



Women with Disabilities Australia

Annual General Meeting

22 November 2024

4:00pm – 5:00pm AEST

Via Teams Videoconference

Attendees

Committee of Management: Karin Swift (President), Maria Scharnke, Nadia Brady.

Staff: Sophie Cusworth (CEO), Belinda Nixon (COO), Sarah Smallman, Jacinta Carlton, Sarah Hamilton, Cat Standley.

Members: Kate Dufty, Nidhi Shekaran, Lorraine Le Plastrier, Natalie Tomas, Natalie Tomas, Jennifer Parry, Sascha Neale, Suzy Keene, Fiona Mason, Heidi La Paglia Reid.
Auslan interpreters and captioners in attendance.

Minutes

1. Welcome and introductions

- Recording for purposes of minutes.
- The purpose of an AGM is to participate in key discussions, hear updates from the Board and CEO and exercise your voting rights as a valued member of WWDA.
- The AGM will cover important topics, including the presentation and acceptance of the annual report, the election of directors and other business matters.
- WWDA President, Karin Swift, made a statement about engaging in the meeting;

We welcome everyone here today and today we reflect on WWDA's work over the last financial year to promote the human rights of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities. We're committed to maintaining an inclusive environment where all WWDA staff and members feel valued and respected. Each member and staff member adds to our vibrant and diverse community and we remind everyone to please engage with each other respectfully, anyone who engages in ways that are not respectful or constructive, may be asked to leave the meeting.

– Acknowledgement of Country:

WWDA acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet and send our deep respect to Elders past and present. We would like to acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the meeting today, we also acknowledge people with disability and in particular women, girls and gender diverse people who come before us and died in institutional settings, as well as those who are still trapped in institutions, or silenced or oppressed by institutional practice. We take on the responsibilities of being clear about the rights of all people with disabilities and where necessary to speak in an informed and considered manner for those who cannot speak for themselves.

2. Apologies:

Gwen Gibbons, Pamela Mania, Donna Justo and Esperanza Torres.

3. Review of Proxy Forms received

It was noted that no proxies have been received.

4. Confirmation of minutes of the previous AGM

Motion: To move that the minutes of the previous AGM be accepted.

Moved: Nidhi Shekaran, **Seconded:** Lorraine Le Plastrier. **Carried.**

5. Acceptance of the annual financial report, Director's report and Auditors report

The President noted WWDA has engaged DKM Auditors for an independent and external audit of our financial reports for the financial year. The audited report will be distributed to members once it is finalised, including via the published annual report.

The President provided a verbal update on the financials, based on the information prepared for the annual report. It was noted finances are tracking well, WWDA engaged Retinue Accounting this year as an external accounting service; all-inclusive accounting, bookkeeping and payroll is provided.

6. Acceptance of the annual report

Motion: For the members of WWDA to accept the annual report.

Moved: Nadia Brady, **Seconded:** Kate Dufty. **Carried.**

7. Chair's remarks

Karin Swift, the meeting Chair, noted;

- Over the past year, WWDA has achieved significant milestones despite challenges within the sector. We've solidified our leadership through advocacy, operational excellence and member engagement, ensuring that the voices of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities remain central in policy and practice.
 - Key achievements this year include launching the Neve website; providing accessible information and resources and expanding the WWDA Lead initiative to empower women and gender diverse people with disabilities in leadership roles.
 - Advocacy efforts have been strengthened, particularly around the NDIS, health and human rights, driving important conversations and challenging systemic barriers.
- Amid these successes, we've faced ongoing challenges, including those related to the

NDIS review and the Disability Royal Commission. These issues highlight the need for continued advocacy and systemic reform.

