

State of the disability advocacy sector 2024 and onwards – Disability Advocacy Victoria

Disability Advocacy Victoria (“DAV”), formerly known as Victorian Disability Advocacy Network, was established in 2003, and is the peak body for independent disability advocacy organisations.

Victorian Disability Advocacy Sector

In 2023/2024 there were 23 disability advocacy organisations funded via the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program.

The Victorian Disability Advocacy Program is a Victorian Government investment to ensure inclusion and participation of Victorians with a disability in the life of the community by funding disability advocacy and self-advocacy organisations

A number of these Victorian disability advocacy organisations also receive funding from the Commonwealth Government through the National Disability Advocacy Program and a small number receive funding from other sources.

Providing Disability Advocacy in Victoria

The Victorian Government states it is committed to ensuring fairness and safety for Victorians with disability, and disability advocacy is a priority commitment in the Victorian State Disability Plan, stating:

“We will work to ensure all Victorians can have equal rights and challenge discrimination through access to a thriving disability advocacy sector led by and for people with disability.”

Disability advocacy works to ensure that the human and legal rights of people with disabilities are promoted and protected so that people with disabilities can fully participate in the community. The work of disability advocacy organisations is varied and includes:

- *individual advocacy*, where an advocate works directly with a person with a disability to provide information, advice, or support to take action to uphold their rights.

- *systemic advocacy*, which addresses discrimination affecting a number of people with disabilities, by advocating for change to legislation, policies and practices.
- *self-advocacy*, where people with a disability speak up and represent themselves, and organisations support people to do this.

The sustainability of the Victorian disability advocacy sector is at a critical point with a number of disability advocacy organisations operating a deficit budget, putting at risk the solvency of some of these organisations. Many of these organisations have faced a significant increase in people with disability needing advocacy, but they have fewer advocates to meet this need.

Our Survey

In June 2024, DAV conducted a survey with disability advocacy organisations / DAV member organisations to understand the impact of ongoing underfunding for the sector. The survey aims to understand whether, with the current levels of funding, disability advocacy organisations:

1. can continue to exist; and/or
2. are able to meet the advocacy needs of people with disability.

The DAV survey asked 15 questions along with 4 optional questions relating to the identity of the organisation, annual revenue, catchment area and service profile.

The 15 questions were grouped into broad themes:

- Questions 1 – 3: Financial sustainability
- Question 4 – 12: Workforce sustainability
- Question 13: Funding sources
- Question 14: Individual comments on financial viability and capacity to meet service need
- Question 15 – 18: Optional questions relating to the identity of the organisation, annual revenue, catchment area and service profile
- Question 19: Any further comments

A Snapshot of Survey Responses from Disability Advocacy Organisations

35% of disability advocacy organisations who responded operated a deficit budget for the last three years

58% of disability advocacy organisations are expecting to run a deficit budget in 2023 / 2024

44% of disability advocacy organisations are at risk of insolvency if they run a deficit in 2024 / 2025.

47% of disability advocacy organisations reduced FTE staff numbers since July 2023, including disability advocates

80% of disability organisations anticipate further reduction of FTE staff in 2024 / 2025 if no increase in funding is provided.

Over 40% of advocacy staff will have gone in the two years from July 2023 – July 2025, with two organisations losing all advocacy capacity, and most others clinging on to small teams, with 77% of organisations still employing advocates, having 4 advocates or fewer.

50% of disability advocacy organisations have had to choose whether to cut advocates or scale back other services.

Summary of Findings: Doing More with Less

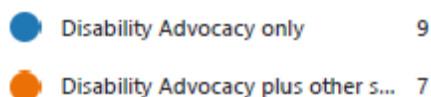
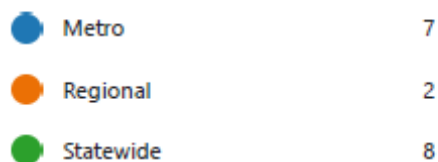
- People with disabilities in Victoria are at risk of not being able to access timely advocacy, during a period of significant structural reform across the sector.
- The majority of advocacy organisations are experiencing increased client demand whilst at the same time experiencing a decline in the numbers of advocates funded to do the work.
- Almost half of disability advocacy organisations are at risk of insolvency if they have to continue implementing a deficit budget.
- In 2024 – 2025 the majority of disability advocacy organisations are expecting further declines in the number of staff employed in the organisation.
- There is a risk of collapse of the disability advocacy sector as previously known, insofar as the reduction in capacity facing the sector indicates a significant barrier to the disability community accessing services.
- Across the sector disability advocacy organisations are having to scale back systemic advocacy, information and advice, wrap around supports and engagement with government as a result of a reduction of funding.

