



Aligning Practice with Vision: Developing SDN's Pathways Approach, 2013-15

Never Stand Still

Art & Social Sciences

Social Policy Research Centre



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Abbreviations

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECT	Early Childhood Teacher
HREA	Human Research Ethics Advisory
ISLT	Integrated Services Leadership Team
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
SDN	SDN Children's Services
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre

1. Executive Summary

From 2013 to 2015, SDN Children's Services (SDN) progressed a process of organisational growth and regeneration to meet its vision of becoming, and being, an integrated organisation. This report contains findings from a three year study evaluating the process and impact of change. It shows progress made by SDN in aligning the organisation's structure, policies and practices with its strategic vision of reducing inequality and realising a better world for children, families and communities. Over the period, SDN developed and consolidated its Pathways Approach, which articulates the commitment of the organisation to child wellbeing, and sets out the practices through which staff influence outcomes for children.

The research team collected information for the study annually, in late 2013, 2014 and 2015. In 2013, SDN staff and leaders were discussing integration as an idea or aspiration, and were consolidating the resources and capabilities to support SDN's journey. By 2014 the process of change had gained momentum, with staff and leaders beginning to see the positive changes brought about by working in more coordinated and connected ways. SDN's Pathways Approach was formalised and was becoming embedded in the approaches and practices of SDN services and staff.

By late 2015, SDN had further progressed its journey. Staff reported that structural and cultural changes in the organisation were enhancing SDN's capacity to achieve its vision and mission. SDN leaders explained how notions of collaboration, which had been abstract principles in 2013, were now embedded in culture and practice. Leaders also explained how the streamlining of SDN's internal structure had empowered community-level decision making and re-allocated resources necessary to prepare for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Further, leaders described how SDN had effectively repositioned itself to attract larger numbers of children from target groups, and alongside this, had consolidated practices which would ensure that the increasingly complex needs of SDN children and families were met. Cross-agency practice was seen to have improved, and SDN was seeing results arise from partnerships.

Staff perspectives also reflect the substantial progress made by SDN. In 2014, 'Pathways for Families' was resonating among staff, providing a unifying approach for SDN centres and programs. By 2015, staff were more familiar with this approach, formally titled SDN's 'Pathways Approach' and incorporated into strategy and practice. Staff had experienced a wider range of integrated practices, and more SDN staff had participated in collaborative 'Team Around' groups. These groups follow the 'Team Around the Child' approach, by bringing together relevant practitioners who work together flexibly to coordinate pathways that respond to individual child and family circumstances. By 2015, many staff had been directly involved and had seen this approach lead to positive results for SDN families. Staff who had not been directly involved were aware of the practices and benefits of these approaches.

Like leaders, some staff were concerned about the external environment affecting SDN, in particular, how the increased competition associated with NDIS would impact on the local partnerships they had established, and how fee-for-service models would affect their interactions and practice with children and families.

In 2015, the 12 representatives of SDN's partner organisations who provided data for the study described very positive experiences of collaborating with SDN. They recognised SDN's leadership in bringing together a broad range of services for children, and explained how SDN's distinctive approach had improved their organisation's capacity to achieve change for children and families.

Surveys of families undertaken in each year of the study show improvement on key measures of client experience. From 2013 to 2015 there was an overall increase in the proportion of families from the three sites who agreed that SDN encouraged their families to access other SDN services. Further, fewer families said SDN had asked them to provide the same information more than once, reflecting how families were benefiting from SDNs integrated Pathways Approach.

Overall, these findings reflect SDN's successful consolidation of its Pathways Approach from 2013 to 2015. The findings demonstrate how SDN's change processes have aligned the organisation's structures and processes with its vision of an integrated, responsive organisation, which is focused on promoting child wellbeing.

2. About the research

2.1 Background

The Social Policy Research Centre entered into a partnership with SDN in mid-2013 to monitor and assess SDN's journey of becoming and being an integrated organisation. The research was designed to explore:

- the factors that led to SDN's decision to become an integrated organisation, including organisational thinking and decision making over the last three years
- factors contributing to the likelihood of success in the three nominated sites
- past, present and potential challenges involved in the 'integration journey', both for SDN as a whole and for each nominated site, and
- outcomes achieved by 2015 by children and families, staff members and communities in the three sites, and the role of organisational integration in achieving those outcomes.

These aims reflect SDN's commitment to building on its rich history of delivering comprehensive and integrated services to children and families, which dates back over a century. The research was informed by and positioned within SDN's strategic agenda, in particular, SDN's Strategic Plan 2013- 2015. The 2013-15 Plan articulated SDN's focus on delivering 'high quality, integrated and inclusive services' as a way to achieve SDN's high level objectives of enhancing children's quality of life, and ensuring children and families from traditionally excluded groups belong, and have opportunities to participate in services.

The first wave of data was collected in late 2013, and reported in detail in the baseline report¹. This showed SDN had many resources available to make its aspirations for integration a reality. Staff and leaders were strongly committed to working in integrated ways, and shared much enthusiasm and willingness to grow. However, integration was not consistently understood across the organisation and although educators in centre-based settings were promoting inclusion and belonging, they tended to be less familiar with integrated models.

One year later, in 2014, the research showed how SDN's journey to integration had gained momentum since the baseline data was collected.² At that time, SDN leaders and staff had shifted from discussing integration as an idea or aspiration to placing integration at the core of their practice. SDN had grown its organisational identity as a provider of a range of services for children and families, in addition to early education and care. Staff and leaders were beginning to experience the benefits of working in integrated ways. Evaluation findings from 2013 and 2014 confirmed the benefits being achieved through SDN's integrated approach, and informed the development of SDN's 2016-2018 Strategic Plan, which recognises the progress made and the importance of the Pathways Approach in underpinning the practices, culture and systems that enable SDN to promote child wellbeing.

The data contained in this report were collected in late 2015, to help assess progress made in the previous 12 months, and overall, since 2013. To show change, some key indicators are compared with 2013 and 2014.

- 1 Cortis N; valentine k; Brennan D, 2014, *Becoming and being an integrated organisation: the experience of SDN Children's Services* [baseline report 2014], SPRC Report 17/2014.
- 2 Cortis, N. valentine, k., Brennan, D. (2015) *Enacting Integration: Progress Report for SDN Children's Services* (SPRC Report 06/2015). Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Australia.

2.2 Methodology for the 2015 study

As was the approach in 2013 and 2014, the 2015 study used a mixed methods approach. The methodology in 2015 included the following:

- Seven interviews with representatives from SDN's Integrated Services Leadership Team (ISLT) (see Section 3). The ISLT brings together senior leaders and leaders of SDN's seven communities. The interviews helped capture how SDN's leadership group were experiencing SDN's journey towards becoming and being an integrated organisation, including their perceptions of progress, what had been working well, and what would help SDN as it continued the journey.
- Responses to relevant questions from SDN's annual employee survey, conducted in 2015 by Voice Project (reported in Section 5).
- Data collected from staff, families and partner organisations involved with three SDN service delivery sites:
 - SDN Ngallia Children's Education and Care Centre at Lidcombe, combined with SDN's Granville hub. The site includes a range of programs, such as the Child and Family Resource Centre, Inclusion Support Agency, playgroups, and Early Childhood Links, which helps families access a range of services to promote participation by children with additional needs.
 - SDN Milperra Children's Education and Care Centre, located within the grounds of Milperra Public School.
 - SDN Redfern, encompassing the Redfern Children's Education and Care Centre, and Brighter Futures, which is located upstairs from the centre, and provides families with services and supports to prevent escalation of problems affecting families' ability to care for their children.

