LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

LIVING WITH DISABILITY RESEARCH CENTRE

# Left behind – Decreasing quality of support for people with intellectual disabilities in group homes

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# Background

- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) fully implemented 2020
  - 692,823 participants - funding from block to individual
  - Funding increased from $6.5b in 2011 to $42b in 2024 approx. 12% yr
- Approx. 5% of participants in group homes (SIL) 30% funding
- 4-6 people ordinary houses in the community
  - Increasing diversity of design and size
- People with intellectual disabilities largest group in group homes
  - 35,972 people (Dec 2024) 39% (14,056) are people with intellectual disability
  - Approx 15% of all people with intellectual disability
- Funding for people in group homes high compared to those living elsewhere
- Average amount for people with intellectual disabilities lower than other groups
  - Average $427,600 v $385,700 (Dec. 2024)

# Research about quality of support in group homes

- Evidence about what makes most difference to quality of life (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018)
  - Staff use of Active Support
  - Frontline management practice – practice leadership
  - Culture of Supporting Wellbeing
  - Senior management support and policies that support frontline leadership
  - Resources – small dispersed – homelike settings. [Necessary but not sufficient]
- Despite many propositions about impact of external environment such as expectations of regulators - workforce turnover – there is little evidence

# Aim and research questions

- Has the quality of staff support in group homes changed between 2013 – 2024?
- What other changes have occurred in group homes over that time?
  - Engagement of people supported
  - Size of homes – staff ratios
  - Strength of frontline practice leadership
- What internal and external factors might explain change in quality?

# Methods

Large longitudinal study

- Observation – engagement and quality of support of people supported (EMACR & ASM)
- Observed measure of practice leadership – interview and observation
- Staff completed data – characteristics of people supported

- Reporting 4 data points – 2013 - 2018 - 2022 - 2024
- Some continuing and some new organisations
  - 2013 – 9 orgs - 58 services - 171 people
  - 2018 – 11 orgs -76 services – 263 people
  - 2022 - 13 orgs – 153 services - 440 people
  - 2024 - 22 orgs – 237 services – 683 people
- Descriptive statistics - trends over time
- Parametric and Non-parametric tests – significant differences in scores over time, same people or services or orgs
- Qualitative fieldnotes

# Findings - Average levels of engagement of people supported

**At individual and service levels**

Trend of increased engagement from 2013 – 2018  then decreased  in 2022 or 2024

Statistically significant changes in social and non social engagement at service level

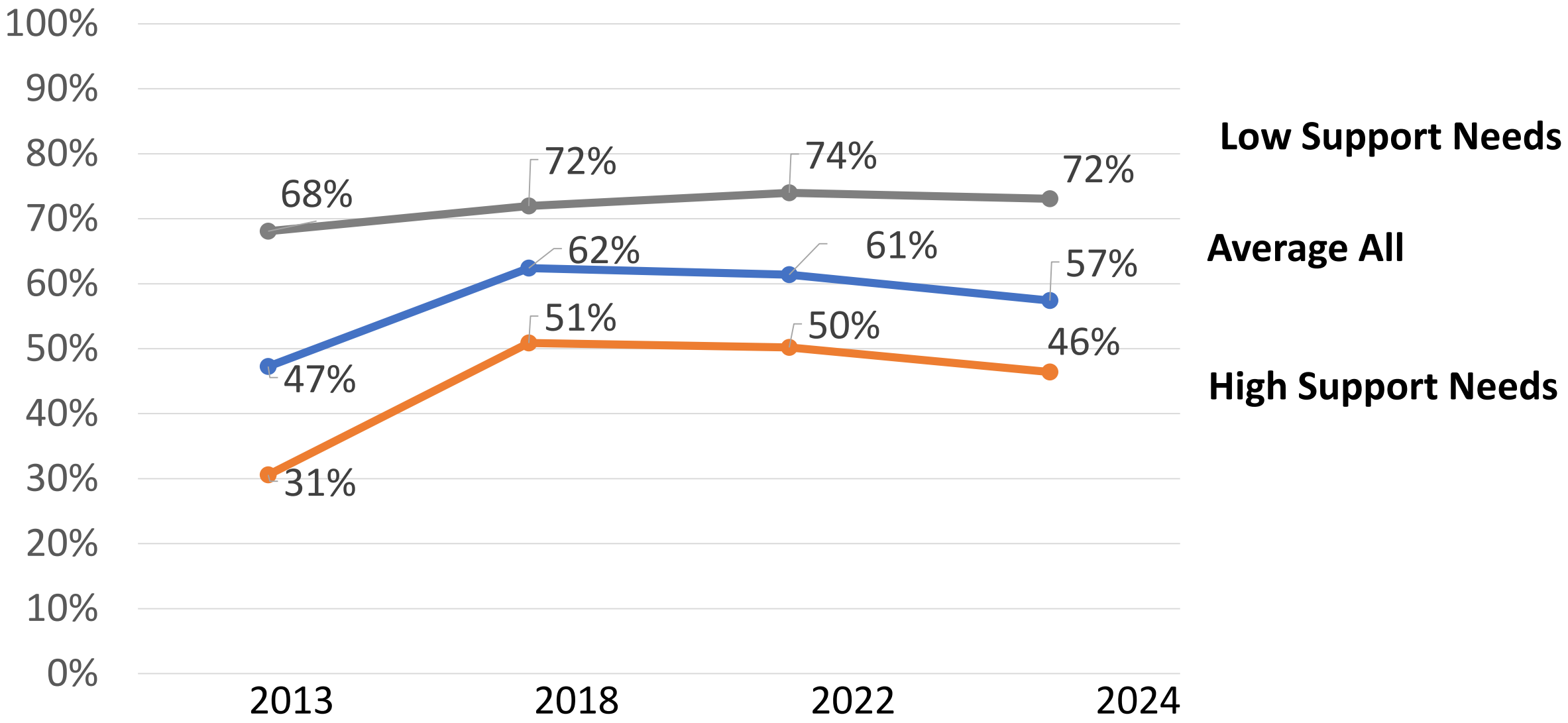
Statistically significant changes in overall engagement at organisational level

