



Mid-term review of the National Return to Work Strategy 2020–2030

Final report – May 2025

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Summary

This report examines the effectiveness of the *National Return to Work Strategy 2020–2030* (the Strategy) after its first 5 years.

Safe Work Australia has undertaken a mid-term review of the Strategy in consultation with Safe Work Australia Members and key stakeholders. This report provides an in-depth analysis of the Strategy's effectiveness and draws on information from a range of sources.

The review found there is broad recognition that the Strategy has been effective in its first 5 years at influencing, informing and guiding the action of stakeholders targeted at improving return to work outcomes for workers with a work-related injury or illness. Feedback suggests the Strategy has improved national collaboration and continues to focus efforts on opportunities for change at the national level.

Feedback from stakeholders has also been positive regarding Safe Work Australia's efforts to drive the Strategy in building evidence, delivering guidance, and raising awareness of key issues to improve return to work outcomes.

Stakeholders found progress reporting based on the Measurement Framework has been a valuable tool for understanding national return to work performance, but also identified opportunities to improve how the success of the Strategy is measured and reported on.

The latest data indicates mixed results on the Strategy's progress against strategic outcomes and toward national targets, however interpreting the results is complicated by limitations on the data currently available (most indicators have not been updated since 2021) and questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other external factors.

In line with the mixed results, stakeholders identified the challenges and opportunities requiring greater focus over the remainder of the Strategy. These include the continuing rise and impact of psychological injuries; ensuring the workers' compensation system has the capacity and capabilities needed to meet demands; and providing further support for employers, workers and other key stakeholders in the return to work process. Stakeholders agreed there are further opportunities for collaboration at the national level and that the Strategy can help influence, guide and inform action over its remaining 5 years to improve return to work outcomes.

Outcomes from the review

- The Strategy remains fit for purpose and its strategic outcomes and action areas remain appropriate and focused on key priorities.
- The latest data indicates mixed results on the Strategy's progress against strategic outcomes and toward national targets.
- Stakeholders value the national initiatives progressed under the Strategy, particularly on research, and support Safe Work Australia continuing to lead their development.
- Stakeholders recognise the limitations of how the Strategy measures progress and support further work to refine the Measurement Framework to inform the Strategy's Year 6 Scorecard in 2026.
- Broad support for continuing to use the Strategy to drive national efforts to meet the key challenges and leverage opportunities to improve return to work outcomes.

About the National Return to Work Strategy

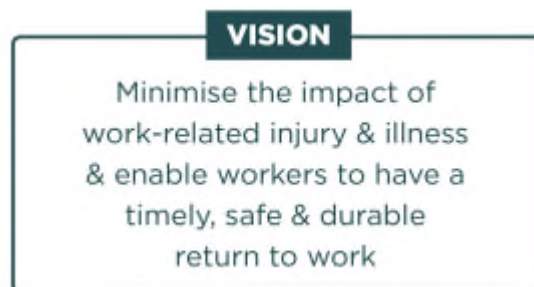
The [National Return to Work Strategy 2020–2030](#) (the Strategy) provides a 10-year framework to drive and leverage national action to improve return to work outcomes for workers with a work-related injury or illness.

The Strategy was endorsed by work health and safety ministers and Safe Work Australia Members in 2019, signifying their commitment to a national collaborative approach to support workers in their recovery and return to work.

‘Return to work’ is about helping workers get back to work or stay at work while they recover from their work-related injury or illness. A positive return to work involves all stakeholders, organisations and systems working well together.

The Strategy’s vision

The Strategy examines and addresses national policy challenges and aims to promote collective national action to minimise the impact of work-related injury and illness and achieve positive return to work outcomes.



Central to achieving the Strategy’s vision is optimising the worker’s recovery and capacity to work, and recognising the role good work plays in achieving this.

The vision is supported by a set of national strategic outcomes that outlines what is expected to change if the Strategy is successful, and a Measurement Framework that sets out how success will be measured. Safe Work Australia undertakes periodic reporting to monitor and measure progress against these strategic outcomes in line with the monitoring and governance arrangements and Measurement Framework.

Safe Work Australia’s role in the Strategy

Safe Work Australia is an Australian government statutory body established in 2009 to develop national policy relating to work health and safety (WHS) and workers’ compensation. It is a tripartite body and includes Members representing each of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, as well as workers and employers.