Across these sites, fieldwork involved:

- Interviews with frontline staff (n = 24) about their experiences of delivering SDN services, what integration means in the context of their work, what SDN staff hope integration will achieve, and their perceptions of progress made so far (Section 4).
- A survey of parents/carers (n = 82) about their experience of receiving services from SDN, and the ways SDN staff have facilitated access to other services and supports in SDN and the community (Section 7). This survey was distributed by Centre directors and program leaders (excluding Brighter Futures).
- A survey of representatives of partner organisations (n = 12) about their experiences of working in partnership with SDN (Section 6).

Ethics approval was obtained from the UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel (Approval Number 9_14_035) and the Research Ethics Committee at SDN (reference E1503DB).

2.3 Response analysis

Table 1 provides a summary of the responses for each element of the 2015 fieldwork. This shows that of the 24 staff interviews, the largest group were in Granville/Ngallia, as was the case in previous waves of data collection. As the aim of the interviews was to capture the perspectives of a cross-section of SDN staff working in each site, it was not essential to interview the same people in each year. Regardless, many staff participated in interviews across the years, although several had moved positions.

A total of 80 completed parent surveys were received, with the largest number coming from Granville/Ngallia. Seven interviews with members of the Integrated Services Leadership Team were completed, and 23 usable survey responses came from representatives of partner organisations. The SDN sites that the partner organisation interviewees had worked with are not reported, to maintain their confidentiality. Results of the employee survey for SDN were also considered as a whole and for relevant SDN communities, as data was not available in disaggregated form for each site.

Table 1: Summary of fieldwork responses, 2015

	Granville/ Ngallia	Milperra	Redfern	All
Staff interviews	11	5	8	24
Family survey	47	17	18	82
Leader interviews				7
Partner organisation survey				12
Employee survey				443

2.4 Structure of this report

Research findings are presented for each component:

- Perspectives of Leaders (Section 3)
- Perspectives of SDN Staff (Section 4)
- Findings from the SDN Employee Survey (Section 5)
- Partner organisation's perspectives on SDN (Section 6)
- Families' perceptions and experiences (Section 7).

Section 8 discusses the overall implications of the research and draws some conclusions.

3. Perspectives of SDN Leaders

Seven members of SDN's Integrated Services Leadership Team participated in an interview. This included senior leaders and community leaders. As in 2013 and 2014, the 2015 interviews were undertaken in person or over the phone, depending on interviewees' preferences. The key aim was to explore leaders' perceptions of progress in SDN's journey to integration. Questions were asked about interviewees' experiences of being a leader in SDN and how this was changing, whether anything had changed about how SDN services worked together and with other agencies, and what could be done to improve how SDN worked with children and families and families' pathways through services. Leaders were also asked what they thought had been working well for SDN in becoming an integrated organisation, and what could be improved, to help SDN thrive into the future.

3.1 Progress in 2015

Leaders' perspectives in 2015 extended those from 2013 and 2014, which showed how SDN had built momentum for change. By 2014, leaders had observed more effective internal working, and more strategic recruitment and partnership, which were continuing to expand SDN's capacity for integration. At that time, SDN leaders were looking to the future, expecting to increase the proportion of children from target groups using SDN services, and that SDN would both partner with more organisations and partner more strategically, so that collaborations aligned more closely to SDN's strategic goals.

Interviews in 2015 showed that leaders again felt SDN's journey had progressed, and that the organisation was consolidating its integrated approach by aligning strategy and practices with SDN's vision. Leaders acknowledged that although the 2015 restructure, which removed the regional manager positions, was a major change, it had been well managed and promoted SDN's capacity to achieve its vision. In particular, this restructure was seen to empower decision making at the community level, and free up organisational resources required for other priorities, including the transition to the NDIS. Further, the process of change was considered well managed.

Overall, leaders felt that SDN's journey to integration since 2013 had achieved major change across the whole organisation. SDN's Pathways Approach was considered to be embedded in ways that resonated with staff. Leaders felt that they were more empowered in their decision making, and that this allowed them to also empower their staff. What were abstract principles of integration in 2013 were now considered embedded in culture and practice.

One leader for example explained how in the first phase of SDN's journey (2013), SDN communities were formed to break down the isolated, siloed working of centres or programs. In the next phase (2014), SDN was able to critically reflect on its structure and operations and acknowledge that the hierarchy was too dense. The changes to the structure of SDN, which included the removal of SDN 'regions' and regional managers in 2015, were perceived to alleviate what was described as some "clunkiness" within SDN, to empower collaboration and responsive decision making. This was corroborated by other leaders. One reflected on the extent of change achieved over the three years:

There's a real understanding that we are meant to be working together, sharing knowledge and skill and that's an expectation. Three years ago when we started it was probably "so how are we going to get people to be integrated and work together"... it's more of an expectation now, people assume that you are going to be asked to help with things, assume that you're going to be asked to share your knowledge, skills and resources because it is an expectation. (Leader 3)

Another leader commented:

There's been a development in the culture of the organisation... while people aren't talking about [integration], I think people are doing it more... people aren't really hung up about what does it mean anymore, people are just getting on and doing it. (Leader 2)

Community leaders in particular commented on how, in this phase on SDN's journey, they felt empowered in their roles and in their decision making, and were able to branch out and build networks to engage more effectively, without needing to seek "approval" from above:

It's nice to see it come to fruition now, because I'm probably at the point now where I've felt the most settled, the most comfortable and then in that respect most able to fully complete my roles and responsibilities.... I definitely feel that the most recent restructure definitely supported how we work more effectively now (Leader 5)

Leaders also commented on how SDN was achieving its vision for children, and had empowered its staff as leaders in the field, to work effectively with children and families:

I think when I first spoke to you I said my dream was that SDN staff who particularly work with children have strong relationships with children. And I think what we've achieved that, we've awakened people's confidence and given them a sense of their identity back as leaders in education for children and working with families. So I feel that we've achieved that people know why they're here and what they're doing. (Leader 4)

More detailed discussion of leaders' perspectives on the effects of SDN's process of change on its structure and practices are discussed below, along with their perspectives on issues for the future.

3.2 Aligning SDN's internal structure with vision

Leaders explained how changes to SDN's internal structure in mid-2015 improved SDNs capacity to achieve its vision and mission. Leaders described how the changes had consolidated a process of "knocking over silos". The changes were seen to have successfully rationalised the layers of the organisation which community leaders needed to work through, freeing these leaders up to make more timely, open and responsive decisions for the services, programs, and children and families in their communities. One leader encapsulated this as follows:

There's more of a streamlined and direct communication between what happens in the services, through to senior management.... It's giving more decision making at the community level and to community leaders (Leader 2)

Another described how overall, the restructure:

gave me more freedom in my role to actually *do* things (Leader 3).

As well as improving communication and decision making, the change in structure was seen to promote the coherence of the organisation, and respond to policy and funding changes. In particular, it was seen as necessary to free up resources which could be invested in adapting to policy change, such as preparing for the NDIS, which would require the organisation to develop new marketing models and models of financial sustainability to adapt to fee-for-service models. One leader explained the extent of change required:

We needed the marketing, because we've got to sell now to parents, not the government. We were really good at tendering, we know the government speak and we were involved in network peak bodies and advisory groups... we've got to now be just as good at understanding the heads and thoughts of families, so it's a huge cultural shift. (Leader 7)

Finally, leaders valued the clear communication around the restructure. Good communication had meant that the rationale for a major structural change was well understood by leaders and staff across the organisation and also enabled them to quickly adjust.

