performed at some of our events, including our Parent Support Group and annual Christmas party. He now often volunteers by playing piano for residents at rest homes, demonstrating that people with disabilities can contribute to society.*



*Image descriptions: A collage of four photos showing children or parents/families attending our various Parent Support and Social Groups, including creative events like a floral arrangement workshop, and a costume themed Christmas party.*

# In the Community

## *Community collaboration*

To help our communities support disabled people better we visit community meetings, schools, libraries, Citizen Advice Bureaus, medical centres and more.

We assisted organisations across Auckland to host 'Disability Supports in the Community' events with Taikura Trust, the Ministry of Social Development and other disability services so local communities can benefit firsthand from information to navigate disability supports.

These events were a huge success, and attended by social workers, community development workers, community organisation staff, disabled people, tāngata whaikaha, families and whānau.

Being a listening ear and having lived experience is meaningful to the people we talk to. They trust us and share stuff that is heartbreaking and tough. While we don't always have solutions, they feel better having spoken to someone who "gets it".

### ***Back to school***

*South Auckland locals, Mera and Aman, are 12-year-old twins on the autism spectrum. Mera has few behavioral issues and is enrolled in the local intermediate school. However, mainstream schools refused Aman due to 'his difficult behavior' or as they were full. Their mother called or visited every intermediate and special school in the area, but to no avail.*

*Stressed and dejected, she contacted us for support. We worked together to involve their current school, Ministry of Education, Taikura Trust and Explore. We later received news that Aman was on the waitlist for a new school, and able to attend another in the interim.*

*"We literally had tears in our eyes when we heard this... Seriously, it is such a big relief! We are able to sleep now... Been a very, very stressful time. I was going crazy. Thank you so much for your support. We know that you are always there for us."*

***"I didn't know those supports existed."***

***"I thought it was up to me to support my son."***

***"How can we learn more?"***

***"I need a break."***

***"Wow, how do we get that?"***



# Advocacy Work

## *A voice for disabled whānau*

### Community Housing Collective

Our Community Housing Collective is five years old this year! We established the Collective to give a voice to disabled people, their families and whānau. Our community simply doesn't have the same choices as our peers. With the market and government not building enough suitable homes, our aim is to raise awareness and advocate for change.

We began connecting developers with organisations like Autism NZ (now a Community Housing Provider) to increase accessible housing. Though progress is slow and demand grows, we're pleased to play a part in seeing more accessible homes built.

We also connect families with information to understand their housing options. Our CEO Mike facilitated a Pathfinder workshop on Housing Options for Disabled People. We also hosted an online Q&A with Taikura Trust and providers on Choices in Community Living (CiCL) - an alternative housing option to residential care for people with significant disabilities.

#### **Community Housing Collective Members:**

*Disability Connect, ME Family Services, Otara Health Charitable Trust, Complex Care Group, Yes Disability, Autism New Zealand, IHC, Cerebral Palsy Association, Te Manawa Respite Care, Spectrum Foundation, Level-up Aotearoa Charitable Trust, Te Ora Puawai, and Auckland Disability Law.*

***“Present housing options for autistic people often do not enable them to live independently with support.***

***We're grateful to Disability Connect and the Community Housing Collective for connecting us to developers who are prepared to offer custom-built homes designed with neuro-sensory elements in mind.***

***We're pleased to be working together to break the cycle of homelessness, housing insecurity and discrimination that our autistic community faces.”***

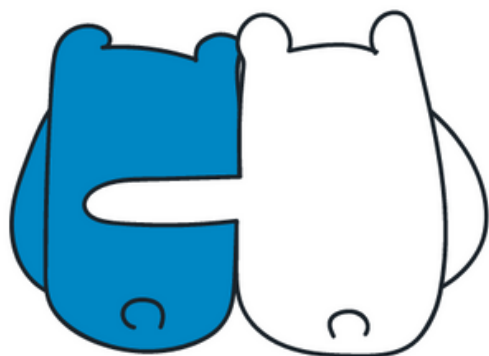
***- Dane Dougan, Autism NZ CEO***

# Advocacy Work

## *A voice for disabled whānau*

Over the past year, we advocated for the needs of disabled people and their families to:

- Mercury and Genesis - research into hard-to-reach consumers living in hidden hardship
- New Zealand Disability Support Network Conference - 100% accessible social housing with Universal Design
- NZ Banking Association and individual banks - better support and resources
- Auckland Council - stormwater resilience and improved emergency response management
- New Zealand Disability Students Association - support in the transition to tertiary study
- Auckland Transport and SESTA - Total Mobility Scheme review to have a clear and simple transition for school leavers to use the TMS post-school



**Standing with you**

*Image description: the backs of a blue and white bear hugging each other from the side, with the text 'Standing with you' below.*



*Image description: A family of three at a protest in Auckland. The father holds a big yellow sign that reads "Give back flexibility, Give me back my voice, Give me back my choice, Ordinary life outcomes!!!". The mother stands behind her daughter who is sitting in a wheelchair.*

- Starship - improvement to the transition home, helping families to connect with natural supports, community workers and school supports
- Christian Leaders Network Conference - better inclusion in churches and theological training
- Activate Agency, Auckland Council and wider industry - choices in clothing, footwear, equipment, design of EV charging sites, provision of gas utilities, housing and transport
- Whakauae Housing Research - needs of whānau hauā / disabled family members included in Papakainga initiatives
- Te Whatu Ora - inclusion in health plans
- Youth Employment Aotearoa and Fairer Futures New Zealand - education opportunities for disabled students.

# Final Words From the CEO

**18 March 2024 is embedded in our memories as the day government announced changes to disability support services with immediate effect. We feel like economic units, which hurts.**



*Image description: Mike smiling. He has short brown hair and a blue shirt.*

This has impacted families significantly in their short-term capacity to live the good life promised by government, and eroded trust and confidence to plan long term.

Our response has been to stand with families, to listen and support. Where opportunities arise, we've advocated with government for cross-party consensus on the long term needs of disabled people and their families, and a plan that gives certainty and confidence.

Government data shows that the number of disabled people entering Disability Support Services is increasing at 8-9% per year, driven largely by improved healthcare. The time is right for an open conversation about the value of our most vulnerable people and what their future needs will be across health, education, housing and social services, and how we as a country will fund it properly.

I'm super proud of our team and Board who not only live with the challenges of disability in their personal lives, but are committed to working together to improve the lives of other families and communities. Thank you for a great year, providing trusted information so disabled people and their families can have the best choices.

Thank you to everyone who supports us, particularly our funders Whaikaha, Te Whatu Ora, Ministry of Social Development, Foundation North, Lotteries, COGS, Mercury, Lister Presbyterian Health Trust, Merkle and individual donors.

Despite the tough climate, you can see from this report that Disability Connect is continuing to make an incredible impact, with a lifetime return in the lives of disabled people and their families of more than \$8.50 for every dollar invested.

We're here to make our communities, government agencies, other organisations and support staff better. I welcome the opportunity to talk further about how you can be part of this amazing mahi.

Ngā mihi nui,  
**Mike Potter**  
CEO, Disability Connect

*Scan the QR code to  
donate and help us  
reach more families  
with lifelong impact:*





# Thank you to our partners who make our mahi possible:



Image description: Eight people from the Disability Connect team smiling together, standing or sitting in front of a branded sign.

e: [admin@disabilityconnect.org.nz](mailto:admin@disabilityconnect.org.nz)  
p: 09 636 0351  
[www.disabilityconnect.org.nz](http://www.disabilityconnect.org.nz)

**disability  
connect.**  
helping families