A key function of Safe Work Australia as set out in the *Safe Work Australia Act 2008 (Cth)* is to develop, evaluate and, if necessary, revise national WHS and workers’ compensation policies and supporting strategies.

Safe Work Australia leads the development of national initiatives under the Strategy and advancing its evidence base, which is publicly available in the Strategy's dedicated [resource library](#). Safe Work Australia is responsible for promoting the implementation of the Strategy, including its national initiatives, and measuring and reporting on progress.

Safe Work Australia's Strategic Issues Group on Workers' Compensation (SIG-Workers' Compensation) oversees the Strategy's delivery and provides advice to Safe Work Australia Members. Individual Safe Work Australia Members retain responsibility for progressing their own initiatives in their respective jurisdictions.

The mid-term review

The Strategy's monitoring and governance arrangements set out that Safe Work Australia will undertake an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of the Strategy after the first 5 years of implementation. The terms of reference for this mid-term review as agreed by Safe Work Australia Members are at [Appendix A](#).

A broad range of consultation activities were undertaken to support the mid-term review. Safe Work Australia conducted internal consultations, workshops and collaborated across teams to ensure the review considers and aligns with Safe Work Australia's current work plan, roles and functions.

We actively promoted and invited feedback across our available channels and undertook extensive consultation with external stakeholders, through a variety of methods, to provide all stakeholders with an opportunity to contribute feedback. We consulted with all SIG-Workers' Compensation members and interested Safe Work Australia Members (covering all jurisdictions and social partners); representatives from employer, worker and professional associations; insurers and claims management providers; workers' compensation authorities and other government agencies.

We used a range of consultation mechanisms, including running a 6-week public consultation period through the Safe Work Australia website, inviting key stakeholders to discuss their views or provide written feedback, and establishing a working group to provide expert advice on data elements of the Strategy.

The mid-term review received engagement across all stakeholder groups with 31 public submissions, 15 bilateral consultations, and 4 additional written submissions from key stakeholders. These contributions have provided valuable and diverse insights into the effectiveness of the Strategy in its first 5 years, the challenges and opportunities for improving return to work outcomes that stakeholders currently face, and options for further work or areas requiring greater focus.

Insights from the review

The review focuses on four key areas, as set out in the terms of reference:

- Effectiveness of the Strategy to drive and leverage national action in the first 5 years
- Progress against strategic outcomes and towards national targets
- Challenges or areas requiring more focus in the remaining 5 years, and
- Appropriateness of existing measures and national targets for the remaining 5 years.

Effectiveness of the Strategy to drive and leverage national action in the first 5 years

There is broad recognition among stakeholders that the Strategy has been effective at driving and leveraging national action to improve return to work outcomes for workers with a work-related injury or illness in its first 5 years.

Among those consulted, most stakeholders agreed the Strategy has helped improve national collaboration for examining and addressing current and emerging challenges to supporting workers in their recovery and return to work.

Stakeholders agreed the Strategy’s vision and strategic outcomes continue to focus efforts where there are opportunities for change at the national level.

While Australian workforce demographics and the nature of work are always evolving, the first 5 years of the Strategy have seen many significant changes in the way we work. Many stakeholders discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic, the gig economy, and changes to health care and technology had impacted return to work and the issues the Strategy is seeking to address.

Despite this, most felt the Strategy has proven broad and flexible enough to focus national efforts where action was required during its first 5 years. This includes Safe Work Australia leading the development of a suite of national initiatives targeting areas of national priority. See [Key achievements – delivery of national initiatives](#).

There is broad support that the Strategy’s 5 action areas are clear and relevant.

Most stakeholders agreed the action areas and supporting activities had helped prioritise and inform national initiatives directed at improving return to work outcomes over the first 5 years and that they continue to reflect opportunities for change at the national level.

Many also commented that the action areas are clear about different stakeholders’ responsibilities and useful in promoting evidence that shows how positive return to work outcomes are more likely when stakeholders work collaboratively.

“The Strategy has successfully set the framework to drive improvement across the industry through collaboration, and the development of data driven, evidence-based best practices.” – Insurer

Stakeholders strongly valued the Strategy’s 10 guiding principles, which were widely referenced by stakeholders when developing organisation-level strategies, policies and programs.

