Annual Report
Making an impact
Completed construction of Australia’s first purpose-built housing initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People with neurocognitive disability.

1,196 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People attending NDIS participant readiness sessions

70,455 hours of accommodation support

5,000 copies of ABI: The facts resource books sent out across Australia

730 individuals participating in awareness training

164 participants in Guddi neurocognitive disability research

More website visits comparing the beginning to end of the financial year

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This has been another notable year for Synapse, delivered through the continued passion, hard work and commitment of our staff and volunteers.

The Synapse team believes that those affected by brain injury or disability are entitled to lead a life of quality, based on their own decisions and choices. This is the drive that motivates them every day, to do more and do better.

This is why—in addition to continuing to deliver on key services—Synapse has this year reviewed and redefined its strategy. Staff, volunteers, policy professionals and the Board took part in a detailed engagement exercise to strengthen our mission and vision for the coming five years and beyond of Synapse service delivery.

Expanding the definition of brain injury to neurocognitive disability has been one of the outcomes of this process. It is an important change as it broadens our horizons in offering support and services to people affected by neurocognitive disability.

The Board and the Executive Team are committed to delivering the objectives in our strategic plan— that it is to support more people who are affected by neurocognitive disability to live with a greater degree of independence.

Our focus for the coming twelve months is sustainability and growth, to be achieved through the capability and skills building of our staff and volunteers, and the fostering of collaborations for essential support services and contributing to policy and social outcomes, and critical information for all people who are affected by neurocognitive disability.

And you will read about the unique Guddi Partnership that enables much needed support and access to services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in a culturally-safe environment.

Synapse currently has four key services: referrals and access to direct support pathways to the NDIS, advocacy for better policies and social outcomes, and critical information for all those affected by neurocognitive disability.

But Synapse’s work provides meaning far beyond these four pillars.

In the Annual Report, you will read about the work that Synapse has been doing to strengthen our relationships with hospital staff and families, helping them navigate the stressful and confusing experience of a loved one being diagnosed with a neurocognitive injury. You will read about Synapse’s research work, which provides evidence-based insights to inform policy, community capacity and wider social conversations in this important and under-resourced area.

Over the past year, we have been working to position Synapse as the organisation of choice for people affected by neurocognitive disability.

We are achieving this by promoting quality of life, self-determination and choice, and by operating nationally with partnerships across Australia to deliver a range of capacity-building activities.

We have continued to focus on marginalised people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those living in remote and rural Australia and those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

During the year, Synapse extended its strategic partnerships with other organisations, which has allowed for the national expansion of the Guddi research. New partnerships were formed with Coast2Bay Housing and Ausmar Assist, which resulted in a purpose-built house for four tenants.

We have also recognised the importance of developing new models of service delivery. In 2017, we launched Guddi Health Week, an initiative designed to provide a single point of clinical assessment for neurocognitive disability and NDIS readiness.

Finally, we spent time setting the strategic plan for Synapse for the next few years. I am pleased to announce that whilst brain injury remains a core focus for Synapse, we are broadening our scope to cover other aspects of neurocognitive disability.

I would like to thank our dedicated staff for their outstanding contribution to Synapse during the year.

Melanie Farris
Chair

Executive’s summary

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Synapse continues to recognise the gaps in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s access to services. In 2017, Synapse secured an extension of the NDS Participant Readiness Initiative (PRI), which is a model that focuses on community consultation and capacity building.

In April, we celebrated a major milestone with the completion of Australia’s first purpose-built, and culturally supported accommodation. The property became operational in October 2017 with tenants moving into their units.

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I would like to thank the Board for their continued support of Synapse. This year we are saying goodbye to some of our longstanding and committed Directors while also welcoming new Directors. I would also like to thank our dedicated staff for their outstanding contribution to Synapse during the year.

Jennifer Cullen
Chief Executive Officer

Chair’s report

“Synapse has this year reviewed and redefined its strategy.”

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About Synapse

“We believe that everyone affected by neurocognitive disability is entitled to a life of quality, based on their own decisions and choices.”

Synapse is dedicated to reconnecting the lives of those affected by neurocognitive disability. We do this through services delivered with integrity, fairness, and a vision for what the future for people with neurocognitive disability could be.

