



Response to the ‘Shaping your new disability employment support program’ consultation paper

28 January 2022

Acknowledgement of Country

The St Vincent de Paul Society acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live and work, with deep respect. May Elders, past and present, be blessed and honoured. May we join together and build a future based on compassion, justice, hope, faith, and reconciliation.

Introduction

The Society appreciates this opportunity to provide input into the new Disability Employment Support program.

Our response to the consultation paper is premised on a commitment to the right of people with disability to earn an income in work freely chosen and on an equal basis with others.¹

As a nation, it is clear we are not yet doing enough to realise this right. Despite significant reform in disability services, the gap between the unemployment rate of people with reported disability and people with no reported disability has widened over the last decade: People with disability are now twice as likely to be unemployed.² The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to further limit employment prospects for people with disability.³

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 aims to 'Increase employment of people with disability'⁴ while the Disability Employment Strategy for the same period seeks to create 'Inclusive workplace cultures where people with disability thrive in their career'⁵. The programs and services that support people with disability in employment, however, are not yet working together to achieve these objectives. Further, the focus has yet to move beyond simply supporting people with disability to find and keep a job, to ensuring people with disability can realise their employment goals and aspirations.

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW has delivered disability services for nearly 50 years. Our experience spans a broad range of service types and many of the people who work in our services have extensive experience in the sector. This submission is informed by focus group discussions with participants in our three Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), and by the perspectives of support workers, care coordinators, team leaders and managers who work in our disability services. Our ADEs are located in Stanmore, West Ryde and Coonamble, and they provide supports in employment to approximately 84 NDIS participants. Our Stanmore and West Ryde ADEs provide packing, assembly and dispatch services, while our Coonamble ADE is primarily a textile recycling business and is attached to a Vinnies Shop. It also provides laundry services, a carwash, and courier services.

Based on our service footprint, the focus of this submission is on the experience of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants, and the opportunity for disability employment services and ADEs to work more effectively, within the context of the NDIS, to provide participants with pathways to less segregated employment opportunities, including open employment.

Recommendations:

- In reshaping employment supports for people with disability, the Department should seek to ensure person-centred responses are available to all people with disability, including people not able to work more than eight hours per week.
- The Department should work with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to facilitate better connections between disability employment services and the NDIS (particularly ADEs), including publishing clear guidance outlining how these systems could work together to deliver better employment outcomes for people with disability.

¹ UN General Assembly 2006, Article 27.

² AIHW (2020) People with disability in Australia

³ Olney, S., Devine, A., Karanikolas, P., Dimov, S., Malbon, J., & Katsikis, G. (2021) Disability and work in a health and economic crisis: mitigating the risk of long-term labour market exclusion for Australians with disability through policy coordination. *Aust J Publ Admin*; 1–18.

⁴ Australian Government (Department of Social Services) (2021) Australia's Disability strategy 2021 – 2031.

⁵ Australian Government (2021) Employ My Ability: Disability Employment Strategy.

- Particular attention should be given to the way in which people’s transport needs are met across and between disability employment services and the NDIS to address current gaps and ensure a more consistent and responsive approach.
- The Department should support ongoing efforts to build aspiration and expectation for employment among people with disability, their families and carers, and within the broader community.
- In shaping the new Disability Employment Support Program, attention should focus on ensuring better access to on-the-job training and supports, including for NDIS participants currently working in ADEs.
- Initiatives that engage employers in creating appropriate jobs and employment conditions need further investigation and support, including a focus on how such initiatives can be scaled.

Question 1.1: Who should be able to access a specialist disability employment program?

Boston Consulting Groups’ Mid-term Review of the Disability Employment Services (DES) Program floats several options to reduce eligibility for these services (thereby reducing costs).⁶ These include targeting cohorts where the impact of assistance will be greatest, reducing the cut-off age to 60, and introducing additional criteria for re-entry into the program for participants who do not achieve an outcome initially.

