**Department of Social Services Discussion Paper: Ensuring a strong future for supported employment**

**Background**

Activ is one of the largest disability providers in Western Australia providing accommodation, community and employment support to over 2000 people living with intellectual disability. Activ provides employment support to 1,000 supported employees in nine Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) sites in both metropolitan and regional areas.

Activ is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the future of supported employment.

To respond to this Discussion Paper, Activ held two face-to-face workshops and developed an online survey to gather responses. Thirty-eight people contributed to this response including supported employees, support staff and a family carer.

**The guiding principles for the future of supported employment**

The discussion paper identifies four “foundational principles” that will guide the government’s policy options to underpin a strong future for supported employment. They include:

* An “employment first” approach for all NDIS participants of working age
* A diversity of employers providing employment supports
* Strong and viable Disability Enterprises
* Employees and employers have certainty about industrial wage setting

The discussion paper asks if there are other principles that should guide the government’s policy direction for supported employment. Activ believes that if the NDIS operates under the above stated guiding principles and supports providers through the provision of adequate time and information to evolve the above guiding principles are sufficient.

Recent data on the participation of people with disability engaged in work or actively seeking work is of concern with only 52.9 per cent of the 2.2 million people with disability who are of working age, are in the workforce or actively looking for work. This compares to a workforce participation rate of 82.5 per cent for people without disability.

Operating with an “employment first” approach and driving these behaviours through planners is paramount for the future sustainability of scheme. Activ suggests quality evaluation to track progress of the implementation of the guiding principles and consideration given to providers to adapt and evolve during a time of considerable change and growth.

**Transition to the future landscape**

Overall, Activ believes that there needs to be greater recognition of the unique needs, experiences and expectations of people living with disability within government and across the private sector. This relies on stronger disability awareness, access and inclusion.

***What is a “good” participation outcome for a supported employee and how can good outcomes be measured?***

A good participation outcome for supported employees would be holistic and recognise the numerous values provided through work for supported employees. Understanding each employee‘s experiences, gifts, aspirations and learning and development differs from their colleagues and having a robust broad framework that captures and values this is necessary.

Activ is of the opinion a good participation outcome should consider an individual’s capacity, and focus on qualitative data as well as quantitative data.

In order to achieve good participation outcomes the sector will need to evolve service offerings and offer a diverse range of services to meet individual needs. This may include social enterprises, business ownership, labour hire and internships. The NDIS has a responsibility to influence the sector and encourage evolution and innovation of services to meet future industry markets. Providers of employment will require an in depth understanding of their employees and a quality life. Without understanding the indicators for both and applying the context of future pathways desired and how this fits into the marketplace providers will struggle to offer good participation outcomes and measure these.

***What do supported employees most value about working in an ADE?***

It has been Activ’s experience that supported employees value a variety of aspects of their employment, however through discussion with our supported employees a few common themes come through strongly.

**Relationships:** Almost all supported employees speak fondly of valued friendships with peers and trusting relationships with staff. Supported employment provides people with disabilities opportunity to engage with peers and foster positive relationships and develop social skills.

**Belonging:** Many supported employees speak of a sense of acceptance and connectedness within an ADE environment and the positive impact this plays on self-image and mental health.

**Purpose:** Supported employees often discuss the sense of purpose provided through work and feel pride knowing they are contributing and are needed.

**Skills:** A common theme shared was the opportunity to develop new skills whether this be by on the job training or personal development offered at sites.

Families and carers often speak of the value of supported employment and the reassurance in knowing their loved one is in a safe environment with support, good friends and something meaningful to do. Supported employment provides a wide variety of value to people with disability, family members and the greater community more than employment.

***Why do most supported employees transition back to supported employment from open employment?***

It has been Activ’s experience people with disability often aspire to open employment and a variety of career paths like any other person. However the feedback received is often the transition from supported employment to open employment is short lived and disappointing for most.

Activ observes many supported employee’s transition to open employment to have them return within 12 months. Supported employees share experiences of isolation, lack of acceptance and lack of support by their employer. When encouraging supported employees to “have a go” at open employment, employees share concern that after many failed attempts they do not have the resilience to continue to face knock backs and to then enter a work environment not conducive to set them up for success.

Meeting a supported employee’s deeper needs of belonging and trusted relationships is crucial for people with disability to thrive in a variety of work environments. The responsibility is of all employers to create an environment based on accessibility and inclusion for all.

***How can more supported employees be provided the opportunity to choose open employment?***

Activ supports open employment and the opportunity for all people with disability to have choice and control over their employment journey. As with any person’s career, choices evolve and aspirations change over time. Activ believes there is no preferred option for all and that a multitude of opportunities are needed to suit all individual aspirations and capabilities.

ADE’s provide significant valued contribution to the sector. It is essential this is recognised and valued as equally as open employment. NDIS policy should focus on evolving the sector and promoting innovation to deliver varied services people want and need in a sustainable manner.

Policy will need to address the significant challenges of open employment such as acceptance within a work place, continued skill development and fostering trusted relationships for open employment to be truly successful option for many.