The guiding principles identify the characteristics of positive behaviours, policies and practices across stakeholder groups and individual, organisational and system levels. Most agreed they remain relevant and useful for guiding stakeholders to develop local initiatives to support achieving the Strategy’s strategic outcomes and should continue to be promoted.

Impact of COVID-19

The Strategy was launched in January 2020, just prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic had an immediate effect on the delivery of national initiatives under the Strategy, as Safe Work Australia focused on supporting workplaces to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape throughout the pandemic. Longer term, the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on return to work outcomes are still not fully understood, so it remains difficult to interpret how much progress reporting reflects the performance of activities taken under the Strategy or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2021 National Return to Work Survey asked 1,620 workers about their experience recovering from an injury or illness and returning to work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 20% of injured workers said the pandemic had impacted their return to work “somewhat” or a “great deal”. Only 11% of workers said COVID-19 made their return to work easier.

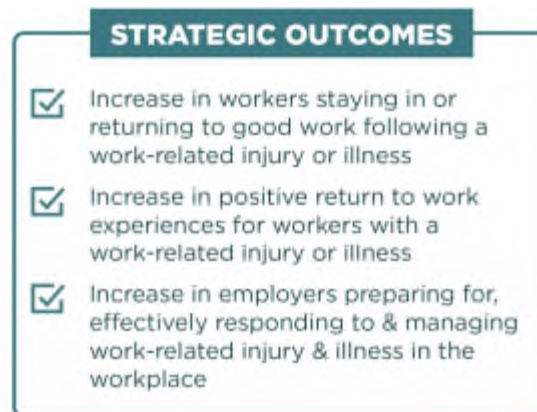
Some of the largest impacts from COVID-19 on the return to work process included limited access to healthcare and rehabilitation treatments, limited access to mental health support and limited access to social and family support. A much higher rate of workers with a psychological injury reported substantial impact on their recovery and return to work, compared to those with a physical injury.

Other impacts contributed to delayed return to work, including COVID-19 restrictions at workplaces and challenges keeping workers safe, reduced or changing demand for many businesses’ products and services, workers being stood down and job losses in more heavily impacted industries, delays in insurance claims processes and greater difficulty communicating with insurers and other key stakeholders.

For more information, see [Returning to work during COVID-19](#) on the Safe Work Australia website.

Progress against strategic outcomes and towards national targets

The Strategy's strategic outcomes centre on the worker and employer, recognising that national actions aimed at workers and employers have potential for the greatest positive impact on return to work outcomes for all stakeholders involved. The strategic outcomes outline in the simplest of terms what is expected to change if the Strategy is successful:



Other stakeholders in the return to work process also play a key role in contributing to the achievement of these outcomes, as reflected in the guiding principles and action areas of the Strategy.

Key achievements – delivery of national initiatives

One of Safe Work Australia's key contributions in the first 5 years of the Strategy has been leading the development of a suite of national initiatives.

Stakeholders were very positive about the national initiatives developed under the Strategy and are supportive of Safe Work Australia continuing to lead their ongoing development. Stakeholders also recognised the considerable work undertaken by jurisdictions to improve return to work outcomes. Information on many of these activities and links to available resources are provided in the [Strategy Resource Library](#).

Stakeholders particularly valued the research that Safe Work Australia delivered under the Strategy.

Feedback from stakeholders was the research delivered under the Strategy is well targeted and helped facilitate sharing of evidence and research across jurisdictions. We heard comments this evidence base has supported organisations' strategic planning, policy development and program development.

This included the following independent research reports developed under the Strategy:

- [Psychological response to injury: Research to support workers' psychological responses to injury and successful return to work](#)
- [Research into Australian workers' understanding of workers' compensation systems and their communication preferences](#)
- [Stigma towards injured or ill workers: Research on the causes and impact of workplace stigma in the workplace, and approaches to creating positive workplace cultures that support return to work](#)
- [Early intervention in the workers' compensation process.](#)

Many stakeholders highlighted the value and utility of data collection by Safe Work Australia and reporting under the Strategy.

Safe Work Australia improved the availability and quality of workers' compensation claims data to enhance building and translation of evidence, data collection and reporting, including:

- a redesigned [National Return to Work Survey](#) that will build a more complete picture of parties in the return to work relationship – the worker and their employer,
- the launch of an [interactive data website](#), and
- key achievements and scorecard reports for the Strategy in [Year 1](#) and [Year 3](#).