2024 levels of engagement lower than 2013

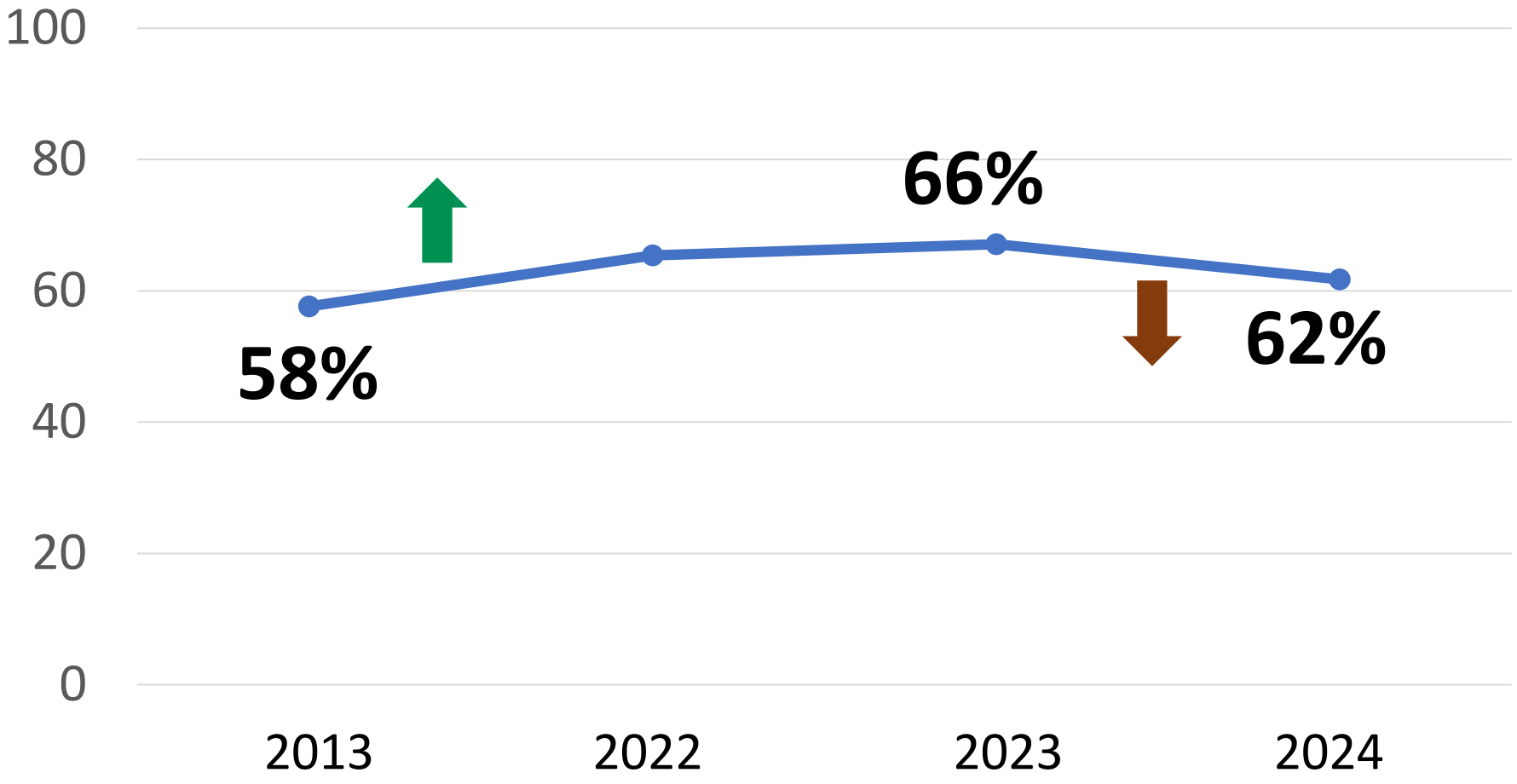
Continuing trend lower engagement of people with higher support needs

Average scores in new organisations consistently lower than continuing organisations

