

Submission topic: **Discussion Paper – Ensuring a strong future for supported employment.**

Submission from: John Yealland General Manager - Thorndale Foundation

Dated: 09 March 2018

### *Introduction*

---

Thorndale Foundation is a not for profit organisation providing a range of supports to individuals with intellectual disability in the Western Sydney - Nepean region of New South Wales. Thorndale has been in operation for almost 60 years and today supports over 150 participants with NDIS plans with supported accommodation, supported employment and community participation. Our Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) currently provides supported employment to approximately 80 people.

Thorndale has been an advocate for the implementation of the NDIS and understands that there would be some issues along the way. We invested heavily to ensure that as an organisation we were well informed of what the changes would be, worked tirelessly with our participants and their families through the planning stages and updated all our IT and internal process in readiness for the roll out in our area of 1 July 2016.

Since the commencement of the NDIS in our region we have seen supported employee numbers increase by 70% over our previous capped places. We are still seeing strong demand for people seeking supported employment with our service. With this in mind, we are keenly focussed on a sustainable supported employment platform to support people who would potentially be otherwise unable to access an employment option appropriate to their individual needs.

We are very committed to providing opportunities for people with a disability to engage in economic participation in the community.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide this submission for your review.

## 1. Are there other principles, which should guide the Government's policy direction for supported employment?

One key underlying principle that should be kept in mind relating to supported employment is equality. There is an expectation in the wider community that those people who are capable of working should be working, this principle should also extend to people with a disability. In an 'ordinary life' people who can work are expected to work, for people with disability to have equality then this expectation extends to this segment of the community also.

This expectation should also incorporate the notion of working to the limit of one's capacity. Supported employment is a cornerstone of the employment continuum where those with a limited capacity have an opportunity to participate in the workforce to the best of their capability.

It should also be noted that not only do supported employment enterprises employ workers with a disability there are also numerous other people employed as a result of the supported employment framework. This extends to the support workers directly, but also the back office staff to keep the organisation running, the transportation workers delivering raw materials and goods for the workers, outside services supporting the organisation, the facilities and cleaning staff, even down to the self-employed small business owner who fills the vending machines. All of these are people who earn an income as a result of the existence of and ADE and contribute to the economy.

## 2. What is a 'good' participation outcome for a supported employee and how can good outcomes be measured?

A 'good' participation outcome for a supported employee would be to be able to engage socially and economically to the best of their ability. Where a supported employee is able to earn a wage proportionate to their capacity and where the difference between their earning capacity and a living wage is met by the welfare system through the adjusted disability support pension.

An appropriate measure for the outcome could be the savings to government in providing supported employment as an option versus the cost to government of other non-work care options.

Other measures of success of the ADE that would include:

- The growth in skills that are demonstrated, either in the range of skills developed and/or the complexity of skills developed and used
- Client satisfaction feedback / survey results
- Progression to open employment
- The length of service of the employee
- The level of attendance of the employee

Although the progression to open employment is one measure it should not be the sole measure of success as there are people who are able to maintain fulfilling long term jobs in supported employment who would not be successful in open employment. Supported employers who do a good job in catering for the needs of supported employees who are happy to remain where they are should not be viewed in a dim light because they might lack the candidates who would be best suited to open employment. If 'success' was measured on open employment transition rates then there could be a tendency for strategic business decisions being made to only seek to support the

mix of people who would make the 'number look good' rather than address the economic participation needs of all workers.

### 3. What do supported employees most value about working in an ADE?

There are many aspects of value in working in an ADE over and above the earning a wage.

- Feeling of self-worth in being able to come to work and contribute to the best of their ability. In whatever capacity this might be.
- Being able to work in a team and avoid potential isolation. For some people, the friends they make at work are the only friends they have. As such work forms a strong social need for inclusion.
- The ability to work in an environment that understand their limitations.
- Recognition that people have different work capacities and work can be structured to cater for that. For an example, a job may be divided over three supported employees in order to achieve what an ordinary worker might achieve on their own.
- The level of understanding and consideration given to their individual needs. An example of this is that someone may perform at a high level for a short period of time however the level of performance may vary markedly over hours, days or weeks. Such wide diversity of performance are unlikely to be acceptable in open employment.
- For some the additional income to supplement their DSP is essential to assist the worker in meeting everyday expenses or the ability to save for something otherwise unaffordable.

### 4. Why do most supported employees transition back to supported employment from an open employment?

The reason that supported employees transition back from open employment is usually as a result of the employee finding the expectations of open employment overwhelming. This is particularly the case for higher skilled supported employees who often have the skills that would be valuable in open employment. This cohort often return because they find the required pace of work too high or unable to be sustained at the expected level for the duration of the standard work day.

