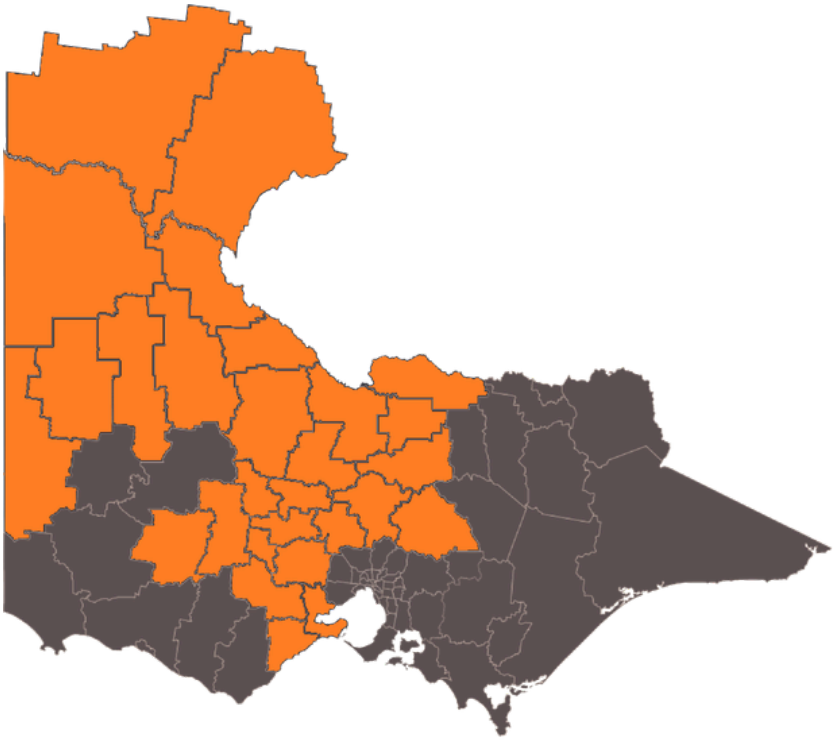
riac

Rights Information and Advocacy Centre

2026 ANNUAL REPORT



Areas we provide services and support

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Vision, Misson & Values

Our Vision

An inclusive and accessible society for all.

Our Mission

To amplify the voice of people in our communities to drive individual and systemic change and achieve social justice.

Our Values

Respect for human rights
Independent
Action with purpose
Collaboration for impact



About Us

Rights Information and Advocacy Centre (RIAC) is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the capacity and wellbeing of individuals, families, carers and communities through advocacy and support services.

Thanks to Australian and Victorian Government funding, RIAC is currently able to empower communities across 22 local government areas spanning throughout regional Victoria and southern New South Wales.

RIAC acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional owners of the land on which we are present, and to their elders past, present, and emerging.

We acknowledge that this land has never been ceded, and was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

From the Board Chair

This was my first year as Chair of RIAC, and I want to start by thanking Carli Leishman. Carli led the Board through a challenging period and handed it over in good shape.

It was a year of major change for our sector. The Federal Budget in May announced significant changes to the NDIS, and Parliament passed them into law in August. In Victoria, consultation is under way on the next State Disability Plan. Like many not-for-profit organisations, we also felt the pressure of rising demand, higher costs and a tight workforce.

RIAC exists to amplify the voice of people in our communities, to drive individual and systemic change and to achieve social justice. When systems change this quickly, people need someone independent in their corner and our mission matters more than ever. I am proud of how our team lived it, and our values showed us how.

Respect for human rights. We stood beside people when decisions about their lives were made without them. We also looked at ourselves. We will launch our Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) at our 2026 AGM and it holds RIAC to the same standard of access and inclusion that we ask of others.

Independent. People trust RIAC because our advocacy is independent of the services they rely on. In a time of reform, that independence is our greatest strength.

Action with purpose. Demand for our help stayed high all year and our team met it with skill and care. Behind every enquiry is a person who did not have to face a complex system alone.

Collaboration for impact. Our best work happened alongside others, people with lived experience, First Nations communities and our partner organisations and our Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC).

These values also drive the three (3) goals of our 2024-2028 strategic plan. We are innovating collaboratively to better serve our communities, with more peer-led and community-based ways of working. We are being a leading voice in our sector and this year we contributed to reform conversations at state and national level. We are building our organisational sustainability and resilience, through a stronger Board, a committed team and a growing group of volunteers.

The Board also changed this year. We farewelled Shaz Sturk and Carli Leishman and I thank them for all they contributed to RIAC. We warmly welcome Jeremy Yipp, who brings new skills and energy to strengthen and lead RIAC. I am grateful to all my fellow Board members, who give their time so generously.

Thank you to our CEO, Dr Sandy Ross, our team, volunteers and our Ambassador, Carol Cooke AM PLY, who continue to take action and speak up for accessibility and inclusion.

This has been a challenging time for our sector and there is more change to come as the NDIS reforms roll out. I am immensely proud of our team, our volunteers and the valuable work we do together. One client said it better than I can "Thank heavens for RIAC." We go into the next 12 months with confidence, ready for what's ahead.