While the focus of our submission is on NDIS participants, we are concerned such changes would create more gaps in a system that is already complex and hard to navigate, and which is clearly failing to provide adequate and appropriate support to many people with disability. The proposed changes to eligibility for employment services would particularly impact older people and people with more complex needs; groups that are already marginalised. If any changes to program eligibility are made, they must be considered within the broader ecosystem of supports available to people with disability and people looking for work, and should be guided by a principles-based approach that seeks to ensure:

- All people with disability can access the support they need to find a job, keep a job, and realise their employment goals and career aspirations.
- People with disability can exercise choice and control over how that support is provided.

Previous consultation processes have also highlighted the lack of employment support available to people with assessed capacity to work of less than eight hours per week.⁷ We agree that this cohort should have equal opportunity to receive support aimed at improving employment outcomes in the open market.

Question 1.4: What is the role of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in supporting employment pathways, and how can this complement a future disability employment support program?

NDIS participants who are looking for work, or who wish to explore new career opportunities, can be required to navigate different systems that do not currently work well together to support their goals and aspirations.

⁶ Boston Consulting Group (2020) Mid-Term Review of the Disability Employment Services (DES) Program.

⁷ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2021) Overview of responses to the Employment Issues Paper.

One NDIS participant in our focus group discussions, for example, told us he had been with a disability employment service provider for four years. He had wanted to find a job in open employment but when he was not successful, he had been placed with an ADE (which had since ceased operations). Even though this was not his desired employment outcome, following his placement he had received no further contact from the DES provider, and lost access to a service that might have allowed him to continue to investigate alternative employment opportunities while working at the ADE as an interim measure.

The need for better connections between the NDIS and disability employment services is recognised in the *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-2022* which commits to publishing clear information about how the NDIS and DES will work better together.⁸ Yet in our consultations with participants and disability practitioners it was clear that there is not yet a shared understanding of the way in which these two systems might connect to provide person-centred pathways to employment and career progression. Considerably more work is needed to create such pathways.

Of NDIS participants who receive supports in employment, the majority (approximately 20,000) currently do so via Australian Disability Enterprises. While there is considerable debate amongst people with disability, disability advocates, and disability service providers as to whether employment in an ADE is an acceptable employment outcome,⁹ in the current landscape they play an important role providing safe and meaningful work opportunities for people with disability.

In line with our commitment to ensuring people with disability have more employment options, however, we are actively working to develop pathways to open employment through our ADEs, as well as exploring our potential to provide less segregated employment opportunities. While this work is still in its infancy, we hope the reshaping of the Disability Employment Support program will facilitate a more integrated approach.

Following ADEs recent transition to the NDIS, workers in ADEs discuss their employment goals annually and identify how they will work towards these goals. Following ADEs transition to the NDIS there is now greater flexibility to deliver, or support the delivery of, individualised support towards broader employment goals, including support in open employment. However, ADEs capacity to actively engage with potential employers on behalf of individual employees, or small groups of employees, to identify or create suitable employment opportunities is limited. While disability employment services routinely engage with employers, there remains a lack of clear information and models demonstrating how NDIS participants working in ADEs could and should be supported to explore alternative employment options, including via partnerships with DES providers.¹⁰ In designing the new DES program, the Department should therefore work with the NDIA to address this gap, and improve understanding of how a participants' employment goals might be matched with support across both systems. This includes the need to challenge the assumption that ADEs are an endpoint for employment and ensure they are not treated as such within the broader service system.

In clarifying how the DES program and the NDIS might more effectively support employment outcomes for NDIS participants, we also note there are opportunities to better leverage the disability-specific skills and knowledge that exist in the disability service system, including ADEs, and which participants noted are lacking in some disability employment services. This is particularly important for people with complex disability, and those requiring more specialised support. Again, greater clarity about how ADEs

⁸ NDIS, 2019. *NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-2022*,

⁹ In its response to the Royal Commission, the Australian Human Rights Commission posited that the current model of supported employment in ADEs does not meet Australia's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly rights to inclusion and non-discrimination.