3.3 Aligning SDN practice

As well as discussing progress made by SDN in adapting its structure, leaders also described how progress to integration was evident in SDN staff and service approaches and practices. Leaders described how the organisation had repositioned itself to attract larger numbers of children from target groups, and alongside this, had sought to consolidate the practices and cultures which would ensure that the needs of SDN children and families were met.

The consolidation of SDN's Pathways Approach was at the centre of SDN's alignment of practice with its vision. Leaders felt there had been substantial improvement in how SDN communicated the approach to staff, and commented on how messages had been narrowed and made accessible and meaningful for staff. The 'SDN Roadmap' was highly valued for articulating key principles of SDN's approach which could be used across services and programs: acknowledging multiple perspectives, using strength-based approaches, listening with respect, connecting people to resources, and following up with families.

In addition, many leaders also commented on how SDN had developed and embedded its 'Team Around' approach to collaborative practice. This approach to joint-working enables a group of practitioners with a clear lead to collaborate and coordinate responses to issues and challenges³. 'Team Arouns' were seen to be occurring more frequently and more effectively. Importantly, they were perceived to have become second nature, with 'Team Arouns' described, for example, as:

a natural part of how teams come together and do our regular service delivery work or our senior leadership work (Leader 4).

Cross-agency practice was also seen to have improved, with SDN observed to have developed more formalised relationships with other agencies, including through working protocols with government. In essence, the relationship building undertaken in previous years was seen to be paying off. Interviewees also observed that children and families were being referred from other agencies, which was interpreted as an indication of SDN's solid reputation through the service network and among families.

3 The approach draws on the "Team Around the Child" model, see Limbrick, P. (2001) *The Team Around the Child: Multi-agency service co-ordination for children with complex needs and their families*. UK: Interconnections.

3.4 Perspectives on issues for the future

While SDN leaders felt significant progress had been made and felt generally comfortable with the organisational structure, some had ideas about how SDN's journey could continue. One felt there was scope for SDN communities to better work together, while another saw a need for disciplinary mentors within SDN, to support practice and collaboration. Others focused on the change required to transition to the NDIS. One leader, for example, discussed how the shift from block funding to a fee-for-service model required a change in mindset, and financial systems, to focus on 'billable hours'. It was hoped that this would not undermine the progress made towards working in integrated ways. Another leader however clearly felt that the NDIS was an opportunity for SDN to shine, and that SDN's integrated approach aligned well with the NDIS:

There was the whole fear where NDIS will be somehow a type of block of good practice, but it's not, it's actually making practice sharper, because we're more responding to what families really need. So the whole key worker, transitional model, having soft entry points, having a continuum of support, that's all there.... (Leader 2)

Overall, SDN leaders felt the organisation's journey to integration had progressed, and that SDN had aligned its structure, strategy and practices with its vision. As discussed in the next section, staff tended to share these views.

4. Perceptions among SDN staff

As in 2013 and 2014, interviews were conducted with frontline staff across three SDN sites: Milperra, Granville/Ngallia, and Redfern. While some interviewees had participated in 2013 or 2014, this was not a prerequisite for participation in 2015. Rather, the aim was to explore how staff in each site felt SDN's journey to integration was progressing, and not to explore processes of change experienced by individuals.

During interviews, participants were invited to discuss their perceptions of SDN's journey to integration, progress made, the effects of any changes, and any challenges encountered. Corroborating leaders' perspectives, in 2015, staff perspectives reflected how the Pathways Approach to service delivery was becoming standard practice, and confirmed that SDN's integrated approach was improving responsiveness to children and families' needs. Interview schedules are at Appendix A.

Overall, staff interviews at the three sites showed that in 2015 staff were generally comfortable with SDN's integrated approach, recognising the importance of SDN's Pathways Approach and understanding its benefits for families. Whereas in 2014, some staff had seemed overwhelmed with what were perceived to be heightened demands associated with integrated working, by 2015 staff in the sites seemed more comfortable with approaches and practices, and aware of the ways their practice with vulnerable families could be supported.

4.1 Staff perceptions of progress

Similar to the leadership group, staff felt SDN had made substantial progress in its journey to integration from 2014 to 2015, with change described as "moving from talking to doing". Staff interviewees underlined how SDN had translated the language of 'integration' into something that resonated with, and had meaning for, them and their colleagues. A staff member who had participated in a 2013 interview reflected on this:

When this project was first designed they were talking about integration and they were thinking about what they were doing as integration but I think they've got a new language, especially the language around Pathways for Families, that people feel a lot more comfortable with (Granville 4)

Another interviewee from Granville explained how SDN's journey to integration resonated with what they were already doing, and welcomed the clarification and validation that came from the Pathways Approach document:

It's about working with families on a holistic level really for me, which is probably something that we really have been doing, it's probably just never been in a document whereas, you know, that Pathways for Families document has come through. (Granville 3)

Indeed, in 2014, SDN staff were more familiar with SDN's Pathways Approach, and more familiar with the full range of services that SDN offers, including early intervention and other programs, as well as centre-based early education and care. The Pathways Approach was also welcomed for providing a clear articulation of SDN values, and a resource that could be used to refocus recruitment on attracting appropriate staff. Overall, SDN's integrated approach was considered to be well understood by frontline workers, who were increasingly recognising the benefits of working in fluid and transdisciplinary ways, and were recognising the supports to their practice offered by SDN and local service networks:

Now it's the actual staff understanding, the ground level understanding.... I can see that it is like that across communities. I could tap into any other resource, it's not just about 'You're an early childhood teacher so you only do teaching' (Redfern 8)

SDN was also perceived to have expanded its identity as an organisation. Whereas in 2013 some staff in programs felt the organisation was dominated by its Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) identity, in 2015 staff in programs felt their services and roles were valued as critical parts of SDN, and commented that the language used by managers was more inclusive and reflected a fuller range of SDN services and supports.

4.2 Staff perspectives on SDN's structure

The interviews with staff did not ask specifically about the 2015 restructure, but several staff nonetheless described how a major change in the last year had been the removal of regional manager positions, along with changes in shared services. A few staff described how the restructure had been destabilising for their work area, as, similarly to previous restructures, it had made the organisation seem unpredictable and unsafe. One commented for example that in the lead-up "you knew something was coming, you just didn't know what", and that repeated organisational change can "make it risky to be critical. But actually the organisation needs critical perspectives to grow".

However, the majority of staff were not directly affected by the 2015 restructure and recognised that, if anything, it had increased the responsiveness of senior managers to their needs as community leaders now had expanded roles. Interviewees that commented on this felt it had made SDN more streamlined, with one staff member explaining, for example, that there were now:

less layers of people to get through before those at the top were hearing about what's going on, and make decisions, so that decisions can be made and changes implemented more quickly. (Granville, 6)

Others also felt the organisation was more clearly structured, and that it seemed easier to get things approved, although a small minority of interviewees commented that SDN decision making remained somewhat bureaucratic, and that the efficiency and responsiveness of decision making could be further improved.

4.3 Staff perspectives on internal working

At each site, there was a general feeling that SDN's internal operations had improved from 2014 to 2015. Staff described having more linkages with SDN services, and making more routine use of these in staff training and in supporting individual children. Many commented on the benefit to their sites of having visits from senior leaders. Further, the strategic planning process was seen to be genuinely collaborative, with one interviewee for example commenting that "it's a plan that the whole organisation can feel that they've contributed to" (Granville 4). Interviewees also alluded to SDN's improved internal coherence, which offered to underpin effective internal working. As one staff member explained:

There's a vision and what they call program logics, which is overarching everything and you can see how you can link in to each of the program logics. So I think that's been a good thing. (Redfern 4)

Staff also described their exposure to 'Team Arounds', and many felt they had more opportunities than previously to share practice, learn from others, and celebrate success. Many interviewees gave examples of ways they had seen SDN's Pathways Approach become embedded in the practice of their own services and those of other SDN services, with results for children and families.

