



Lynette (left) pictured with Mary-Rose



Able Australia CEO, Lynette McKeown

Thank you.

I want to begin by thanking you for your generosity. Our donors and funders make so much of our work possible, and we hope to share some of that impact with you today. We also acknowledge those who couldn't make it; we have a great donor base, and it truly makes a significant difference.

A bit of history about Able.

Many of you have been donating for 25 or 30 years or more, and you deserve a huge round of applause. You probably know the history of Able as well as I do! Some of you have already shared those great stories this morning.

Able began as the Deaf Blind Association in the 1950s during the Rubella outbreak. Many pregnant women who contracted Rubella gave birth to children who were deafblind. At the time, deafblindness was assumed to mean intellectual disability. There was a paediatrician, Dr. Pitt, and an audiologist, Eddie Keir, who both had later had long relationships with Able and led Able for many years. They were working with these children and thought they had far more potential. They didn't believe the literature that deafblindness meant intellectual disability.

They conducted trials, provided therapy, communication support, and sensory stimulation, helping these children thrive and become independent. That philosophy became the foundation of Able Australia and continues to guide us today.

Our values and approach.

We now work with a broader group of people. Those who are deafblind and those with more complex disabilities. Our approach is centred on understanding each person as an individual, communicating with them, and focusing on what they want, what they *can* achieve, rather than what they can't. This is very different from the old model of "Here's your cup of tea, sit here, do this." Today it's about: *What do you want to do? What are your goals?*

You'll hear more about that from Graham today, who works in our day services.

Milestones and growth.

In 1967 we became the Deaf Blind Association, with a few name changes along the way. That makes next year our 60th anniversary, something we definitely need to mark on the calendar!

I've been at Able for around eight years in various roles. I originally joined to help prepare for the rollout of the NDIS, then moved into operations, working with many clients and staff as we've continued to grow.



Our expansion in Tasmania.

One of our recent developments was acquiring Mosaic in Tasmania at the end of 2024. Mosaic is a beautiful organisation with values very similar to ours. The NDIS environment is challenging, as you may have read, and this partnership has made us one of the largest providers in Tasmania. Like Able, Mosaic provides accommodation support and day programs, but they also support children. This gives us a foundation to rebuild and grow our children's services. As specialists in deafblind support, alongside Senses in Western Australia, we see a real gap in the transition from childhood to adulthood, and we're committed to strengthening that pathway.

Changing causes of deafblindness.

While Rubella was once a major cause, today most children are born deafblind due to genetic conditions such as Usher syndrome and CHARGE syndrome. In adults, ageing is the most common cause, as sight and hearing decline.

Funding realities.

Most of our funding comes from the NDIS, but it is tightly restricted to individual supports. It doesn't cover the broader experiences that make life richer. That's where your generosity - through donations, grants, and fundraising - is absolutely vital. It provides a greater everyday experience for people with deafblindness and disability, because it doesn't attract a lot of funding.

Your support helps us provide opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach: community outings, exercise programs, zoo visits, and other activities that require additional support or are simply unaffordable for many people. These experiences make a profound difference in the lives of the people we support and are funded through our donors and we do have some grants as well that we seek to supplement that, to provide better opportunities for the people we support.

Thank you again for being here and for everything you make possible.

Questions for Lynette

? How has NDIS funding and government policy affected Able Australia's sustainability and service delivery?

💬 Lynette explained that the NDIS is a challenging environment that needs to be sustainable for generations to come. The government's stance on that is an appropriate one, ensuring the full suite of services is available to the whole population that is affordable and ongoing.

- **Pressure on NDIS growth and tighter funding rules:**
The government's priority is ensuring the NDIS is financially sustainable, which has led to capped growth and increasingly narrow definitions of what will and won't be funded. While this approach aims to make the system affordable long-term, it has reduced flexibility and created challenges for providers and participants alike.
- **Funding mix and reliance on the NDIS:**
The NDIS is Able Australia's largest and most significant revenue source, with most traditional state-funded disability services now rolled into NDIS-funded programs. The organisation also receives some state-based funding for children's services, contributions from the Disability Support Pension for supported accommodation, and limited accommodation funding through the NDIS — though this applies to only a small subset of participants.
- **A major gap in affordable and appropriate housing:**
There is a significant shortfall in accessible, affordable accommodation for people with disabilities. While some specialist disability housing exists, it often doesn't meet people's needs in terms of location, accessibility, or connection to family and community. Traditional

providers like Able continue to supplement this gap by operating and maintaining supported housing, despite limited government focus or funding in this area.