Rich Jennings
Chair



From the CEO

The 2025–26 financial year was one of both challenge and opportunity for RIAC. Across the year we continued to witness increasing demand for advocacy services from people with disability, their families, and supporters, particularly as the impacts of ongoing reforms within the disability, aged care, mental health and social services sectors continued to be felt across our communities. Our staff, volunteers and partners worked across all the communities we are part of – from Geelong to Bendigo, Shepparton and Mildura - to ensure that people were supported to understand their rights navigate complex systems and have their voices heard in decisions that affect their lives.

As a regional organisation, RIAC remains acutely aware of the additional barriers faced by people living in rural and regional Victoria. Access to services, transport, specialist supports and information is poor compared to the metropolitan area, and the need for independent advocacy continues to grow. In addition to the layer of disadvantage for clients living in regional, rural and remote regions we work with, we are mindful of the very complex challenges faced by many of our clients with disabilities from First Nations communities, or with other diverse cultures and languages, or related to gender and sexuality.

A significant focus during the year was responding to changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme and associated review and appeals processes. Increasing unfairness and complexity within government systems has reinforced the importance of independent advocacy as a safeguard for people with disability.

RIAC continued to advocate not only for individual outcomes, but also for systemic improvements that promote fairness, accessibility and inclusion. A highlight of the year was the Bendigo Community Forum ‘From Ableism to Allyship’ in May 2026. The Forum was run by RIAC in partnership with Women with Disability Victoria (WDV), the Have a Say Bendigo self-advocacy group, and RIAC’s RAISE your Voice Bendigo group as well as local members of RIAC’s Lived Experience Advisory Committee. 130 people attended the half day event, participating in workshops as well hearing from a panel of people with disability reflecting on their experiences of ableism and capacity building and advocacy.

Another highlight of the year saw RIAC collaborating closely with the 5 other Victorian rural/regional disability advocacy organisations, and forming a consortium to bid for funding in the new Commonwealth Disability Advocacy Support Program. RIAC and our colleagues made submissions to the Department in its design phase highlighting the importance of place-based services and maintaining strong regional presence in service delivery.

None of RIAC's achievements would have been possible without the commitment and professionalism of our staff, volunteers, Board members and partner organisations. I would like to thank every member of the RIAC community for their dedication to our mission and values, but in particular my thanks go to our wonderful staff team and the generous Board members whose support is crucial for me in my role.

Last but not least I also acknowledge the individuals and families who place their trust in us during some of the most challenging periods of their lives.



Dr Sandy Ross
CEO



Our Board

As at 30 June 2026, the RIAC Board comprised:

- Bich Jennings (Chair)
- Malindi Mishra (Vice-Chair)
- Chris Lobo (Treasurer)
- Nicole Aebi-Moyo (Secretary)
- Ainslee Hooper
- Dianne Thomson
- Daryl Peter
- Louise Halliwell
- Malindi Mishra
- Nicole Aebi-Moyo
- Jeremy Yipp

We acknowledge the valued service of the Board Members who stepped down during the year:

- Shaz Sturk
- Carli Leishman

Our Ambassador

As RIAC's Ambassador, I have been proud to continue using my voice and live experience to champion the rights, inclusion and participation of people with disability.

Throughout 2025–26, I worked with RIAC to highlight some of the very real barriers people with disability continue to face. This included speaking publicly about my experience with Qantas and the broader need for airlines, businesses and services to understand that accessibility is not an optional extra.

For Self Advocacy Day, I encouraged people with disability to know their rights, speak up and have confidence that their voices matter. I also supported RIAC's advocacy around emergency preparedness, highlighting why people with disability must be included from the beginning in planning for bushfires and other emergencies, rather than considered as an afterthought.



International Day of People with Disability was another important opportunity to promote inclusion, visibility and genuine participation in our communities.

Beyond RIAC, I continued to support the MS community through advocacy, ambassador roles and speaking engagements, using those opportunities to encourage greater understanding of disability, resilience and inclusion.

The significant changes to the NDIS announced in the May Budget have made independent disability advocacy even more important. As the NDIS evolves and new Foundational Supports are developed, organisations such as RIAC will have a critical role in helping people understand what those changes mean, ensuring lived experience informs their implementation and advocating for people who may otherwise fall through the gaps.

There is still much to do. I am incredibly proud to support RIAC as it continues to stand alongside people with disability, amplify their voices and fight for their right to choice, dignity and full participation in community life.

CAROL COOKE AM

Our Programs

ADVOCACY

- National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP)
- NDIS Appeals
- Victorian Disability Advocacy Program (VDAP)
- Indigenous Advocacy Program

ACCESS & SUPPORT

- Home and Community Care (HACC)
- Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP)
- Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC)
- Strengthening Parents Support Program (SPSP)

Client Snapshot

CLIENTS SUPPORTED	CLIENTS ASSESSED	FEEDBACK RESPONSES	POSITIVE FEEDBACK
655	416	395	91.1%
Clients supported across RIAC programs.	Clients assessed through advocacy outcome measures.	Feedback responses reviewed across available sources.	Positive feedback across comparable satisfaction measures.



This word cloud visualises the most common themes identified in client feedback. The prominence of words reflects how frequently they were mentioned, highlighting the aspects of service most valued by clients.

"I felt listened to, supported and respected throughout my interactions with RIAC."