¹⁰ Devine, A. et al (2020) *Exploring the interface of the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Disability Employment Services*. Melbourne Disability Institute and Brotherhood of St Lawrence, August 2020.

and disability employment services might interact to support employment outcomes would help realise these opportunities.

As the interface between the NDIS and DES is clarified, we also note the need for a specific focus on how people with disability are supported to overcome transport issues as a barrier to employment. Participants in our consultations reported that particularly during the process of looking for and securing a job, and before an NDIS plan has been updated to reflect a change of circumstances, the approach to how a person's transport needs are addressed is unclear and inconsistent. One participant, for example, said that when trialling a new role his DES provider had given him a handful of taxi vouchers to use when needed, but these had soon run out, leaving him out of pocket. Our support coordinators also noted that participants' NDIS plans did not always cover the real cost of transport to and from employment, thereby reducing the funding available for other activities.

Recommendations:

In reshaping employment supports for people with disability, the Department should seek to ensure person-centred responses are available to all people with disability, including people not able to work more than eight hours per week.

The Department should work with the NDIA to facilitate better connections between disability employment services and the NDIS (particularly ADEs), including publishing clear guidance outlining how these systems could work together to deliver better employment outcomes for people with disability.

Particular attention should be given to the way in which people's transport needs are met across and between disability employment services and the NDIS to address current gaps and ensure a more consistent and responsive approach.

Question 3.1: What has been your experience of receiving employment support from a DES or other employment services provider?

Most of the employees and NDIS participants we spoke to said they had had little or no interaction with a DES provider. Those who had, however, made the following observations:

- Our support coordinators have assisted participants who have requested employment support in their NDIS package to connect with the most appropriate disability employment service provider. In some cases, the coordinator's role has extended beyond facilitating the initial connection; they report that without regular follow-up and prompting participants have not received the expected level of support.
- Several of our practitioners and NDIS participants reported that some DES providers lack disability-specific skills and understanding. Our ADEs noted that when DES providers have referred participants to them, it has been clear that their understanding of ADEs and the support they provide has been limited.

Question 3.2: What types of services and supports would best help a person with disability find and keep a suitable job and progress their career? Who should provide this support?

The majority of participants we spoke to in our ADEs said they were happy in their current role and described what they liked about it. The reasons participants valued their jobs at the ADE provide insights into the types of services and supports that are important to consider in helping people with disability find and keep other employment opportunities. These included:

- The ADE's capacity to tailor work according to people's strengths and requirements. Participants described how some people were good at specific tasks, while others were able to complete more complex processes. The allocation of roles was based on people's individual capacity.
- The flexibility to respond to people's needs. Some participants needed more support on some days, their capacity to perform certain tasks changed over time, or they needed time off for various reasons. These needs could be accommodated within the ADE.
- The on-the-job training and support available through the ADE.
- The social connections. One participant said 'This isn't just a job. It's also about the people. We know each other here. We don't come here just to work, it's something to look forward to.'
- Opportunities to improve social skills and gain confidence by learning new tasks, and being given new responsibilities including leadership/mentoring roles.

Participants who had previously worked in open employment reflected on the experience, and compared it to their current work environment in the ADE:

- One participant said that while he had earned more money in his previous role in open employment, he had been under a lot of pressure and found it too hard keeping up with other people who were more qualified.
- Another participant said he had initially wanted to work in open employment. The Disability Employment Service he was with at the time had found a role for him, but it required him to stand all day and he wasn't able to keep that up.
- Two participants spoke about how previous employers had not been able to accommodate their needs. One person said she had taken too many days off, while another said his employer was not able to provide him with the on-the-job support he needed, nor offer him consistent hours. They compared these experiences with the more flexible conditions available at the ADE.
- One person shared that he had previously spent five years in a role where he had connected with a manager whose daughter had a disability. When the manager retired, he had missed this informal support and felt that others in the organisation did not understand his disability. He therefore made the decision to leave.