- **Organisational structure under the NDIS:**

Most of Able's services transitioned from State Government supports into the NDIS and now sit within a largely NDIS-funded operating model. Under NDIS, key service areas include home and living supports, day services, behaviour support, specialist deafblind services, and children's services (separate support). Overall, NDIS-funded services make up the clear majority of the organisation's operations.

- **Current environment and organisational response:**

The NDIS has been transformative and remains vital, but the current phase of reform is difficult. Able is navigating this "rollercoaster" with a long-term outlook — committed to quality services, client safety, sustainability and efficiency so the organisation can continue supporting people with disability for generations to come. Past financial stewardship and reserves have helped buffer current challenges. We will keep investing in the services and staff and quality, that NDIS does not fund.

- **Commitment to quality, registration, and safety:**

There are now 180,000 providers in Australia, and only 16,000 are registered. Able is a registered NDIS provider, which brings significant compliance costs and administrative burden. However, registration is viewed as essential, particularly for high-risk services, to ensure safety, quality, and accountability. We are happy that it is going to be mandatory. The organisation continues to invest heavily in staff training, systems, and governance to protect clients, ensuring their safety and maintaining trust with families.

- **Shift to individualised, one-on-one support:**

Under the NDIS, funding is tied to each person's individual plan, goals, and assessed needs. This means Able must now deliver far more personalised, one-to-one support than in the past. The organisation can no longer rely on broad, group-based models or generalised service delivery.

- **Operational changes and added resources:**

To meet these requirements, Able has had to build additional internal capacity — more staff, more specialised roles, and more systems — to manage the administrative, reporting, and compliance obligations that come with NDIS funding. The organisation has also had to adapt its service structures so that supports can be delivered in a way that aligns with each participant's plan.

- **Maintaining traditional services, but within new constraints:**

The traditional work of the organisation continues, but it now sits within a much more regulated and prescriptive funding environment. The NDIS dictates what funding can be used for, how supports must be documented, and how outcomes must be measured. This has required Able to rethink how it delivers long-standing programs while still staying true to its values and history.

? Does Able Australia have a strategic approach to advocacy and sector engagement?

 Lynette explained:

Strong advocacy despite organisational size:

Able Australia is highly active in advocacy and engagement and, for its size, "punches well above its weight." The organisation is closely connected with sector peak bodies, sits on state committees, and actively contributes to policy discussions and reform.

CEO Collaboration network:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Able helped establish what is now known as the *CEO Collaboration*. It was initially a small group of organisations working together to share information, manage risk, and keep people safe at a time when there was widespread uncertainty across the sector.

This collaboration has since grown significantly, now bringing together more than 140 organisations and over 200 executives who meet monthly. The group facilitates sector-wide forums, coordinated advocacy, and collective engagement with government.

Coordinated advocacy with government:

Through this network, Able and its peers advocate directly to ministers, partner with peak bodies, and contribute to initiatives such as parliamentary breakfasts. Key advocacy priorities include reviewing NDIS funding models, particularly the need for tiered funding that recognises the higher costs of supporting people with complex needs compared with low-complexity services.

Sharing resources across the sector:

The collaboration also functions as an informal “phone-a-friend” network, allowing organisations to share policies, resources, and expertise rather than duplicating costs. For example, Able has shared recently updated, legally compliant policies (such as privacy policies) with other providers to improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary expenditure across the sector.

? What role do volunteers play at Able Australia?

 **Lynette explained:**

Changes following exit from aged care services:

Able previously relied on a significant volunteer base within its aged care services, particularly in Queensland. In late 2024, the organisation made the strategic decision to exit aged care, recognising that those services needed to sit within a larger organisation offering a full continuum of care. The aged care arm was also financially unsustainable.

