

Response to the Department of Social Services

National Disability Employment Framework

Issues Paper.

Ability Tasmania Group Inc. congratulate the Minister on his decision to take such a wide ranging review of Disability Employment Services in readiness of the cessation of the current DES contract in February 2018.

Ability recognises that a number of the program's current settings such as Ongoing Support, Direct Registration and the demand driven approach are the envy of many of its peers overseas. These elements are key successes of the program and this and previous governments are to be congratulated in creating and retaining them as key features.

Ability Tasmania Group Inc. is a small not for profit organisation assisting people with an Intellectual Disability get ready for, find and keep employment in their community. It operates in Tasmania and the SE suburbs of Melbourne, using DES, NDIS and Fee for Service funding to carry out its objectives.

Almost 100% of its current and potential client base would be NDIS eligible. We rely almost exclusively on direct registration, with only 1 Centrelink referral in the past 12 months.

We understand these features influence our response to the issues paper in a manner that may not be reflective of many of our peer organisations.

Ability's response mirrors the broad nature of the 'Issues Paper' and discussions held across Australia, articulating broad principles which may then drive program development.

Ability Tasmania Groups' response also draws on the paper developed by Inclusion Australia, titled '*Designing evidence based Transition to Work and Open Employment Support for People with an Intellectual Disability*', (March 2015)

Ability Tasmania Group Inc. believe the next steps should be driven by the following principles.

Principle 1. An Assumption of Employability

There has been an ongoing drop in the percentage of people with an Intellectual Disability in the DES program. In May 2015, the percentage of participants in the DES ESS program who have an Intellectual Disability as their primary impairment stands at just 8.8%. (Dept. Emp. May 2015)

This is a manifestation of the low expectation across state and federal systems that people with an Intellectual Disability, especially those with a moderate Intellectual Disability, can work successfully in open employment.

As a result, the number of people with more significant impairments moving to non-work activities has increased since 2005. (Aust. Institute on Health and Welfare 2014). Such an outcome is at odds with the government's stated goal of increased economic participation of people with disabilities.

The low expectation that community based work is a viable option for people with an Intellectual Disability is also manifested in the lack of work related funding in the National Disability Insurance Scheme with only 11.4% of all plans have a work element in them. In Tasmania where the NDIS trial site cohort is young people 15- 24, (an age cohort where transitioning from school to work should be a primary goal and activity), only 25% have a plan with work preparation in it. (NDIS July 2014). As potentially a significant 'feeder' program into DES for people with an Intellectual Disability, such a low rate is troubling.

The Minister's goal that employment for people with disabilities should be central will require a different way people get streamed to work focussed programs. The current practice requires an individual with an Intellectual Disability to 'prove' their work capacity before they have experienced work. Yet we know through 50 years of experience that the only way work capacity of people with significant impairments can be accurately assessed is through opportunities to try work with explicit job training. To meet the Minister's goal, the assessment should be based on the simple question, 'What support do you need to gain and maintain work'.

Assessments conducted before the individual with an Intellectual Disability gains work are ineffective. It is imperative DES policy removes such assessments rather than increasing them if the goal is to assist more people with an Intellectual Disability into work.

Principle 2. That school, transition and work programs are blended.

Expectations are formed at early ages. While not part of this review, Ability notes that the active trialling of work should begin at school, building capacity and fostering the expectation that work will be a natural pathway for all students leaving compulsory education, regardless of their level of disability. The school leaver should then move seamlessly into a Transition to Work program that in turn, seamlessly transitions into a DES style work program. Each level builds on the successes gained within the previous system and creates for the individual with an Intellectual Disability what Inclusion Australia calls ...'*the opportunity to imagine work as part of their lives*'.

State- funded Transition to Work programs will cease in a years' time with them beginning to transfer to the NDIS. This represents an historical opportunity to have a national Transition to Work program linking to an employment program, based on models that work for the population with significant and ongoing support needs.

Program design for the employment program and Transition to Work programs should be mutually congruent, seeing work as the natural pathway post school and where the interface of each system is seamlessly blended.

Principle 3. The Right Support- Building service quality and capacity

Having service systems that are congruent to the needs of individuals with an Intellectual Disability is only part of the framework required to enable people with significant disabilities get ready for, find and maintain work. Having skilled service delivery is also critical. There has been a diminishment of skills within the personnel that staff Disability Employment programs over the last 10 years. In turn this has fed into the static outcome rates and engagement in work for people with more significant disabilities. The skills required to customise a job, to provide Systematic Instruction and to apply such strategies as Applied Behaviour Analysis are important if successful outcomes of long term paid work of significant hours a week are to be achieved.

The Commonwealth's current strategy of Competitive Tendering has not achieved these outcomes. It has led to professionals leaving the sector, seeking a more stable work environment that is less compliance focussed to develop and implement their skills.

To foster the acquisition and development of the specialist skill set needed to customise employment and provide appropriate training that ensures success, services should be supported by some other improvement strategies that compliment a more market (participant) approach.