- As we move into 2025, we're committed to deepening our policy influence and advocacy efforts.
- This year has all also been marked by significant transitions with the departure of our long serving CEO, Carolyn Frohmader. We thank Carolyn for her contributions to WWDA over 27 years.
- We acknowledge the leadership of Sophie Cusworth as acting CEO during this period of change.
- Our gratitude extends to all staff members and partners for their continued support as we navigate the evolving landscape.
- The Chair took a moment to acknowledge Carolyn's departure and provide thanks not only from herself, but on behalf of the whole Committee. Carolyn has led the way for WWDA for many, many years and we thank her for her leadership and her advocacy in the disability sector.
- The Chair also acknowledged how proud and happy she is to acknowledge the employment of Sophie as our new CEO, and that Sophie is doing an amazing job and WWDA has bigger and brighter years ahead for WWDA under Sophie's leadership.

8. CEO's remarks

The CEO introduced herself and noted it is a real privilege to take on this role and an honour and responsibility that isn't taken lightly.

Sophie gave a brief visual description of herself; "I am a young woman with pale skin. I have dark brown hair, dark brown eyes and I'm wearing a blue shirt. And I have a blurred background so that you can't see any mess in my living room."

Sophie shared a bit about herself; that she is a woman with multiple disabilities; an autistic person with chronic pain. She lives in Melbourne on the land of the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation and she is deeply passionate about gender equality and disability rights.

Prior to work at WWDA, Sophie was a lawyer working in employment safety and anti-discrimination and has a background in gender studies and a passion for advancing human rights. Sophie commenced at WWDA in 2023 as the Senior Policy Officer and then became the Manager of Policy and Advocacy.

In January this year, Sophie was appointed by the Committee of Management as the acting CEO, while the former CEO, Carolyn Frohmader was on a period of leave. After Carolyn Frohmader's departure from the organisation, WWDA undertook a recruitment process for a permanent CEO, during which Sophie applied, and she noted she is honoured to be appointed permanently.

Sophie stated; "It's a real privilege to lead our organisation's mission to advance the rights and freedoms of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities in Australia. WWDA has a really remarkable history, and it's built on the tireless advocacy of so many strong leaders and I'm really humbled to carry forward that legacy. I'm deeply committed to WWDA's mission and our ethos and our really strong human rights framework. I'm dedicated to continuing our critical advocacy, drawing on my background as a lawyer and my lived experience of disability. I'm also committed to continuous learning and improvement, individually as me, but also as an organisation. And I would like to extend my thanks to the WWDA Committee of Management, the staff team, many of whom are here today, our WWDA members and our valued partners for their ongoing support and dedication."

Key achievements for WWDA;

- Creation of a new, more accessible WWDA website.
- Launch of Neve.
- LEAD leadership and mentoring tool kit.
- Provided ongoing policy advice and expertise to government and WWDA's representation at national and international levels.
- A significant membership increase over the last year.

- More initiatives planned to ensure that the voices of our community are central to our work.
- WWDA is dedicated to continuous improvement, having rolled out changes to workplace systems, completed a review of policies and procedures, and introduced new ways to support staff well-being.

Collaboration

- WWDA has worked closely with other organisations across gender and disability spaces, strengthening relationships and partnering on joint resources and submissions, the CEO noted WWDA extend our heartfelt thanks to the organisations and people who have worked with WWDA this year.
- Member contributions have been invaluable and Sophie thanked Women with Disabilities Victoria and Women with Disabilities ACT for the collaborative work this year, particularly to inform the NDIS changes.
- WWDA navigated a significant period of reform, particularly following the findings of the Disability Royal Commission and the review of the NDIS.
- It was an important year across WWDA's work as both a National Women's Alliance and a Disability Representative Organisation, to make sure that the voices of women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities inform policy development in all areas.
- WWDA has been represented at international forums, including through the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Through these platforms, WWDA has been able to elevate the priorities of our community on an international stage.
- WWDA have contributed submissions, evidence and advice to a range of enquiries addressing issues related to women's health, sexual and reproductive rights, access to services, the Disability Royal Commission, gender-based violence and Australia's implementation of its obligations under international human rights law.

- WWDA have continued to be represented on a range of advisory bodies, including in relation to the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.
- WWDA have really valued the opportunities to collaborate with partner organisations in developing policy submissions and advice, strengthening our collective impact and ensuring that the needs and priorities of our community are heard.