Current volunteer involvement:

Since exiting aged care, volunteer involvement has reduced significantly. Today, volunteers are involved in specific programs for example, Deafblind camps, where volunteer support remains essential and highly valued.

Looking ahead:

While the current volunteer cohort is small, Able sees strong potential to expand the use of volunteers in meaningful ways across its services. The organisation is actively considering how volunteers could be better integrated to add value, recognising the significant contribution they could make if used effectively. This is an area of active discussion and growing focus.



Lynette and Meredith (middle) pictured with Kathy

Able Australia Head of Research and Centre of Excellence-Deafblind, Dr Meredith Prain

Introduction and legacy

I work as the National Head of Research and Centre of Excellence in Deafblindness, and I feel very privileged to have the opportunity to carry forward the legacy that Lynette has spoken about; our heritage and long history of working with people with deafblindness. Today, I would like to share some of the current projects we are working on.

Grant-funded research and projects

Under the NDIS, our work in this space is now very heavily dependent on grant funding. All of the projects I will talk about today are grant funded.

Deafblind Information Australia project

The first project is delivered in collaboration with organisations Lynette mentioned earlier (Senses WA in Perth and Deafblind Australia, the national peak body). Together, we have formed *Deafblind Information Australia*, a project funded by the Department of Health, Disability & Ageing. At Able Australia, we identified a significant need for learning and training in deafblindness. Many people simply do not know where to start or how to work effectively with people who are deafblind. To address this, we deliver face-to-face national training. This training is deliberately hands-on and highly practical, as working with people who are deafblind involves many tactile elements. As research continues to grow, we are gaining a much better understanding of how to achieve high-quality interactions with people who are deafblind.

This training is delivered across Australia. In addition, we have developed an online training option to ensure accessibility for those who cannot attend in person. The online course provides foundational theory and learning, while the face-to-face training builds practical skills. We have partnered with the Academy of Healthcare, a registered training organisation, and are currently running the third pilot of this online course. The feedback has been extremely positive, which is very encouraging. Importantly, we also have several people with deafblindness undertaking the course, which has been wonderful to see and has contributed significantly to shared learning and insight.

Orientation and Mobility Projects

Another major focus of our work is research. One of our current research projects focuses on orientation and mobility.

People with deafblindness are a highly diverse group. Communication styles vary depending on age of onset, cause, and the presence of additional disabilities. There are two common challenges experienced by all people with deafblindness: communication, and orientation and mobility.



A significant international project, led by Deafblind International, developed a core set for deafblindness within the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* framework. One of the key outcomes of that four-year project was the identification of orientation and mobility as a central issue, which aligns closely with our current research focus. Through funding from the National Disability Research Partnership, we conducted a national research project exploring the orientation and mobility challenges faced by people with deafblindness. We ran focus groups across Australia and are currently analysing the data and refining the research questions for the next phase.

In addition, we received funding from the Transport Accident Commission and the Department of Transport and Planning to deliver a project focused on safety. This project provides training for both communication guides and people with deafblindness, offering strategies and practical tips to improve safety when navigating the community. While there has been a particular emphasis on road safety, the project has highlighted broader challenges (including difficulties navigating within buildings) which must be addressed even before road crossings are considered.

Global definition of deafblindness

There is also important international work underway to develop a global definition of deafblindness. Despite expectations, many countries still do not have a clear or consistent definition. In Australia, recognition is fragmented, with different departments applying different definitions.

Currently, we do not fully align with the NDIS definition, which requires profound vision and hearing loss. We know that if someone is profoundly deaf, even a mild vision impairment can significantly affect their ability to compensate, particularly in low-light environments. We have recently submitted a paper based on interviews with people with deafblindness from around the world, exploring what they believe should be included in a meaningful and practical definition. Not everyone who meets clinical definitions identifies as deafblind — particularly older people, who may simply say they do not see or hear very well. However, many deafblind-specific strategies remain highly relevant and beneficial for this group.

