**Podcast transcript
Series 6, Episode 1**

**Providers speak: What it takes to deliver quality outcomes in the SDA market**

**Dr George Taleporos:**

Hi listeners and welcome to Reasonable and Necessary, Australia's premier podcast series on everything you ever wanted to know about the National Disability Insurance Scheme. I'm your host, Dr George Taleporos, and on today's episode we're talking to SDA providers about what it takes to deliver quality outcomes in the SDA market.

Joining us are Queenie Tran from Summer Housing and Tom Worsnop from Guardian Living. Both of these organisations were 2 of the first providers to enter the SDA market and they have lots of knowledge to share.

Hi Queenie and Tom, thanks for joining us.

**Tom Worsnop:** It's a pleasure.

**Queenie Tran:** Thanks for having us, George.

**GT:** I'm really excited for this chat with you. But before we get any further, can we start with just some introductions. So Queenie, tell people, who are you?

**QT:** So my name's Queenie Tran and I'm the chief operating officer at Summer Housing. My background's in accessible architecture and design as well as property management.

**TW:** And I'm Tom Worsnop. I work at Guardian Living and my title is the tenant outcomes manager. My background's been working in the disability sector for about the last 25 years. I've had particular interest in people with acquired brain injury because that's where I started, and I've been working in this area of tenancy and working around housing for about the last 7 years.

**GT:** Excellent. Now, this is really great that we've got you, both of you, on the podcast today because you've got lots of experience in SDA and in understanding the needs of tenants. I'd like to start just by getting a bit of a sense of the type of housing that you provide and the model of that housing. Queenie?

**QT:** Summer Housing's been focusing on the delivery of high quality apartments. So we're really supplying apartments to individuals that have either extreme functional impairment or significant support needs. So we've been developing SDA or specialist disability accommodation in really well located areas to allow individuals to participate in the community and to live with as much independence and safety as possible.

Now, we currently operate what we call a 10 plus one model. That means that we've got 10 apartments that we've designed and modified. For people with disabilities there is specialist disability accommodation, and these apartments are mixed within a mainstream development plus one on-site overnight assist apartment and that's where we have carers operating a 24-hour support model.

**GT:** I've been to one of your apartments and it's impressive. It's really, really great to see these apartments that just look like regular apartments but they're accessible to people like me. I know that it was the first time that I entered an apartment, did a 360 degree turn and didn't take all the furniture with me. So it was a really very nice experience.

**QT:** Thanks, George. We're incredibly proud of our projects and because we're really focusing on having apartments in really well located areas as well, we just love the sense of community that comes through with a lot of our projects and really working with great developers and architects to really deliver something that's quite special and unique.

**GT:** That's wonderful that we've got to the stage where disability housing looks as good as it looks. I mean, the design, the - even the finishing touches in the apartments. There was this thing that I noticed, it was like in the bathroom, you were just sort of surrounded by all these features that were within reach, you know, it was very, very exciting. And Tom, you deliver something similar, don't you?

**TW:** Yeah, Guardian Living does a similar arrangement to what Queenie's outlined. You know, the idea is to provide people with an opportunity to live in the terms everybody calls nowadays living like everyone else. So an opportunity to live in an apartment that actually looks like everybody else's apartment but is enhanced with technology that can mean people can do things with technology that they might not be able to do because of reach because of capacity themselves. And I guess the other key things around this, as Queenie said, location's really important so that people can live close to where the activities that they are going to be involved in will occur, close to things like health services if they've got significant health needs through their daily lives.

But I guess the other aspect too is to try and build apartments and the built structure and the support model that actually works within that built structure that allows people to do things like have time on their own when they don't actually need somebody with them. While they can still contact somebody if there's an emergency, they don't have to have this sense of somebody looming over them the whole time if they're very happy just to spend a couple of hours watching a movie on their own or they want to go out on their own and they don't need a support worker with them.

So it's a combination of trying to keep things as regular living as everybody else can, but having those enhancements around you so that you're also feeling safe and when there's an emergency you know that there's going to be somebody at your fingertips to help if you need it.