Neurocognitive disability is any type of brain damage or neurological disruption that causes partial or permanent cognitive functional disability or psychosocial maladjustment. Neurocognitive disorders can affect memory, attention, learning, language, perception, personality and behaviour. In this report we refer to neurocognitive disability as a collective term of injuries.

We believe that everyone affected by neurocognitive disability is entitled to a life of quality, based on their own decisions and choices. In working to achieve this, Synapse delivers a range of services across Australia.

Information, referral and advocacy

Synapse provides a national information and referral service for individuals and families impacted by neurocognitive disability. Our advocacy work aims to provide opportunities for people, families and communities to actively participate in and lead decisions that impact their lives and the things important to them.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

As the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) continues across Australia, our service for individuals ahead and after the NDIS roll-out in their area.

Synapse is committed to providing information and support to individuals, communities and families to maximise participation in the NDIS. We help individuals and communities to develop skills and confidence to lead decisions about their current and future needs and goals.

Synapse works with communities to facilitate participant readiness activities and NDIS pre-planning ahead of NDIS engagement. As a registered NDIS provider, Synapse also provides assistance to individuals to build skills in coordinating and managing their NDIS plan based on the individual’s expressed needs.

Synapse is also a provider of NDIS Appeals. This service provides support for individuals to raise concerns about their NDIS plan and the NDIS process.

Resources

We produce a number of nationally-recognised resources for individuals and organisations. These publications aim to build and share contemporary knowledge and understanding of the impacts of neurocognitive disability across diverse communities and life stages.

Peer support

We value the power of connection, sharing and learning from others’ stories and experiences. Synapse Reconnections is a national network connecting individuals and carers for peer support.

Research

The Synapse Research and Development team undertakes research in Queensland and other locations to inform community understanding of the extent and nature of neurocognitive disability. Our research enables Synapse to respond effectively to community need and to advocate for social change. We also work with communities to engage and support communities in research activities.

Indigenous services

Our team work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities nationally and in rural and remote communities to explain and talk about the availability of services, including the NDIS. Our research and development focus is on marginalised people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with neurocognitive disability and a range of co-morbid conditions within the context of the NDIS environment.

Housing support

Synapse provides support to individuals to live well in their home of choice. Throughout various housing options, Synapse supports individuals to design services that maximise choice and control over their daily lives. Synapse recognises that life opportunities and choices are strengthened through quality support coupled with stable housing.
New housing options

"Claire said that she has become a happier and healthier person after moving into her own home."

Advocacy has expanded in the past year

"136 Customer Service staff at 19 NSW Fair Trading centres received brain injury awareness training."

Building capability in partner organisations

Synapse has forged strong partnerships leading to the establishment of new specialist housing on the Sunshine Coast. The housing has been purpose-built and designed to improve accommodation options for people living with disability.

Claire has previously lived in a house that was not readily accessible and didn’t meet her support needs. Claire says that she feels like she has won the lottery by being able to move into this new home, which meets all of her needs. She also said that she has become a happier and healthier person with the assistance of the Synapse team and that they are there for her beyond her immediate care needs.

Synapse has expanded advocacy capability expanding our work nationally. With the roll out of the NDIS throughout NSW, funding has provided by the Department of Inclusion Services to ensure individuals have access to support when seeking review of NDA decisions.

Synapse is committed to work in partnership with others to build awareness and understanding of the impacts of neurocognitive disability.

In March 2017, Synapse had the opportunity to build knowledge in NSW Fair Trading to provide better services to people with neurocognitive disability across the state.

A total of 136 Customer Service staff at 19 NSW Fair Trading centres received neurocognitive disability awareness training that was tailored to meet their requirements.

This was a great chance for Synapse to work with a large government organisation to build their skills so that people with neurocognitive disability would receive services from an organisation that understands their experiences.

Synapse has expanded advocacy capability expanding our work nationally. With the roll out of the NDIS throughout NSW, funding has provided by the Department of Inclusion Services to ensure individuals have access to support when seeking review of NDA decisions.

Synapse was successful in securing the opportunity to deliver this service in NSW. Launching in February 2017, NDIS Appeals assisted 41 individuals from across NSW before 30 June.

Synapse is also one of three providers who was selected to assist NSW icare participants with support and advocacy in relation to dispute or complaints.

Services provided include long-term care and support needs to anyone who is severely injured in the workplace or on roads within NSW.