Able Australia's Deafblind services

I would also like to speak briefly about our Deafblind services. The Centre of Excellence in Deafblindness operates separately from service delivery, which is primarily NDIS-funded.

Our Deafblind services include:

- Communication guide support: one-to-one community-based support for activities such as attending medical appointments, banking, swimming, and everyday tasks that are particularly challenging without sight and hearing. Communication guides are skilled support workers trained in deafblind communication methods and guiding techniques.
- Support coordination: an NDIS-funded service that assists people with deafblindness to engage appropriate supports and use their funding in line with their plan.
- Recreation program: delivered in partnership with Deafblind Victoria, offering monthly group activities. These programs are important for social connection and belonging, as people with deafblindness often feel marginalised within either blindness-only or deaf-only services.
- Deafblind Camp: a grant-funded program led by a paid Deafblind Camp Coordinator and guided by a committee of people with deafblindness. This is the first time the camp has been truly deafblind-led and will take place next month, in April.
- Communication guide training: delivered two to three times a year in partnership with Deafblind Victoria. This two-day training includes orientation and mobility specialists and

covers guiding techniques and cane use. People travel from interstate to attend, as there is limited specialist training available in this field.

Consultation and leadership of people with deafblindness

It is critical that people with deafblindness are actively consulted and involved in the work that affects them — the principle of “nothing about us without us” is central to our approach. Within the Deafblind Information Australia project, we have a reference group comprised of people with deafblindness, and we employ deafblind trainers in every state where training is delivered. They lead and deliver significant components of the training. Over the life of the project, it has been wonderful to see their confidence and presentation skills grow, with many now delivering webinars and contributing more broadly to advocacy and education. Working in true partnership with people with deafblindness is essential, and building their capacity is one of the most important outcomes of our work.

New research from Able's Centre of Excellence - Deafblind

Deafblindness is a combination of sight and hearing loss, which impacts a person's ability to communicate, access information and participate equally in society. Deafblindness is much more common than people realise, and as we age, it is likely that more of us will require deafblind-aware services.

We are proud of the work led by Able Australia's Head of Research, Dr Meredith Prain, in partnership with members of our Deafblind reference group and their partners. Research plays a vital role in raising awareness, improving support, and driving positive change.



New research from Able Australia's Centre of Excellence - Deafblind is shedding light on the real-life challenges families face after early Usher syndrome diagnosis. Usher syndrome accounts for approximately half of all cases of hereditary deafblindness.

That is — the cause of deafblindness from birth.

The research explores the challenges faced by families of children with Usher syndrome, especially as improved genetic testing leads to earlier diagnoses — a life-changing shift that brings both opportunities and new questions.

This is an important step forward in better understanding and supporting the deafblind community.

The Centre of Excellence — Deafblind aims to make life better for people with deafblindness in all areas such as communication, access to good quality services, housing, education, employment, technology and health. Through research, consultancy, training, information and advocacy, we work together with people with deafblindness and their social and support networks, service providers, advocacy groups, universities and Government agencies.

The wide array of key achievements in the last 12 months include:

- ✓ Completion of Deafblind Technology project, evaluating outcomes of introduction of technologies for Victorians with deafblindness
- ✓ Completion of development of a World Health Organisation ICF Core Set for deafblindness
- ✓ Two Communication Guide training programs run to develop knowledge and skills in working with people with deafblindness
- ✓ Two Video Interaction Guidance Initial Training Courses delivered to identify and improve on communication strengths
- ✓ Presentation at the South Pacific Educators of the Vision Impaired Conference
- ✓ Development of a course for Auslan interpreters to build competency in deafblind interpreting
- ✓ Recognition by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) that deafblind interpreting is a specialist skill
- ✓ Publication of 7 peer-reviewed journal articles
- ✓ Development of an online Deafblind Introductory Training Course



Graham (left) pictured with Batool and Stewart



Community Services Lead, Graham Furman

Background and Passion

I have worked in the disability sector for over 20 years and am deeply passionate about both the industry and my work at Able Australia. Advocacy sits at the heart of everything I do, particularly for people with disability who are often unable to advocate for themselves.

