



Submission
Future of Supported Employment – March 2018



Executive Summary

The following submission is prepared on behalf of the Flagstaff Group for the purpose of providing feedback in regards to the discussion paper on Supported Employment issued through the Department of Social Services in December 2017 that was circulated for consultation.

In addition to the formal discussion topics articulated in the paper, this submission addresses specific areas including:

- Framework Principles
- ADE's as a valid continuum of employment for people with disability
- Government, Industry and Public Stigma towards ADE's
- Strategies for strengthening ADE's
- Employment as a mandatory inclusion in NDIS plans for people with capacity to work
- Considerations for Open employment
- Supported employment as a Safety Net
- Government Targets for Social Procurement & Employment

Although the Flagstaff Group supports & strongly advocates the strong community opinion that supported employment is a distinct & legitimate alternative to open employment for many people with a disability, particularly intellectual disability, the feedback provided in this paper is intended to improve the services for the percentage of people with a disability with capacity and/or potential to achieve open employment.

Flagstaff provides its feedback from the view of an Australian Disability Enterprise operating 7 business divisions with 285 people with a disability. In addition, Flagstaff also engaged the feedback of parents and carers of our employees which was collated by way of a focus group whereby specific questions as part of the issues paper were raised along with a series of other queries that relate to challenges for people with a disability in transitioning to open employment.

It is important to note that the parent/carer participants of the group represent dependents working within Flagstaff's supported employment environment across a diversity of ages, types of disability, and period of employment within an ADE. Representatives have also experienced firsthand a diversity of experiences in accessing alternative employment services and support including other ADE's, educational institutions including TAFE and Universities, TTW / SLES courses, Disability Employment Services and volunteering. The respondents also have firsthand experiences in trying to secure work and trialling employment in various organisations in the Open employment market.

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ADE's As a Valid Continuum of Employment for People with Disability

Flagstaff group wishes to highlight the importance of supported employment as a valid pathway for providing tangible work readiness skills for people new to employment and a valid pathway for creating a continuum employment model that delivers vocational skills development and open employment.

Given the operational and commercial diversity that is offered by supported employment across many ADE's, Flagstaff believes that supported employment is best placed to provide a safe, nurturing and supportive environment to help people with a disability to build their independence and vocational skills with a view to them potentially utilising these skills to achieve economic independence.

Flagstaff recommends changes to the ways in which the facets of the continuity of work achieve better outcomes of employment participation. Currently this lack of a cohesive and coordinated response adversely impacts on the development of skills for a person with a disability and was not conducive to achieving open employment outcomes or increased economic participation of supported employees.

Given ADE's extensive experience in working and supporting people with disability, coupled with their close relationships and diversity of customers and workplaces, Flagstaff recommends ADE's be eligible to undertake the role of placing supported employees who wish to work into open employment. By receiving a placement support payment for support of the participant ADE's would be provided an incentive to move on supported employees.

Reducing Stigma Towards Supported Employment

As witnessed in the recent Wage Tool Challenge of ADE's led by the actions of a number of Government funded advocate groups, which was recently heard by the Fair Work Commission, a misguided stigma surrounding supported employment and the role that ADE's play in the community and the lives of its employees and families is apparent.

The absence of support from the Commonwealth Government which proactively supported the advocates challenge to the sustainability of supported employment and pushed for the use of SWS tool was acknowledged by ADE's and thousands of individual workers and their families. The challenge actively highlighted the lack of information and understanding regarding the value and role ADE's play in the lives of thousands of people with a disability and their families and revealed the presence of misguided perceptions of ADE's as unethical, predatory and akin to sheltered workshops.

Flagstaff urges the Government to acknowledge the innovation, targeted support and commitment to unlocking the potential of people with disability that ADE's provide through open recognition and education about the value ADE's play in the community including active promotion of the social and economic impact as quantified in the buy ability measurement tool.

Government Targets for Procurement and Employment

In an effort to show leadership to the broader open employment market and the wider community on the benefits of employing people with a disability, Flagstaff believes that it is most important for the government to demonstrate its commitment of providing employment within its own departments and services similar to many government departments in European countries.