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Claire now has control over the things that are important to her.
In July 2016, as the area of Sydney where Bruce lives began its transition to the NDIS, Synapse started to work with Bruce and his mum, Nerida, to provide support in accessing services under the scheme.

Bruce suffered a traumatic brain injury in 1978, which resulted in a lengthy rehabilitation period. However, following his rehabilitation, Bruce did not receive any formal support. He was very reliant on his mother for general support and decision-making, and Nerida was concerned (as she is ageing) about who would look after her son when she was no longer able to.

In January 2017, with support from a Synapse advocate, Bruce requested access to the NDIS. By mid-February, Bruce, supported by a Synapse pre-planner, had developed his pre-planning workbook, which was submitted to the Local Area Coordinator prior to his planning meeting.

Less than a week after the meeting, Bruce had his NDIS plan, which provided significantly more support than he expected. Unfortunately, support coordination was not included in the plan, which Bruce and his mother felt was necessary as he had no experience dealing with support providers. Therefore, Bruce requested a plan review with support coordination included.

The Synapse Brokerage Program continues to provide an invaluable service for people affected by a brain injury to access goods and services that allow them to reach their goals.

Lisa is a younger person living in a nursing home who received an NDIS Plan while under a short-term guardianship order. The public guardian had previously worked with Synapse and knew of our strong commitment to supporting people with a neurocognitive disability to live with dignity and independence.

Lisa’s NDIS plan included Support Coordination hours and she engaged Synapse for this role. One of Lisa’s goals was to improve her physical mobility so that she could return to her lifelong passion of horse riding.

The role of Synapse’s Support Coordinator was to liaise with different service providers (physiotherapy, occupational therapy and direct support workers) to ensure that everything was in place for Lisa.

It has been a long process but over the last two months, Lisa has started to spend time with horses and participated in group activities as she moves towards meeting her goal.
A new way of providing early support in hospital

Synapse understands the need for a service which provides support and information for families and individuals in hospital following a brain injury or stroke and throughout the rehabilitation journey. Synapse has launched a new program to address this need: the Brain Injury Family Liaison Service.

The aim of the Brain Injury Family Liaison Service is to increase the health, well-being, and independence of the individual and family upon discharge from hospital. Our Family Liaison Officer will build relationships with families during the acute stages of hospital admission and be a link between the hospital staff and family. They will help translate clinical information regarding assessments, prognosis, rehabilitation and services available to families who are undergoing a highly emotional experience.

Synapse will continue to provide information and support to the family and the individual after discharge. Synapse is undertaking comprehensive research and evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the program, and ensure that we are continuously improving our service.

This service has been made possible through generous donations from family and friends of people who have experienced stroke.

Donations like those that have made the Brain Injury Family Liaison Service possible are powerful examples of the very real impact of everyday individuals.

Guddi health weeks

Guddi health weeks aim to provide a culturally-safe assessment that facilitates access to the NDIS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live with a permanent disability. The Guddi Partnership (Synapse, Specialist Disability Service Assessment and Outreach Team [SDSAOT], Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability, and Griffith University) worked with the Townsville Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Women (TATSICFW) to run the first health week in Townsville in February. SDSAOT provided on-site health assessments using the Guddi Protocol. TATSICFW supported participants to discuss their needs with SDSAOT and complete NDIS applications. The week in Townsville assessed 33 participants and also helped raise awareness about the NDIS for the community.

There were many learnings from the first week of delivery, which have been shared and used in further health weeks. We are pleased that in addition to participant outcomes, the weeks have promoted relationship building, collaboration and communication between community members, individuals, families, services, NDIS and work Local Area Coordinators.

Connecting differently

The Synapse Reconnections program provides the opportunity for individuals with neurocognitive disability to connect and share their experiences with people who understand and relate to the challenges they face due to neurocognitive disability.

The Reconnections program has been expanded with the launch of a Reconnections Facebook group, which provides a place of support and relationship building online.

The group is a dedicated private space for individuals experiencing neurocognitive disability and has grown to 47 contributing members. Some of these online connections have also resulted in face-to-face meetings and friendships.

Participants post about events they are going to and invite people in the group to join them. Due to its growing popularity, the Reconnections program now runs regular group gatherings with plans to expand.