Key achievements for WWDA this year;

Funding;

Securing renewed funding for WWDA's work as a Disability Representative Organisation and as a National Women's Alliance. This funding will support WWDA's ongoing efforts to ensure that the WWDA community is represented in government decision making, law reform, policy development and implementations of programs and policies that impact the WWDA community.

Advocacy work;

WWDA led the development of a position paper in support of a Human Rights Act endorsed by all the national Disability Representative Organisations. The National Disability Insurance Agency committed to developing a gender strategy for the NDIS, and the government committed to targeted work to prevent and respond to gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities.

The CEO acknowledged this year has also been really challenging. WWDA has seen significant change both within the organisation and within the disability rights space. The government's response to the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS changes have been incredibly difficult and disappointing for many in our community.

WWDA remains committed to strong advocacy for the rights of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities. WWDA are committed to growing the organisation's capacity and increasing engagement with members and working

collaboratively with partner organisations to continue to make WWDA's impact even stronger.

The CEO noted that WWDA are committed to ensuring voices of our community are central to all areas of government reform and policy making that impacts the lives of those in the community, because there must be nothing about us, without us.

Goals and priorities for WWDA in the next 12 months;

1. WWDA will keep working to improve the human rights of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities in Australia.
 - WWDA will speak up for the right to live free from violence and abuse.
 - WWDA will speak up for the right to make choices and be involved in decisions.
 - WWDA will speak up for sexual and reproductive rights.
 - WWDA will speak up for economic security, including the right to work.
2. WWDA will continue to be a leader in Australia and around the world for the rights of women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities. WWDA will help to create, put into action and monitor the laws and rules that support these rights.
3. WWDA will keep making the organisation stronger by building strong systems and support in the organisation and for the people who work at WDDA. This will help WWDA to achieve goals, make a long-lasting impact and be a strong organisation for the future.
4. Over the next 12 months, WWDA will continue to be a strong and constructive voice for the community it represents. To do this, WWDA need to have strong systems in place and ways for its community to take the lead in our advocacy.

The CEO noted she looked forward to continued engagement with the WWDA community.

9. Election of Directors

- Maria Scharnke introduced themselves, giving a brief visual description “I am an intersex white person in my early twenties with glasses and a communication device. The communication device has some disability advocacy pins on the shoulder strap”.
- Maria thanked all nominees for their interest and dedication to WWDA and noted WWDA engaged Virtual Support Specialists, external experts in governance, to provide governance, human resources and administrative support to the WWDA Committee and team. Virtual Support Specialists assisted with the nomination and voting process, to ensure the election remains independent.
- Maria thanked all the members who voted and advised the attendees that WWDA received 62 votes in total. It was noted the votes were verified against the member register to ensure all votes received were made by full WWDA members.
- Six were invalid. The results were very close. Maria thanked everyone who nominated for the elections.
- The five people elected by the WWDA membership to the Committee of Management were listed as; Tess Marotta, Nadia Brady, Jodie Haigh, Karen Swift and Samantha Neylon.
- Maria congratulated the newly elected Committee of Management members and thanked everyone for their support for WWDA and encouraged members to apply for future positions on the Board.
- Maria noted office bearers would be decided at the next Management Committee meeting.
- Karin thanked Maria and acknowledged Maria’s dedication and support to WWDA, and to Karin as President, and wished Maria all the best for the future.

Appointment of Auditor

It was noted that DKF BKM Audit and Insurance is WWDA's current auditor, and WWDA would like them to remain so for the next year.

Motion: To appoint DKF KBM Audit and Insurance as WWDA's independent auditor.

Moved: Maria Scharnke, **Seconded:** Nidhi Shekaran. **Carried.**

Heidi La Paglia asked when the auditor was last changed, and the CEO responded that the auditors were engaged in 2024. It was noted it is best practice to change auditors every few years to ensure independence.