Feedback was that it provides a national picture on return to work rates, as well as benchmarking to assess scheme performance, particularly valuable for smaller jurisdictions. Stakeholders were particularly supportive of Safe Work Australia's new interactive data website, which improved access to data on return to work and workers compensation.

Stakeholders were very positive about the practical evidence-based resources that Safe Work Australia delivered under the Strategy, particularly for small and medium business and injured workers.

These resources included:

- [National principles for communicating workers' compensation information to workers](#)
- [Managing the relationship with an injured or ill worker during return to work: A guide for supervisors in small and medium businesses](#)
- [Developing a return to work plan: A guide and template.](#)

Feedback was these resources provide accessible and practical guidance on how to improve an injured worker's journey through recovery and return to work.

“These resources have been useful in training and providing guidance to employees and return-to-work coordinators, contributing to success in return to work rates and reducing recovery timeframes.” – Employer representative

Stakeholders were very supportive of Safe Work Australia’s national communication campaigns which promoted the Strategy’s research, best practice guidance and messaging about ways to improve return to work.

Stakeholder feedback on the national campaign based on the Strategy’s workers’ compensation stigma research was very positive. This included development and publication of resources on [Taking action to reduce workers’ compensation stigma](#).

Stakeholders said this campaign was highly engaging and impactful at raising awareness about workers’ compensation stigma and practical ways to address it.

Measuring progress

The Measurement Framework uses 15 indicators to monitor performance against the strategic outcomes of the Strategy, published in a scorecard at key milestones across the Strategy’s lifespan.

Measuring progress toward achieving the Strategy’s strategic outcomes will provide signposts throughout its 10-year life and enable the efficient and effective targeting of resources to both monitor and improve return to work outcomes, including informing national initiatives under the Strategy. The national targets for improvement are directions of change that we want to see to ensure we are making progress towards the strategic outcomes.

The scorecard was previously published with the introduction of the Strategy in 2020 (Baseline results), in 2023 (Year 3 of the Strategy), and now again in this mid-term review report (Year 5 of the Strategy). The Year 5 scorecard is presented on [page 13](#).

There are some practical limitations in analysing the results of the latest scorecard.

The indicators presented in the scorecard use data from workers’ compensation claims and the National Return to Work Survey. The 3 indicators based on workers’ compensation claims have been updated with new data.

The remaining indicators have not been updated since the 2021 National Return to Work Survey. Since the survey was last conducted in 2021, Safe Work Australia has led an extensive redesign of the survey, including development of an employer module, and a comprehensive national pilot. The redesigned survey will provide greater insights on stakeholder perspectives and will be conducted again in 2025. This means the indicators based on the survey have not been updated in the latest scorecard, but are expected to be updated with new data¹ in the next scorecard in Year 6 of the Strategy. Data from the pilot was assessed as not suitable for use in scorecard reporting.

Another factor to consider when interpreting the scorecard is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on return to work and work-related injury and illness rates.

¹ With the exception of indicator d, which was removed from the survey during the redesign process. This indicator will not be updated with new data in future iterations of the scorecard.

These matters are further discussed in the later section on [Appropriateness of existing measures and national targets for the remaining 5 years](#).

The evidence suggests a deterioration in Strategic Outcome 1: Increase in workers staying in or returning to good work following a work-related injury or illness.

All 6 indicators of this outcome have moved in the wrong direction since the beginning of the Strategy, noting 4 indicators are based on (older) National Return to Work Survey results and so should be interpreted with caution.

Injured workers with an accepted workers' compensation claim are more frequently having time away from work, with the rate of accepted claims that do not involve any time loss declining by 19% since the start of the Strategy (indicator e).²

Injured workers with a claim are also staying away from work for longer periods of time. The rate of workers who had at least 13 weeks away from work has increased by 31% since the start of the Strategy (indicator f). This trend is also reflected in the increasing share of claims that are for work-related mental health conditions, which has increased from 6.4% in 2012-13 to 10.5% in 2022-23p. The median time lost from work in these cases is more than 5 times that recorded across all injuries/diseases.

The other 4 indicators for Strategic Outcome 1, based on (older) National Return to Work Survey data, suggest that since the start of the Strategy, injured workers are less likely to have returned to work, more likely to have required additional time off due to their injury or illness, less likely to self-rate their health as at least 'good', and more likely to report a diminished ability to work effectively once returned to work.