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A national platform for research

Synapse is committed to contributing to knowledge and evidence that informs better services for people with neurocognitive disability. Synapse hosts a systematic review at the forefront of change and practice that delivers real and meaningful outcomes for individuals and communities.

Synapse has strong research and development capacity. Synapse also research to advocate for social change, strengthened community capacity and professional practice for people with neurocognitive disability.

Over the last twelve months, our R&D team have shared their findings to raise awareness of the issue: ‘Intersecting Indigeneity, Colonisation and Neurocognitive Disability’.

Symsnath has engaged with a range of government departments, researchers and community services to share our research findings and to use these findings to develop better service for people with neurocognitive disability.

A number of articles have been published in journals, in addition to various presentations at national conferences and workshops. Our research has also been featured in radio and internet radio. Publications include:


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Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders

It has been a busy year for our resident Senior Research Fellow and Elder-In-Residence, Aunty Janet Hammill, PhD. Aunty Janet is a renowned researcher in the field of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), particularly amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Aunty Janet reports a considerable increase in inquiries for health-related information for individuals, service providers and FASD education and training.

Using a streamlined approach, the delivery sessions comprise a series of presentations from emergency and medical professionals.

The event was a chance for Synapse to interact with adults and families who are concerned about the risks from road trauma, with realistic crash re-enactments and presentations from emergency and medical professionals.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders

Over three days in August, Synapse participated in the annual bstreetsmart event held at Sydney Olympic Park. The event aims to reduce the fatality and injury rates of young people by promoting safe behavior as drivers, riders, and passengers.

This year, almost 3,500 young people attended, most being students between school years 10 and 11. Those in attendance were able to see first-hand the effects of road trauma, with realistic crash re-enactments and presentations from emergency and medical professionals.

Our voice

While Synapse has its headquarters in the Sunshine State, its journey over the past few years has brought a national focus, in particular with the pairing of the Brain Injury Association of NSW. For the first time, the proportion of online visitors from the Sunshine State has doubled in comparison with the last year.

Our April edition of magazine featured stories from across Australia.

In the six months to June, over 5,000 copies of the magazine were sent out to individuals and organisations around Australia.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience at least twice the level of disability as non-indigenous Australians yet they frequently lack culturally safe supported housing options. The Cairns community identified a need for a safe place of belonging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability. In April, Synapse proudly celebrated the completion of our Cairns housing initiative. Australia’s first purpose-built housing initiative for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with complex disabilities has been possible through 9+ years of partnership with community, traditional owners and elders. The initiative provides eight homes and support services that have been intentionally designed to promote cultural safety and informed by an unwavering commitment to Indigenous social and emotional well-being.

Synapse Cairns will offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with complex disabilities the opportunity to access culturally safe support and services that are culturally responsive, aligned with the principles of social and emotional wellbeing. The support model is designed to build these reciprocal relationships and connections, individual skills and workforce design unrequired to deliver on.

Synapse Cairns has an alternative workforce design and structure. The design and structure supports culturally safe practice that is aligned to the principles of social and emotional well-being. It is designed to respect service users’ rights to self-determination, the need for cultural understanding, impact of history on trauma and loss, recognition of human rights, the impact from racism and stigma, recognition of kinship, recognition of diversity, and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strengths. Culturally safe practice will also provide meaningful opportunities for people to be self-directed and attract, engage and retain a strong workforce that acknowledges, respects and preferences community and cultural knowledge.

Synapse Cairns acknowledges and respects community and cultural knowledge. Synapse’s practice model focuses on cultural understanding and capability building. Cultural mentors will be external to the support worker function. The mentors will:

- Be service design to be firmly grounded in the stories and experience of community knowledge.
- Tenants to self-direct support and services that are culturally responsive, aligned with the principles of social and emotional well-being. The support model is designed to build these reciprocal relationships and connections.
- Workforce roles will be drawn from Community thereby leveraging and strengthening social capital.
Coming together to yarn up

Connecting with each other, to country and culture. Caring for our people and strengthening connections to belonging. Synapse Participant Readiness Initiative artwork by Aunty Semah Mokak-Wischki.

During the year, a total of 1,196 individuals attended Synapse NDIS Participant Readiness Initiative (PRI) sessions in Brisbane and Torres Strait IslanderPrince in areas across Queensland, including South East Queensland, Townsville, Cairns, Mackay, Bowen, and Sarina.