***Why is participant access to concurrent DES and ADE support services so low?***

Activ’s experience is many supported employees have had negative experiences in open employment. For the reason’s stated above as well as the depressed labour market, casualization of the workforce and a detrimental impact to supported employees mental health, many supported employees choose to maintain the comfort of supported employment.

***What is the role a supported employer can play in building employee capacity for transition to open employment?***

An ADE is well placed to build an employee’s capacity to transition to open employment. ADE’s have a significant advantage over other models because ADE’s hold trusted long-term relationships with supported employees enabling ADE’s to work closely with a supported employee and provide training and support in the context the supported employee needs. Supported employees are far more likely to accept or try something new or develop a skill when supported by a trusted entity.

The staff operating within an ADE are skilled in a variety of techniques to support learning and career development of supported employees. Looking inwards and leveraging off the experience and diverse toolbox of strategies already available within an ADE setting provides significant opportunity to establish work readiness pathways.

Activ is of the opinion that even though we operate as an ADE, work is completed in either natural settings equal to open employment or a similar environment with expectations on productivity, acceptable workplace behaviour and continued development just like open employment.

Activ would like to see more opportunities for exploration of employment options based on supported employees gifts and talents. This could include opportunity for discovery process at intervals throughout one’s career and option of job tasting.

***What will attract NDIS participants to employment opportunities in the future?***

Activ’s experience is that participants should be engaged by the planner with an “employment first” approach, whereby if the participant is of working age employment discussions must take place and be catered for during the planning process. For those not exposed to employment previously due to profound disability, finding and keeping a job funded strategies should be applied to support people to consider employment opportunities.

To attract future participants to employment the following may be considered:

* Delivery of contemporary employee readiness programs and training for future primary industries and life skills.
* Fostering development of varied employment environments to cater for varied interests that are flexible to meet individual needs.
* Creating environments that meet participant’s desire to belong and develop trusting relationships.
* Creating environments that are conducive with achieving success and renumerate individuals fairly for a day’s work.

**Strategies to support employer/providers to offer effective employment opportunities**

Overall, Activ believes that employers will only be able to offer more effective opportunities when the sector is fully deregulated and artificial price setting is removed.

***How are ADEs marketing their services to an expanded market of potential NDIS participants?***

Given the state of the sector and the significant change and ambiguity over the future direction in an employment space it is realistic for providers to hold off extensive marketing until such time that the sector can provide clarity on:

* Supported Wage System
* Future NDIA pricing levels
* And provide a commitment to an “employment first” approach that is observed with increased number of participant plans funded for employment.

Activ’s focus has been on developing stronger relationships with schools, community and families. Along with engaging in numerous marketing services such as representation at sector events, flyers and building a strong presence on social media platforms.

***What is the range of NDIS supports that ADEs currently offer?***

Activ has maintained the delivery of its services offered under previous funders and aligned these to the equivalent NDIS supports. The NDIS do offer greater diversity of supports as seen with the SLES trial. Activ commenced piloting Learn and Grow services within its ADE settings and consolidated its operations to enable greater variety and choice at sites. With time and clarification Activ, like many providers, will commence innovating further in preparation for the future.

***What costs would be involved for ADEs that choose to:***

1. ***Reform to more open employment models?***

The costs associated with any reform or change of service model would be significant for all providers. Understanding the market base, desirability of the service offering, required skills sets, ICT, and infrastructure to name are few require research, time and dollars. To develop future services that meet actual need and aspirations requires a strong evidence base, the investment in research and development is costly. Many of these factors are not readily available to many providers at this stage, given the governance and funding structures of NFPs that place different operating conditions to commercial entities.

1. ***Redevelop as service providers offering other NDIS supports?***

The NDIS provides providers an opportunity to evolve and expand their service offerings at a time where transformation and innovation is preferred. Expansion into new markets and innovation of niche industries should be considered critical to growing a business and future proofing. However, whilst the sector already has demands placed on it to rapidly grow and change to meet the demand created by the NDIS, many businesses are struggling with cash flow, resources and infrastructure to do both.

We already seeing mergers and partnerships take place and this provides many organisations opportunity to expand into new services. It would be welcomed by the sector to have short to midterm financial support to assist providers exploring alternative operating models.

***c) Specialise in the provision of employment support as a non-employer?***

The expansion on non-employer models diversifies opportunities provided to people with disability looking to enter the workforce. Models such as labour hire and enclave are limited in the sector and broadening the scope of this model offers a variety of prospects. The impacts of IR would need to be considered and organisations may require support to explore this. Activ would welcome varied options for people with disability to explore in order to truly provide choice and control under NDIS.

***Should the Government have a role in supporting new market entrants and start-ups in the short-term?***

Given the depressed labour market and a need to build a robust platform encouraging employment for people with disability, Activ supports the role government has in supporting new market entrants, start-ups and current providers to develop models that are robust, financially viable and meet a market need.