The data shows mixed results for Strategic Outcome 2: Increase in positive return to work experiences for workers with a work-related injury or illness.

Positively, insurers are taking less time to process claims (indicator j), with the average time taken declining from 5.8 weeks to 5.2 weeks over the course of the Strategy thus far. As noted in the [Methodology for the Measurement Framework](#), there is strong evidence that insurer decision time is a leading indicator of return to work.

However, the other 3 indicators for this outcome show little change from baseline results. The level of perceived fairness of the workers' compensation process has declined very slightly (indicator g), while indicators on work-focused healthcare and stressful healthcare interactions (indicators h and i) have changed less than a percentage point since the start of the Strategy (noting that the latest data are several years old now).

The limited evidence available shows mixed results for Strategic Outcome 3: Increase in employers preparing for, effectively responding to and managing work-related injury and illness in the workplace.

² Note that the ABS Work-related injury survey (which provides estimates representative of all injured workers, regardless of whether they made a claim) shows that the proportion of workers who didn't take time off to recover from their injury has increased from 60% in 2017-18 to 66% in 2021-22. More data is needed to determine the implications of these results.

All 5 indicators for this strategic outcome are based on (older) National Return to Work Survey results and thus should be interpreted with caution.

2 of the 5 indicators have deteriorated slightly: workers' perception of the support they received from their employer (indicator k), and workers' belief in their ability to return to work (indicator o), have both slightly diminished.

The other 3 indicators show very marginal improvements: workers are slightly more likely to be contacted by their employer following their work-related injury or illness, slightly more likely to return to modified duties or hours, and slightly more likely to have a return-to-work plan in place.

Measure and Source	Description	Baseline measure (average of 2016 and 2018 surveys where available)	Year 3 (average of 2018 and 2021 surveys where available)	Year 5	What we want to see
Strategic Outcome 1: Increase in workers staying in or returning to good work following a work-related injury or illness					
a. Safe return to work NRTWS	The percentage of workers who had returned to work and required additional time off because of their work-related injury or illness.	17.8%	21.4%	No new data	↓ Decrease
b. Durable return to work NRTWS	The percentage of workers back at work for at least 3 months.	67.5%	65.7%	No new data	↑ Increase
c. General health NRTWS	The percentage of respondents with good to excellent self-rated health.	74.0%	69.2%	No new data	↑ Increase
d. Work Role Functioning NRTWS	This indicator collates average Work Role Functioning questionnaire scores in workers who had returned to work.	55.3%	52.9%	N/A (discontinued)	↑ Increase
e. Timely return to work* NDS	The rate of accepted claims with time loss at 13 weeks, 26 weeks and 52 weeks (per 1000 claims)	13 weeks: 162 26 weeks: 103 52 weeks: 62	13 weeks: 189 26 weeks: 125 52 weeks: 79	13 weeks: 213 26 weeks: 140 52 weeks: 84	↓ Decrease
f. Stay at work* NDS	The rate of accepted claims that do not involve any time loss (per 1000 claims)	374	352	304	↑ Increase
Strategic Outcome 2: Increase in positive return to work experiences for workers with a work-related injury or illness					
g. Perceived fairness NRTWS	The percentage of workers who overall perceived their workers' compensation process to be fair.	74.6%	73.5%	No new data	↑ Increase
h. Work-focused healthcare NRTWS	The percentage of workers who had positive overall work-focused healthcare communications with their main healthcare provider.	78.7%	79.1%	No new data	↑ Increase
i. Healthcare stress NRTWS	Percentage of workers reporting that they had stressful interactions with a healthcare provider.	29.8%	30.3%	No new data	↓ Decrease
j. Insurer decision time* NDS	The average time, in weeks, between claim receipt by an insurer and their decision to accept a claim	5.8 weeks	6.0 weeks	5.2 weeks	↓ Decrease
Strategic Outcome 3: Increase in employers preparing for, effectively responding to and managing work-related injury and illness in the workplace					
k. Employer response NRTWS	The percentage of workers agreeing that their employer supported them following their injury.	66.0%	62.1%	No new data	↑ Increase
l. Employer contact NRTWS	The percentage of workers contacted by their employers since their work-related injury or illness.	61.9%	63.0%	No new data	↑ Increase
m. Return to work planning NRTWS	The percentage of workers who reported that they had a return to work plan.	65.3%	66.3%	No new data	↑ Increase
n. Workplace accommodations NRTWS	The proportion of workers who had returned to work and reported that they returned with modified hours or modified duties.	35.5% returned to <i>slightly</i> different duties 17.6% returned to <i>completely</i> different duties 36.1% returned to <i>modified hours</i>	35.7% returned to <i>slightly</i> different duties 18.3% returned to <i>completely</i> different duties 36.9% returned to <i>modified hours</i>	No new data	↑ Increase
o. Return to work self-efficacy NRTWS	The percentage of workers who overall felt positively about their ability to return to work.	74.9%	71.3%	No new data	↑ Increase