Our approach to PRI is based on a community development model of engagement, ensuring that activities are community-led and culturally appropriate. Synapse consults local community on what would work best for them before commencing sessions. Synapse is pleased to report that this approach received endorsement from the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.

Synapse also received an extension on funding to continue PRI into 2017/18 — an illustration of the success of Synapse’s recent work, and the impact of our approach to PRI on participants.

Synapse also successfully secured Commonwealth Government funding to increase NDIS awareness in hard-to-reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Delivery of sessions commenced in July and will be delivered throughout the Cape and Gulf areas in Far North Queensland.

“Our approach is based on a community development model of engagement.”
“One of the strengths of this approach is that it allows each partner to focus on their core delivery capability.”

The year saw the relaunch of the Synapse Brain Injury Network Group. The Network is made up of service providers, allied health specialists, researchers, and volunteers who work in the field of brain injury. Synapse held the annual networking breakfast in May 2017 with 30 people attending. There was a positive atmosphere as people had the chance to talk about their services and find out more through networking with others.

As part of relaunching the group, we wanted to know what would be most meaningful and engaging for participants. It was suggested that we hold two half-day mini-conferences per year, with various guest presenters talking about their services and expertise. We received many great topic ideas, and these formed the basis for the presenters for our inaugural conference in July 2017. Topics at the conference included Common Law and people’s rights, community rehabilitation, Advocacy, and the NDIS.

Our services delivered at a home in Sippy Downs on the Sunshine Coast have a strong foundation in building capability and impact through partnership. The home was purpose-built for four tenants by Ausmar Assist, a special disability accommodation builder and part of the Ausmar Group. The home features wider entries and safe, accessible features to ensure that the tenants have appropriate access to live their everyday life. Managing the tenancy in Coast 2 Bay Housing can manage affordable housing options in the Sunshine Coast region.

Synapse entered the partnership as the support provider, with our Service Support Workers delivering the daily living and longer-term goals of the four tenants.

Sippy Downs has been successful for both the tenants (see Claire’s story on page eight) and partners. One of the strengths of this approach is that it allows each partner to focus on their core delivery capability, ensuring that each tenant receives a high service standard.

The partnership approach has been the first of its kind for Synapse and signifies the potential for similar opportunities to impact individuals and the community in the future.

“This is a great opportunity to meet with colleagues who normally may not have the chance to talk face to face.”

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Cairns Point Prevalence Project

The Cairns Point Prevalence Project began in late 2014 at Anglicare North Queensland’s Quigley Street Night Shelter, supported financially by a philanthropic trust. The research was undertaken in collaboration with Synapse, DDSAT, and James Cook and Griffith Universities.

The Cairns Point Prevalence Project

Partnersing with Mission Australia

Mission Australia in Cairns has invited the Guddi Partnership (Synapse, Specialist Disability Services Assessment and Outreach Team [SDSAOT], Specialist Disability Services Assessment and Outreach Team [SDSAOT], Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability, and Griffith University) to support the implementation of the Guddi Protocol in three of their homelessness services.

This project will include community engagement, the use of culturally safe methodologies (including the Guddi Protocol), staff training, and the building of a data repository which will contribute to an accurate evidence base regarding the wider and nature of complex health problems experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In September 2018, Synapse broke ground at the Warner Street site in Cairns delivering an eight-year development journey. The funding for the construction of the building came from the Commonwealth Government and was the result of several grants awarded by three State-level organisations, non-government, and corporate groups.

During the year, Synapse continued to work with architect, Peoples Cherted Design and Indi Design, project managers AECOM, and construction company Hutchinson Builders, local elders, and the community.

The successful completion of the project relied on the dedication of, and communication between, the partners to deliver through the construction phase, including the Tropical Far North Queensland rainy season.

Synapse is delighted with the completion of the construction. Because of the commitment of our partners, Synapse Warner Street is set to support up to eight tenants in a culturally appropriate setting.

Stroke Peer Support

There are 475,000 individuals who have experienced a stroke and/or brain injury in Australia, according to a report by Deloitte in 2017.

Our Synapse Options team provide the initial information and referral service whereby those affected by a stroke and/or brain injury are able to access services and support and services are offered to our callers.