Who Responded to the Survey

A total of 16 Victorian disability advocacy organisations responded to the survey with 9 organisations preferring not to be named.

Of the 16 organisations who responded to the survey regarding their service footprint:

- 8 organisations were funded to provide advocacy statewide
- 6 organisations were funded to provide advocacy to the metro area of Melbourne
- 2 organisations were funded to provide advocacy in regional Victoria
- 7 organisations were funded to provide advocacy as well as other services
- 9 organisations were funded to provide only disability advocacy



What Proportion of Your Funding is State (VDAP) Commonwealth (NDAP) or Other

	Victorian Disability Advocacy Program (VDAP)	National Disability Advocacy (NDAP)/NDIS Appeals	Other
7 Organisations		Entire Funding	
2 Organisations	Entire Funding		
1 Organisation	90%		10%
4 Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90% • 10% • 30% • 40% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10% • 90% • 70% • 60% 	
1 Organisation	40%	40%	20% NDIS Appeals

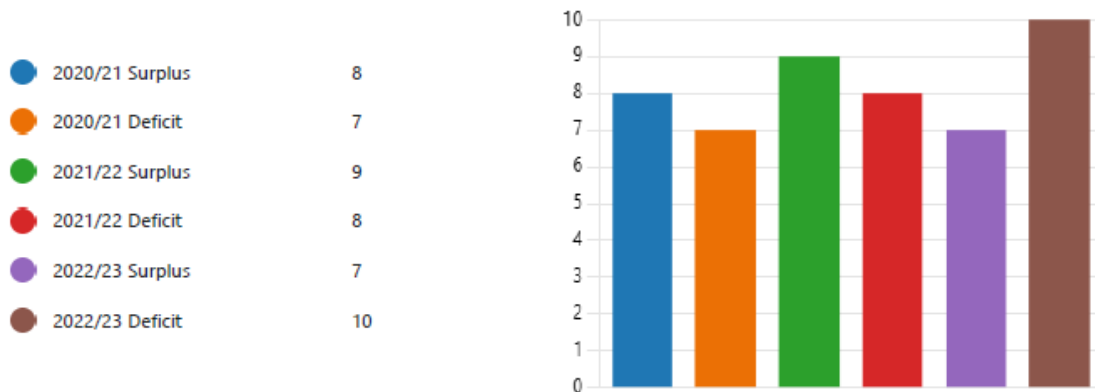
The Annual Revenue of organisations who responded to the survey ranged from:

- 2 organisations had an annual revenue of \$2.4 and \$2.25 million
- 1 organisation had an annual revenue of \$483,000
- 2 organisations had an annual revenue of \$295,000 and \$225,000

