

9 Conclusion

The Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set (CSDA MDS) collection was set up in 1994, and in 2000–01 was a \$2.5 billion program. Its establishment enabled complete, nationally comparable data on disability services funded under the CSDA to be collected in Australia for the first time. Since its inception the data have been used extensively for planning and reporting purposes and to:

- monitor trends in services and service user profiles;
- respond to public enquiries about services or service users;
- respond to ad hoc data requests from specific services or areas; and
- substantiate budget submissions relating to disability funding.

The process of review and redevelopment began in 1999 during the life of the second CSDA, when it was acknowledged that there was a significant change in the nature of service provision, information needs and availability of technology in use across the disability field.

The process focused strongly on asking policy makers and other stakeholders about their main information needs, as well as government departments responsible for CSTDA-funded services, CSTDA-funded agencies, service users, non-government organisations, carers, peak organisations and anyone else interested in the disability service field. The methodology employed throughout the project gave them the opportunity to comment, participate in and test the redeveloped collection. This process of extensive consultation and field testing ensured that the CSTDA NMDS reflected the information needs of the field and was a valuable process in strengthening relations with all stakeholders.

It was also necessary to consider:

- the feasibility of collecting meaningful information in this was – that is, from service providers in a national administrative data collection;
- the workload of service providers; and
- the extent to which the data could be considered as a genuine by-product or administrative necessity in the service delivery process.

The balancing of information needs and these practical considerations was essential to achieving the ‘vision’ outlined in Chapter 1.

Although the redevelopment process sought the information needs of policy makers and stakeholders, it was not possible to meet all of these fully in the redeveloped collection. A notable example of information needs not met by the collection is the issue of unmet needs for services, which was raised by a number of stakeholders. Various options were considered, but rejected on the grounds that this data collection vehicle might well yield unreliable data – for instance, double counting (if waiting list data are not well managed) or under-counting (because of undue focus on the needs of people known to existing services). There is further discussion of the processes of estimating unmet need in a recent AIHW study on this topic, including a discussion on the possible further development of registers and waiting lists producing unmet needs data aligned to the CSTDA NMDS service data (AIHW 2002b).

In the future, full-year data about service users and a number of new data items from the CSTDA NMDS collections will increase the power of the information collected and provide better outcomes for all major stakeholders. For people with disabilities, the data will be useful for evaluating the accessibility, appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of CSTDA-funded services. This should lead to improved services and outcomes. The data will also be more relevant to the needs of funded agencies, and will better inform government planning, service development and service delivery.