Service leaders appreciated opportunities to link up and share issues and find support, while other staff commented on the benefit of meeting with SDN staff from outside their service who were working in similar roles, or had similar disciplinary backgrounds. Interviewees described appreciating the regular opportunities to meet and share challenges. As one explained:

I get to meet them in person and really have those conversations and realise 'Oh you are actually facing very similar problems to me so maybe we can have a talk' (Ngallia, staff interview 1)

Some staff in centre-based settings however had minimal contact with other parts of SDN, or other organisations. These staff members were aware that working in an integrated way was an expectation of their service and that they could develop these links in the future. They could also identify other staff who offered points of connections.

Communication was a recurring theme in staff discussions of SDN's improved internal working, with many commenting specifically on improved communication within SDN. While some interviewees mentioned how senior leaders had communicated through site visits, others pointed to staff email as the most important development. Among educators, the recent extension of access to email for all staff was perceived as a major source of inclusion, although some staff were unsure how they would keep on top of staff emails in their limited time off the floor. One interviewee described how important these communications were:

We've just had the staff email come into effect, so I think that's really good because I like to be able to see what's coming down from head office as well, rather than thinking it might be filtered through the manager. So yeah it's good to have that contact from the general managers... we're getting all the emails from HR, we're getting them from Ginie as well, so yeah, it's good to be included in that. (Milperra, staff interview 4)

Co-location also emerged as a theme with respect to internal working. However, whereas in 2014 staff at Redfern and Milperra appeared to be seeking more engagement with co-located services, there was less emphasis on this in 2015. Staff appeared more accustomed to exchanges afforded by co-location, such as regular visits of SDN children to the library at Milperra Public School, and supportive exchanges between Brighter Futures and ECEC staff at Redfern. Some also felt they had access to a wider range of services and supports than those with which they were co-located. This raised some concerns about the benefits of co-location at Redfern, in the context of the risk of co-locating a service for high-risk clients at a child care centre.

4.4 Working with other organisations

By 2015, working with other organisations had become standard practice at each of the sites. Interviewees described regular opportunities to connect with other services in their local communities (for example, through local network meetings), or ways their service leaders were building partnerships and embedding SDN services in the community. Across the centre-based services, staff routinely encountered colleagues from other agencies visiting to help support children with additional needs.

Interestingly, some noted the importance of connecting with other organisations in the context of preparing for the NDIS. These interviewees underlined the importance of ensuring other organisations understood SDN services so that they could provide appropriate referrals. One interviewee however noted the risk that the NDIS would undermine the collaborative environment in which SDN was operating, and expressed some concern about how collaboration would occur in a more competitive environment:

There's just like that little joke in the industry now that oh we can't tell because we're competitors now, and it does change the way you do business. The whole NDIS thing makes me a little bit nervous. I don't know how it's going to work in the end. (Granville 2)

4.5 Adapting practice

Staff also discussed ways their practice with children and families had changed, in line with SDN's journey to integration. Staff in centre-based settings described improved practices for working with children with additional needs. Interviewees described how staff had been exposed to more children with additional needs, and that they had developed a wider repertoire of skills for working with these children. Centre-based staff described benefiting from therapist support in the centre for children with additional needs, and many described being in contact with external supports to assist with establishing strategies to meet children's needs. Other staff described how they had adapted their practice with Aboriginal families to recognise inter-generational trauma, and associated reluctance to receive service supports.

As staff in 2015 had more exposure to children with additional needs, they also recognised the complexity of working with these children, and their training and support needs. Although some staff in centre-based settings described finding it challenging to work with children with additional needs, interviewees were very confident in the organisational supports available to help:

It's really challenging at times when we have to deal with children with special needs and sometimes I'm a bit lost, I don't know what to do and it's good to know that there's support around to help us and how we can improve ourselves, which is great. (Ngallia 4)

Another interviewee discussed an experience of working with a child who had experienced trauma, and described this as a "turning point" in her career:

It was a great way to open my eyes to how SDN can expand and kind of do that 'team around' approach, to all come together for a common goal.... It was great to just be able to see what different services are out there for families... I think it kind of built upon my capacity as an educator as well in being able to say well not everybody is the same, not everybody fits into a box... ..for me that was even a turning point in my career..... it was very important for me as an educator to learn that, and I think also too, being able to inform other educators that not every child is going to fit into a box. (Milperra Staff interview 3)

4.6 Staff perspectives on challenges

Some staff described challenges associated with integrated working. Staff in centre-based settings pointed to higher staff-to-child ratios as necessary for working effectively with children with additional needs. Rising caseloads in early intervention services were similarly seen as barriers to effective working. A small minority discussed how expectations of integration of co-located services now seemed unrealistic, and expressed the view that SDN's organisational identity still emphasised centre-based provision and did not fully encompass other forms of service delivery, such as early intervention.

Other staff focused on the process of change associated with adapting to the NDIS. These staff described how clients would be shopping around for services, and that they would need to maintain SDN values in this context. As one interviewee described:

It'll be a more competitive environment out there kind of vying for similar families. And at the moment it's not so competitive I guess because we're all funded... how well we market what we do versus what the other places do could mean the difference between how many clients we get and not. Yeah, I think there will probably be less collaboration. (Granville 6)

Some staff concerned about adapting to the NDIS focused on the awkwardness of charging families for services, and how the fee-for-service model could clash with their focus on children and families. One described:

It clashes a little bit with your values. You're kind of going 'I've got to charge families for this'. You've never talked about money with families, there's an awkwardness in it. Yeah, there's awkwardness... And also just, you know, when you've got time with families that time with families is precious and you want to be working with them, not looking at the clock and talking about the administrative matters and payments" (Granville 3)

These perspectives largely corroborate those of SDN leaders, with staff feeling integration had been embedded in SDN's Pathways Approach, and that the benefits of integration were being realised, although there were some concerns about the future, including the NDIS.

5. Findings from the 2015 Employee Survey

SDN's annual employee survey was conducted in 2015 by Voice Project. As in previous years, it included questions about integration. In particular, employees were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements. In 2015, 443 staff from across the organisation responded. Due to small sample sizes for individual services or sites, the data cannot be disaggregated for the study sites. Instead, it is provided at the community level, and for all of SDN. The data reported is the proportion of staff respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement.

The survey items relevant to SDN's journey to integration are included in Table 2 and Table 3 below. Table 2 shows the findings for all SDN staff who responded in 2013, 2014 and 2015. This shows that over the period, levels of understanding of SDN's integrated or Pathways Approach were maintained, as was the commitment of SDN staff to this approach. While there was a drop from 2014 to 2015 in the proportion of staff who agreed that 'There is cooperation between different sections in SDN', this may be because the question was worded in a different way in 2015. Changes in the proportion of staff agreeing with other statements tended to be only slight.