# Average Level of Engagement (Individuals)



# Organisational level engagement

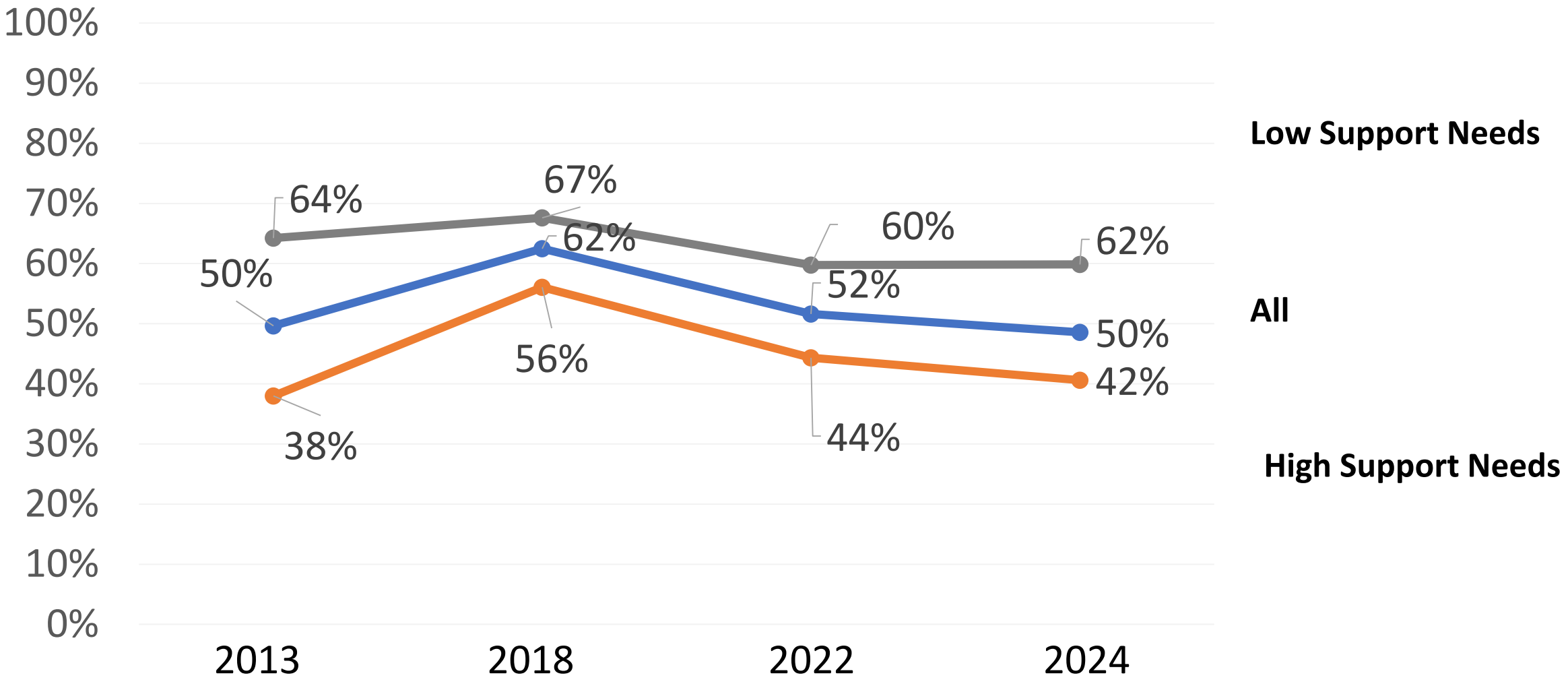



Statistically significant increase 2013 –2018 - decrease to 2024

# Findings - Quality of support - measure of Active Support

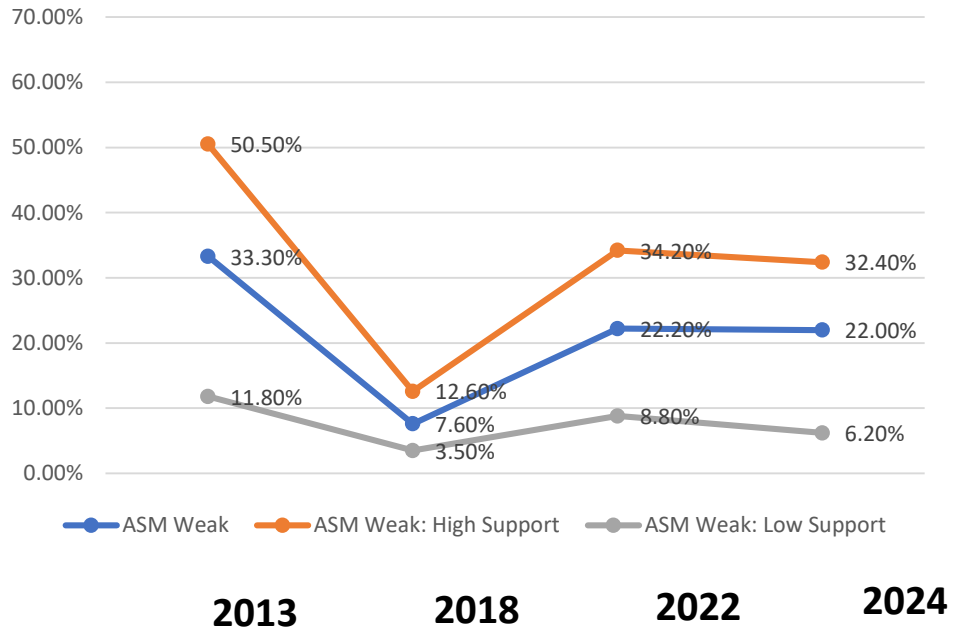
- Trend similar to engagement - increases from 2013 to 2018 – decrease to 2024
- Similar when % good and weak Active Support considered
- Statistically significant changes at individual, service and organisational levels 2018-2024
- Continuing trend of lower quality support for people with higher support needs
- Trend of lower quality support in new compared to continuing organisations