Synapse has developed a peer support service for marginalised Australians with a neurocognitive disability. Synapse is engaging government and other potential partners with the findings of this research.

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Corporate services

Synapse has a dedicated corporate services team that works to support the delivery of our services.

During the year the team focused on improving efficiencies. A new time and attendance system was implemented removing the need for paper based timesheets which required manual entry into the payroll system. This system now also manages the rostering of our supported accommodation team.

Another way in which our corporate team has supported service delivery is in the introduction of NDIS Financial Plan Management (FPM). FPM provides a service to NDIS clients by our Finance Department. Synapse now provides 16 clients with management for their NDIS plan finances.

Delivering FPM has increased our understanding of the NDIS, knowledge that is now influencing other Synapse services that involve the NDIS.

Making an impact with donations

“Our donors help increase the impact of Synapse. Their support makes our services go further.”

Our donors help increase the impact of Synapse. Their support provides the extra resource that makes our services go further. This year Synapse saw two significant contributions.

Last Christmas, Synapse started an awareness partnership with local brewery Brisbane Brewing. Synapse now has a presence on the counters of their West End and Woolloongabba premises. In some ways an unlikely partnership – a neurocognitive disability organisation partnering with a business in the alcohol industry. However, as Synapse works to reach those most at risk, it is critical that messaging around the safe consumption of alcohol is made accessible.

For Brisbane Brewing, a family run craft brewery, responsible drinking is a large part of their culture. As well as raising awareness, the partnership also raises ongoing donations that support the production of Synapse resources for those experiencing neurocognitive disability.

Also, as mentioned earlier in the report, our new Brain Injury Family Liaison Service has been developed solely from the generosity of family and friends impacted by stroke. The service provides a Family Liaison Officer in Brisbane’s Princess Alexandra Hospital, with a view to reaching other hospitals as the service develops. The Family Liaison Officer will provide support to families from the point of injury through to post-discharge, between hospital staff, families, and ongoing rehabilitation services.

Synapse is a deductible gift registered not-for-profit. Support received at all levels increases the impact that we can make in the lives of individuals and families experiencing neurocognitive disability. Donations over $2 can be used as tax deductions; this means that while Synapse receives the full impact of the contribution, donors also receive value back in return.

To make an impact through the work of Synapse visit synapse.org.au/donations, or contact us at info@synapse.org.au to find out more.
Meet the Board

Synapse has an experienced team of Non-Executive Directors providing leadership on our Board and strategic input to the direction of Synapse.

Melanie Farris
Chair, Non-Executive Director
Melanie has an extensive background in governance, communications and corporate sustainability. Currently, she is the Chair of Siena’s Foundation, among others. She gained entry to the University of Queensland board of the Prince’s Foundation in 2005, with three others, to establish the ‘Safe Places for Children’ fund. Since that time she has taken a leadership role in identifying key research areas and identifying gaps in policy to better protect children. She also serves as an external member on the Audit Committee of the Department of Health and supporting the consumer movement to ensure better care for people with a disability, injury or chronic illness.

John Chambers
Non-Executive Director
John has had a varied career in his early career - working as a carpenter, boat builder, commercial fisherman, as a carpenter, boat builder, and in real estate. He later moved into the university sector, becoming a Senior Associate and Dean in Commerce and Law. John is a Partner at Murphy Schmidt & Ebsworth, where he was made a Senior Associate in 1991. In 1994 he was made a Partner at Ebsworth and Ebsworth, becoming a Partner in 1995. In 1999, John became a Partner at Murphy Schwartz and his retirement in 2015. John also serves on the Queensland Board of Nurses and Midwives Board of Australia.

Anthony Thompson
Non-Executive Director
Anthony has over 25 years’ experience in executive, consulting and company roles. Anthony provides leadership on our Board and strategic input to the direction of Synapse. Anthony subsequently completed a Master of Commerce and Law. Currently, he is an external member on the Audit Committee of the Department of Housing and Public Works, Transport and Main Roads, and Penrith and Cabinet. Anthony generally sits on a director for a number of companies across Australia and Asia. He also spends time coaching senior management across private and government organisations.