Table 2: Staff Survey findings, 2013 to 2015 (% who agreed or strongly agreed with statements)

	2013 (n=401)	2014 (n=404)	2015 (n=443)
I understand SDN's integrated, Pathways Approach ¹	83	85	84
I am committed to SDN's integrated Pathways Approach ¹	85	87	85
There is good communication across all sections of SDN	---	--	56
Knowledge and information are shared throughout SDN	--	--	61
There is cooperation between different sections in SDN	70 ²	69 ²	61
I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides and supports	90	89	86
I feel confident in helping families find what they need from SDN	90	89	86
I feel confident in helping families find what they need in the community	86	86	84

1 Note slight difference in wording in 2015, to refer to 'SDN's pathways' rather than 'SDN's integrated' approach.

2 Question was worded as "All work areas/departments cooperate effectively across the organisation"

Table 3: Relevant findings from the Staff Survey, 2015 (% who agreed or strongly agreed with statements)

	Inner and Central Sydney (including Redfern)	Western (including Granville/ Ngallia)	St George/ South Sydney (including Milperra)	All of SDN
I understand SDN's integrated, Pathways Approach	87	80	84	84
I am committed to SDN's integrated Pathways Approach	85	90	82	85
There is good communication across all sections of SDN	58	52	53	56
Knowledge and information are shared throughout SDN	60	59	53	61
There is cooperation between different sections in SDN	67	54	51	61
I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides and supports	69	93	89	86
I feel confident in helping families find what they need from SDN	78	85	92	86
I feel confident in helping families find what they need in the community	76	91	84	84

6. Partner organisations' perspectives on SDN

Whereas in 2013 and 2014 the research methodology involved telephone interviews with representatives of partner organisations, in 2015 an online survey tool was used, which included a mix of questions requiring participants to select from a range of options, and several which provided opportunities to describe experiences and perceptions with free-text responses. The survey explored the same issues as were explored in previous years, including:

- participants' organisation and role, and the ways their organisation worked with SDN
- what working with SDN meant for their organisation, and the children and families they work with
- what had worked well, and what could be improved, and
- what else could be done to help SDN work more effectively with other organisations.

6.1 About respondents

Respondents from 12 partner organisations completed the survey. Of these, three were managers or coordinators, three were therapists, two were caseworkers, while the others included a social worker, support worker, or project officer and health promotion officer. Respondents' descriptions of their services reflect a focus on disability and early intervention, including therapeutic services, statutory child protection workers, primary health care, and family support services. Respondents had had contact with services across the three sites, and some other SDN services, including SDN Beranga.

Table 4 shows that the most common types of involvement that partner organisations had with SDN were delivering a service to a child or family involved with SDN (reported by 58.3% of participants), sharing information with SDN about a family or child (58.3%) and providing information about a service to SDN (50%). Of course, because of the small sample size this should be considered a description of the kinds of involvement of participants from the study sites only, and not representative of all of SDN's partners.

Table 4: Participants' involvement with SDN

	<i>n</i>	%
Delivered service to a child or family involved with SDN	7	58.3
Shared information with SDN about a family or child	7	58.3
Provided information about service to SDN	6	50.0
Interagency work-group or committee	5	41.7
Referred a child to an SDN service	5	41.7
Contacted SDN to find out more about their services	4	33.3
Accepted a referral from SDN	3	25.0
Other	3	25.0

6.2 What working with SDN means for other organisations

Participants described positive experiences of collaborating with SDN, with some comments reflecting how SDN seemed more open to engagement than other early education and care services, for example:

It has been a positive experience overall developing relationships through interagencies and professional development events. Generally it is difficult to engage Early Childhood educators in community development initiatives due to legislative priorities eg staff ratios.

Some expressed very impressive knowledge of, and support for SDN's model, including the 'keyworker' and 'Team around' approaches. Comments included that experiences of working with SDN had been:

Great! Collaboration and working in a Team Around the Child/Family model to ensure best support for children/families/

Another commented:

We appreciate the early intervention and support (Keyworker model) that is offered to families before, during and after the assessment and diagnosis period.

Participants described how working with SDN had improved their organisation's capacity, giving greater understanding of the range of services on offer, which could help other services make informed referrals, and had helped other organisations expand and improve their service:

Our organisation has been able to recruit another early childhood service to carry out the [program] and therefore, extend our reach of the program in [the] District. As a result of working with SDN, we've been able to obtain valuable feedback on the available program resources and improvements we could make.

One commented on how links with SDN had helped the organisation strengthen its supports for families, and how they helped link SDN with families:

As we have developed links with SDN it has enabled us to be a greater support to our families by being an integral part of their support network. We can also be a positive link between the family and SDN.

Some also commented on the specialist knowledge of SDN staff, and the consistency in SDN's approaches and supports:

It's been incredibly helpful. They have specialist knowledge that assists us achieve family goals.

[SDN] has really shown a nice consistency in approaches and support to families.

Only one respondent commented that their partnership with SDN could be enhanced:

I would like to do more partnership programs with SDN and I have asked about this over the last few years as we used to do programs together but this has not happened in a long while.

As well as asking participants to describe what working with SDN meant for their organisation, the survey also asked participants to rate how well SDN had helped their organisation meet its goals. Of the 10 who answered the question, two answered 'extremely well', four answered 'very well' and three answered 'fairly well'. Only one reported 'not at all'.

6.3 What has working with SDN meant for the children, families and communities that partner organisations work with?

Representatives from partner organisations were also asked about what SDN meant for the children, families and communities they worked with. Some commented on how working with SDN has helped promote better inclusion of children in mainstream settings, and had helped to educate children and families on topics such as nutrition and physical activity. Another comment focused on families' receipt of early intervention and support:

Families feel more supported and their child/children received much needed early intervention and support. We always refer children to SDN's Playgroups and encourage families to attend as the first point of service and early intervention at SDN.

Respondents were asked how well they felt SDN met the needs of children and families. Of the 10 respondents who answered, one said 'extremely well', six said 'very well', and three said 'fairly well'.

To gauge respondents' perceptions on the convenience and efficiency of SDN, the survey asked respondents from partner organisations to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- 'SDN services are convenient for families'
- 'SDN services are efficient for families'
- 'I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides for children and families'.

Answers were captured on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Results are shown in Table 5. On each measure, seven or more of the nine people who responded (three were unsure or missing) agreed or strongly agreed.

Table 5: Respondents' agreement with statements about SDN (n=12)

	SDN services are convenient for families	SDN services are efficient for families	I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides for children and families
Strongly agree	3	3	1
Agree	4	4	7
Neither agree nor disagree	1	1	1
Disagree / strongly disagree	1	1	0
Unsure / missing	3	3	3

6.4 Good things about contact with SDN

Respondents also commented that they found SDN staff to be enthusiastic about keeping up to date with current guidelines, and that they had good knowledge of the programs and supports that were offered. One appreciated SDN's:

willingness to have me as a member of the team supporting the child/family and providing support for my preparing the child for school.

Others commented on the knowledge, approachability and commitment of SDN staff:

Staff have been easy to contact, very knowledgeable and friendly. Staff also have a keen sense for helping clients and their families.

SDN are good at providing referral information for us at [our program] to assist with our intake process for eligibility and for the formal assessment. Families that have been allocated a keyworker are well supported. The Playgroups are well run and when we suggest to a family to attend a playgroup we know they will be well looked after.

Others also commented on the prompt responses, approachable and reliable nature of SDN staff, and the good communication skills of SDN staff, coupled with their willingness to assist.

6.5 Partner organisation's perceptions of how working with SDN could be improved

Respondents were also asked how working with SDN could be improved. One representative of a partner organisation suggested that SDN could increase its visibility in the community:

Generally I would say that SDN provides quality services for children and their families. Perhaps they need to be more visible as an agency within the community.