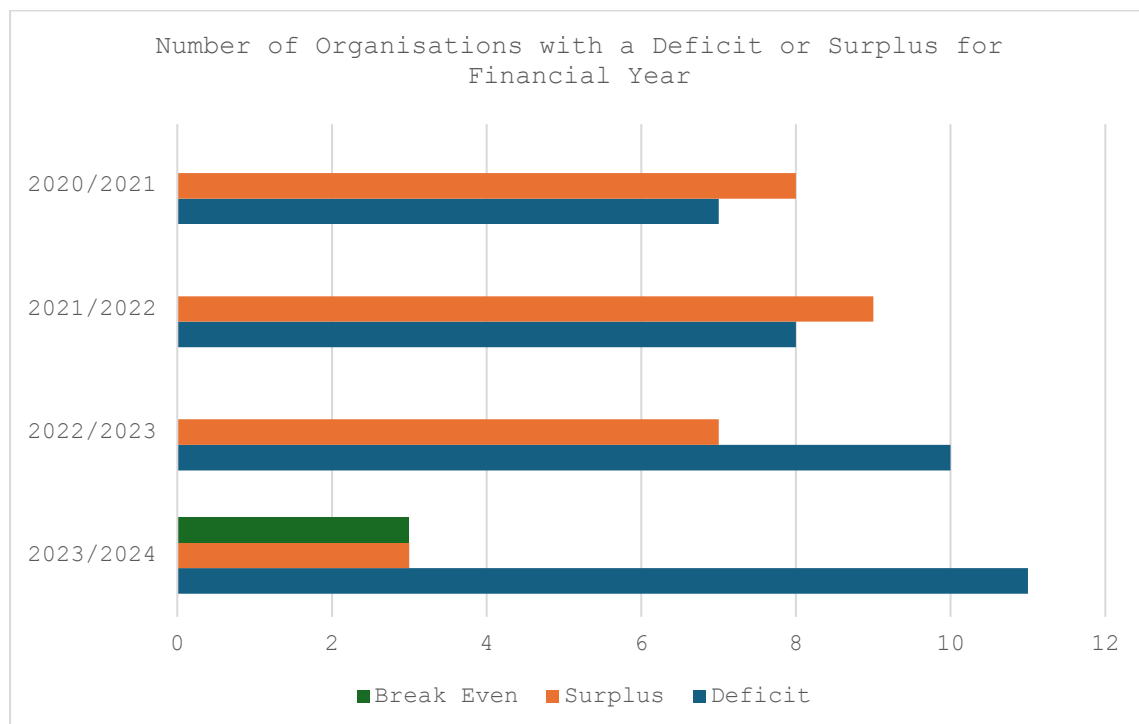
Financial Sustainability

Over the last three financial years (2020 / 2021 / 2022) has your organisation run surpluses or deficits?

- 6 organisations operated a surplus budget
- 6 organisations operated a deficit budget
- 5 organisations operated budgets that were a combination surplus / deficit



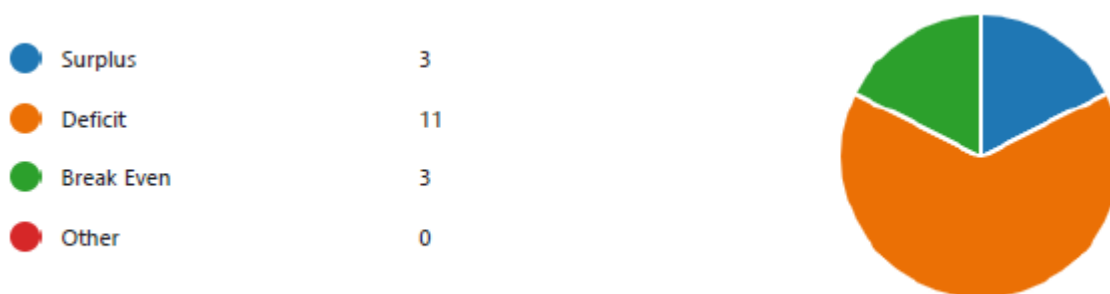
1. 35% of organisations operated a surplus budget for three years
2. 35% of organisations operated a deficit budget for three years



What are you anticipating for 2023 / 2024?

- 3 organisations expecting to operate a surplus budget
- 10 organisations expecting to operate a deficit budget
- 3 organisations expecting to operate a break-even budget

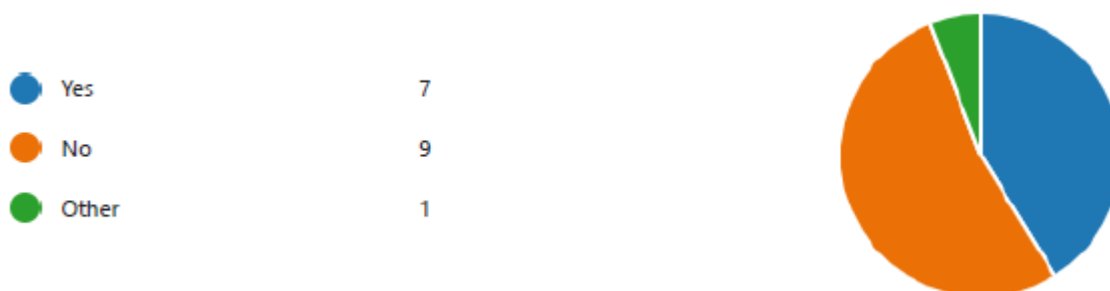
58% of disability advocacy organisations are expecting to run a deficit budget in 2023 / 2024



Would operating a deficit budget risk your organisations solvency?

- 7 organisations replied yes: operating a deficit budget risk the organisations solvency
- 9 organisations replied no: operating a deficit budget would not risk the organisations solvency

44% (7 of 16) at risk of insolvency if they operate a deficit budget in 2023 / 2024



Impact on workforce sustainability

Since July 2023 have you reduced your FTE?