Sonia Berry
Non-Executive Director
Sonia has over 25 years’ experience in senior executive, consulting and company roles. Sonia has held a number of leadership positions in the health care sector. She has worked in Australia and internationally in the strategic communication and management of engagement spaces, with a focus on critical communication and developing digital environments. She currently works for a family office, a fund manager and for a key organisation in real estate risk management. She also lectured at Deakin University in 2005, with three others. She founded and became a Chair for the nonprofit Safe Places for Children. Anthony generally sits on a director for a number of companies across Australia and Asia. He also spends time coaching senior management across private and government organisations.

Paul Ruchowsky
Non-Executive Director
Paul experienced a severe brain injury as the result of a fall on 22 December 2003. Since then he has taken a leadership role in identifying key research areas and identifying gaps in policy to better protect children. He also serves as an external member on the Audit Committee of the Department of Health and supporting the consumer movement to ensure better care for people with a disability, injury or chronic illness.

Dr Paul White MBB BS FRANZCP FRANZCP has extensive experience in many areas of health care, including governance, education, research planning, development and management, clinical leadership, public health, and direct clinical care. He has held a number of leadership positions in the health care sphere. He is a psychiatrist with a particular interest in Far North Queensland. He is Clinical Director of the Specialist Disability Assessment and is the NDIS.

Neil Jackson
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Dr Paul White
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Non-Executive Director
Jennifer Cullen
Chief Executive Officer

Jennifer Cullen is an Adjunct Associate Professor and CEO of Synapse. Jennifer has over 26 years' experience in disability and aged care services. In 2013 she was appointed to the NDIS Independent Advisory Council as the Queensland Member and in 2016 was appointed to the National Disability and Carers Advisory Council as a Member.

She leads a range of research initiatives and projects that focus on improving Indigenous Australians with complex neurocognitive disabilities, including FASD. Jennifer is a descendant of the Wakka Wakka people.

Our Leadership

Synapse has a very capable leadership team that is responsible for providing strategic and operational management for the organisation. The team represents a wealth of experience in specialist disability services, research, and corporate management.

Jennifer Cullen
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Jennifer Cullen is an Adjunct Associate Professor and CEO of Synapse. Jennifer has over 26 years’ experience in disability and aged care services. In 2013 she was appointed to the NDIS Independent Advisory Council as the Queensland Member and in 2016 was appointed to the National Disability and Carers Advisory Council as a Member.

She leads a range of research initiatives and projects that focus on improving Indigenous Australians with complex neurocognitive disabilities, including FASD. Jennifer is a descendant of the Wakka Wakka people.

Adam Schickerling
National Disability Reform Manager

Adam Schickerling has over 15 years’ experience within the government and community sectors. In 2015 he was appointed to the NDIS Independent Advisory Council as the Queensland Member and in 2016 he was appointed to the National Disability and Carers Advisory Council as a member. With experience in business improvement and organisational development functions, Adam has expertise in leading national expansion and growth strategies focussing on disability and community care.

Clare Townend PhD
Research and Development Manager

Dr Clare Townend is the National Manager, Research and Development at Synapse and an Adjunct Associate Professor at Griffith University and James Cook University. She is a Chief Investigator on a suite of research projects which aim to improve identification and understanding of neurocognitive disabilities amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Queensland and Victoria. This work includes the Guddi project – research with homeless people in Cairns. Clare also has a background in mental health policy research and service provision.

Judith Hunt
Chief Financial Officer

Judith’s role includes the management of accounting at Synapse as well as general business support in corporate services, marketing, and communications. She has over 20 years of financial management experience across various industries, including the not-for-profit environment. Judith also serves in a volunteer role on the Board of Directors for Communify Queensland.