# Individual level average quality of support

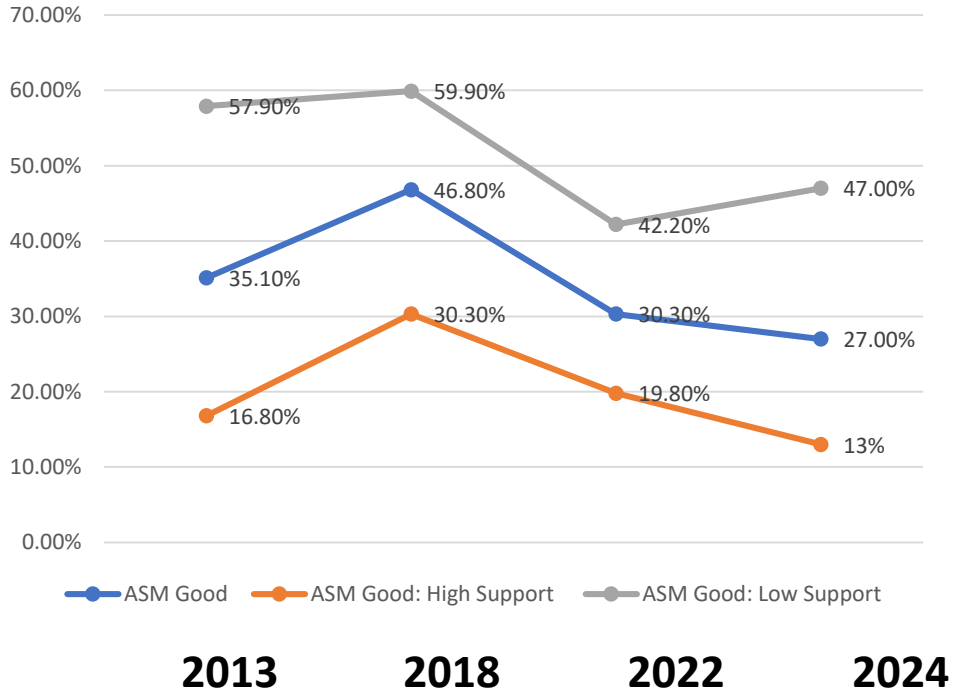



Good Active Support score of 66% or more on the ASM

# Percentage Weak Active Support




# Percentage Good Active Support



# Explaining trends