Furthermore, to ensure the sustainability of ADE's who currently provide a diversity of goods and services across Australia, ensuring a Government percentage quote that requires the acquisition of services and products from ADE's of at least 2% of spend will help to raise the sustainability and demand for goods and services from existing ADE's. Such a quota linked with contract terms will provide positive improvements and ongoing commitments of revenue to such ADE's that will enable the investment of capital infrastructure and further business investment resulting in more supported employment jobs and skills development opportunities.

Supported Employment Safety Net

For many people with a disability working in supported employment, accepting an opportunity to progress into open employment equates to relinquishing the security and safety net of maintaining their Disability Support Pension if the open employment placement does not work out.

Whilst ADE's such as Flagstaff proactively develop new and unique initiatives (which costs are entirely unfunded) to provide opportunity for supported employees to transition to an open employment environment, successful outcomes of these initiatives are still very small. To demonstrate this – included is an example of a real life program recently designed.

In the past two years, Flagstaff developed a Career ability program which partnered with private industry to create real job opportunities in the Aged care sector for selected employees with requisite skills and experience. The program offered intensive tailored training, one on one support, work experience placement with a dedicated mentor which then led to opportunities of traineeships and guaranteed casual employment. From the pool of 10 high functioning employees who participated in the program, zero participants maintained the open employment opportunities provided to them citing the following reasons:

- Fear of losing Disability Support Pension for good if they started to incur significant hours of work per week
- Insecurity in the casualised environment of rostering causing anxiousness and confusion
- Genuine misunderstanding of process in the open employment environment and inability to make adequate decision making without the assistance of a parent or carer.
- Fear of reducing DSO payments as a result of the higher hourly rate
- Lack of one on one support that they are used to receiving in their ADE
- Feelings of isolation from their friendships and work relationships made with their ADE
- Fear of feeling less valued in the work they would transfer to

Documented confirmation of a 'safety net' to not lose the immediate eligibility to return to the disability support pension as a result of attempting or undertaking a period of open employment is critical in increasing successful open employment outcomes.

Strengthening ADE's

To ensure the ongoing sustainability and expansion of ADE's, Flagstaff recommends the development of a funding stream that provides revenues for capital investment to enable ADE's to continue their evolution in modern businesses. Such expansion and support will ultimately create flow on benefits of employment creation and opportunities for skills development across a variety of industries for people with a disability. Investment of capital that supports a strong business case will provide greater opportunities to raise wages and employ more people with disabilities.

Considerations for Open Employment

To attract supported employees into exploring open employment, Flagstaff provides a range of unfunded initiatives for a number of employees who have attempted the transition to the open employment market. Due to the aforementioned challenges of lack of support and understanding of the employees complex needs, the majority of have returned to the supported employment environment.

Flagstaff parents and carers referenced a number of negative experiences in securing and trialling work in the open employment sector which resulted in the employees losing their open employment position.

With this in mind, the new framework must provide an adequate safety net that promotes and supports people with a disability to keep trying the open employment space. The fall back of an alternative supported employment option for them to move back to in the event that they are unable to sustain open employment along with continuity of their disability support pension is imperative.

Responses to the specific discussion questions:

Q1 – Guiding Principles

In reviewing the principles as stated in the issues paper which are foundational to the framework, in general Flagstaff supports these principles.

Flagstaff recommends the inclusion of an additional principle that is targeted to addressing a person with a disability's "Choice" of employment. The principles must recognise that to achieve the outcome of increased participation levels, a diversity of employment options must be encouraged and acknowledged. Flagstaff believes there is a distinct focus upon "open employment" as the preferred option for the government and advocate groups which does not necessarily align to the actual capacity of people with a disability, nor the market readiness to accommodate a significant influx of people with a disability into this sector.

The "Employment first for all NDIS participants" principle can be construed as directive and may not take into account those people who are not eligible for an NDIS package. Rather a focus on "Employment and skills development first for people with a disability" is a more appropriate and inclusive principal.

Flagstaff recommends adding an additional principle that is targeted to addressing adequate support and education in alternative new employment models and structures and the issue of misconceptions about employing people with a disability. The principle would be centred on: "Clear and Mandatory Employer education regarding the needs of people with disabilities".

Q2 – Strategies to support employment participation for people with disability

Good participation outcomes are quite varied and individual to every employee. These outcomes can range from an individual reporting they are feeling connected to their community, feelings of inclusion in working as a team, improved behaviours and health, social connectedness, opportunity for friends at work, improved skills, heightened confidence levels, increased financial security, improvements in independence and decision making, participation in work experience, gaining of new qualifications and exit to open employment.