Others commented on waiting lists, although this was not necessarily within the control of SDN:

We find the waiting lists for a service to be really frustrating as I'm sure the SDN Workers do as well. [We] are always keen for early intervention to begin as soon as possible. Often children are seen at our Intake Clinic and they have no early intervention services in place. It would be great if we could guarantee earlier intervention.

Other comments included resources to help better explain to families what SDN offers, as families could sometimes be unsure exactly what services involved, while another respondent suggested meeting with SDN policy makers to formally embed their program in SDN's policies.

Overall, the survey of SDN partner organisations showed that SDN is held in high regard in the service network. Partner organisations recognise the value of SDN's approaches, and recognise that working with SDN has enabled them to improve capacity and effectiveness. This is consistent with findings from 2014, which similarly showed how SDN is generally well regarded by other organisations for its contribution and leadership in the service network.

7. Families' perceptions and experiences

In 2015 (as in 2014), SDN staff distributed a survey to families with a child using SDN services, on behalf of the research team.⁴ In most cases, a link to the online survey was distributed although hard copies with reply paid envelopes were provided to some families who preferred this option. As an incentive to participate and symbol of appreciation, the research team donated \$5 to services for each completed survey. Due to the multi-modal survey distribution process, a reliable response rate cannot be calculated. The number of usable survey responses in 2015 (82) was slightly lower than in 2014, when 96 completed surveys were received.

7.1 About Responding Families

As Table 6 shows, around 70.7 percent of survey respondents had one child using SDN services. Table 7 shows that almost half of responding families had been involved with SDN for two years or more (46.3%), while a quarter (25.6%) had been involved with SDN for less than one year.

Table 6: Number of children using SDN services per respondent family, 2015

	One child		Two or more		Total
	n	%	n	%	n
Granville/Ngallia	37	78.7	10	21.3	47
Milperra	10	58.8	7	41.2	17
Redfern	11	61.1	7	38.9	18
Total	58	70.7	24	29.3	82

Table 7: Responding families' duration of involvement with SDN, 2015

	Less than one year		One to two years		Two to three years		Three or more years	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Granville / Ngallia	9	19.1	17	36.2	10	21.3	11	23.4
Milperra	5	29.4	3	17.6	7	41.2	2	11.8
Redfern	7	38.9	3	16.7	4	22.2	4	22.2
Total	21	25.6	23	28.0	21	25.6	17	20.7

⁴ As in 2014, the survey was not distributed to Brighter Future Families. Note also that in 2013, the research team also conducted a small number of interview with families, covering the same issues as the survey.

Almost half of responding families in 2015 had a child from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background (45.1%) which was higher than in 2013 and 2014 (34.2% and 41.7% respectively) (see Table 8). This describes the survey sample, and should not be taken as representative of all SDN families at these sites, as the sample size is small relative to the total number of families using other SDN services.

Table 8: Characteristics of responding families, 2015

	Has a child from a CALD background		Has a child with additional needs	
	n	%	n	%
Granville / Ngallia	28	59.6	5	10.6
Milperra	7	51.2	1	5.9
Redfern	2	11.1	2	11.1
Total	37	45.1	8	9.8

Respondents were asked to indicate which SDN services they had used. Overwhelmingly, families had used one SDN service only, most often a centre. At Milperra, no survey respondents reported using an SDN service other than the Centre. At Redfern, one respondent had used an SDN service other than the Centre. Among respondents from Granville/Ngallia, five had used the Child and Family Resource Centre, and two had used Stay and Play. One had used Early Childhood Links and one said they had used the Helping Children with Autism program.

7.2 Receipt of supports

Families were also asked about whether, in the last 12 months, SDN had supported their child or family in a series of ways. Of the 82, around a third (27, 32.9%) said SDN had provided information about other services or activities in the community, and 21 (25.6%) said SDN had provided information about other SDN services. Eight said SDN had helped their child or family to access another service in the community, and the same number said SDN had assisted by meeting or consulting with a therapist or doctor. Seven said SDN had helped their child or family to access another service from SDN, and the same number said SDN had helped by allowing a therapist from outside SDN to visit their child at SDN.

7.3 Perceptions of SDN Services

Convenience and efficiency

As in 2013 and 2014, the 2015 survey asked parents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- 'SDN services are convenient for families'
- 'SDN services are efficient for families'
- 'SDN has asked me to provide the same information more than once'.

Answers were captured on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements, although there were some slight differences between the sites (see Table 9). In Granville and Milperra, figures dipped from 2013 to 2014 but picked up from 2014 to 2015. In Redfern, the proportion who agreed SDN services were convenient and efficient increased from 2013 to 2014, but fell again from 2014 to 2015.

Figure 1 (data in Table 9) shows that across all sites, the high level of agreement among families that services were convenient and efficient were sustained across the three years. Interestingly, the proportion of families which said that SDN had asked them to provide the same information more than once fell. The fall was largest from 2013 to 2014, when the proportion who agreed with the statement almost halved, from 42 percent to 22 percent. However, there were further falls from 2014 to 2015, from 22 percent to 17 percent, reflecting the impact of improvements in SDN's systems and internal operations on families in the sites.

Figure 1: Percentage which agreed or strongly agreed with statements, all sites, 2013-2015

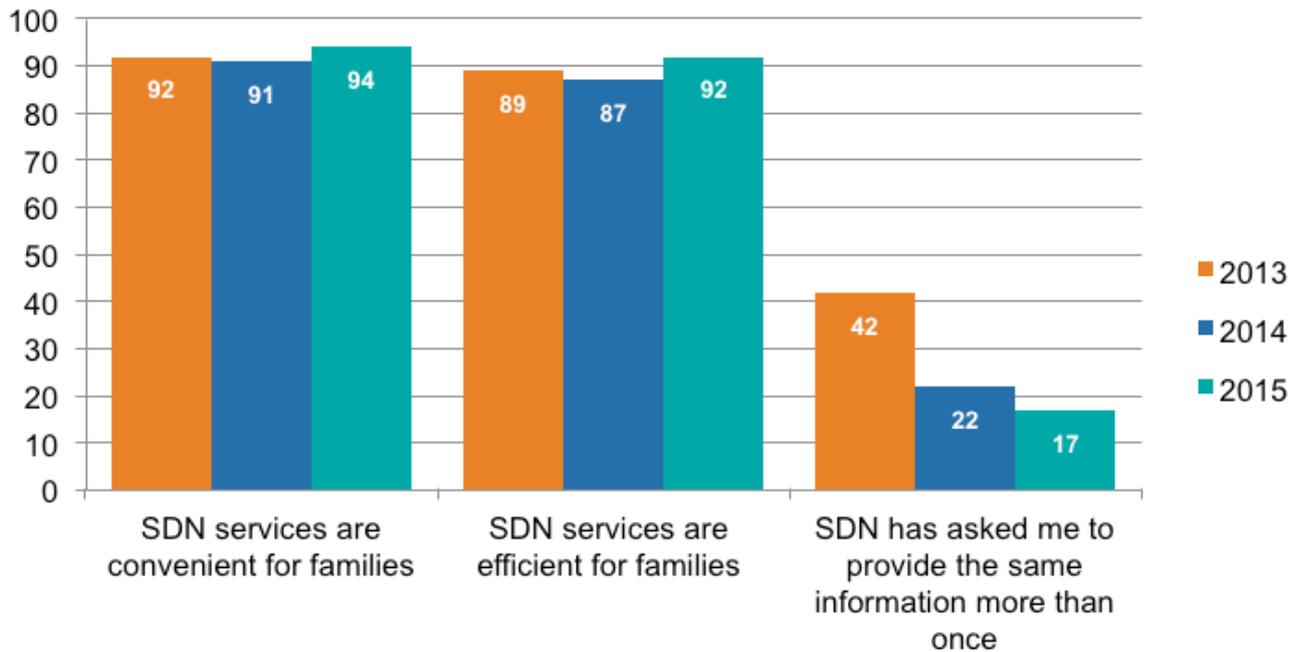


Table 9: Percentage that agreed or strongly agreed with statements, 2013-2015 (%)