Explanatory notes:

For more detail on the measures please refer to the Strategy's [Measurement Framework](#) and [Methodology for the Measurement Framework](#).

NRTWS refers to the Safe Work Australia's *National Return to Work Survey* which collates information from injured and ill workers on their experience of the workers' compensation system and return to work processes. To account for changes in methodology across different waves of the NRTW Survey, indicators from the NRTW Survey use a two-wave rolling average when available, except for in cases where there is no data prior to 2018, in which case a single year figure was used for the Baseline figure and a two-wave rolling average (2018, 2021) for the Year 3 figure.

Data for some indicators based on NRTW Survey (indicators a, b, c, d, g, h, i, k, n and o) have been revised based on updated calculation methods intended to better capture the concept being measured. As a result, the revised figures in this scorecard may differ to those published previously.

NDS refers to Safe Work Australia's *National Data Set for Compensation-based Statistics* which includes national information on accepted workers' compensation claims. Please note, workers' compensation claims data only accounts for injured workers who have made a workers' compensation claim which has been accepted. Indicators drawn from the NDS use a rolling baseline average of 3 years' data to reduce the effect of year-on-year variability. For the Year 5 figures, an average of 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 data has been used for each indicator.

* Improvements to Safe Work Australia's data quality and methodologies, as well as the updating of workers' compensation claims data, have led to figures for this indicator being revised.

Challenges or areas requiring more focus in the remaining 5 years of the Strategy

Stakeholders identified challenges and opportunities requiring greater focus over the remainder of the Strategy.

The continued rise and impact of psychological injuries was mentioned by many stakeholders as one of the most significant challenges for return to work.

Stakeholders expressed concerns that psychological injury claims rates and costs continue to rise despite significant activity in all jurisdictions.

Stakeholders suggested a number of opportunities, including developing research into improving the management of psychological injury and further practical resources for key stakeholders, including leveraging WHS guidance on managing psychosocial hazards to ensure workers return to a safe workplace by preventing or mitigating re-exposure to psychosocial hazards.

“Safe Work Australia has an opportunity to leverage the work it is doing in the safety/prevention space to influence return to work. Employers are very focussed on safety and particularly psychosocial risks currently. Better linking safety with claims/recovery will promote better return to work outcomes.” – Return to work policy advocate

There was recognition that the current initiatives under the Strategy are seeking to address some of these issues, including the review of [*Taking Action: A best practice framework for management of psychological claims in the Australian workers' compensation sector*](#) to ensure it remains contemporary and fit for purpose, and research into the drivers of secondary psychological injuries in the workers' compensation process.

There was strong feedback about the challenge of ensuring the workers' compensation system has the capacity and capabilities needed to meet demands, particularly for psychological injuries and in regional and remote areas of Australia.

This includes shortages in medical specialists for diagnosis and treatment and retention of experienced claim managers, who are a significant contributor to successful return to work outcomes in more complex claims.

Stakeholders suggested there may be opportunities to provide support on considering the range of mental health services available to find the most timely and appropriate support for an injured worker's needs.

Many suggested that workers and employers need more support and guidance, particularly small and medium businesses and vulnerable workers.

Suggestions included improving:

- workers' and employers' understanding of their rights and responsibilities in the return to work process
- awareness of workers' compensation stigma and how to reduce it
- workplace dispute and conflict resolution, and
- support for identifying suitable duties and workplace adjustments.

There was also strong feedback about the challenges in supporting:

- gig workers, as the gig economy continues to expand, and
- workers in high-risk occupations, such first responders or those exposed to silica dust, in the light of new evidence on work-related diseases such silicosis.