**GT:** Right. Now, you've alluded to this concept of having someone within reach when you needed that. So effectively what you're saying is that there is a supported independent living or a support service that is on site 24/7, is that right?

**TW:** Yeah. It's this combination of knowing what you need in your life that's planned ahead so that if it's something like helping you to get out of bed in the morning and have your food available that you need, you know that pretty much every day that's going to be 1 of the things that you're going to have to plan for. But if you don't have anybody available, say you have people in for 2 or 3 hours in the morning and then you don't have anybody else in until lunchtime, you've also got a site in the same building where there is a staffed group of people who you can call on, they can actually in an emergency or in a - not even in an emergency but if something suddenly happens unexpectedly, you know that there's somebody who can help you out when you can't do an activity on your own.

And like a simple version of that is if you're somebody who's in a wheelchair and you can't reach to the floor and something falls off your tray table and all you really need is somebody to come and help to get that back up so that you can get on with your life, then you've got somebody available within 10 or so minutes who can just pop up, do that activity for you and leave you alone again.

**GT:** Exactly. And that's often the difference between, you know, how being able to live independently or not. I want to explore this concept of support provision and SDA. We know that we are working with a scheme where there is a separation between housing and support, where the intention is that you can live somewhere and that you have control over who provides that support and that you can change providers. That is a key policy of the scheme. But I understand that both of you or your services have a slightly different approach to this and I'd really like to just understand that a bit better. So Queenie, can you tell us how do you deal with the separation of housing and support?

**QT:** Yeah, sure. Look, from our side, we think that it's incredibly important that tenants have choice and control in all their supports and that should include housing. Participants should have choice of housing in supports that best suits their needs with providers who are best placed to deliver those supports. So we believe that that could only be achieved by separating housing and direct supports so that participants are not obligated to have a housing provider that's selecting the support provider that delivers what is really quite an intimate and specialised direct support. And similarly, we don't think that supports should limit the housing needs and options that somebody may access.

So at Summer Housing, the way that we do this is that we want to focus on things that we think we do best, which is delivering the high quality properties for people with significant disabilities and then we work with our tenants so that they can select a provider that can deliver the backup supports in the OOA apartment and they deliver a concierge model on site. Now, more importantly they also have full choice and control of their daily living supports. So ultimately they may potentially have 2 different support providers that can provide their supports throughout their roster of the day.

Separately, Summer Housing also works with a property and tenancy manager who really is acting more like an agent for Summer Housing. So overall, each of our participants have quite a strong circle of supports that would be around them to deliver all of their supports, whether it's housing or direct services.

**GT:** Really interested to understand that a bit better. So you broker the tenancy side of things, is that right? Is that what you meant by that provider that's involved in assisting with tenancy matters?

**QT:** Yeah, correct. So Summer Housing sees ourselves as a landlord. We own the properties and we work really closely with the tenants to make sure that it's suitable to their needs. But we also recognise that a lot of tenants will need to have somebody that they can call on, quite urgently in some cases, to make sure that all their repairs and maintenance are kept up to date and also answering all the questions around their leasing, their rent, et cetera. So we would work with a separate property and tenancy manager and in most cases that's going to be a community housing provider who has a lot of experience working with people with disabilities, and they're the agent. So Summer Housing is a landlord with an agent, similar to a real estate agent, as a community housing provider, working with the tenants on the housing side.

**GT:** Has that evolved? Is that something that you've always had? And if you've recently put it in place, how did you come to that decision?

**QT:** It is a relationship that we've had from some of our very early projects and the reason that we've had that is because as an organisation that's operating across the country, we know that it's going to be really important to have people that's available on hand and who can be really the eyes and ears on site. So working with locally based community housing providers ensures that our tenants are going to get a quick response first time, any time that they call somebody.

At the same time, we also want to have that separation between ourselves and the tenants so that if there ever was any complaints or feedback that participants wanted to share back with us, they don't feel like there's going to be a blockage or that it's going to impact their housing if they were going to try and deliver us any issues that they may find arising.