"The experience was really helpful, even though I was not successful. I appreciated the care and attention to detail shown throughout the process."

"RIAC made navigating things much easier and provided support when it was needed most."

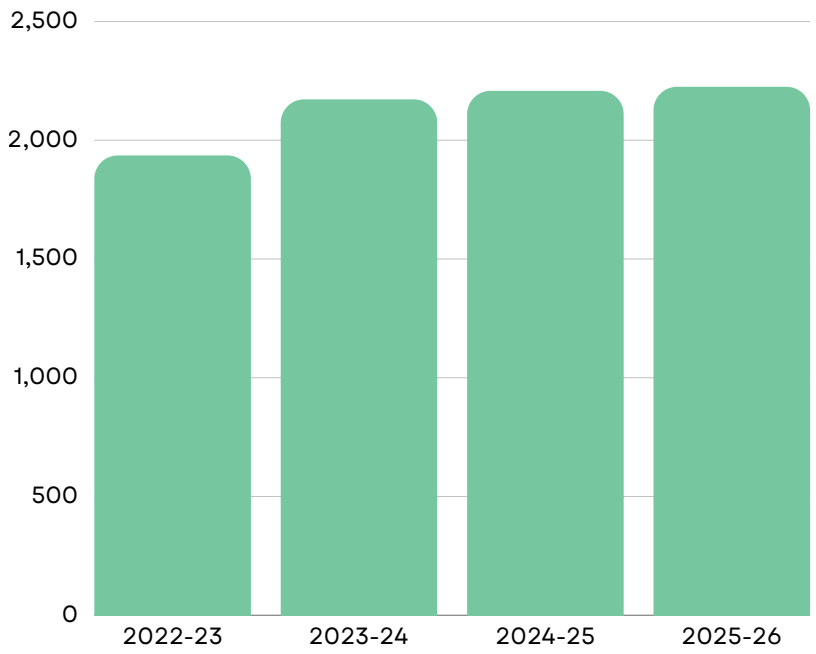
Intake Team

In 2025/26, the Intake Team remained the critical first point of contact with RIAC for our communities, helping people access the right support at the right time. With demand remaining high, the team balanced responsiveness, fairness, and effective service coordination to ensure people were not left navigating complex systems alone.

- 2,225 enquiries received across the financial year.
- 806 matters resolved or allocated to internal services and support pathways.
- 407 advice and information responses provided, helping people understand their options and make informed decisions.
- 585 referrals made to external services and community partners, ensuring people accessed specialist support when needed.
- 203 out-of-catchment enquiries redirected to appropriate local services

The Intake Team is in the frontline of the high demand for RIAC's support, and managing that demand is essential to make sure we get to assist as many people as possible, and in a timely fashion suitable for their circumstances. The Team provides people contacting RIAC with critical information, focuses our limited resources on clients at the most risk of harm, and builds strong partnerships across the service sector.

Most importantly, the Team provides a welcoming point of contact, empathy, understanding and expertise for vulnerable people seeking assistance from RIAC.



Intake Enquiries 2022-2026

INTAKE EXPERIENCE

4.67 / 5

Positive Intake Feedback

93.8%



Intake Advocate: Jackie Albrecht



Intake Officer: Shelbey Dryden

Advocacy Team

During a period of significant reform across disability, aged care and community services, RIAC's advocacy team worked to support clients and communities in protecting their rights and ensuring the experiences and perspectives of people with disability informed decisions at local, state and national levels.

RIAC Advocates continue to focus their efforts supporting individuals facing barriers to:

- accessing services and entitlements
- exercising their rights to choice and control over their lives
- securing appropriate supports

Behind every advocacy matter is a personal story of resilience and determination. These lived experiences not only drive our individual advocacy work but also inform our systemic advocacy priorities.

Demand for advocacy services continued to increase significantly during the last year. In the face of this, RIAC exceeded its funded service targets across all advocacy programs during the year, striving to respond to the record levels of demand. Most notably, RIAC supported more than twice the expected number of clients requiring assistance with appealing an NDIS decision to the Administrative Review Tribunal (ART). This reflects both the increasing demand for independent advocacy and the uncertainty experienced by many participants as the NDIS continued to undergo significant changes, with many cuts to plans.

Deriving from our individual advocacy and understanding the way many systems and processes let down people with disability, RIAC maintained a strong focus on advocating for improvements to systems. Through submissions, consultations and participation in state and national policy forums, RIAC highlighted issues including access to disability services in regional communities, supported decision-making, accessibility, complaints and dispute resolution processes, and the need for stronger safeguards and rights protections.

A major focus during the year was supporting policy development and service reform through the participation of people with disability. RIAC contributed to consultations informing the next Victorian State Disability Plan and supported engagement with First Nations people with disability living in regional communities. This work helped ensure that culturally safe, accessible and locally responsive approaches were reflected in policy discussions. RIAC also made submissions to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiries into accessibility of election voting, and treatment of TAC claims. We supported initiatives through the Gordon TAFE Centre of Excellence in Disability Inclusion, and continued our involvement with the Golden Plains Shire Disability Advisory Committee.