10. Other Business

Project Updates

WWDA LEAD Project.

Cat Standley

Cat gave a visual description of herself; "I am a woman of colour with blonde hair and I am wearing a red floral dress and blue framed glasses".

- Peer networking sessions were finalised during the reporting period, these were run over a three-year period.
- Several Co-designed workshops on public decision-making were created, engaging women and gender diverse people with disabilities.
- WWDA's membership increased by over 181% in the last year and some of this increase can be attributed to the membership satisfaction survey which was delivered in August to October 2023.
- The LEAD team worked extensively with the Co-design committee and the expert Co-production panel members to create essential materials for the leadership and mentoring tool kit which was launched in October 2024.
- Sophie thanked Cat and gave congratulations for all the team has achieved this year.

Comms Update

Jacinta Carlton – Senior Manager of Media and Communications at WWDA.

Visual description "I have long dark hair and I'm wearing a yellow knitted cardigan. In the background I have some photos of my family and friends and there may even be a glimpse of a real-life family member, but hopefully not. My pronouns are she/ her and I live in the land of the Muwinina people in Nipaluna country, Tasmania.

- WWDA made big improvements in communicating our work and representing our community in the last financial year.
- Member survey results from last year were reviewed. Key themes were how WWDA connect and share our important work and how WWDA can better engage and provide opportunities for our members to communicate with us.
- Updated branding for WWDA; a new look and feel across our platforms, fresh colours, a new font and new line drawing illustrations to better represent WWDA.
- Language; how WWDA describe our community and who WWDA represent was updated. WWDA also developed a new, more accessible website to showcase the work WWDA does and provide areas for our members to better connect with WWDA.
- WWDA reached more people through awareness and project campaigns and improved social media strategies, sharing more powerful stories from our members.

Sarah Hamilton – Membership and Communications Officer

Sarah uses she/they pronouns and lives on Yuin Country in South Coast NSW. Sarah has light brown shoulder-length hair and is wearing thin green glasses and a pink shirt.

- Sarah noted she undertook LEAD project communications until the project ended in October, Neve communications following the project's end in May and has been creating and scheduling companywide social media since June.

- WWDA have taken on feedback and suggestions from members in the last year and branding has changed across social media and the website. Membership has had massive growth in numbers, engagement, reach and general online impact.
- WWDA has grown by;
 - 796 new members since the last AGM, bringing our current membership to 2546.
 - Over 5000 followers across all social media platforms including;
 - 2500 new followers on LinkedIn,
 - Over 1000 new followers on Instagram, and
 - Over 1200 new followers across Facebook, on our public page and our community group.
 - 550 new newsletter subscribers.
- 300 new social media posts and 42 email blasts were released since the last AGM; ranging from policy statements to media mentions, event promotion, member opportunities, Neve and the Toolkit.
- WWDA's achievements are very diverse.
- Online engagement has seen the biggest increase with an average of 15,000 views per month, over 1000 interactions and around 150-200 people each month have joined WWDA's platforms.
- This engagement has renewed interest with WWDA's new website, with more members involved in events and projects and overall result is a more inclusive and committed community that is really connecting with our content.
- WWDA have cemented themselves as a place for opportunity and advocacy within the disability space and Sarah noted she looks forward to continuing that in 2025 with WWDA's 30-year campaign.

Neve Project Update

Sarah Smallman – Senior Project Officer

Visual description "I'm a woman with long black hair and olive skin and hazel eyes, and my background is blurred".