	Granville / Ngallia			Milperra			Redfern			All		
	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015
SDN services are convenient for families	97	86	96	95	91	94	80	97	89	92	91	94
SDN services are efficient for families	93	83	96	90	82	94	84	92	78	89	87	92
SDN has asked me to provide the same information more than once	39	11	17	25	17	24	70	34	11	42	22	17
I have felt confident approaching SDN staff about the needs of my family	98	95	92	90	91	82	86	92	78	92	93	87
I have contributed ideas about SDN services	51	48	45	48	34	53	54	50	39	51	45	45
SDN has taken my views on board	61	43	49	47	31	65	43	50	33	51	43	49

n=114 (2013) n=96 (2014) n = 82 (2015)

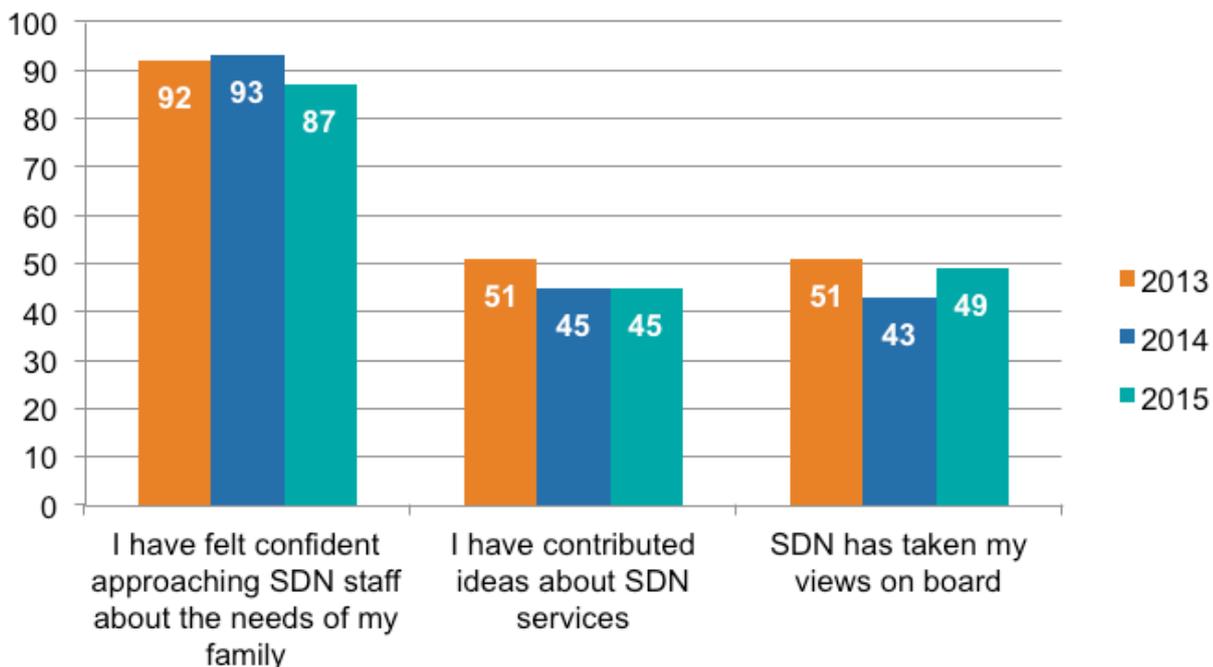
7.4 Families' Relationships with SDN

As in previous years, the survey sought to capture families' involvement in, and relationship with, SDN services, by asking whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- 'I have felt confident approaching SDN staff about the needs of my family'
- 'I have contributed ideas about SDN services'
- 'SDN has taken my views on board'.

Results are shown in Figure 2 (data in Table 9). Overall, change across the years was fairly minor. At each site and overall, lower proportions of families said they felt confident approaching SDN staff about the needs of their family in 2015 compared with 2013, although change was only slight and falls were from a high base. For the other indicators, the proportions of all respondents who agreed with the statements were steady, although there were some differences among the sites. At Granville/Ngallia and at Redfern, both the proportion of parents who agreed that they had contributed ideas about SDN services, and the proportions who agreed that SDN has taken their views on board fell, while the opposite trend was apparent at Milperra.

Figure 2: Agreement with statements, all sites, 2013-15 (%)



7.5 Families' Access to other SDN services and supports

As in 2013 and 2014, families were asked about how SDN services had facilitated access to other services and supports. This was explored by capturing respondents' levels of agreement with various statements:

- 'I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides for children and families'
- 'SDN has encouraged or helped my family to access other SDN services to meet our needs'
- 'SDN has helped my family find what we need in the community'.

Seventy-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that they had good knowledge about the services and supports SDN provides (see Figure 7). This is less than in 2013, when the figure was 85 percent, but slightly higher than in 2014 (76%).

While there was a slight fall in the overall proportion of respondents who felt they had 'good knowledge of the services SDN provides for children and families', there were overall gains on the other measures. From 2013 to 2015, there was an overall increase in the proportion of families which agreed or strongly agreed that 'SDN has encouraged or helped my family to access other SDN services to meet our needs'. Whereas 39 percent of families that responded to the survey said SDN had encouraged or helped their family to access other SDN services to meet their needs in 2013, this figure was at 52 percent in 2015. Similarly, there was improvement in the indicator 'SDN has helped my family find what we need in the community'. In 2013, 40 percent of responding families agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, rising to 46 percent in 2015, driven by a large gain from 2014 to 2015 in the Milperra site. Indeed, on each of these indicators, there was strong growth in agreement among families involved with the Milperra site.

Table 10: Percentage that agreed or strongly agreed with statements, 2013-2015

	Granville / Ngallia			Milperra			Redfern			All		
	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015
I have good knowledge of the services SDN provides for children and families	93	66	83	86	87	94	73	79	57	85	76	79
SDN has encouraged or helped my family to access other SDN services to meet our needs	57	46	62	23	34	47	37	37	11	39	40	52
SDN has helped my family find what we need in the community	56	55	53	30	39	65	30	49	11	40	45	46

n=114 (2013) n=96 (2014) n = 82 (2015)

7.6 How SDN meets the needs of families

The survey asked parents to describe how SDN met their needs. Many made statements such as :

The staff and carers are fantastic with my children and have worked hard to assist and support their individual needs. My children are happy to go there.

Genuine care and love for our family. A healthy and safe place to play and learn.

Kids are really active and encouraged to explore and be themselves. The carers relate brilliantly and my kids feel secured, valued and loved. They have a ball!

Others pointed to the importance of a multicultural environment for children, and the flexibility and individualised attention children received:

It provides my son with a caring multi-cultural environment in which to grow. It helps him to learn English which we don't use much at home on an everyday basis. They had provided me with extra occasional days when needed. They take the time to explain my son's development and him reaching certain milestones, and understanding how it fits in terms of the learning / curriculum they have at the centre. They also provide us with some recommendations on how to help him in some aspects where he is a bit delayed.

Those with children with additional needs also described how SDN had helped, as these comments show:

The staff at SDN have been excellent in working with us to manage his issues and exploit his strengths.