Collaboration remains central to RIAC's impact. We worked closely with disability advocacy organisations, community groups, governments, peak bodies and local stakeholders to strengthen the advocacy sector and address emerging issues. In the advocacy sector, RIAC staff sit on the Boards of both Disability Advocacy Victoria (DAV) and Disability Advocacy Network Australia (DANA), as well as the Victorian Rural Advocacy Network (VicRAN). In particular, RIAC staff contributed to the development and pilot implementation of the new Advocacy in Ageing and Disability Standard (AS 5391) as part of its sector contributions.



RIAC gratefully acknowledges Commonwealth funding of NDAP and the NDIS Appeals program and Victorian Government funding of VDAP.

Australian Government
Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

VICTORIA State Government
Families, Fairness and Housing

First Nations Advocacy



RIAC's First Nations advocacy team is focused on providing culturally safe support to Indigenous community members through individual advocacy, information sharing, and community group engagement, and supporting RIAC's development as a culturally safe mainstream advocacy organisation. RIAC has two First Nations advocates funded through Commonwealth (National Disability Advocacy Program) and State (Victorian Disability Advocacy Program) Departments.

Community engagement and culturally safe support
Community engagement has included attending local events, speaking with people in community, and building relationships with other agencies. These opportunities have helped RIAC advocates strengthen connections, share information about available supports, and better understand the needs of community members.

Networking and referral pathways
Networking remains an important part of the work of RIAC's First Nations advocates. It enables advocates to:

- gather up-to-date information about local services;
- identify culturally safe mainstream services for warm referrals;
- support participants and community members with general enquiries; and
- build trusted relationships with agencies that can provide appropriate support.



Networking with wide range of Aboriginal Organisations and Mainstream Agencies, included:

Aboriginal peaks/ACCOs

- VACCHO,
- VAEIA,
- VALS.
- Njernda Aboriginal Co-Op (Echuca)
- Rumbalara (Shepparton)
- DJAARA Co-op (Bendigo)
- MADEC Aboriginal Co-op (Mildura and Kerang)
- BDAC Aboriginal Co-Op (Bendigo)

Other First Nations groups

- The Deadly First Nations disability Self Advocacy Group
- LAN (Local Aboriginal Network, Seymour)
- LAJACs (Local Aboriginal Justice Committees, Mildura and Bendigo)
- Administrative Review Tribunal (Aboriginal Liaison Officers)

Other orgs

- Goulburn Valley Health
- Echuca Health
- Numurkah Health
- Bendigo Health
- Villamanta
- WellWays
- Orange Door
- Primary Care Connect
- Intereach
- CSEC (Cultural Significant Event Committee, Mildura)
- Services Australia
- Bendigo Senior Secondary College

RIAC First Nations Program participated in gathering information for the upcoming 2027/3031 State Disability Plan. Discussions and surveys were held at community events, like the Be Well Be Connected expo and the sisters Day out, group gatherings and information sessions with Community Members.

Listening to community experiences

Community engagement has also involved attending Indigenous wellbeing groups to highlight RIAC's services and listen to people's experiences. These conversations have provided important insight into the barriers faced by people living with disability, as well as carers supporting family members with disability, while providing information to help community members to understand their rights and how to access them.

Case study

An applicant with an acquired brain injury was referred to RIAC after being flagged as verbally aggressive and prone to swearing. The advocate worked with him, and through conversations, he acknowledged that his behaviour was inappropriate but explained it came from frustration when others did not understand what he needed. "As his advocate, I listened, identified the support he required to help have his daughter returned to his care, and assisted him with discrimination matters. Over time, our discussions helped him build the confidence and skills to advocate for himself and seek the information he needed."

First Nations Disability Advocacy

First Nations Advocacy has supported community members with a range of matters, including NDIS Appeal Tribunal conferences, Disability Support Pension claims, aged care applications, medical reports, and service complaints through meetings, phone calls, and emails. This support is provided in partnership with participants, helping build confidence and encouraging future Self-Advocacy.

Home and Community Care (HACC)

RIAC's HACC Access and Support program helps vulnerable people, people with disability, and carers access the services they need to live safely and independently in their communities. RIAC runs this program across the Loddon and Mallee regions.

A key achievement this year has been the continued success of the Inform Hub, which provides practical, face-to-face assistance to people requiring support with forms, service navigation, information, and referrals, with drop-in sessions on Tuesdays in Bendigo and Mildura. Feedback from clients of the Hub is strongly positive about the value of this service. From 233 feedback responses in 2025-26 the average satisfaction rating on a 5 point scale was 4.86, with 224 respondents indicating they would recommend RIAC to family and friends.

Inform Hub clients most commonly sought assistance with Centrelink forms, NDIS access and information, aged care services, disability support applications, and rebate claims. Where more intensive support through our Advocacy or other parts of Access and Support programs were relevant, clients were able to go on to access those services.

RIAC volunteers help staff the Inform Hub, and we are grateful for all the invaluable contributions made by them.

For many people in our community, navigating government systems to access basic entitlements is very difficult. Often technology is inaccessible and creates barriers to access. RIAC's HACC Access and Support program provides clear information in plain English, listens to individual circumstances, and connects people with appropriate supports. The program has big impacts, reducing stress, building confidence, and helping people remain engaged and connected within their communities.