- 8 organisations out of 16 have reduced their FTE since July 2023 and all 8 organisations reduced FTE disability advocates as part of that process
- 7 organisations out of 16 have not reduced FTE's at the same number in 2023 as the previous year in 2022
- 1 organisation had no paid staff in 2022 and no paid staff in 2023

47% of disability organisations who reduced FTE's since July 2023 included reduction of FTE disability advocates

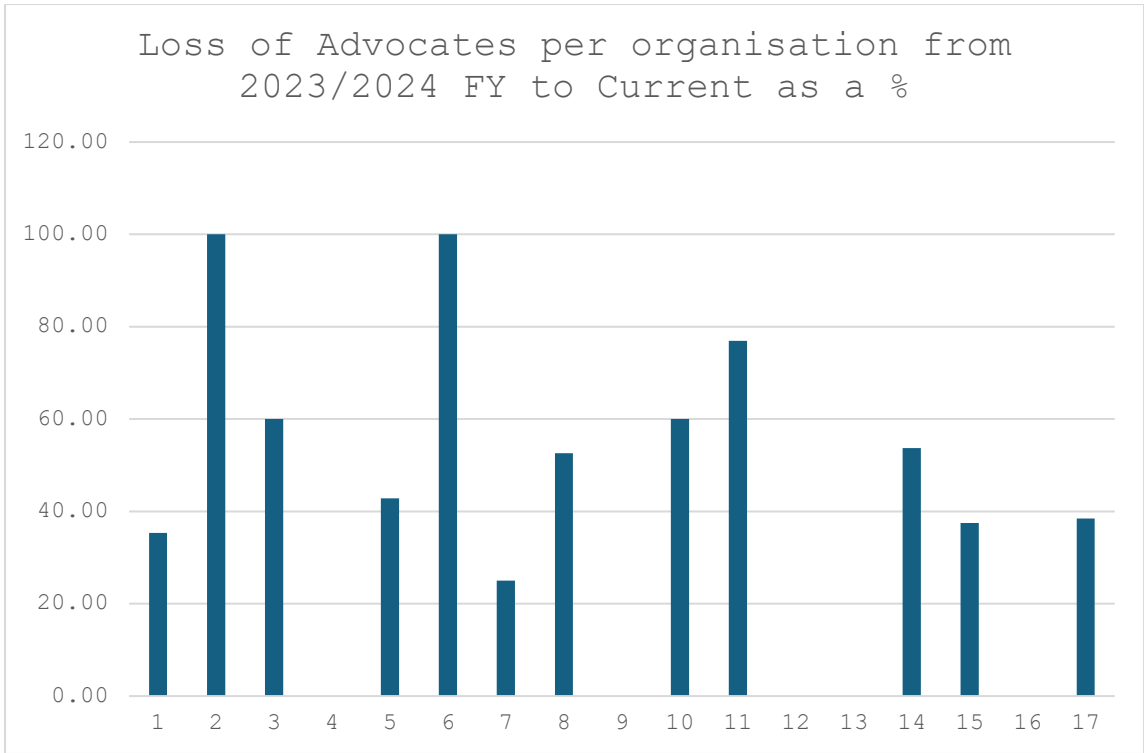
● Yes	8
● No	8
● Other	1



Are you anticipating the need to reduce your full time equivalent (FTE) in financial year 2024/25 if there is no increase in funding beyond indexation?

- 3 organisations do not anticipate reducing FTE in 2024 / 2025 if there is no increase in funding
- 12 organisations do anticipate reducing FTE in 2024 / 2025 if there is no increase in funding

80% of disability organisations anticipate further reductions of FTE in 2024 / 2025 if no increase in funding is provided



Thematic Comments from Disability Advocacy Organisations About Financial Viability and Capacity to meet Community Need

Theme	Numbers of Organisations Experiencing This Circumstance
Disability Advocacy Organisations have had to choose whether to cut advocates or scale back other services	6 of the 12 (50%) organisations have had to choose whether to cut advocates or scale back other services
Disability Advocacy Organisations are experiencing financial constraints affecting their capacity to meet community need	6 of the 12 (50%) organisations are experiencing financial constraints affecting their capacity to meet community need
Financial Constraints mean that Disability Advocacy Organisations have to choose to shut down either systemic advocacy or limit individual advocacy	5 of the 12 (40%) organisations have to choose to shut down either systemic advocacy or limit individual advocacy
Disability Advocacy Organisations have long waiting lists for access to advocacy as financial constraints mean there are not enough advocates to meet client demand	2 out of the 12 (16%) organisations have long waiting lists for access to advocacy as financial constraints mean there are not enough advocates to meet client demand
Other Relevant Comments	
If we don't receive any we will need to close or merge (Communication Rights Australia)	
Demand is up. Expectations on the professionalism of advocates is up. Disability advocacy is delivered by professionals not volunteers. Funding needs to reflect that (STAR Victoria)	
We have provided 143 hours of FREE systemic advocacy this year to the end of April just responding to Victorian (and a small amount from Commonwealth) departments/agencies who approached us. This policy and technical knowledge will disappear if the government does not value professional and experienced advice. (Deaf Victoria)	
The increasing salary & wage costs, the increasing operational costs including external auditing to remain accredited and financial audits and insurance costs are all impacting on viability (Anonymous)	