- In early 2022, WWDA secured funding from the Australian Government's Department of Social Services to expand WWDA's developed website called Our Site, with the focus on addressing violence against women, girls and gender diverse people with disabilities.
- Feedback from initial Co-design workshops indicated a really strong preference for developing a new website rather than expanding the existing Our Site, which led to the creation of Neve, a website that really prioritises lived experience, accessibility and user friendly design, while also centring on a holistic approach to addressing violence and abuse awareness and prevention.
- The project was really driven by the recognition that rates of gender-based domestic and family violence are significantly higher for people with disabilities and even higher for women with disabilities.
- Neve is the *first* Easy Read first website in Australia. This means the website is in Easy Read format, with an option to navigate to a plain English mode. It provides accessible gender-based violence awareness and prevention resources, ensuring that those who experience the most barriers to access information don't have to do the most work to access the information they need.
- A key element of the Neve project was the Co-design process, which engaged over 200 women and gender diverse people with disabilities, their families and sector professionals across Australia, in every state and territory.
- Through numerous workshops, surveys, ongoing review and feedback loops, the website was continuously refined to better serve its intended audiences, always considering how the audiences intersect.
- The process was guided by a project steering committee, composed of individuals with a lived experience of disability and gender-based violence. They were involved from the very beginning of the project right up to its completion. Their input was invaluable in shaping a product that truly reflects the needs and preferences of women with disabilities.
- Launched in May 2024, it is a ground-breaking website, created by and for women with disabilities in Australia. It is the result of two years of really extensive consultation and

collaboration, addressing the community's really distinct need for accessible, relevant information and support.

- Neve has received overwhelming positive responses from the WWDA community and professionals and continues to be accessed by hundreds of individuals each week.
- Sarah took a moment to acknowledge and thank the project steering committee and the women with disabilities who contributed to this amazing resource. Sarah thanked Zoe, the project manager on Neve, noting Zoe led the team with an unwavering passion and dedication to that journey.

Karin thanked Sarah for her update and gave an acknowledgement of the work that went into Neve.

Claire Bertholli - Youth Advisory group and Youth Network

The CEO spoke to Claire's update in her absence. Sophie noted that Claire and the Youth Network have completed some fantastic work to inform a whole range of policy initiatives, including collaboration with Jean Hailes to create Easy Read resources on going to the doctor. Sophie noted the initial idea was Claire's and she presented the idea to the Jean Hailes community who supported her with funding for the project. User testing was involved, and the Youth Advisory Group has had a whole range of opportunities to inform WWDA's policy work. Following recruitment, the Youth Advisory Group has grown to be even more representative of our community.

The CEO noted it's so wonderful to take a moment to hear all of the highlights and congratulated all of the staff team. The Chair seconded the CEO's sentiment and took the opportunity to thank all of the staff who contributed to the work of WWDA and to the WWDA community within the last financial year. Karin noted the WWDA Management Committee acknowledges and thanks Carolyn Frohmader, the former CEO, for her tireless advocacy and her significant contributions to WWDA and the disability rights movement. As WWDA enters its 30th year of being an organisation, Carolyn will certainly be acknowledged.

Questions from members:

Maria Scharnke: Can we get an Easy Read of the Annual Report for next year?

Nadia noted this is an excellent question and really important as part of being an inclusive organisation. Sophie was in agreeance and noted the possibility of making this years' Annual Report Easy Read also. The CEO noted the Annual Report has been circulated, with some financial reports yet to come.

Natalie Tomas: Natalie applauded Carolyn Frohmader's contributions to WWDA and asked if WWDA has thought about a legacy or award to acknowledge Carolyn in perpetuity.

The CEO responded that the Committee of Management had shared a message and announcement on WWDA's website and an acknowledgement in our Annual Report. The CEO also noted the WWDA team are working on a campaign for our 30th anniversary, which will acknowledge the incredible legacy of WWDA under Carolyn's leadership. WWDA are open to hearing from the community around ways to pay tribute to her incredible impact on the disability rights movement.

Natalie noted that to have something more permanent like a program or award would be a legacy Carolyn deserves.

Sophie provided acknowledgement by WWDA of the suggestion to provide permanent acknowledgement and thanked Natalie for the comment.

11. Meeting close

Karin thanked everyone for attending and noted WWDA value the opportunities we have to connect with our membership.

Sophie thanked the captioners for support in the meeting and everyone who attended and supported WWDA for the meeting.

The meeting was closed at 4:54pm AEST.