The success of the Inform Hub demonstrates the ongoing need for accessible, person-centred support within regional communities, and RIAC is keen to explore opportunities to expand the service to other parts of our catchment, into the Goulburn Valley and Barwon regions while those needs remain widespread and unmet.

"Very helpful"

"Thank heavens for RIAC"

"Friendly and welcoming"

RIAC gratefully acknowledges Victorian Government funding of HACC.

VICTORIA State Government | Department of Health

Inform Hub

RIAC's free Inform Hubs offer dedicated support to individuals who need assistance with completing forms and accessing or using technology, operating on Tuesdays in Bendigo and Mildura.

We support people with:

- Filling out forms (Centrelink, housing, Government rebates etc.)
- Writing a complaint about a service.
- Linking in with services such as legal and housing.
- Setting up of iPads, computers, phones and other devices.
- Downloading and use of apps such as MyGov, Services Victoria, My Aged Care, Medicare Express and more.

We have templates to help with NDIS and DSP applications also.
The clinic is a culturally safe, LGBTQIA+ safe space and offers an interpreter service, black & white printing, Wi-Fi, and scanning facilities.

We do not provide any legal or advocacy advice in these sessions, but we may be able to refer people to other services or internally to a RIAC advocate or Access & Support Officer.

During the current funding period, RIAC's Inform Hub has assisted approximately 200 individuals across the Bendigo and Mildura communities. Support has ranged from help with completing Centrelink and other complex forms, accessing energy supplements and rebates, making inquiries to My Aged Care, and navigating DSP and NDIS processes. Additionally, many individuals have been connected to RIAC's advocacy services through referrals to our specialist teams.





Volunteer Program

RIAC's Home and Community Care (HACC) funding from the Victorian Department of Health includes funding for a Volunteer Program.

The Program includes the members of RIAC's Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC), as well as volunteers supporting clients in key programs, primarily the Inform Hubs in Bendigo and Mildura. RIAC's Board also comprises volunteers, although they play a governance role outside of this program. This part of the Report is focused on the program volunteers.

In 2025/26 RIAC experienced a successful year of volunteer recruitment, welcoming five new volunteers and increasing the overall volunteer cohort to eight individuals. This included two volunteers in Mildura, Marg and Ane, and six volunteers in Bendigo, Sherrie, Erin, Juanita, Wendy, Nancy, and Michelle. As is often the case within volunteer programs, there was some movement throughout the year. Erin and Juanita were only with RIAC for a short period before securing ongoing employment opportunities, while Marg chose to step down from her volunteer role to spend more time travelling and enjoying retirement activities. A particularly positive outcome was Juanita's transition from volunteer to employee, with her appointment as an Advocate in the Bendigo office. Juanita has become a valued member of the RIAC team and her journey highlights the important role volunteering can play in developing skills, confidence, and pathways to employment.

At the conclusion of the reporting period, RIAC had five active volunteers. Sherrie is providing ongoing support to the RIAC Carer Support Program in Bendigo, contributing valuable assistance to program activities and client engagement. Ane, Wendy, Nancy, and Michelle support RIAC's weekly Inform Hub service, which operates in Bendigo and Mildura every Tuesday between 10.00 am and 2.00 pm. Their contribution helps ensure community members can access information, referrals, and support in a welcoming and accessible environment. The dedication and commitment of these volunteers continues to strengthen RIAC's capacity to respond to community needs and extend the reach of its services.



The LEAC was established in 2024 and is an important part of RIAC's governance and operational framework, putting the voices of people with disability into a key leadership role. The LEAC comprises 10 members, all of whom have disability and live in our catchments, including at least one Board member. It meets four times each year and provides valuable guidance and advice to the RIAC Board and management team on issues affecting people with disability. LEAC members contribute insights on disability rights, advocacy priorities, service delivery, accessibility, and emerging community needs, helping to ensure RIAC's work remains responsive, relevant, and informed by the people it serves.

Lastly, as well as acknowledging the invaluable and generous contributions made by our wonderful volunteers, we acknowledge the valuable contributions of our volunteer coordinator, Kate Kerlin. Kate concluded over two years in that role and with RIAC at the end of June 2026, during which time she provided dedicated leadership and support to RIAC's volunteers.

Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP)

During 2025-26, RIAC was funded to work in the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) aiming to support older people to stay in their own homes. Client focused work was funded through Specialised Support Services (SSS), providing individual advocacy and navigation support to vulnerable older people.

RIAC also received funding for Sector Support and Development (SSD), strengthening the capability of CHSP providers and supporting the sector through significant aged care reforms.

The year saw major changes to the Government's approach to aged care with the new Aged Care legislation and establishment of the new Support at Home program. Anticipating these changes, the Government had been winding down the CHSP, with many providers in regional areas leaving the program. As part of these changes, RIAC's SSS funding ended on 30 June 2026.

RIAC has advised the Department of significant unmet need in the community for client advocacy to support older people and their carers in navigating the system. We would be keen to continue doing that work if funding can be made available.

Specialised Support Services (SSS)

In its CHSP advocacy work, RIAC supported older people experiencing vulnerability, disability, isolation or difficulty navigating complex aged care systems. RIAC recorded 1050 hours of SSS activity against an annual target of 869 hours.