“Gig workers often face significant challenges when it comes to workplace protections and entitlements, including not being able to access workers' compensation benefits like return to work.” – Worker representative

Stakeholders also suggested that those who support workers in their recovery and return to work, particularly employers, insurers, claims providers, and health practitioners, also need more support and guidance.

Stakeholders suggested there are opportunities to improve understanding of the role of everyone in the return to work process, drive more meaningful collaboration amongst differing groups, and promote wider recognition of the health benefits of early return to good work.

“More education, resources and guides are needed to get the return to work and caring message across all aspects within employers e.g. HR, supervisors, return to work coordinators, senior management, etc.”
– Return to work policy advocate

Overall, stakeholders support continuing to use the Strategy to drive national efforts to meet the key challenges and leverage opportunities to improve return to work outcomes.

Stakeholders agreed there are further opportunities for collaboration at the national level to address these challenges to improving return to work outcomes. They also agreed that the Strategy can help influence, guide and inform action over its remaining 5 years to supporting workers in their recovery and return to work.

Appropriateness of existing measures and national targets for the remaining 5 years

Return to work is a complex process in which many factors at the individual, organisational and system levels interact to influence a worker's recovery, absence from work and the durability of their return to work.

The Strategy's Measurement Framework aims to reflect this complexity by helping identify the most important areas to collect data to measure the Strategy's success.

The existing measures and national targets were developed in partnership with governments, worker and employer representatives and informed by evidence, expert advice, and insights from various stakeholders during the development of the Strategy.

For more information on the rationale and details underpinning the Measurement Framework, see [Methodology for the Measurement Framework](#).

Stakeholders were supportive of the Measurement Framework bringing together a range of measures with the aim of providing a comprehensive view of national return to work performance.

Stakeholders particularly valued having a time series for the data used in the Measurement Framework, which allows an understanding of historical trends.

In some jurisdictions, the progress reporting has been used to drive improvements in their workers' compensation scheme by providing a basis for targeted interventions and valuable benchmarking for assessing scheme performance.

Stakeholders were positive about the Measurement Framework using data collected from workers' compensation claims and the National Return to Work Survey.

These data sources are routinely collected and have national coverage. Relying on existing data collection minimises the effort in collating, analysing and reporting on measuring the success of the Strategy. The mix of data sources helps provide multiple perspectives on performance.

"The Strategy has very clear measures of its success and the expanded indicators subsequently produced are very thorough and broad picture of the status of return to work outcomes." – Return to work policy advocate

Due to limitations with the data currently available, stakeholders felt current progress reporting may not represent the Strategy's impact in its first 5 years.

One limitation of the existing methods is with the currency of the data and evidence, partly due to scheduled reporting that is out of sync with scheduled data collection. This means scorecards can be slow to reflect changes in the contemporary landscape or actions taken under the Strategy by Safe Work Australia, jurisdictions and other stakeholders.

Stakeholders suggested considering diversifying data sources and incorporating supporting or partial indicators to help improve the currency of progress reporting.

Stakeholders also highlighted that there may be evidence gaps in the existing Measurement Framework, particularly relating to the increasing proportion of psychological injury claims. There were further concerns about underreporting of psychological injuries nationally and whether the Measurement Framework could better capture and highlight this data.

Stakeholders suggested that progress reporting could better reflect the considerable work taken under the Strategy to improve return to work outcomes.

Stakeholders recognised that it may take time to see the impact of the Strategy. The Strategy creates a framework to develop research and national policies on return to work, which aims to support achieving the strategic outcomes by informing and influencing policy decisions. There is an opportunity to consider how to better communicate the effectiveness of the Strategy in influencing, informing and guiding action as well as the impact of those activities toward achieving the longer-term strategic outcomes.

Stakeholders also suggested there is an opportunity for the Measurement Framework to provide more context about the changes in the broader environment that the Strategy operates within. While the scorecard shows many of the indicators are declining or not changing nationally, stakeholders felt this may reflect more of the impact of external factors, like the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than the impact of activities under the Strategy. However, the impacts of COVID-19 or other external factors on return to work outcomes are not fully understood and current data limitations makes this claim difficult to quantify.

One suggestion was to adopt the landscape monitoring approach from the [Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2023–2033](#), which draws on multiple evidence sources, including partial indicators and research, to identify and describe the changes we want to see and where they are occurring.

Stakeholders noted the scorecard could provide a clearer and simpler narrative.