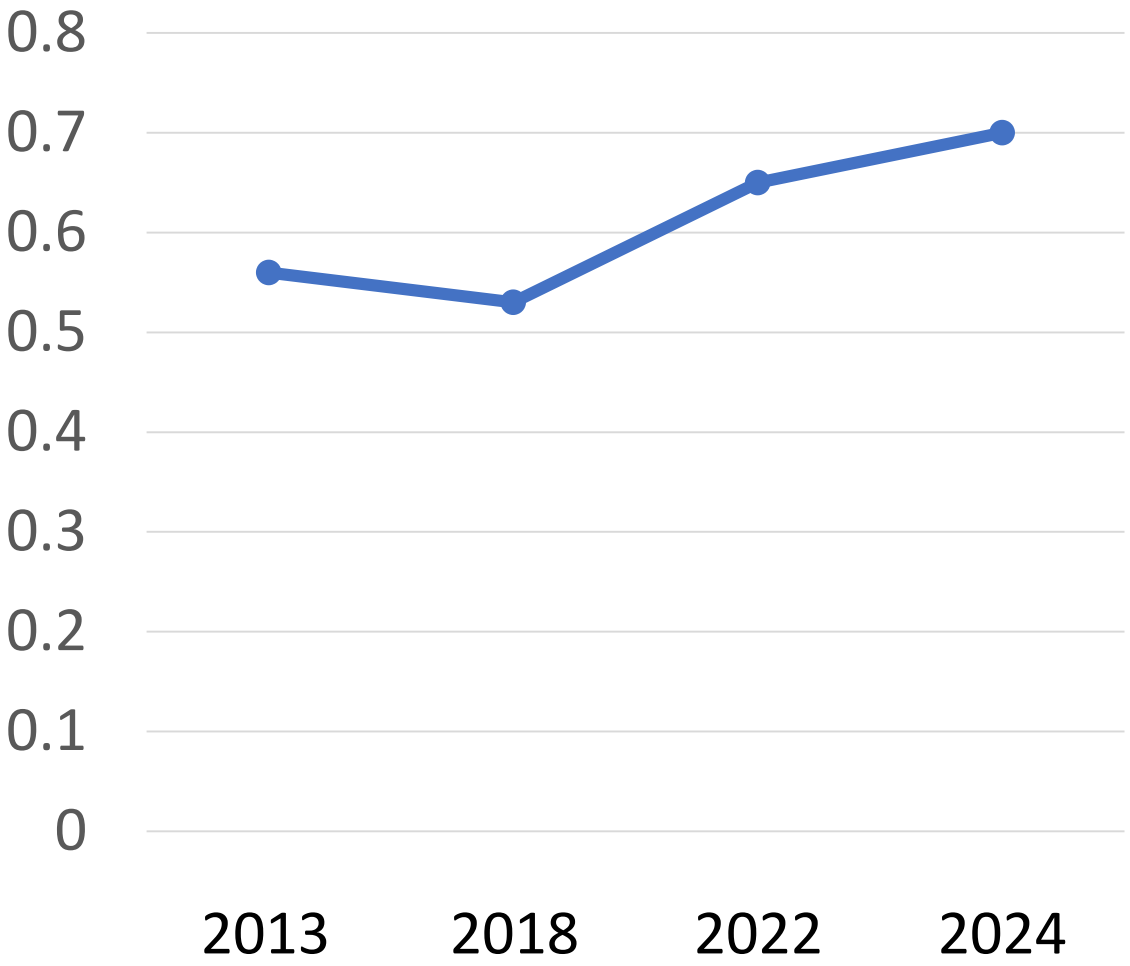
**Not size or staff resources**

Trend of decreasing average number of people in services

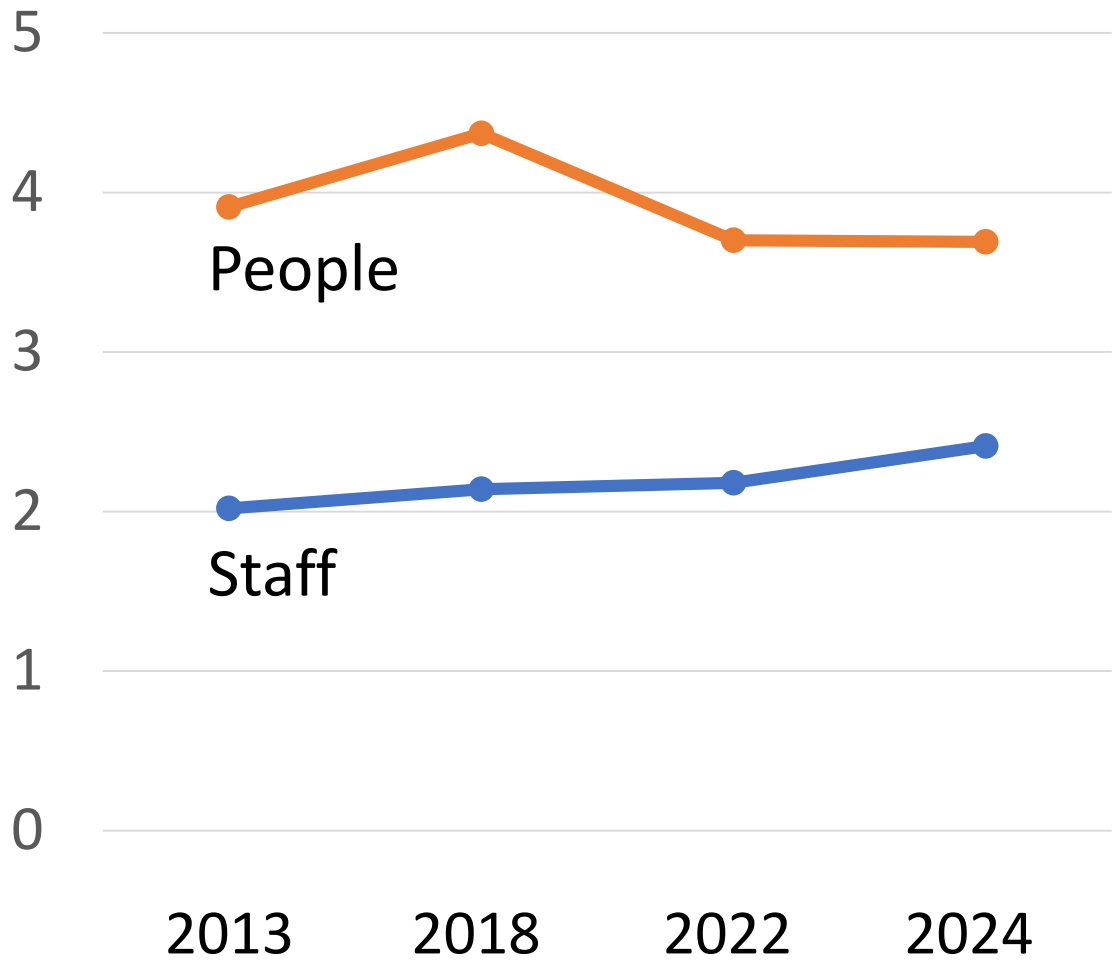
Trend of more staff resources and increase in staff to client ratio