- **Individual navigation:** RIAC provided one-to-one navigation support for aged care clients, particularly people with diverse needs, through appointments, telephone contact and incidental assistance.

- **Client assistance** included advocacy and support relating to My Aged Care, referrals, assessments, service coordination and access to appropriate services. RIAC's independent advocacy approach was particularly important for people who were at risk of falling through service gaps or were unable to progress matters without individual assistance.

- **Community engagement:** RIAC participated in aged care forums and events, including the Ouyen Aged Care Expo, to share information and connect older people with relevant pathways and supports.

Case Study: CHSP

Damien, 86, lives alone in regional Victoria and was referred to RIAC due to complex support needs. A home visit by RIAC staff identified severe hoarding and squalor issues that made his home unsafe, leaving Damien living in a caravan on his property. He wanted support to clean his house so he could safely return to living in his house. RIAC helped him access a Level 2 Home Care Package and, despite being offered a referral to the Care Finder program, Damien chose to remain with RIAC because of the trust he had built with his Access and Support worker.

RIAC assisted Damien to navigate the aged care system and prioritised connecting him with a Level 2 Home Care Package provider, recognising that access to funded services was critical to addressing his living situation. Although offered a referral to the Care Finder program, Damien chose to remain with RIAC, citing the trust he had developed with his Access and Support worker. Following the commencement of his Home Care Package, the provider supported a clean-up of Damien's home, while RIAC continued to play a key role in engaging Damien with services. When Damien became reluctant to accept assistance, both he and the provider turned to RIAC for support, enabling services to continue and progress toward his goal of returning to live safely in his home.



RIAC gratefully acknowledges Commonwealth funding for CHSP.

Australian Government
Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant Project – RAISE your Voice

In 2024 RIAC, in partnership with Grampians disAbility Advocacy, received a three-year grant from the Department of Social Services to build the capacity of people with disability to participate in their communities and work to make their communities more inclusive. This is our RAISE your Voice project.

During 2025/26 the RAISE your Voice Project maintained and supported 11 Peer Action Groups across regional Victoria. Project staff facilitated peer-led groups, provided education on human rights and disability rights, and supported participants to engage with local Members of Parliament and other stakeholders. Participants reported increased confidence, self-advocacy and decision-making, with positive impacts extending into home life.

Participant impact example

N joined the Bendigo Peer Action Group after his advocacy for installing wheelchair charging points at local bus stops had stalled. With support from peers and the Group facilitator, N rebuilt confidence, refocused the project into achievable steps, met with the mayor, presented at a community forum and discussed the initiative with the Department of Transport and Planning. His experience demonstrates how peer support can strengthen self-belief, confidence and advocacy skills, and contribute towards building more inclusive communities.

RAISE your Voice Forum

One of the highlights of the year was the inaugural RAISE your Voice Forum, held at Halls Gap in February 2026. Representatives from each of the 11 Peer Action Groups came together to share their findings, exchange ideas and build connections across regions. The forum included activities at the WAMA Centre, a shared dinner, an overnight stay in Halls Gap and presentations the following day. Solo musical performances by participants added to the atmosphere, creating a strong sense of connection, celebration and shared purpose.

Overall, the forum strengthened connections across the PAG network and reinforced the value of peer-led spaces where people with disability can share experiences, build confidence and advocate for change together.

R.A.I.S.E
YOUR VOICE

Consistent care could be cut

BY ASHLEIGH WYSS

For Camperdown residents Liz Morrison and Ellie Blackney, being part of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has given them access to a form of consistent care and independence that would otherwise be out of reach.

But following Health Minister Mark Butler's announcement that the Federal Government intends to cut 160,000 people from the scheme, both Liz and Ellie, alongside hundreds of thousands of Australians living with a disability are being met with an uncertain future.

The planned cuts come as the government attempts to rein in the scheme's purportedly unsustainable expenditure.

The NDIS is expected to cost the Federal Government $50 billion in the 2026-2027 financial year, with projected annual growth at five to six per cent.

The NDIS currently provides support to more than 760,000 Australians living with a disability and was established in 2013 to fund a more cohesive and equitable disability support system compared to the fragmented network available across states.

Ellie said she dreaded the possibility of being removed from the scheme.

"I worry all the time," she said.

"I'm due for another review in September, I'm afraid they're going to take even more stuff away.

"If it was dropped, or even some of it dropped, I would decline rapidly."

Ellie, who lives with functional neurological disorder, has been an NDIS participant since Covid.

With the help of support workers, Ellie receives assistance with essential daily tasks like showering and gardening, is able to travel to appointments and attend therapeutic activities such as guitar lessons in Geelong; something she said would not be possible otherwise.

Liz shared Ellie's anxiety, especially regarding the loss of access to social support.

"They are things that everybody is entitled to do," Liz said.

"And I think that if we can't do them on our own, why should we be punished?

"I mean, are you supposed to sit at home all week every day and do nothing?

"Before I was on the NDIS, I'd be in bed until one or three o'clock in the afternoon. It really, really has changed my life."

In recent years, the Federal Government has enacted sweeping reforms aiming to slow the NDIS's growth and preserve the scheme's long-term sustainability.

The gradual tightening of the scheme over the past two years has included 2024 changes to the NDIS support list that details which services a participant is allowed to spend their allocated funding on, which was enforced following widespread concerns over misuse and dodgy providers.