The majority of clients who attend our day services rely on others to represent their interests. Their safety, dignity, and basic needs are always our highest priority and inform every decision we make.

Gratitude and the Funding Environment

I want to give a clear picture of what we do at our day services and to express how genuinely grateful we are for donor involvement. Without that support, much of what we offer simply would not be possible.

As Lynette has already mentioned, the NDIS environment is becoming increasingly restrictive. Funding is tighter and more prescriptive, which means we must be creative and resourceful in how we deliver meaningful programs. Your support enables us to continue offering experiences that go beyond basic funded supports, and it is truly appreciated.

Day Services Overview and Location

We operate two day services in Victoria. One in Camberwell and another in Northcote. The Camberwell service is located on the grounds of a former lawn bowls club, leased from Council. This gives us a beautiful outdoor environment, including landscaped areas and a large vegetable garden, which we use extensively in our programs.

These spaces allow us to host large events and to welcome not only clients from both day services, but also families, external supports, and residents and staff from our supported accommodation services.

Large-Scale Events and Inclusive Celebrations

Thanks to generous donations, we are able to host regular large-scale events that foster connection, celebration, and inclusion. These include:

- Able Games, aligned with events such as the Olympics or Commonwealth Games, where clients decorate team shirts, make torches, participate in parades, and compete as one inclusive team. Participation is celebrated regardless of ability — the focus is on giving things a go and being involved.



- Seasonal and community celebrations, including:
 - St Patrick's Day
 - Friendship Day (aligned with Valentine's Day)
 - Halloween
 - An annual Christmas breakup party

These events bring clients, families, and staff together and create opportunities for shared joy and meaningful engagement.

Meaningful and Personalised Gifts

Donations also allow us to provide thoughtful, personalised gifts to clients. Rather than generic items, we focus on things that feel special and personal.

For example, recent Christmas gifts included:

- Personalised canvas bags with the Able logo
- Each client's name
- A keychain
- A photo of the individual

These small but meaningful gestures make a significant difference to people's sense of value and belonging.

Our Approach to Day Services

Our day services are deliberately different from traditional models where people attend a centre from 9am to 3pm and stay on-site all day.

Instead, the centre serves as a starting point:

- Clients arrive, meet their support worker, enjoy a cup of tea, catch up with friends, and discuss plans for the day.
- From there, most activities take place out in the community, guided by each individual's interests and choices.

We take great pride in offering opportunities that focus on mainstream participation, not disability-defined programming. In fact, we run only one disability-specific activity per week — a disco. Everything else is fully integrated into the community.

Dignity of Risk and Choice

A key principle guiding our work is the dignity of risk.

This means that people with disability should have access to the same opportunities as anyone else, even if those activities involve some level of risk. Additional support needs should not automatically limit experiences.

To support this safely, we:

- Conduct risk assessments
- Ensure appropriate staff-to-client ratios
- Provide group-based activities for safety and social connection
- Remain flexible and responsive to individual preferences

Even when there is a planned program, clients retain full freedom of choice. If someone decides they do not want to take part in an activity, we follow their lead and adjust accordingly. Nothing is rigid, and nothing is set in stone.

Centre-Based Programs

While much of our work happens in the community, the centre also hosts purposeful and meaningful programs, including:

Music Program

We run a highly popular music group led by talented support workers. One staff member, Guy, brings his guitar and accordion — he also repairs accordions professionally. Music sessions are consistently engaging, joyful, and accessible, especially for clients who would not otherwise have access to formal music therapy or live performances.

Art Activities and Creative Expression

We have run art therapy on a sporadic basis in the past, however formalised art therapy programs can be costly. As a result, we focus on being creative within our means. Art remains a daily activity at our day services, even if it is not delivered as formal art therapy.

Clients engage in a wide range of creative activities, including:

- Painting
- Drawing with pencils
- Collage and mixed media
- Exploring different textures and materials

We are keen to reinstate formal art therapy in the future, should funding permit, as we recognise the value it can bring.

Culture Club Program

One of the programs I am particularly proud of is our Culture Club. This program originally began as a weekly cooking class but has since evolved well beyond food.