That is, more staff and fewer people in services over the years

# Ratio staff to people supported




# Average number of staff and people in a service



# Explaining decreases in quality of support – Practice Leadership

**Reduced strength of practice leadership at service level**

Similar trend to engagement and Active Support

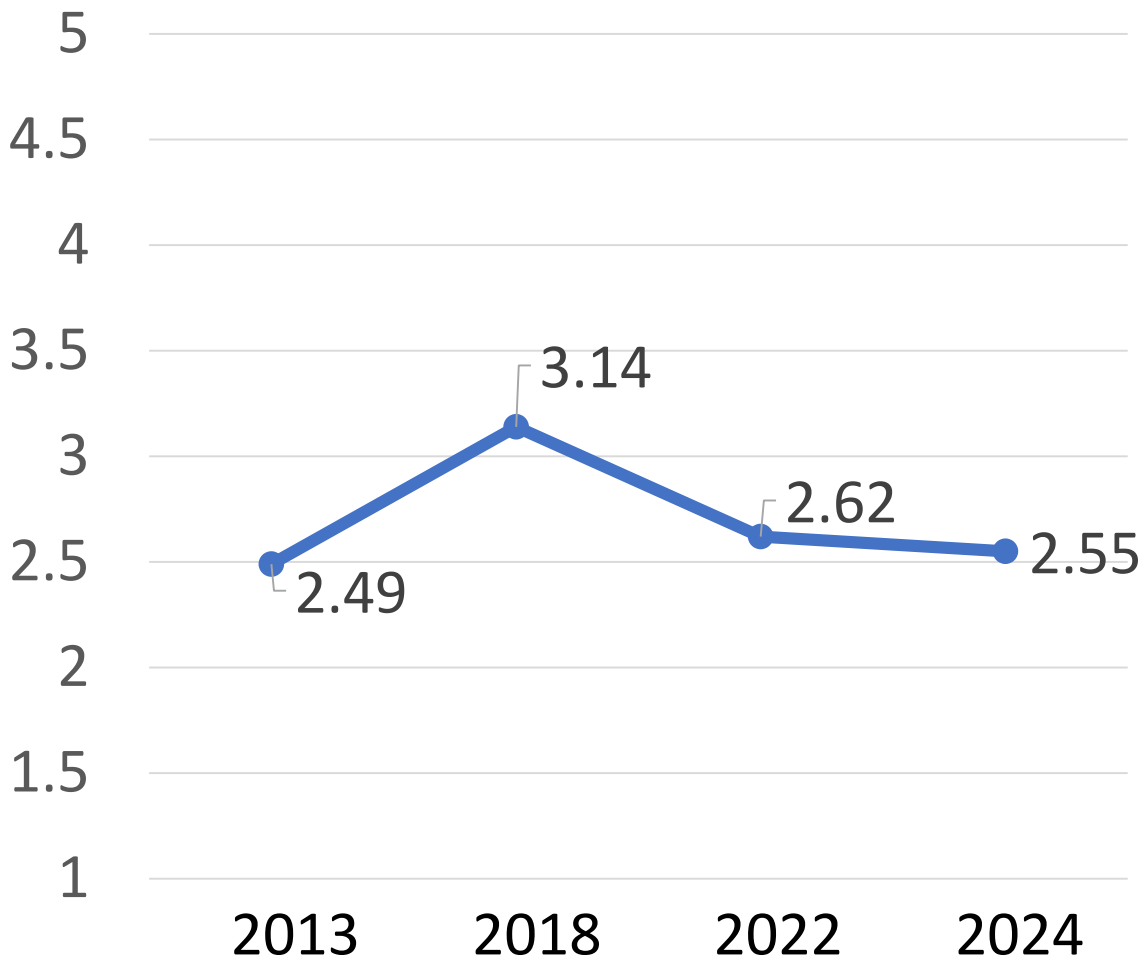
Average scores increased from 2013 – 2018 declined from 2018

**Significant differences at organisational level**: increased 2013- 2018 decreased 2018 -2024

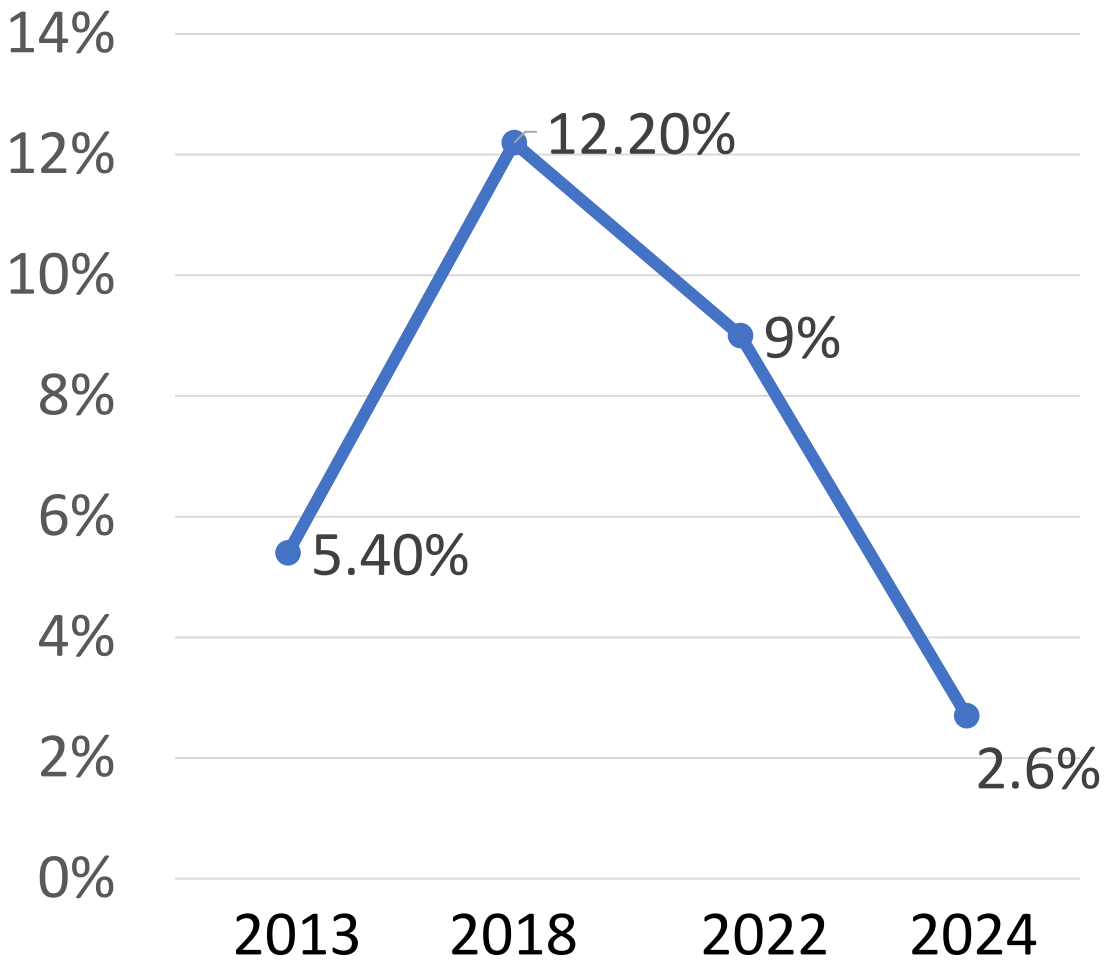
Trend of lower scores for new compared to continuing services