Last year, travel allowances claimable by therapy providers were slashed in half, a decision which disproportionately impacted regional participants where distances between services are greater and options more limited than in metropolitan centres.

The Federal Government then announced the Thriving Kids program, a youth service aimed at supporting children with low to moderate needs, those with autism and developmental delay, outside of the NDIS.

For those who may be offboarded from the scheme off the back of the most recent cut, Federal Health Minister Mark Butler has said the government's intention is for participants leaving the scheme to be redirected to other supports, including foundational programs run in partnership with individual states.

But participants and disability advocates have raised concerns these services are not yet fully defined.

Ellie said support she had previously relied on in tandem with the NDIS, including local government disability services, had been scaled back or absorbed into other programs.

Meanwhile, Liz said the process for entering the NDIS, or accessing certain funding allowances was becoming increasingly restrictive and inaccessible.

After her NDIS plan was reduced last year, Liz was forced to fight to restore funding for essential supports, including medical consumables and travel at a tribunal.

She said she relied on assistance from Southwest Advocacy at Warrnambool, which took over her case and guided her through the process.

"It's very, very, very difficult to understand where you're meant to go or what you're meant to do," she said.

Liz said the pre-existing system was already too complex to navigate and that without the guaranteed allocation of a support co-ordinator, the difficulty of finding local services or specialists meant many people gave up along the way.

"They ask you to get all these doctors reports, psychiatrists, psychologists and then it's not good enough, they say, 'oh, have you exhausted all avenues of trying to get better?'

"You think, well, how much proof do I need?"

Rights Information Advocacy Centre project officer Nicola Delaney said local advocacy services were already facing record waitlists.

"We're getting record long wait lists for advocacy support, and there's been a big increase in people needing support through the tribunal," Nicola said.

NDIS participants in Colac and district who are anxious about the status of their current plan can find support through the RAISE Your Voice Peer Action group which meets between 3pm and 5pm on the third Monday of every month at the Colac Salvation Army Community Centre on Dennis Street.



CONCERNS: Liz Morrison, Ellie Blackney and Nicola Delaney are worried about planned cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Calls for increased accessibility for trains

A DISABILTY self-advocacy group is calling for more awareness and assistance at the Camperdown Station, including increased carriage numbers on trains.

RAISE Your Voice Colac, which has many Camperdown members, has also called for the reinstatement of the booking system which has been paused during the free public transport period.

Member Nicola Delaney said the group was passionate about people with disabilities being able to access all the services and supports they need to live, work and play in their communities.

"Often in smaller towns like Camperdown, it's hard to access essential everyday supports so it can mean people are needing to travel to Colac or Warrnambool," she said.

"Many of our group members rely on public transport, and we've heard from a lot of people who feel isolated because they can't use public transport or don't feel confident using it.

"We have been talking about moving the group to Camperdown so more people can be involved – we're really keen to try to advocate for change in the community.

"Our numbers are limited at the moment, so we're trying to grow the group as well.

"We want to be a part of making the change as well – we haven't decided how yet, but we want to raise awareness of things like the sunflower lanyard and how to use the booking system once that's back up and running."

Ellie Blackney, a Camperdown resident and a member of the group, said one of the key accessibility issues for her has been the lack of assistance for those with a disability to board or get off trains and coaches.

"It can be a bit tricky with the buses because not all of them are designed for people who use walking sticks or walkers to get on – particularly for those who have issues with stairs," she said.

"The disabled parking is a bit of a distance away from platform.

"When the station's closed, it's even longer as you have to walk right around the outside of the building to get to the disabled parking in poor lighting.

"At the moment, it's not very clear about when the station is going to be open and manned – the V/Line website says it's open and manned until 8pm – 9pm on some nights and weekends, but there's only someone there until 4pm at the latest.

"That can be make it confusing for people, especially when people want to request assistance or to know where the safest place to park is."

Ms Delaney said the free public transport period, a Victorian State Government initiative to encourage residents to reduce fuel usage, has added additional issues for those with disabilities.

"With the trains being crowded, it's very hard to get a seat a lot of the time," she said.

"That means people don't feel confident catching or attempting to catch the train if they've got sensory processing concerns.

"There's often not a quiet carriage on the train as well because there's only three carriages.

"There are some tools V/Line has brought in to help their staff be more aware of people's disabilities such as the sunflower lanyard scheme.

"You often find the local station staff and bus drivers aren't necessarily aware of things V/Line says they should be aware of."

Ms Blackney said she was hoping for more awareness for those with disabilities, meaning people can get the help they need to access public transport and the accommodations to do so.

"It'd be good to have a space for luggage and bikes as you often find they're in the disabled spots and you can't access them because people are leaving their bikes, luggage and prams there – there's nowhere for people to put those things," she said.

"We want to be like everyone else – get on a train and go about our business.

"We might need a little bit of extra help, but we want to do what everyone else does without barriers."

Ms Delaney said the lack of accessibility for train services didn't just impact those with disabilities – it impacts the whole community due to the crowded services.

"Just because we're in the country doesn't mean we shouldn't have the same rights as people in the city – they have big trains with lots of carriages and country people have to be all shoved in like sheep in a truck," she said.