A secondary reason has to do with the lack of the same level of support for other non-work related issues. For example in supported employment many workers who live more independently often have a poor support network, ADE staff assist with a range of tasks including assisting workers with Centrelink, Department of Housing, real estates, utilities companies and other agencies they might need to interact with. This level of support is generally unavailable to workers in open employment in an ordinary work environment.

Open employment is less 'forgiving' in the amount of time a worker is away from their job seeking assistance with other things or needing some 'time out'. This can be time required throughout the day or through 'days lost'.

Workers returning to ADE come back to the safety of a more supportive work environment that understands an individual's unique support needs.

Supported employees often have difficulty in open employment group training sessions because they sometimes need a greater level of support for the learning to be effective. This can be through the provision of additional support or alternatively increased time to develop the level of skills required. ADE's are experienced in providing this level of support and have the capacity to provide it.

Social connection is also another reason why people return to supported employment. Our experience is that more independent supported employees do engage with each other on a social level outside of work and these friendships are highly important to individuals as part of their overall support networks.

In open employment, people with disability can find it hard to be able to raise issues and concerns and can be unclear of their rights. They return to supported employment for the 'safety net' of working with their friends and peers without the stigma of feeling different from their co-workers.

Although there are workers to transition to open employment, sometimes this can require multiple 'leave and return to ADE' before finally being successful to remain in open employment.

#### 5. How can more supported employees be provided the opportunity to choose open employment?

Although there may be desire from supported employees to choose open employment there is also resistance from open employers because the view is often that people with a disability can't do the job. There needs to be a preparedness of open employers to see that employing people with a disability in the right jobs means that the worker is capable of doing the 'full job' and is not a burden on the existing workforce. There are many anecdotal stories of people with a disability being employed but as soon as the funding run out their employment ceases. This is indicative of tokenism because if the employer was truly embracing the employee as an equal there should be no issue in maintaining the employee once the initial subsidy ceases as is the case with many fully able workers employed under Jobactive employer incentives. There still persists an attitude within the wider community that employing workers with a disability is too hard and it's easier to employ someone without a disability.

Supported employees can also be provided opportunities to choose open employment by supported employers who can encourage workers who have developed the skills and abilities to meet the needs of open employment. A concern of supported employers is in having developed a worker to a high level then having them move to open employment can be a significant loss of skill which will take some time and effort to replace. Consideration should be given to remunerating the supported employer who successfully transitions a supported employee to open employment as consideration of the investment in time to build skills that are then able to be utilised by open employers.

#### 6. Why is participant access to concurrent DES and ADE support services so low?

From our experience, this was due to the resistance of DES to engage with ADE's to develop this. We had approached DES providers some time ago to introduce our services and clients with a view to assisting into open employment but there lacked the interest from our local DES providers to follow-up. There have been no further advances either from the ADE or the DES to further explore this opportunity. We would welcome the involvement of a DES to seek opportunities to transition employees to open employment.

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

A supported employer can provide an extended pathway for people to develop the skills for open employment however there needs to be consideration in the funding to provide for the additional training cost that would be incurred. At present the focus on supported employment is to become more commercially focussed. The challenge this presents to supported employers is that it 'tilts the balance' towards more productive value adding work to cover costs rather than being able to spend additional time in training and development.

The introduction of the NDIS funded School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) is an important link in the continuum between school and employment. This funding provides the opportunity to support school leavers with more targeted support which has the ability to be tailored to the objectives of the individual. Supported employers are well placed to be able to prepare school leavers for employment through the level of understanding of needs and the ability to provide practical workplace experiences in a real work situation with high levels of support.

With the introduction of the SLES activity there has been the opportunity to focus more on developing additional skills that are transferable with whatever employment option the school leaver achieves. Where work experience programs through schools provide an exposure to various workplaces for students to try different work activities. The SLES program lifts this to another level, for students who qualify for it, by engaging them in a full work preparation pathway which address all the aspects of employment.

## 8. What will attract NDIS participants to employment opportunities in the future?

The NDIS planning process has a key part to play in this regard. There has been a number of examples in the past where planners or LAC's had not included employment as part of the NDIS planning meeting or worse still being told "Oh, we'll just give Johnny community participation, he doesn't need to work because he has the Disability Support Pension".

Work experience programs are very useful in developing a desire to undertake employment options. This is both for potential workers but also importantly for families. When we provide feedback to families or invite them in to see their family member in a work setting they are often surprised to see the level of ability their loved one demonstrates in the work setting.

NDIS participants having the opportunity to trial work participation, even as part of community participation program or a volunteering capacity is an effective strategy. Our experience has been to have successfully transitioned people from a day program into part time employment through the exposure to a work experience component of a day program.

Strong links with the support units in schools also provides a pathway for young people to see that the transition from school to employment is an ordinary pathway for people. Work experience programs that start from as early as Year 9 have proven very successful. This allows for a wide variety of workplace experiences and also to develop familiarity with various employers so that the often difficult post-school transition is able to be handled more smoothly.