***What investment, or industry adjustment will promote viable expansion in the employer/provider market?***

To support longevity and expansion of the employment market priority needs to be given to policy, recognising that the current environment is high risk with many uncertainties that prevent organisations from moving forward. Access to timely data and sharing of information will support educated decision making. As previously mentioned, resolving these will enable organisations to map out a future and identify where to test based on organisational risk appetite.

Investment and financial support would be welcomed by Activ and seen as a measure supportive of the sector’s long-term sustainability.

***How could employer/providers share learnings of their success and failures within a competitive market?***

Developing a collaborative sector whereby providers share learnings for the benefit of increasing the quality of service delivery impacting the people we serve is a positive concept. It also poses the challenge of sharing learnings for the better of people whilst not giving away intellectual property. Collaboration with adjacent providers rather than direct competitors would be welcomed however, the sector lacks the sophistication and experience at the moment and could benefit from private sector or government support in this area.

***How can wage supplementation be better targeted?***

Activ is of the view wage supplementation must be carefully considered with robust data to support decisions. Wage supplementation should consider a variety of triggers impacting on the ADE, such as productivity, changes to IR and identified costs of service required to deliver ADE supports.

**Strategies to facilitate greater choice and control for NDIS participants.**

Overall, Activ believes that there is significant room for improvement in the way choice and control is encouraged for all participants. This includes through enabling stronger pre-planning and planning conversations with participants without unduly influencing or limiting choice and control in that early stage.

***How can the NDIS enable an employment first approach in planning?***

Deploying an “employment first” approach is a necessary and reasonable expectation of the NDIS to promote the right to an ordinary life. Moving “Finding and keeping a job” to a core support aligns funding to expectations that all individuals of working age will have the opportunity to explore work and engage in work activities.

Work is core for all people to live the life they choose. Creating a culture whereby all participants are encouraged at a minimum to explore “finding and keeping a job”, and where social inclusion activities are an after work pursuit rather than the occupation itself.

Monitoring and measuring the performance against an “employment first” approach is required to track progress and understand barriers.

***How do current assessment processes drive the inclusion of employment supports in an NDIS participant’s plan?***

In Activ’s experience this aspect requires significant improvement to standardise the experience of and value to participants. Activ supports many supported employees who have faced significant delays with review of their plan impacting continuity of employment and causing significant stress. A third of plans are not reviewed prior to the expiry date, resulting in Activ spending significant time chasing planners.

As with any practice, a review of the current assessment practices should be undertaken to improve practices and ensure a thorough process which is nimble enough to meet individual needs and serve the sector.

***a) Are existing employment assessment processes appropriate for NDIS participants?***

As Activ and many other providers have done, transferring existing services under the banner of NDIS funded supports shows that the current assessment methods meet the need. However, transferring assessment methods and processes do not create diversification and maintains status quo. A review of these assessments and how they encourage an “employment first” approach in a diverse market will drive evolution and improvement in the sector.

***Are there different approaches to planning that could be explored for different groups of supported employees (e.g. younger workers, established workers, retirement transition)?***

Yes. As with any person, an individual’s career aspirations and life trajectory changes over time. A variety of supports and services need to be engaged to support an individual throughout these changes and support a positive change.

***a) How could SLES better support school leavers to build skills and confidence in order to move from school to employment****?*

Activ recognises the benefits of the SLES program. To ensure a thorough process and positive outcome governance needs to be applied to the discovery process to ensure school leavers and those important to them have explored a multitude of pathways based on an individual’s strengths.

Positive engagement with school leavers is critical to Australia’s future economy and more time needs to be allocated to youth and their families to set high expectations at a young age.

Greater collaboration between NDIA and the Department of Education to create a joint partnership in addressing change and promoting a strong future will go a long way in supporting this.

***What role could or should an NDIA Local Area Coordinator or planner have in linking participants to an employment opportunity?***

NDIA Local Area Coordinator or planner’s key role is to engage in conversation about employment and fund the opportunity to explore an employment pathway or stay engaged in employment. The role is not to influence the decision of the participant, but rather create maximum potential for the participant to exercise choice and control.

***What role could or should NDIA market stewardship have in developing a market with a range of employment, other support, or participation options for existing supported employees?***

Activ believes an NDIA market stewardship role would best serve the sector through knowledge sharing, building provider capabilities, driving collaboration and exchanging information. Organisations are keen to prepare for the future and create sustainable models and market stewardship can provide the tactical intelligence and governance through policy to support this.

***Long term pricing and funding arrangements for the provision of supported employment***

Activ would welcome a long-term pricing and funding arrangement for the provision of supported employment. There would be several considerations to be factored in to ensure a sustainable future for the sector.

**Summary**

Activ thanks you for the opportunity to contribute to this Discussion Paper and convey our thoughts. Activ consulted with thirty-eight individuals, the majority of which were current supported employees. Feedback has indicated that there is great value in supported employment for people with disability. There remains a need for work readiness training to make a successful transition to alternative employment pathways. This will not be possible in the absence of employment funding through the NDIS and greater care is required to ensure employment is a key component of the NDIS Planning conversation.

Providers require clarification on the many pending decisions. Policy and a supported investment to innovate future services will assist in delivering a strong employment sector.

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