 16 March 2018

**Submission to:**

**A Strong Future for Supported Employment**

Introduction

Sharing Places Inc is an ACT based, not for profit disability service provider, providing community access and social participation support (day services) for adults aged from 18 years who have severe to profound disability. The people who access Sharing Places have high and complex needs and require full time support and intervention. All clients accessing Sharing Places have a primary intellectual disability, requiring 24/7 intensive support. Clients present with high and complex needs in the areas of mobility, challenging behaviour, communication, personal care, PEG feeding, seizures, self-injurious behaviour, sensory disorders, and dual disability disorders. Sharing Places is the only disability service provider in the ACT delivering quality day options and catering to such a diverse set of needs.

Sharing Places recognises that each of our clients is an individual with different needs and desires. Sharing Places works closely with our clients, their families and other agencies in developing and delivering individualised supports within a variety of community settings. Individual plans are developed between our clients, staff, families and carers, and other disability service providers. These individual plans include specific and detailed strategies and skills development against goals from a range of learning domains. Sharing Places works to see individuals achieve self-determination in all those matters important to them, and strives to remove those barriers that prevent people from participating fully in our community.

Sharing Places currently supports 159 people across 12 support teams in the ACT, with each support team having access to a team base and wheelchair accessible vehicles. Sharing Places employs permanent staff members (both full time and part time) due to the complexities of the people we support and the need for specialist knowledge management across the organisation. This is also essential for workers to build relationships based on trust, as people with high and complex needs can only achieve their goals when they are in environments where they feel comfortable to take on challenges.

Issues

There is potential for Sharing Places to support people to transition through pathways that may lead to participating in supported employment. However, there are a number of barriers preventing this from occurring. These barriers are outlined below.

Community Links and Participation

Sharing Places is very well placed to support people to access their community in chosen activities for recreational purposes, for skills development, for pre-vocational experience, and for volunteering options. Those participating in these activities could have the potential for extending their participation into workforce options. People accessing Sharing Places are supported to achieve their personal goals, many of which overlap into developing skills that are transferrable to the workforce such as social behaviour, communication skills, fine motor skills, etc. Although many participants who are working to achieve these skills development goals are not necessarily focussed on employment options, an employment first approach (as suggested in the discussion paper) could assist the participant to focus on activities that achieve employment focussed goals as well as social and community participation goals. These may then progress the participant into employment pathways. For people with high and complex needs, employment options not only provide the opportunity to be earning a wage but it also provides opportunities to participate alongside fellow employees and to be included as a valued member of the community.

The important point to make here is that it is imperative that NDIS plans (and the employment first approach) include all people of working age, and not only young people looking for post school options. It is also important to note that, for people who have not had the opportunity of investigating employment options previously, it may be more difficult to identify opportunities for employment, services that may assist them with employment options, and indeed that employment options may be a possibility.

NDIS Supports

Sharing Places supports many people who have been deemed to be unsuitable for the workforce and, as such, workforce pathways are not included in any discussions about the person’s future. This may be excluding many participants who actually do have the capacity to work. There are many opportunities for young people with disabilities to access NDIS employment supports, and this is not the case for older people with disabilities. The previous funding models placed people into boxes of working or not working when, in fact, for people with disabilities it is much more fluid and people may move in between recreational-type activities and employment activities often depending on their individual circumstances. Those people who have been placed in the not working category need to have the opportunity to have this mindset lifted and open up possible employment pathways. Currently, many NDIS participants do not have employment support included in their plans and there is a long and involved process in having it included with requests for plan reviews in the ACT taking an extremely long time. It is also very unclear as to what the process is for having employment supports included in planning discussions, or where to begin an employment pathway.

NDIS support should also be available for people interested in embarking on employment activities, regardless of people’s abilities. To promote true social inclusion and improved quality of life, many people would benefit immensely from being included in workplace activities alongside members of their community. For some people, this would require intensive support but no more than would be required for supporting the person in social/recreational activities. Sharing Places currently creates opportunities for people with high and complex support needs to volunteer in their community, however, there needs to be a step further in people having opportunities to be supported in employment activities alongside workplace colleagues. These opportunities, while currently not available, are imperative for being included as valued members of the community.

Clear Employment Pathways

Sharing Places works closely with providers within the sector, and there are many opportunities for opening up employment pathways. There is much focus on pathways between supported employment to open employment, and not enough focus on pathways for people not in the workforce (and who have traditionally been excluded from workforce options) to supported employment options. There needs to be employment first options included for all people with disabilities. People with disabilities need to be supported to reach their full potential and to participate in employment activities alongside other members of the community. It needs to be recognised that some people may require intensive support for this to occur, but this should not limit their opportunities to be involved in workforce activities. The process for employment pathways needs to be easily accessible for everyone, not just employment providers. Sharing Places would be very supportive of any opportunities to transition people from recreational options to employment options in a way that is most beneficial and sustainable for the participant. This would entail working closely with employment providers and opening up referral and support networks.