**GT:** That's really interesting. Thanks, Queenie. Tom, can you talk us through your model?

**TW:**
Yeah. The issue of separating the housing provider and the support provider is 1 of the really basic principles of the NDIS. So that's in place. So we would have always have a separate provider of the support function and there'd be multiple providers of support functions too from the person or the organisation that runs the housing. And the principle behind that of course is so that if you don't like what's going on in terms of your support, you don't actually have to move out of your house to change things. So that's a really basic principle that's in place, I think, and is a really big change under the NDIS from what used to be the case.

Guardian's a little bit different in its modelling to Summer in that we're not actually the SDA provider ourselves. We broker that service and we broker the provider services as well. So as I said at the start, my title is actually tenant outcomes manager, so I'm not a manager of a service myself, I actually broker, on behalf of tenants, outcomes that they want to achieve.

Now, I know this becomes a bit of a sort of semantic challenge to say where is choice and control really? Some of our models that we set up originally had 1 particular support provider who provided both the sort of the planned elements of what people need and the sort of the backup systems and as things have evolved and changed, we're now in a sort of sense of doing a hybridised version of complete separation and choice of everything that goes with support to the point where sometimes Guardian is in a place where we will pre-choose a provider that can actually provide the basics and then the individuals can then move in and understand how the system works and then the choice, if they don't like that provider, can come into play.

**GT:** Okay. So is that your way of managing the risk of a random SIL provider coming in with a new project and not having some guarantees in place? Is that why you do that? Because providers are going to be listening, thinking, you know, there's a few different ways to do this, what's the pros and cons? So can you talk us through some of those?

**TW:** Yeah, certainly in a purist sense, the choice of everything that's in your life is what everybody aims for. The challenge we've got really in some of the development of how the NDIS has played out is that trying to align everybody's eligibility for an SDA apartment at the same time, so that you've then got everybody in a position to jointly choose a provider to provide the shared component, can be logistically also almost impossible.

And so you've got this thing where you also have people who, for example, a typical example we see is people who are in residential aged care at the moment who really want to get out of aged care but they've been living there for a number of years and all of their services are provided by the provider of the aged care system. They don't want to have the challenge of having to figure out how do I actually manage all of the different types of service provision in a new environment? They really love the idea of giving somebody else the responsibility for making that all work, somebody who's got some experience enough to say whether a provider's really going to do this in an innovative way or whether they're just going to do the same old same old that you've seen in group homes. I mean, that's sometimes I think is useful for people.

But there are other people who right from the beginning know what it is that they want and they know how to manage it and they might've had experience already in a different environment where they've chosen their providers. So I guess Guardian's trying to run that balance between - and sometimes it works for people to have complete choice, sometimes they just want somebody else to give them a sort of a starting point so that then they can land how they're living, land how they can sort of make best use of living in an apartment and how they can use flexibility and then they might want to say, okay, well I'm ready now to start talking about whether or not this provider's the 1 I want or do I want to change.

So there are various ways you can tackle this and I think my experience shows different people have different priorities when it comes into these new types of housing developments.

**GT:** Queenie, is that how you've found that?

**QT:** Yeah, look, we've definitely found a lot of different experiences amongst our participants that have led to them wanting to select different service models. One of the key things that we've found with our model in that they get to bring their own supports as their core supports, whoever they may be and whether it's new or existing relationships. That makes it a lot easier for them to really have that sense of choice and control and it's also a lot easier for them to change if things don't work out, particularly if they're moving into a completely new environment and they really need to take some time to settle in and work with different providers and make sure that they are a good fit.

One of the tenants that we were speaking to earlier this week did also say that for her it did take 2 years until they found a really good working model in terms of not just the organisation, the provider that they're working with, but also being able to find the right support staff and training them up to a point where she just felt a lot more confident. So finding supports is a notoriously hard thing to do and with things changing and chopping all the time. So in some ways, having a model that allows you to have that flexibility really helps people to feel stable with their housing and at least that side of the equation's all resolved and easy to do.