Aunty Janet Hammill PhD
Senior Research Fellow

Dr Jan leads the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorders Research stream at Synapse. She is the coordinator of the Collaboration for Alcohol Related Developmental Disorders (CARDD), formerly the Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Research Network, at the University of Queensland Centre for Clinical Research and also a member of the National Indigenous Disability Researchers Network. Having a shared ancestry with the Wiradjuri people of the NSW Pilliga Scrub and of the first convicts into the area, Jan’s primary interest is in Indigenous health outcomes.
Synapse operations grew significantly in 2017, with growth in the capacity for services and new supported accommodation locations. As a result, employee expenses noticeably increased. Overall, Synapse ended the year in a strong position, increasing our comprehensive income and equity.
### Statement of comprehensive income
For the year ended 30 June 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>2017 $</th>
<th>2016 $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operating revenue</td>
<td>8,433,171</td>
<td>7,262,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountancy and auditor’s remuneration</td>
<td>(23,040)</td>
<td>(23,075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising and promotions</td>
<td>(63,471)</td>
<td>(38,328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client support services</td>
<td>(424,161)</td>
<td>(314,063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer expenses</td>
<td>(154,627)</td>
<td>(111,217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy fees</td>
<td>(179,430)</td>
<td>(27,300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depreciation and amortisation expense</td>
<td>(163,365)</td>
<td>(175,774)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee benefits expense</td>
<td>(5,774,118)</td>
<td>(4,948,521)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance costs and charges</td>
<td>(255,508)</td>
<td>(287,280)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>(62,299)</td>
<td>(64,316)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal expenses</td>
<td>(21,595)</td>
<td>(18,489)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office expenses</td>
<td>(43,118)</td>
<td>(52,308)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle expenses</td>
<td>(48,118)</td>
<td>(52,308)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other expenses</td>
<td>(329,621)</td>
<td>(333,301)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property expenses</td>
<td>(2,450)</td>
<td>1,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating surplus / (deficit) for the year</td>
<td>707,203</td>
<td>590,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-operating activities</td>
<td>3,015,662</td>
<td>343,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus / (deficit) for the year</td>
<td>4,106,053</td>
<td>1,130,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total comprehensive income for the year</td>
<td>4,106,053</td>
<td>1,130,656</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Statement of financial position
For the year ended 30 June 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>2017 $</th>
<th>2016 $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cash on hand</td>
<td>2,039,169</td>
<td>4,644,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and other receivables</td>
<td>251,665</td>
<td>105,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other current assets</td>
<td>50,550</td>
<td>71,569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total current assets</td>
<td>2,341,384</td>
<td>4,821,447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property, plant and equipment</td>
<td>11,107,372</td>
<td>7,901,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total non-current assets</td>
<td>11,107,372</td>
<td>7,901,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total assets</td>
<td>14,329,426</td>
<td>12,812,897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current liabilities</td>
<td>2,031,673</td>
<td>4,805,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade and other payables</td>
<td>858,567</td>
<td>416,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grants and revenue received in advance</td>
<td>604,040</td>
<td>3,047,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrowings</td>
<td>101,365</td>
<td>101,365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisions</td>
<td>280,226</td>
<td>280,226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total current liabilities</td>
<td>2,031,673</td>
<td>4,805,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-current liabilities</td>
<td>4,016,088</td>
<td>3,852,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrowings</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lease liabilities</td>
<td>95,250</td>
<td>96,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total non-current liabilities</td>
<td>4,113,330</td>
<td>3,959,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total liabilities</td>
<td>6,145,011</td>
<td>8,764,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net assets</td>
<td>5,164,415</td>
<td>4,075,302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>7,712,458</td>
<td>3,865,458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accumulated surplus</td>
<td>471,857</td>
<td>471,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total equity</td>
<td>8,184,315</td>
<td>4,337,315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the course of the year, we have been reviewing Synapse’s direction and focus. Working across the organisation and with the support of our Board, we have developed a new strategic plan that will ensure Synapse continues to make a positive impact across several areas in the years ahead.

As part of the review, Synapse has identified the possibility of broadening our expertise to areas closely related to brain injury. We know that many of the individuals and families that we have supported often experience other neurocognitive conditions. Synapse will broaden its focus to collective neurocognitive disabilities, defined as problems with the brain or neural pathways caused by conditions that impair learning or neurological functioning for both such as after neurological illness, mental illness, drug use, or brain injury. Synapse will focus increasingly on partnerships. As detailed in this report, partnerships already play an important role in how Synapse impacts individuals and community. Partnerships bring additional resources, specialist focus, and greater impact. Synapse will continue to form partnerships that will positively impact those affected by neurocognitive disability.

Synapse is well known for its services in Queensland and New South Wales. Increasingly, Synapse has been undertaking research and sharing expertise across Australia. We have seen an increase in requests for resources and information from across the country. Synapse will continue to look at how we can better contribute across Australia.

Our belief stands firm; we believe that everyone affected by neurocognitive disability is entitled to lead a life of quality, based on their own decisions and choices.