

Valued Lives National Disability Employment Strategy Submission

Valued Lives Foundation Pty Ltd is a user-led disability support organisation operating as a social enterprise since 2013 in Western Australia. Our mission is to assist people to live Valued Lives in welcoming communities. Opportunities for meaningful employment is a key ingredient for living a good life, the foundation of Valued Lives' work. The Valued Lives Microenterprise Project is an innovative peer-led project working across three Hubs in the Perth Metropolitan area, leading the development of customised employment options including Microenterprise development for people with disability.

Valued Lives has a "think big, remain small and deliver locally" mantra. Fundamentally, we believe that everyone has the right to work and should be able to access flexible and tailored supports to enable capacity-building and skill-building with the end-goal of gaining meaningful employment. Microenterprise plays a highly important role in employment creation and income generation opportunities. We are well placed to provide a user informed submission, as we work closely with our Microenterprise owners exploring what work has; and does mean for each of them.

Tailored and individualised approaches to employment for people with disability increase positive employment outcomes. Customised employment allows people with disability to take the time to undertake discovery and harness their skills, interests, and abilities to inform what employment looks like for the individual – whether it be in a Microenterprise or through an existing employer. This tailored, person centred approach overwhelmingly correlates to positive and sustained employment outcomes. Critical to the customised employment approach is sufficient NDIS funding, which can be inconsistent and vary grossly depending on the planning experience and decision making of individual LACs and Planners.

The Microenterprise Project operates within a customised employment framework. Participants are guided by skilled Microenterprise Advisors through a process of:

1. Discovery, where a person's work-related skills are identified and refined;
2. Business Planning, one on one workshoping of all aspects of business planning and development of custom business plans in a format that is owned and understood by the participant (i.e. social story, easy English business plans); and
3. Launch, support to launch a Microenterprise and refine the business idea and skills.

We have overwhelmingly found that self-employment gives participants choice and control, as well as greater job satisfaction and financial independence. One of our Microenterprise owners has worked as an employee within the hospitality industry for over 13 years, in a variety of casual positions. He has complained on a number of occasions that he was consistently overlooked for promotions, had infrequent shifts, and had little opportunity for career progression. Now as a Microenterprise owner operating a mobile coffee business, he sees himself as financially independent, a boss, as well as a leader and role model for people with disability.

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The current services available within the broader disability employment landscape do not lend themselves to promoting self-employment as an option – which we note is highlighted within the consultation paper. This is evidenced through the experience of one of our Microenterprise participants who was also a client with a Disability Employment Services (DES) provider. He was operating a successful and profitable mobile car washing business and loved being self-employed. The DES provider stated that his car washing business was a great way for him to get experience - so that he could eventually get a job, as an employee, washing cars for someone else. Ultimately, after being pressured by his DES provider, he took a paid position washing cars – that paid significantly less than he was making while operating his business. This example demonstrates the constraints within the current DES policy and funding framework – where DES providers are not funded for self-employment outcomes. When this is viewed alongside mutual obligation requirements it is clear that there is the potential for DES providers to use this power imbalance to influence employment decisions of people with disability, and potentially disadvantage them. We recommend that the Strategy acknowledges that current systems such as DES need to be redesigned to recognise and support self-employment as a legitimate employment avenue.

We believe that the Employment Strategy's four key areas of focus are useful in guiding meaningful change in the disability employment space. We do, however, wish to highlight sections of the Strategy that would benefit from further information and detail to further strengthen the Strategy as it currently stands.

We at Valued Lives are interested in knowing more about the 2019 and 2020 NDS and Disability Employment Advisory Committee consultation processes guiding the formulation of the recent Employment Strategy. Co-design is an important element underpinning our work within the project, and as a result we see benefit in the inclusion of more specific information regarding these processes to be made available to the public within the Strategy. Further to this, we would happily facilitate co-design opportunities within our networks.


Given that end-sources on Microenterprise and disability were cited in the Consultation Paper (such as Collins and Stronach, 2020), we also see merit in showcasing forms of customised employment such as Microenterprise as a pathway for youth, including school-aged leavers, relating to the focal point of **Building employment skills, experience, and confidence of young people with disability**. Valued Lives Microenterprise Project was funded through a 12-month Information Linkages and Capacity Building grant. Despite providing support for over 100 participants, against a KPI of 30 we have been unsuccessful in securing further ILC grant funding. The current funding environment where short term employment projects are funded are not conducive to meaningful change and increased employment outcomes for young people with disability. We would recommend the Strategy recognise the need for longer term grant funding to increase likelihood of sustainability for innovative employment projects. Further to this, on the ground we are not seeing individualised employment support funding, as outlined in the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy, flowing through into NDIS plans – further impacting sustainability.