Parents communicated that government must acknowledge that supported employment and good outcomes and benefits deriving from it should not be centred around a ideological mindset of employment equals open employment– rather it should recognise the significant benefits and impact to an individual's life and flow on benefits that work brings to a person's wellbeing.

Q3

Employees in supported employment value a diversity of aspects including:

- Having a meaningful purpose and feeling of belonging
- Choice of employment type (open/supported)
- Participating in a meaningful vocational based activity that provides skills development
- Social inclusion
- Interaction with colleagues and opportunity to gain friends and relationships
- Understanding and value of money & increased earning capacity
- Flexibility to maintain employment around the needs of the individual
- Acceptance and support in a welcoming environment
- New found confidence of working in a team and having acceptance and support in a welcoming environment.
- Feeling valued and part of a team
- Contributing to and feeling part of an organisation

Q4 & Q5

Refer to comments in Supported Employment Safety Net - Page 2

Q6

A lack of a cohesive and coordinated response between ADE's and DES providers still adversely impacts on the vocational skills development for a person with a disability and is not genuinely conducive to achieving open employment outcomes.

In areas of high unemployment, DES resources are often dictated by fiscal restrictions for outcomes placing work ready clients into open employment. Clients with limited work skills or were not behaviourally "work-ready" often did not progress into meaningful open employment opportunities and instead their interaction with the DES did not go beyond regular 'catch up' visits. Ensuring that both ADE's and employment services are provided incentives and funding to collaborate more inclusively through a continuum of employment and skills development pathway going forward is crucial to enabling better workforce participation for people with a disability.

Many regional areas do not have large Government operations or Large Corporates to move people to employment relying on sole traders who struggle to employ and adequately support a person with a disability.

Key issues raised by a number of parents and carers of employees from their experiences with DES providers and open employment placements highlighted whilst employees received initial support at commencement of a job placement, the period of support was not adequate or extensive enough to adequately "on-board" a person with a disability. Changes to the rules of service provision to enable employment service providers the ability to provide support and guidance on the job for longer periods of time is critical.

For many participants, failure to obtain and maintain open employment via a DES was due largely to the lack of ongoing and tailored support for the person with a disability. Flagstaff families and participants cite a number of stories whereby they had utilised in DES services only to find that there was a lack of understanding of the level of complexity and support required for the individual to maintain that employment.

Q7

ADE's offer firsthand expertise in the provision of support and tailored tasks and work based activities that meet the needs of an individual. Supported employment offers a unique pathway of building and nurturing work readiness and capacity for individuals who may be new to work environment. In building these fundamental skills in individuals and supporting their growth through a variety of work options, ADE's play a unique role in helping supported employees find the right fit for an open employment job.

Ade's also offer potential links with customers and organisations that underhand and value the role of people with a disability participating in the work force and can often provide opportunities for open employment trails. In funding Ade's to actively pursue such avenues for participants, ADE's can actively resource the referral and exploration of open employment options for their supported employees.

Q8

ADE's are respected for developing work ethic in individuals and preparing people with a disability for work. What will attract NDIS participants to employment opportunities is if they are provided a choice of employment that delivers security, a supportive environment that values the individual's contribution and an opportunity to develop skills and greater learning.

Upfront conversations in every NDIS plan surrounding a participant's choice to explore opportunities to work are critical in developing and maintaining a desire to work. Ensuring work is part of the conversation followed by provision of options that offer a supportive environment is a critical stepping stone to achieving employment.

Q9 – Strategies to support employer / providers to offer effective employment opportunities

ADE's proactively market supported employment and work based programs to NDIS participants and their families through a variety of channels including:

- Advocacy
- Community engagements events & Open days
- Partnerships with corporates and community working groups
- Word of mouth referral
- Mass media advertising channels including Radio
- Direct marketing
- Online and Social media including Facebook, Instagram and Linked in
- Public relations and proactive “earned” media Flagstaff to promote the achievements & positive outcomes of individuals

The role organisations such as Flagstaff plays in promoting inclusion and changing social perceptions on the potential and capabilities of people with a disability through our networks and engagement with customers of all kinds is largely undervalued and unquantified and should be actively recognised.