**Qualitative data suggests – less focus on practice more on administration – negotiations about funding, coordination with external providers, filling shifts, onboarding staff, compliance reporting**

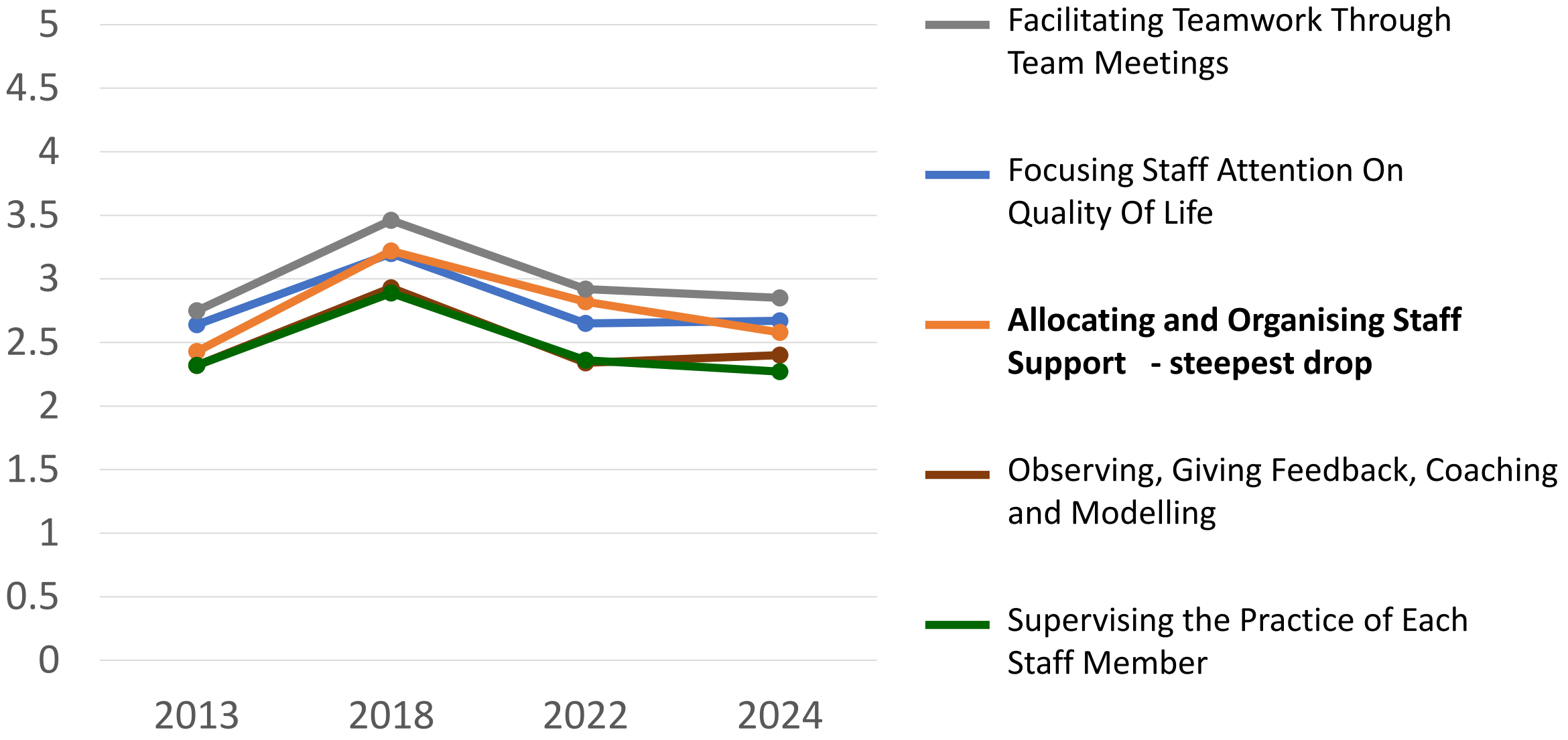
# Strength Practice Leadership - max 5




# Overall % Services Rated Good/Excellent



# Lowest scores consistently supervision and observing



# Explaining decreases in quality of support - Resources

- Raw NDIS data shows increasing value of individual packages
- Increased organisational costs associated with
  - Wages - changes to awards
  - Regulation costs and high staff turnover (NDS, 2024)
- Financial stress on organisations 50% in deficit across sector 2024 (NDS, 2024)
- Data shows study organisations similar trend

# Explaining decreases in quality of support – External sector factors

- High staff turnover - 24% casual 16% permanent staff (NDS, 2024, 40:60 ratio approx. )
- Implications - costs, training, consistency of support and knowledge of individuals
- Sector change – turmoil major reviews, public critique and reforms to reduce costs (NDIS Review – Disability Royal Commission –Major amendments to NDIS Act

  *"Constant change and uncertainty can be an exhausting operating environment". (NDS, p14)*
- 88% organisations operating conditions have worsened in the sector (NDS 2024)
- 84% organisations disagreed the NDIS was working well
- Cost Model for group homes – fixed prices set by NDIA

*"Price settings are creating a race to the bottom. The only way to remain viable is to compromise quality.*(p.13)