I would say that from our side, the concierge or the on-site provider is really there as a backup. As I said, we do find a lot of our tenants do have changing supports over time and sometimes part of that issue is the reliability of supports and whether or not we can also ensure that everybody's going to have their support workers turn up on time and be able to deliver the supports with the right training. So having an on-site provider that really picks up any missed shifts or if somebody's running late to 1 of the appointments, it just gives people a lot more reassurance.

**GT:** I'm really interested in also exploring quality and safety and before I do, Tom, can you jump in now, you had something to say?

**TW:** Yeah, I think 1 of the really difficult things around choice is it's very easy to do the choice part of it when it's just your 1-on-1 support and really the ultimate part of that I think for most people is they want somebody who they trust in there, coming in and doing - particularly if it's personal care.

When there's a shared component of how you make your choice when - particularly in apartment developments where people don't necessarily know each other. They know that they share the on-site support part but they don't know necessarily what other people make use of that shared component for. And so there's a really important separation between how you make a joint decision about a provider and an individual provider that can provide your 1-on-1. And often it comes down to okay, I can accept some compromises around the sort of shared component because I know that it's always going to be shared with other people. Whereas if it's my individual support, sometimes I just want to make sure that I've got full control over that. So just the separation of what's the backup system from the planned system, I think introduces a bit of a different sort of challenge in terms of choice and control.

**GT:** Yes, absolutely. And often it's quite hard to get 10 people to make a decision about where they're going to go for dinner, let alone -

**TW:** Yeah, exactly.

**GT:** - what support provider they're going to use and I think that that's something that would definitely play out.

**TW:** And I think we have to continue to keep an eye on that as providers, don't we, Queenie? To sort of make sure that we're not stopping people from having choices but we don't load people with choices that are really difficult without any support to do those choices too.

**GT:** Well, what kind of support do you put in place to help people to decide on this, a shared support service provider? Tom?

**TW:** Well, I think the first part about that is to explain really carefully when we start talking to somebody about moving into an apartment, about how that might look. And as Queenie said earlier, sometimes people move into these apartments and they don't really know how it's going to work until they're in there and it's starting to happen. So you try and actually give people an idea about - particularly this idea about what you can plan ahead and what it is that you've actually got to have as a backup and how those 2 things might work for you.

And then the providers, when we introduce them, they then have the responsibility for in a sense winning over the trust of the individual so that if they want this person to be supported well, then they need to be able to have a good relationship with the person enough to allow them to be trusted too. So there's a lot of building of relationship and trust, which actually needs to go in in the early stages so that then people, if they do make a decision and they're not sure whether it's the right 1, they also know how they could then change that decision in the future.

**GT:** Absolutely. I'd like to turn now to look at the responsibilities of the SDA provider around quality and safety and how that might differ from a supported independent living provider. Can we start with you, Queenie? Can you tell us, when it comes to keeping people safe, how do you work out what's your role and what's the role of the SIL provider?

**QT:** Yeah, sure. Look, this is obviously a really important part of what it means to be an SDA provider and I guess first of all, keeping people safe is everyone's responsibility. So if we sort of look at the whole model that Summer Housing is delivering, we take quite a proactive approach in undertaking the EOI for the concierge provider that's operating on-site. And when I say we're quite proactive, not only are we tendering this to reputable organisations who have not only said that they're capable of delivering the service but we also do quite a lot of work in terms of getting a written submission from the organisation, doing an interview process as well as a due diligence process that really looks through all their governance aspects as well as risk.

Once all that information is compiled, we summarise all that for tenants to make their decision but we don't really just leave them to make a decision, we've got tenancy support officers as part of our team. So every single project that we work on, we've got a tenancy support officer that's assigned that will step through every single part of the process all the way from receiving the initial offers from Summer Housing, getting their SDA, finding a SIL provider that they're comfortable with and then working with their support coordinators to really get everything else in place for a move. So that includes things like making sure that they've got their core supports or their 1-to-1s lined up, that they've got OTs in place to do all their reviews and make sure customisations are ready, working with their NDIS planners and really explaining how the model works.