Currently the scorecard presents the national targets for improvement as directions of change that we want to see to ensure we are making progress towards the strategic outcomes. Many stakeholders commented these can be complicated to interpret when looking across all 15 indicators. There is an opportunity to develop an approach for rating the performance of each indicator and providing an overarching summary.

Initial work with the mid-term review's data expert working group has identified several options for refining the Measurement Framework.

This includes options for more sophisticated analysis of new or existing data sources, additional supporting or partial indicators, and ways to improve data reporting. Reaching national agreement on new data sources, measurement tools and reporting mechanisms will take time. There is an opportunity to undertake further work to refine the Measurement Framework in time to inform the Strategy's Year 6 Scorecard in 2026.

Outcomes of the review

The review found there is broad recognition that the Strategy has been effective at influencing, informing and guiding the action of stakeholders in its first 5 years.

There is a clear consensus that the Strategy remains fit for purpose and its vision, strategic outcomes, and action areas remain appropriate and focused on key priorities.

Stakeholders were very positive about the national initiatives progressed under the Strategy, particularly on research, and are supportive of Safe Work Australia continuing to lead development of further national initiatives in the Strategy's remaining 5 years.

Stakeholders valued Safe Work Australia's efforts under the Strategy to build the evidence base, deliver practical guidance and resources for key stakeholders, and raise awareness of key issues through national communications campaigns.

Stakeholders recognise the limitations of how the Strategy measures progress and support undertaking further work to refine the Measurement Framework in time to inform the Strategy's Year 6 Scorecard in 2026.

Stakeholders found progress reporting based on the Measurement Framework has been a valuable tool for understanding national return to work performance, but also identified opportunities to improve how the success of the Strategy is measured and reported on.

The latest scorecard indicates mixed results on the Strategy's progress against strategic outcomes and toward national targets. Although it shows progress has been made in a few areas, other areas have shown little change or are moving in the wrong direction, including an overall decrease in injured or ill workers staying or returning to good work.

However, interpreting the scorecard is complicated by limitations with the data currently available and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most indicators have not been updated since 2021, partly due to scheduled reporting that is out of sync with scheduled data collection. Initial work to refine the Measurement Framework includes options for more sophisticated analysis of new or existing data sources, additional supporting or partial indicators, and ways to improve data reporting.

Overall, there was broad support for continuing to use the Strategy to drive national efforts to meet the key challenges and leverage opportunities to improve return to work outcomes.

This includes challenges with the continuing rise and impact of psychological injuries and ensuring the workers' compensation system has the capacity and capabilities needed to meet current demands, including shortages in medical specialists and retention of experienced claims managers, as well as providing further support for employers, workers and other key stakeholders in the return to work process.

Appendix A – Terms of Reference

Background

In 2019, Safe Work Australia (SWA) Members and ministers with responsibility for work health and safety (WHS ministers) endorsed the *National Return to Work Strategy 2020–2030* (the Strategy), signifying their commitment to a national collaborative approach to support workers in their recovery and return to work.

The aim of the Strategy is to minimise the impact of work-related injury and illness to help injured workers have a timely, safe and durable return to work. The Strategy creates a framework to develop research and national policies on return to work to facilitate shared insights and guide future policies in Australia.

The Strategy is supported by a [Measurement Framework](#) which sets out how the success of the Strategy will be measured. SWA has agreed to undertake reporting to monitor and measure progress under the Strategy in line with the monitoring and governance arrangements and Measurement Framework.

Scope of the review

As agreed by SWA Members, SWA will undertake an in-depth analysis of the effectiveness of the Strategy after the first 5 years of implementation.

The review will be conducted in consultation with SWA Members, SIG-Workers' Compensation and other key stakeholders and will consider information from a range of sources.

The review will consider:

- how effectively the Strategy drives and leverages national action to improve return to work outcomes for workers with a work-related injury or illness
- progress against the Strategy's strategic outcomes and towards the national targets
- challenges or areas requiring a more dedicated focus in the remaining 5 years of the Strategy, and
- the appropriateness of existing measures and national targets for the remaining 5 years of the Strategy.

The review will be finalised by 30 June 2025.

The outcomes of the review will be provided to SWA Members for discussion and response before providing a final report to WHS ministers for information. The key findings of the review will be made publicly available.

A working group will be established to provide expertise and support on the data driven elements of the Strategy's Measurement Framework and will report its findings and recommendations to SIG-Workers' Compensation.