This might be;

- Supporting the training and technical assistance for provider staff, linked to evidenced based practice.
- A strong focus on rebuilding a community of practice for providers and staff, linked to excellence in performance outcomes.
- Setting benchmark outcome rates by disability that become targets of excellence.
- Reinstate the provision of hours and wages into the quality and reporting matrix.

Principle 4. Investing up front in what works

Both International and Australian experience shows that few people with an Intellectual Disability transition from 'work readiness' programs that are undertaken away from the workplace where the skills are to be used gain community based work. Data from the NSW Transition to Work program highlights this with the stand out success being a program that allows skill development to be achieved 'on the job', placing the individual in a work setting and then providing explicit training on the skills needed to work in *that* environment. Ability has seen the development of many work readiness programs that purport to be 'innovative' or 'world's best practice' that fail to find many or indeed *any* jobs for participants.

Ability is concerned that a reliance on the market to drive performance through the funding of such untested 'innovative' practises (as found frequently found in the NDIS), could see significant funding at risk of being spent for few employment outcomes. The government is right to demand a return on the investment in the sector and should therefore only invest in proven models of service. It should also have the

capacity to test the veracity of claims of success against a performance framework that is robust and transparent. Further, if programs are found to consistently fail to deliver expected outcomes after supporting interventions, funding should be withdrawn.

Understanding what works is not a difficult task. Fifty years of data from across the world shows what works for people with an Intellectual Disability. The program's policy and guidelines would be built around that knowledge with providers tested against their capacity to deliver.

Principle 5. Transparency

Ability Tasmania supports the establishment of a market driven approach where organisations can set up physical operations in any area and undertake a suite of activities, letting participants choose providers. However choosing a provider without access to performance data that is clearly understood, universally applied and transparent in its formulation is not a real choice.

The Star Rating system currently used by the program to rank performance achieves none of these things. It fails to inform a consumer if a service has any particular specialty or a focus on a particular phase or how the regression analysis affected a service.

People with disabilities and their support network must be able to make a choice based on which provider has specialist skills congruent with their needs, is most likely to get them a job, with a substantial number of hours and who will maintain assistance for as long needed.

Principle 6. Supporting a market approach but recognising its limitations

Ability supports the removal of the current practice of providers operating under a 'contract by area' approach and supports an alignment to the NDIS model of the market place dictating service and supply. However it also recognises that in some regions this may not be adequate because of distance, size of the population or a lack of providers interested in assisting a specific group. In such situations Ability Tasmania Group sees a legitimate role for government interventions.

Further, Ability is cautious in regards to the government's interest in developing a market based funding model based on billable hours such as found in the NDIS. Ability Tasmania Group Inc. bases its caution on its two years of experience under the NDIS trial site in Tasmania. The expenditure of each individual is not easily predicted and can vary both up and down, over time. The strict billable regime with a fixed hourly rate that is below the rate needed for organisations to absorb those ups and downs of support with a sound infrastructure and remain viable would potentially drive services away from assisting people deemed to be 'high cost.'

The successful provision of customised employment is unlike a JobActive program where staff are employed to essentially carry out administrative tasks. Successful and cost effective outcomes for people with significant and ongoing support needs requires skilled staff and the funding should reflect that. The funding model should

either provide a commercially viable hourly rate or retain its current formula where money can move between participants depending upon need.

The program also needs to ensure it remains funded at rates that reflect movement in the cost goods and services as currently done for the NDIS and ADE sector.

Ability supports principles such as the above that would drive sector improvement. The outcomes that result from implementing the principles would be further enhanced by allowing participants to 'vote with their feet'. Market share should be decided on an organisation's capacity to deliver sustainable jobs rather than an arbitrary allocation of a percentage of Centrelink referrals.

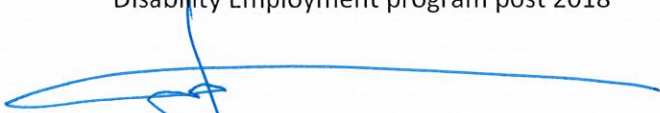
Principle 7. A long term engagement with the labour market is maintained, focussed on career building

One of the key features of the current DES program is the Ongoing Support phase. A raft of reasons have led to this becoming a small part of the DES program with just under 11% in DES ESS being in this phase. (Dept. of Emp. May 2015)

The revised employment program should focus its policy and practice settings in a manner that encourages appropriate long term support that is focussed on building a career. Such a focus not only encourages people to 'try work', knowing they won't be 'dumped' but also encourages employers to maintain their engagement with the concept of open employment, knowing they can gain assistance over the time the individual with a disability is employed by them.

Long term engagement with a focus on building hours and wages also maintains the benefits to the taxpayer of reduced welfare payments and increased taxpayer contributions.

Ability Tasmania Group look forward to the next phase of the development of the Disability Employment program post 2018



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July 2015.