So we're really there every single part of the way to make sure that people are confident in what's happening, but also feeling safe and secure in knowing that we are keeping them at the front of mind in everything that we do. We set out really clear roles between all of the different organisations and I think on top of what Tom was saying earlier about that relationship building and trust, it's also extending that across to all the different stakeholders that are involved in this process. It's the sense of collaboration to make sure that safety is really kept at the forefront of making sure that somebody's safe when moving into 1 of our properties.

**GT:** Tom, how about your service?

**TW:** Yeah, along with what Queenie's saying, because so much of what you've said, Queenie, is so important in this process, isn't it? Trying to make sure that people are very clear about where their responsibilities lie, because there are specific quality and safeguards measures that actually you have to be able to abide to if you're going to be an SDA provider anyway. And similarly with SIL providers, there is actually a framework in which you have to be able to operate to be able to be … as a SIL provider.

So there are sort of background policy areas that you just have to be able to tick off. But, you know, what we find is that sometimes in the world, people can tick things off on a bit of paper but you actually really need to investigate that a little bit more closely. And Guardian's - we're a much smaller organisation than Summer Housing is, so in a sense what the tenancy support officers might do as a team in Summer, really comes down to me and my colleague, Nicole, because there's 2 of us doing that work.

Guardian's role in a sense is to set up these new quality housing and support outcomes for people and our role is to do that to the point where we can then hand it on to the key SDA provider and the SIL providers who can then continue that on. So the early stages of preparing people for housing, getting the transitions working, helping people to stabilise what it is that their lives look like under these new apartment development systems look like, and then securing that so that people all then know how to manage it themselves is where we then stop and move and hand on to the next people.

And quality is really part of that, making sure that people really do feel like their risks are being managed, that they know the risks that they personally take on and they can make choices about that when they feel like it's important that - you know, there's this concept of dignity of risk. Some people don't need somebody else to take over their lives when they feel like they can take on the risk themselves. So it's a bit of a complex process but it's very much about an all hands on deck sort of approach to making sure everything works.

**GT:** Yeah, it does and it also sounds like a lot of work. Do you think that SDA providers or providers who are thinking about entering this space, do you think they'd be surprised by how resource intensive this can be?

**TW:** I think yes.

**QT:** No, I'd say in short, definitely. I think a lot of SDA providers really focus on the end product in that they're thinking about the property and the building itself. But I think through everything that Tom and I have said today, a lot of what we're really focusing on is the support that the SDA provider themselves are providing participants to feel empowered to make the decision as to whether or not this is the right housing choice and what that could look like once they move in. So building that relationship and trust with tenants and then connecting with their circle of supports to really make sure that they've got strong foundations to have a sustainable housing outcome.

**GT:** What do you think are some of the risks here for providers in terms of quality? What are some of the risks that some of them might make, that we can sort of prewarn them about?

**TW:** If I can go there, then 1 of the key things I think is people underestimate the challenge of coordinating all of the bits together. It's quite a complex bit of work making sure that your SDA eligibility is in place, that your funding for your supports are in place, that you've got the coordination of the 2 things working well together and I think some people have been surprised at the length of time some of the approval processes take so far. And the NDIA certainly is trying to improve their speed of considering all of these different components and getting them lined up better but it's quite complex to make sure that people understand just how many different components have to be in place before you can actually set up a tenancy under these new SDA, SIL and for that matter, in the future, different models.

**QT:** No, I completely agree with Tom. And I would actually add as well, just not really knowing your tenants, whether it's in designing a product that suits their needs or not communicating with them and ensuring that those needs are still accommodated after they move in, it's not just a simple process of building something and moving somebody in and being all good and dandy at that point. There's quite a lot of work on the back end as well in what we call a transition stage where people are still settling in and feeling comfortable with where they're at and making sure that everything is still looked after once they're in the property.