Culture Club is designed to engage all five senses, creating rich and immersive cultural experiences. While food remains an important component, the program focuses more broadly on inclusion, learning, and cultural awareness.

Our approach is intentional. Rather than highlighting differences as barriers, we frame them as strengths. We aim to foster curiosity, understanding, and respect, and to actively promote inclusivity and cultural awareness.

Staff from diverse cultural backgrounds play a key role in this program. They share elements of their culture and help create authentic, meaningful experiences for clients.

Examples of Culture Club activities include:

- **St Patrick's Day celebrations**, featuring Irish music, dancing, a shamrock scavenger hunt, and a potato-and-spoon race
- **Diwali celebrations**, where clients and staff wore traditional clothing, enjoyed music and dancing, and shared culturally significant food

Clients, families, and staff all respond extremely positively to these experiences. Culture Club helps everyone feel valued, included, and appreciated, and we hope it inspires others to incorporate similar approaches into their own programs.

Purposeful Programming

Although our day services are not centre-based in the traditional sense, everything we do is intentional, well planned, and meaningful. Whether activities occur inside the centre or out in the community, they are designed with purpose and guided by individual interests and outcomes.

Community-Based Activities

While some activities are structured throughout the week, we remain flexible wherever possible.

Regular community-based activities include:

- Bowling
- Swimming, offered three to four times per week, with some clients attending multiple sessions
- Gym programs
- Parks and gardens, rotating across locations throughout Melbourne to maintain variety and interest

Swimming is particularly impactful. Many participants have high support needs, requiring two staff members for safety, hoisting assistance, or behavioural support. While these activities incur additional costs, the benefits are extraordinary. Being in the water often reveals abilities we might not otherwise see, and the joy and confidence it brings to clients is one of the most rewarding aspects of the work.

All community activities are reviewed regularly. Staff complete feedback surveys after outings so we can assess whether activities were enjoyable and meaningful for each individual, allowing us to adjust programs week to week.

Life Skills Development

We run a program called **Shop, Learn and Cook**, that focuses on developing everyday life skills. In one example, a client travels independently on public transport, shops for ingredients, returns to the centre, prepares a meal, eats, cleans up, and then moves on to another activity later in the day. This program promotes confidence, independence, and practical skills that can be transferred to everyday life.

Volunteering Opportunities

While not all clients have the capacity to volunteer, we actively support those who do.

Examples include:

- Volunteering at Bunnings, watering plants and assisting staff
- Shelf organisation at local op shops
- Sign writing at a local butcher, completed by a client with exceptional handwriting

We continue to explore new volunteering opportunities that align with individual strengths and interests.

Click and Collect Initiative

Clients are also involved in a **Click and Collect program**, supporting Able's wider operations. Day services and accommodation houses submit orders for PPE supplies, including gloves, masks, and COVID kits. Clients assist with:

- Collecting supplies from the national office
- Sorting items into orders
- Delivering supplies to other day services and accommodation houses

This initiative builds responsibility, teamwork, and practical workplace skills.

Accessing Free and Low-Cost Community Experiences

With funding pressures, creativity is essential. We actively seek out free or low-cost events and experiences across Melbourne.

These include:

- Museums and exhibitions
- ACMI and Scienceworks
- Local cultural experiences
- The Oakleigh Fire Station demonstrations, which are a standout favourite for clients and consistently generate strong engagement

We also had tickets to attend the Australian Open, but extreme weather conditions made this unsafe. This remains an activity we hope to revisit in future years.

Impact Beyond the Individual

The impact of our work extends well beyond the individuals we support.

One example involved a young person with very high behavioural support needs. Prior to accessing our services, the family felt overwhelmed and unsure how to manage safely. Through consistent support, guidance, and collaboration with behaviour support teams, this individual gained independence, developed daily living skills, and became actively engaged in the community every day.

The family has since adopted the same approaches and has even been able to travel overseas together for extended periods — something they never believed would be possible.

These outcomes demonstrate that the impact of our work reaches far beyond the individual, transforming the lives of families and opening up opportunities they once thought were out of reach.