They efficiently meet the needs that we require by staff being readily available to collaborate and work through issues and the director is approachable to do the same. My concerns are taken seriously with plans being implemented when needed. My child is given a safe and secure environment to grow, explore and learn in that is grounded in research based outcomes.

The staff are really supporting towards my children. They are considerate for my son's allergies and always thinking with this in mind and ensure they follow the correct recommendations for his needs.

[Staff] visit and collaborate with our son child care to achieve our goals in our son development.

They listen to my worries and help me with ideas for my child behaviour. They help with places we can go in the community

Some parents emphasised how important it was that SDN were receptive and approachable:

SDN Ngallia have been very helpful and supportive throughout the past year I have joined with them. They always ask for family feedback and are very nice and friendly. You can talk to them about anything regarding your children's needs.

The teaching staff can be approached to assist with issues outside of the daycare environment relating to my children

Others emphasised flexibility, such as being "able to squeeze my kids in on extra days when needed", while another noted the:

late closing hours, able to fit child in on days they are not permanent for when it has been required, this has been a massive assistance in ensuring my husband and myself can attend work.

Overall, this set of comments underline how parents saw SDN to be receptive and responsive, and valued the rich learning environments and links SDN provided to other service and supports in the community.

7.7 How SDN could support families to access services and supports

Finally, parents were asked about how SDN could better help their family access the services and supports they need. Some used the opportunity to underline the contribution SDN made in their lives, and did not offer ideas about how this could be improved:

In my experience SDN goes above and beyond already.

The information provided by SDN to access community services has been good. I have no comments to improve this

Some parents suggested more individual meetings and more of a focus on community events, while others said they had been unaware of the full range of services delivered by SDN. One commented:

Perhaps communicate that they can provide families with access to other services outside of SDN. I actually wasn't aware that SDN did this.

One felt there was a need for:

better communication about my child's progress in regard to learning and social skills etc. I often don't know what my child has done during the day besides play outdoors and some vague description of activities such as play doh or painting. The outdoor area is great however the indoor areas appear run down and has not been renovated in many years.

Another suggested a need for other forms of communication, stating that:

Staff and parents are often busy at drop off and pick up and therefore can't meet regularly to discuss their child's progress.

Others focused on staffing and commented that "the frequent staff changes are less than ideal". One described how SDN services could be strengthened by reducing turnover:

Within any year quite a few staff come and go which may be a reflection of the industry as a whole. This can be disruptive for children, especially if they have bonded with carers. The better the conditions are for the carers the greater the chance of improved stability at the centre. The carers work so hard and deserve to be acknowledged supported to assist children in this important stage of development.

Others commented on the excellent work done by SDN staff, for example:

SDN does a fantastic job and they should all be very proud. We have seen the changes and growth and how accommodating they have been..... thank you for all that you do and how committed you all are.

I strongly believe SDN is a wonderful advocate for children's education and care. The team at SDN exhibit a wealth of knowledge and understanding which in turn helps guide families in the right direction

8. Conclusions

This report has shown how, in 2015, SDN had embedded integration in its structure and practices. Since 2013, it had developed a distinctive Pathways Approach, which articulated commitment to inclusion and quality, and which had helped align SDN with its strategic vision of delivering connected, responsive services that make a difference in children's lives.

Progress since 2013 has been significant. When data were first collected in 2013, SDN was progressing an agenda for integration as part of the organisational regeneration which followed the restructure of the organisation in 2011. At that time, resources and capabilities to support SDN's journey were in place, including leadership commitment, community leaders, and commitment for practice improvement.

Through 2014 and 2015, opportunities for staff to work in integrated ways had grown, and staff had seen collaboration and partnership improve outcomes for families, including through 'Team Around' approaches. Staff had built relationships across SDN and with partner organisations, with collaboration becoming standard practice. SDN's organisational identity had expanded to encompass the breadth of services it delivered.

In 2015, partner organisations recognised and valued SDN's contributions to vulnerable children and families and to local service networks. Representatives of partner organisations articulated a range of ways SDN had bolstered their capacity and effectiveness, enabling them to work more effectively with children, including children with a disability.

In all years, high proportions of families reported SDN services were convenient and efficient, and families generally felt comfortable approaching SDN with their needs. In 2015, families described a range of ways that SDN had met their needs, including through offering culturally diverse environments for learning, supporting children with additional needs, and by being flexible, receptive and approachable. From 2013 to 2015 there was an overall increase in the proportion of SDN families which had been encouraged by SDN to access other services. Importantly, the proportion of families that said SDN had asked them to provide the same information more than once had fallen, indicating more effective administrative systems, and more streamlined experiences of engagement with SDN.

Overall, from 2013 to 2015 it appears that SDN has made significant gains in becoming a more integrated organisation, breaking down internal silos to promote joined-up working, and delivering services in more coordinated and connected ways. In coming years, we expect SDN leaders, staff, partners, and children and families, to build on the progress made, and continue to experience the benefits of working in integrated ways. SDN should continue to capture regular feedback from partner organisations about their experiences of working with SDN, staff experiences of implementing SDN's Pathways Approach, and ultimately, the extent to which children and families are benefiting from its integrated approach.

Appendix A: Interview Schedules

Interviews with Leaders

- Can you tell me about whether and how your role has changed over the last 12 months (if at all)? What does it mean to be a leader in SDN?
- I understand SDN has been developing a new strategic plan. Can you tell me about that?
- I understand there has been a change in the structure of SDN in the last 12 months. What has been the thinking behind that? How is that impacting on SDN's work?
- Over the last 12 months, what (if anything) has changed about how different parts of SDN work together?
- In what ways has the mix of Centres and programs (support services) within SDN changed? Has anything changed about their relationships, or how they work together?
- Over the last 12 months, has anything changed about how SDN works with other organisations?
- Has anything changed with respect to how SDN is working with children and families, in particular children with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds? What else would you like to see SDN do to support families and address the inequalities that children face?
- Over the last 12 months, has the meaning of 'integration' changed for you in any way? Has the meaning of integration, or how it is understood, changed across the organization in the last 12 months? In what way?
- Over the last 12 months, what do you think has been working well for SDN in becoming an integrated organisation?
- Over the last 12 months, what have been some of the challenges in becoming an integrated organisation?
- Overall, what do you think has been achieved since SDN embarked on becoming an integrated organization?
- In what ways do you see SDN's journey to integration continuing, if at all?
- What do you think would help SDN develop and thrive into the future?

Interviews with staff

- Can you tell me about your role at SDN? How long have you worked at SDN?
- In the last year, what, if anything, has changed about how SDN does its work?
- In what ways does your service work with other areas of SDN, if at all? Has this changed in the last 12 months? In what ways?
- In what ways does your service work with other organisations (if any)? Has this changed in the last 12 months? In what ways?
- In the last 12 months, has anything changed about how your service works with children and families? What about for children or families with additional needs, or from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- What else could help your service to work with children with additional needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- As you would be aware, SDN has been working to become a more integrated organisation. What (if anything) does 'integration' mean in the context of your work? Has this meaning changed in the last year? In what ways?
- Over the last 12 months, what do you think has been working well for SDN in becoming an integrated organisation?
- Over the last 12 months, what have been some of the challenges in becoming an integrated organisation?
- What do you think would help SDN as it continues the journey to integration? What kinds of obstacles are there? How do you think they could be addressed?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about integrated services, or SDN's journey to integration? Or your experience with SDN over the last 12 months? Or 3 years? Or what SDN could do better for children and families?