Microenterprise has been largely underexplored by young people with disability, and our project is increasingly receiving enquiries from high schools and parents of school-aged children about the transition from school to Microenterprise. Microenterprise is evidenced to contribute to enhanced meaning in life, purpose, increased self-confidence, and a sense of



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citizenship within the community¹. However, we also find that parents and families can at times have low expectations for young people with disability, and that schools are under-resourced - meaning they do not always explore creative post-school options such as Microenterprise. This can lead schools to seek work experience opportunities for students in segregated environments such as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs). We have a number of our Microenterprise owners who have worked within an ADE setting. Experiences have included exclusion from ADEs for being too quick and efficient - with the explanation provided being that there would not be enough work for other participants. Microenterprise participants have also noted that they felt undervalued because of the low rates of pay within the supported wage system, adopted by ADEs. We believe in providing people with disability in-depth information on **all** services available to allow for wholly informed decision-making. We recommend that tailored and individualised employment pathways for young people are highlighted within the Strategy paper, so that innovative approaches to employment for young people can be realised.

While the Strategy proposes to reorganise the way disability employment services are currently funded, we feel that a more specific approach would be valuable in better understanding and ultimately implementing the Strategy. There is room for further exploration beyond the focus area of **improving systems and services for jobseekers and employers**, specifically around linkages. The existing services are challenging to understand and navigate, even for professionals working within the disability employment space. For example, many of the people we work with have a high level of support needs, and typically would not be eligible for employment services such as DES and ADEs, and they are also not eligible for small business programs such as the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS). Despite this, we frequently have LACs and Planners inadequately fund the NDIS plans of Microenterprise owners – rather directing them to these services that they are ineligible for. One recommendation to contribute to better outcomes is the suggestion of a co-design process relating to how supports are currently funded.

We also wish to acknowledge that the recommendations featured on pages 13 through to 16 are heavily ADE and DES centred. As a service provider operating largely independently of these spaces, we hope that the updated Strategy will work to accurately reflect the diverse range of services available to people with disability beyond mainstream services Australia-wide. We recognise that DES has a role to play within the disability sector but acknowledge that the 2021 Disability Royal Commission highlighted that consumers indicated dissatisfaction with DES provision, with many citing issues such as poor client outcomes and lack of support. We work every day with people who have had negative experiences within the DES system. The lack of tailored employment support, lack of creativity, as well as the wider policy and funding constraints that DES providers work within, equate to poor employment outcomes for people with disability. This is demonstrated in the Strategy through the stagnant unemployment rates of people with disability in the last two decades, despite significant investment into DES. For example, one young man we work with has a passion and talent for data and numbers, and ideally would like to work within an office environment. His DES provider after learning this, placed him in a job pushing trolleys - which he said he disliked. The DES provider would have received a payment because there was a demonstrated employment outcome – however this young man did not remain in this job. The

¹ Simon Darcy, Jock Collins and Megan Stronach, “Australia’s Disability Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: Experiences of People with Disability with microenterprises, Self-employment and Entrepreneurship”, (Sydney: UTS, 2020).

position was not meaningful employment for him – it did not harness his skills or interests, nor did it offer any real employment capacity building opportunities. This is an example of the DES system perpetuating underemployment of people with disability, to meet star rating requirements and secure funding. This example is not an isolated incident – rather it is the ongoing narrative that we encounter when working with people who have or are involved with DES providers.

Ultimately, we believe that the consultation process is vital in identifying and understanding the needs of the sector and community more broadly and look forward to seeing the finalised National Disability Employment Strategy. This submission highlights only a small number of the employment experiences and stories from our participants. We would be happy to facilitate further consultation and co-design – as ultimately the Strategy does need to be informed by the experiences of people with disability who are using the services.

Should you wish to discuss any of the above points further, Valued Lives Microenterprise Project can be contacted via Microenterprise@valuedlives.org.au or on (08) 9274 7760.



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