Q10

In addition to consistent and secure supported employment that offers a diversity of work options and industries, Flagstaff offers the following complementary supports including:

- One on one and group support in Finding and keeping a job
- Dedicated transition to open employment course
- SLES program
- Vocational Programs for students that introduce them to work readiness skills and work environments
- A variety of programs aimed at building independence such as a tailored learner driver program, computer literacy skills, health and wellbeing, managing relationships, healthy cooking and eating, social inclusion activities including a supper club
- Dedicated transport to and from employment
- Unfunded work experience opportunities with existing customer contacts
- Tailored programs for skills building in areas of specialised interest for the participant
- Formal TAFE Qualifications tailored to suit the individual’s skills and abilities that is delivered in a supportive onsite format

Q11

- a) ADE’s would require significant capital investment to reform to a full open employment model. We do however question if this as a realistic goal and strategy that ignores the fact that thousands of people with disability who want to work but are unable to perform in a full open employment environment, therefore preferring to maintain the deeply valued safety net of support and inclusion of supported employment provides.
- b) Whilst Flagstaff provides NDIS supports that are complementary to work and build independence we believe Supported employment provides a unique and effective model that builds work readiness, skills development, purpose and fulfilment for participants whom have vocational goals and maintain a continuum of employment and transition to open employment.
- c) Flagstaff is already providing a significant amount on unfunded employment support in assisting our employees to trial and find open employment roles that suit their needs. Whilst flagstaff has thousands of customers across Australia, suitable places are extremely limited and require hours of resource to ensure the right cultural fit and environment for a person with a disability to set them up for a successful long term outcome. Flagstaff’s skills in helping to identify and place a person into open employment are relevant however commitment for funding for placement is required along with realistic goals for placement.

Q12

Support of new market entrants should be dependent on their expertise and capacity to provide the requisite ongoing support and understanding of individual participants complex needs. Whilst funding for alternative models can assist in employment innovation in the short term, a significant risk resides

in the development of new models that are not sustainable and reputable for people with a disability in the long term.

Issues surrounding service oversight and ensuring participants are provided with the support they need in a safe and sustainable environment that gives security of employment in the long term. Not maintaining a level playing field for new entrants could lead to short cuts and rorting similar to that seen in the VET sector.

Q13

Greater workforce participation for people with disability resides on investment in education within the disability and corporate sectors to acknowledge the gap in inclusive workplaces for people with disability and the benefits of work on the lives of individuals.

Whilst the paper refers to multiple strategies for implementation, commitment to an essential first step of education and awareness building has been overlooked which Flagstaff believes is paramount to the future success of any action or strategy.

Expansion in the employer market will never occur if there is no understanding of the complexity and support needs required to make the workplace suitable and inclusive for people of all abilities. The industry must first create a pipeline of interest and opportunity for employment and open conversation on how this may work with Government leading the way first and foremost with employment quotas.

Q14

Peak bodies such as the NDS are ideally placed to communicate provider and employer learnings with a view to improving and refining employment models and increasing participation. To promote the continuum of employment that Supported employment actively provides, the peak body and Government must first work towards removing existing stigma towards supported employment and more proactively promote people's right to choose regarding their preferred employment and skills development pathways.

Q15

Flagstaff does not support or endorse the use of the Supported Wage Tool system as the sole tool to determine wages.

As part of the Fair Work Commission Modern Award Review process, Flagstaff supports and endorses the use of a Work Value Classification Structure as per the evidence recorded and submitted #AM2014/286 within the review.

In the event that ADE's are forced to adopt the Supported Wage System as a result of the review, wage supplementation must be provided at 100% to cover any increase on current employee wages as a result of the revaluation of wages as result of implementing the SWS, with a commitment to providing this 100% level of subsidy for a minimum of 5 years in transition.

Additionally, assistance via a capital investment fund to assist ADE's in continuing to evolve into more modern businesses will actively provide more opportunity for employment and opportunity to increase revenue that will therefore help support wages.

Q16 – Strategies to facilitate greater choice and control for NDIS participants

To enable an employment first approach, as a minimum NDIs must include employment in every plan where the participant is assessed to maintain Centrelink work capacity test of 8 hours. This needs to be mandatory inclusion that leads the conversation of work and helps change the mindsets of participant cohorts who may never have considered work as an option.