"It's not really fair – we pay the same taxes, we should get the same service.

"It's an issue which affects people in the area, but disproportionately affects people with disability.

"We're hoping we can do something in increasing that awareness, not just in the general community but for V/Line to offer that training to all station staff."



RIAC gratefully acknowledges Commonwealth funding of the ILC Grant.

Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Strengthening Parents Support Program (SPSP)

The SPSP program continued to provide vital support to parents and carers of children living with disability throughout 2025/26. Through a combination of peer support, social connection and access to professional services, the program supported families in the Loddon region to feel more connected, informed and empowered.

All SPSP services are provided free of charge, and families do not require an NDIS plan to access support.

SPSP facilitated regular carer groups in Castlemaine, Bendigo and Echuca. These groups provide a safe, welcoming and inclusive space for families to connect with others who share similar experiences. The groups have a strong focus on self-care, with group activities promoting relaxation, wellbeing and stress reduction. Feedback from parents and carers in the groups has been overwhelmingly positive, with many participants reporting an increased sense of community connection and greater confidence in navigating the challenges associated with their caring role.

Across the Loddon region, parents and carers of children living with disability are also able to meet one-on-one with the SPSP Coordinator to discuss their personal circumstances in a confidential setting. Families seeking ongoing individual support may be referred to the program's Social Worker.

School Can't Support

On 16 September 2025, SPSP partnered with Bendigo Health to host a School Can't information session for families experiencing school attendance challenges. The session provided practical information, resources and tools, and was presented by Tiffany Westphal, Director of School Can't Australia. Attendees valued the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of school attendance barriers and to access strategies to better support their children.



In response to the success of this event, SPSP launched a dedicated parent support group on 23 September 2025 for families of children experiencing difficulties with school attendance. The group meets fortnightly and provides families with ongoing peer support, information and access to relevant resources.

The School Can't Support Group successfully secured funding through the Victorian State Government Disability Self-Help Grants Program. Operating under the auspice of RIAC and with support from the SPSP program, the group will host a series of family events over the next two years. These events will aim to build resilience through social connection and empower families through access to expert advice, shared experience and practical knowledge.

RIAC gratefully acknowledges Victorian Government funding of SPSP.

VICTORIA State Government | Families, Fairness and Housing

Ableism to Allyship Bendigo Forum

In May, RIAC co-hosted an inclusive community forum for Bendigo and surrounding areas.

The day was a wonderful success, with the audience enjoying the keynote speaker, Sam Drummond.

Sam is a broadcaster, lawyer and disability advocate. He shared his knowledge and experience in human rights, media and advocacy.

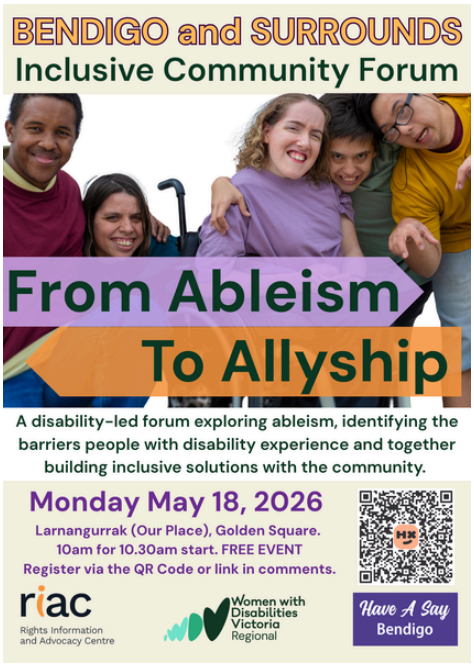
Following this, a panel discussion was held talking about:

- What is ableism?
- How does it impact us?
- What can we do to change it?

Thank you to the panellists: Juanita Miller, Renay Barker-Mulholland, Dr Bree Wright and Shona Brown.

Four workshops were also held covering various areas. These were:

- Community Safety
- Transport
- Accessibility
- Speaking up for myself and others



RIAC acknowledges our partners in the event - Women with Disabilities Victoria and Have A Say Bendigo. The event was also supported by a grant from the City of Greater Bendigo.



Looking ahead

During 2026-27 RIAC will continue to listen, learn and act on client feedback to strengthen our services.

Our focus will be on improving timeliness, communication and accessibility while growing our impact for people with disability.

STRONGER FEEDBACK CULTURE
Embed consistent feedback collection across all programs and services.

BETTER ACCESS TO SERVICES
Continue to improve visibility, wayfinding and access to RIAC services.

IMPROVING CLIENT EXPERIENCE
Use feedback to enhance service delivery, communication and follow-up.

GROWING OUR IMPACT
Expand our advocacy and partnerships to achieve fairer outcomes for more people with disability.

"We are committed to continuous improvement and meaningful change driven by the voices of our clients and community."

Thank you to all clients who shared their feedback. Your voice shapes our future.



Thank you to our funders

Australian Government
Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

Australian Government
Department of Social Services

VICTORIA State Government | Department of Health

VICTORIA State Government | Families, Fairness and Housing



RIAC thanks its volunteers, supporters and other stakeholders for their continued support.

This report was designed by Lauren Burchell, Executive Assistant at RIAC.