**GT:** So do you think that sometimes providers, they think too much about the financial return without thinking about the person?

**TW:** I think there's a danger that some - you know, we are talking about an open market system and I think people who see the financial return as the motivation for getting into the system probably will flounder after a while because the bottom line is, there is choice and control now and that people can choose to move on if they want to. So unless you do provide a quality service, as either an SDA provider or 1 of the other providers, people are going to vote with their feet and walk away from you.

So it is an open market, there is the potential for that to be exploited, but reputation and people talk to each other now, there's great access across the social media channels to be able to find out from other people who've lived in a certain property, whether that's working well or not. So I think that's the counterbalance to that idea that there is potential for exploitation of the financial side too.

**GT:** Just before we go, I'd like to ask each of you maybe to just share some of what you've learned in this space and maybe provide some advice for other providers or people who are thinking about entering this space. What would you say to them, particularly with respect to quality and safeguarding, making sure that people have an SDA property that meets their needs? Tom?

**TW:** I think the basic thing to say to people is make sure that what you're looking to achieve is actually what people with disabilities want. And there are plenty of sources out there that will inform you about that. People with disabilities are not a uniform group of people. They have different preferences and they have different levels of support need. So, don't go into this believing that you can set up a sort of 1 size fits all build and that there's just going to naturally be people who are going to be interested in coming along and saying, "Yes, I'll have that". Really you do need to actually understand what it is that people with disabilities want as a starting point and you do have to have a bit of a commitment because as the NDIA has been growing and changing, it has really challenged us all to rethink the way even some of our assumptions have been, even people who think they've been pretty progressive in some of the ideas that they've brought to this. We've been challenged, so don't go into this -

**GT:** Who's done that, Tom? No one's ever challenged you, have they?

**TW:** That's your job, George, isn't it?

**GT:** Queenie?

**QT:** I'd circle back to getting to know the tenant and similar to Tom, it's not every single person is going to want every exactly the same thing. It's that focus on customer service and knowing that everybody's going to have something slightly different that they're really looking for. So if you take the time to really listen and learn, you're going to really find a way to really connect with the tenant and the participants that you're working with and really deliver an outstanding outcome for them. So it's about being able to be flexible, not just in the designs and the property, but really being flexible in how you work with people and adapting to that change over time.

**GT:** Can I add 1? I think that there's also a need to understand the NDIS and how it works. I think that some providers can come in and just think "Oh, I'll get a house and I'll get some provider and it'll just happen". But you need to really understand that the NDIS is - it's new and complex and the policies can take a bit of time to get your head around. And you don't want to do the wrong thing and there's also the Quality and Safeguards Commission, there's practice standards, there's all sorts of things that you need to be aware of. It's not really as simple as buying a house and getting people to move in. Is that right?

**TW:** Absolutely.

**QT:** Most definitely.

**TW:** I think the other thing too is the world of the NDIS means there are opportunities that haven't been able to be created in the past. You know, you used to have a much more restricted system and so the capacity to do innovative and new things was pretty limited at times. The world's your oyster now in 1 sense, so long as you've got, as you said, George, all of the knowledge that actually is the basics in place and you're across that, the rewards of doing something for somebody who's never been able to successfully find a good housing and support option and seeing them thrive in a way that they've never done before, the rewards for that are absolutely fantastic.

**GT:** I think that's a really good point to end on unless anyone has anything else to add?

**TW:** No, thanks for the opportunity to have this discussion, George. It's been really good.

**GT:** Queenie?

**QT:** Thank you both so much. This has been fantastic and we'd love to see a lot more really innovative models coming on board with the SDA.

**GT:** Thanks so much, guys. It's been a great discussion.

**TW:** All right, cheers.

**QT:** Thank you.

**GT:** That's all we have time for on today's episode of Reasonable and Necessary, brought to you by the Summer Foundation. Check out our website for all previous podcasts and transcripts. We also love hearing from you, so please contact us with your comments and suggestions for future episodes. Until next time, stay well and reasonable.