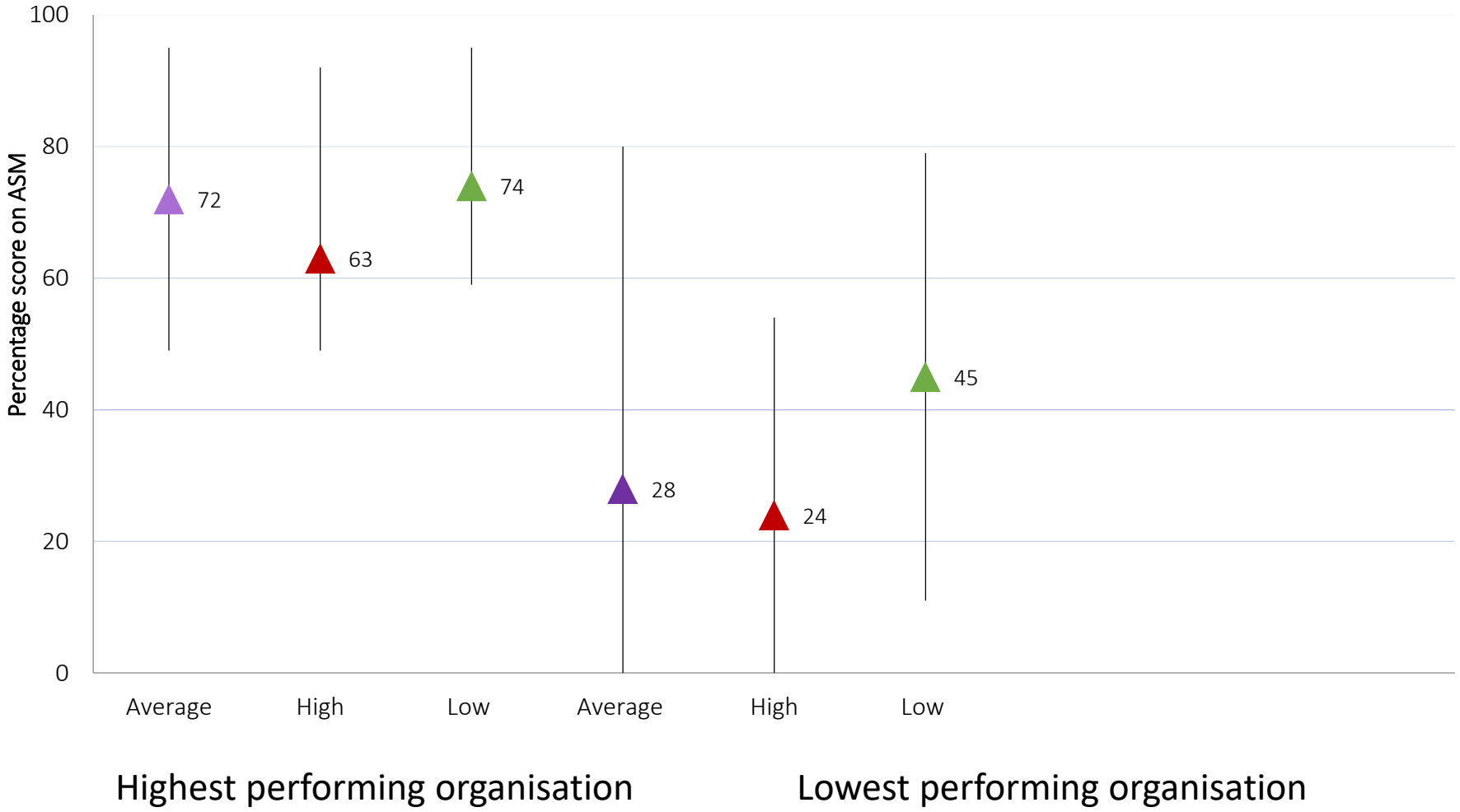
- Regulatory strain – harsh administrative compliance driven approach
- Diversion for core business to nice to have extra's

# Explaining decreases in quality of support - Neglected group

Dedifferentiated system – doesn't take account of people with intellectual disabilities

- Long term people in group homes identified as forgotten and neglected group by NDIS review
- Seldom heard from directly or represented in debate about services - often reliant on family advocacy undermined by rights perspectives or long-term providers
- Key debate about size and closure of group homes - individualised accommodation rather than quality of support - important wherever a person lives
- No outcomes yet from 2023 commitment to create new practice standards for group homes

# Quality is possible - significant variability between organisations



# Going against the trend

- Much to learn from organisations going against the trend and sustaining quality support
- Marked by investment in training and skilled support workers
- Reframing frontline managers as Frontline Practice Leaders
- Support for practice leaders and KPI’s
- All of these improve quality of support and engagement of people supported
- In turn these impact on staff satisfaction leading to less turnover, costs and impact on quality
- But can they sustain it in the current climate?

# Conclusions

- Decreasing quality of support for people with intellectual disabilities in group homes in context of individualised funding and increased overall funding for disability sector
- People with highest support needs receive poorest quality of support

**Focus on for predictors of quality**

  - Senior leaders prioritise frontline work
  - Face to face and hands on training in Active Support
  - Time for all 5 tasks of Frontline Practice Leadership
  - Structures and processes that support Practice Leadership
- Differentiate support needs of people with intellectual disabilities
- Compensate for disadvantages of people with higher support needs or without social capital
- Don’t get distracted by non-core business
- Don’t blame models – tackle underlying NDIS design issues impacting on services and workforce

# What needs to change

- Reduce external pressures impacting on quality – reporting, compliance, constantly changing environment
- Rebalance regulatory approach to making good things happen rather than preventing bad things
- Develop quality of life measures tailored to people with intellectual disabilities
- Embed evidence-based process indicators as part of standards reform
- Improve auditing processes – use observation
- Mandate competencies and registration of frontline managers in practice leadership
- Mandate training and competencies for support workers
- Differential funding for services/organisations with objective evidence of quality

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