When asked about future work aspirations, and what services and supports might help people who wanted to work elsewhere achieve this goal, most participants said they did not want another job. Some of the reasons given included:

- The importance of safety and familiarity. People valued this in and off itself, and one participant told us it was particularly important to him given his eyesight was deteriorating. He was concerned he would be less able to navigate new environments over time.
- The importance of on-the-job training and support and a perception that this would not be available to the same degree in other workplaces.
- Administrative barriers. One participant said that the process of updating an NDIS plan following a change of circumstances was complicated and time-consuming, and that this acted as a deterrent.

One participant said he would love to work for the police or fire brigade, but his attempts to gain work experience as a volunteer had been unsuccessful. Another participant in regional NSW would like to work as a barista, but as the town has only three coffee shops, employment opportunities are limited.

Taken together, these insights and experiences point to an ongoing need to focus efforts in several key areas.

First, there is need to build aspiration and expectation for employment among people with disability. While most of the participants we spoke to in our ADEs said they were not looking to move into open employment, this may be in large part due to a belief that this is not a realistic or desirable option. For some, this belief has been validated by negative experiences in open employment. Our practitioners, however, noted a marked generational shift in the career aspirations people with disability hold for themselves, and the expectations of their families and carers.

In supporting NDIS participants and their families to build confidence to try open services, effort is also needed to ensure that initial experiences are positive and supported. When people are placed in inappropriate roles this can have a long-term impact on their self-belief and willingness to explore other employment opportunities. We note that more of the participants at our regional ADE reported that they had enjoyed a range of work experience opportunities in diverse settings. The strong social connections between local business owners and operators and the ADE made these opportunities easier to arrange.

Focused efforts are also needed address the significant gap in the support and flexibility available through ADEs, and the conditions experienced in other workplace environments, if people are to successfully move into open employment. For many of the participants we spoke to, the lack of on-the-job training and support was a major barrier when thinking about the possibility of working elsewhere.

While there is some potential for ADEs and other disability service providers to expand the on-the-job supports available to people with disability seeking to work in open employment, this comes with several challenges, including:

- The need for a shift in mindset required when employers are asked to accommodate a support worker who is not a company employee.
- The cost of support delivered individually or at higher ratios in settings that employ only small numbers of people with disability.

In our consultations, another recurring theme was the need to better engage employers in creating appropriate jobs and employment conditions. Many of the negative experiences raised by participants during consultation related to employers not understanding what is required to create sustainable employment. To increase the number of employers willing and able to successfully recruit and retain employees with disability, increased investment in training and initiatives that build the capacity of employers is needed. Furthermore, different strategies are needed in regional and rural areas where the lack of overall employment opportunities is an added challenge.

Concerted efforts focused on increasing the supply of jobs that meet the aspirations and needs of job seekers with disability are also needed, if efforts to ensure people with disability have opportunities for education and skills development, work experience, and on-the-job training and support, are to succeed at scale.¹¹ Initiatives that motivate employers to offer more supported, flexible and tailored employment opportunities will not only be of value for people with disability; they would also benefit

¹¹ A recent review of evidence of employment strategies for people with cognitive disability recommended identifying ways to combine supply, demand and bridging interventions across the disability employment ecosystem. Kavanagh A, Brown D, Dickinson H, Mallett S, Marck C, Weld-Blundell I. (2021). *Evidence review: Strategies to increase employment and economic participation for people with a cognitive disability*. The University of Melbourne.

people in a broad range of life circumstances for whom greater flexibility in the workplace is needed or desired.

Recommendations:

The Department should support ongoing efforts to build aspiration and expectation for employment among people with disability, their families and carers, and within the broader community.

In shaping the new Disability Employment Support Program, attention should focus on ensuring better access to on-the-job training and supports, including for NDIS participants currently working in ADEs.

Initiatives that engage employers in creating appropriate jobs and employment conditions need further investigation and support, including a focus on how such initiatives can be scaled.

Conclusion

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW hopes that the issues raised in our submission will help inform the development of the new Disability Employment Support Program – and related services – so that the system is better able to realise the right to employment for people with disability.

Should we be able to provide further assistance as this work progresses, please contact Rhiannon Cook, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, at Rhiannon.cook@vinnies.org.au.