Q17

The NDIS assessment process poses significant gaps in promoting employment and educating people, with disability regarding vocational skills development. The level of engagement and promotion of supported employment as a valuable option to build work readiness and skills is extremely low with very few NDIS planners proactively raising this. Statistics that highlight just 6% of participants with employment in their plan (mainly made up of current ADE supported employees – no new entrants) highlights the underrepresentation that employment is having in NDIs plan conversations.

With the reduction in capping, ADE's provide a pathway to employment for anyone on the DSP, however employment is not being considered as valuable outcomes by many NSDIS planners. This opportunity must be leveraged by LAC's and NDIS planners to:

- 1) Proactively ask the question of every participant over the ag of 15 regarding work and vocational skills development as part of capacity building supports
- 2) Consider all training and employment options available to develop a suitable pathway for employment
- 3) Consider complementary independence building programs that will reinforce achieving employment goals.
- 4) Provide the option for a participant to trial work as we currently find many supported employees drop in and out of employment.

Q18

SLES programs that work alongside supported employment can produce positive outcomes in developing tangible work skills and readiness for younger people leaving school. Leveraging supported employment workplaces for early leaver work experience and supported employment options whilst undertaking SLEs programs can deeply engrain the skills and behaviours required in a work place.

Feedback from parents and carers raises the role the school system plays in the success of employment participation and preparation for young individuals with disability. Parents and Carers felt that reducing barriers to employment for people with a disability can also be achieved through a greater focus on preparation and early intervention during the jump from primary to high school for many individuals. Commonalities were experienced by many families with challenges relating to transition between primary to high school systems with greater resource and emphasis required on this key milestone for young people with disability. The school system can on occasion inadvertently foster fear of failure for students with a disability entering a school environment with higher needs who are aware of a gap in capacity comparative to other mainstream students.

Development of a transition and inclusive program that aims to more sensitively manage students through the transition is recommended for exploration. In addition, parents highlighted the pressure felt by families and parents surrounding the stigma of accessing support services and the need for greater support for parents to understand the capacity of their son / daughter. In particular, programs and education for parents and carers was recommended to help provide positive parenting skills in setting realistic goals in small increments as a valuable way of building confidence for students. Respondents felt it was critical to challenge mindsets of "achievement" and promote greater understanding that placing people with support needs in situations that do not enable them to flourish can result in feelings of inadequacy and can be extremely detrimental to their longer term progress – particularly in relation to work readiness and employment.

Suggestions regarding greater availability of support units surrounding the transition to high school were recommended, as well as dedicated program that addressed bullying / inclusion and acceptance for all students and teachers (supported and not) to set the tone for acceptance of people of all abilities at this key time of transition.

Q19

LAC's can act as a critical conduit in providing people with disabilities tangible information and guidance that will assist them in accessing supports to reach skills and work based goals into the future. LAC's can also place an important role in firstly introducing work based concepts to a person with disability who may have never considered this was possible.

Feedback from respondents who have undertaken meetings with LAC's regarding NDIS plans highlighted that very little attention was dedicated to discussions around work and employment goals with the primary area of focus centring on social inclusion as opposed to work and vocational skills development. To enable people with disability to understand the opportunities available for employment and work, LAC's must be aware of the variety of supported employment, volunteering and open employment opportunities available to people with a disability and most importantly actively promote services that match participant needs.

Importantly, LAC's must be aware of the complexity of the individual's needs and how this can be a significant consideration when choosing relevant services and supports. For people with capacity to work promoting support of all types with a view towards skills and employment as a pathway is critical to raise the participation level of people with disability across Australia.

Again, the stigma towards ADE's needs to be addressed with LAC's seeing ADE's as a valuable incubator of building skills that provide a pathway to employment.

Q20

The NDIA and Government have a crucial role to play in the establishment of an educational campaign for industry, corporate, public to promote inclusion in the workplace and the ability for vocational and skills development for people with a disability. Any success in improving participation outcomes is reliant on broader awareness and acceptance.

Flagstaff finds that the suggested strategies for implementation of increasing work participation must be accompanied by significant effort to educate and articulate the value of accepting people with a disability into the workplace. It is also important that ADE's and supported employment is seen as an vehicle for people with a disability to build a work ethic that prepares them for at best open employment and at worst secure supported employment.

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