

The logo for wdea works, featuring the text 'wdea' in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font, followed by 'works' in a regular, lowercase sans-serif font. The logo is positioned in the upper right corner of the page, set against a blue background with a diagonal pattern of thin, parallel lines.

wdea works

# **Response to the National Disability Employment Strategy Consultation Paper**

May 2021

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## About WDEA Works

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WDEA Works (WDEA) is a community focussed, not-for-profit organisation that has been delivering Disability Employment Services (DES), general employment services and Social Enterprise programs for over 30 years. WDEA currently operates across four Employment Regions and ten Employment Service Areas (ESAs) in regional Victoria and the South East of South Australia, delivering high quality services to participants.

Our mission is to achieve sustainable employment outcomes for the most vulnerable members of the communities in which we operate. We deliver a range of targeted employment services to people with disability through key funded programs including DES, jobactive as well as individualised supports in employment and capacity building supports for school leavers through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

## Introduction

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WDEA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on a National Disability Employment Strategy (NDES). As a longstanding and high performing provider of employment and related services for people with disability we understand the impact employment has on the lives of those we work with.

Employment is important. The people we serve and support through our services are often among the most marginalised members of their communities. The difference work makes to their lives, the lives of their families, their extended support networks and to the broader community is what motivates us daily. We commend the Government for putting forward a vision and long-term strategy aimed at increasing employment opportunities for people with disability and believe that the focus on building employer capability, early intervention, changing community attitudes, and improving disability employment services has the potential to make a difference.

Having been actively engaged in key disability policy and program reforms over the last 30 years, WDEA recognises that while many gains have been made across those decades, the rate of employment for people with disability has remained stubbornly still, and despite many efforts barriers remain perennial. We are also acutely aware that the environment in which we deliver services is complex and rapidly changing. The full roll out of the NDIS, changes within the labour market, new technology, shifting skillsets sought by employers and factors like the COVID-19 pandemic all have an impact on the way we deliver our services and how we think about their design for the future. Intervening early, keeping people with disability at the core of our work and supporting meaningful engagement and opportunities for sustainable and quality employment outcomes has always been important to our

organisation, and it is through this lens that we are approaching this response to this consultation.

We currently support approximately 5500 people with disability find and maintain employment across regional and rural Victoria and South Australia and the following feedback reflects our experience and offers our perspective on the national strategy.

## General Feedback

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WDEA fully supports the creation of a long-term vision for improving employment for people with disability. Delivering a strategy that focusses on the role of all stakeholders, building capability and capacity within the broader community while keeping the aspiration and needs of people with disability front and centre of its design and thinking can set a clear agenda for the future that has the potential to make a real difference.

We also strongly agree with the overarching vision of an inclusive Australian society where all people have access to meaningful work opportunities. As a provider of employment services, we know first-hand the power of employment. We know changes to the labour market such as the rise of flexibility, innovation, increases in non-standard employment such as contracting, freelancing, the gig-economy etc present opportunities, but we can't ignore the impact of low quality and insecure work, particularly vulnerable groups. We believe it is critical that the strategy focuses not just on increasing employment, but on the nature, quality and security of work for people with disability - focussing not just on a job but on work and a career across a lifetime.

We would also note that we recognise the complex nature of the employment ecosystem and increasing the employment rates for people with disability. This is not a problem with a simple, single solution, and as noted in the consultation paper, despite ongoing focus and investment by successive governments across the last two decades, the dial has been difficult to shift. We believe the four priority areas encompass key aspects that are vital to transformation. But real, sustained solutions to increasing the participation of people with disability in the workforce will only come through truly holistic approaches. We suggest the need to think more broadly about the role of income support, housing, education and training, infrastructure, workplace relations and accessibility, as well as government services, labour market, employer confidence and capability. We understand that many of these aspects will be picked up in the overarching National Disability Strategy, but feel it is critical to mention their intersection with employment and potential impact on the success of the NDES and the need to take tangible action.

As a provider of employment supports under the NDIS we work with many participants with significant disability. We know that the NDIS has a Participant Employment Strategy aimed at increasing the rates of employment for NDIS participants, but we strongly believe that while the NDES should focus on all people with disability, it must be particularly attentive to those with the most significant support needs and greatest barriers to employment. If we can open more doors and build employers and communities that are confident in supporting those with high support needs, we create a more inclusive approach that benefits all people with disability.

Finally, what we know as both a service provider and employer of people with significant disability - being the only person with significant disability in a workplace can be just as, if not more, isolating than working among peers with disability in a congregate employment setting like an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE). Meaningful employment opportunities are not just those that offer a job and an income, but those that meet a person's economic, social and personal wellbeing needs, and offer real choice and control about for people around where they work, what they do and how they are supported. It is important that any actions under the strategy ensure we move away from disability employment as charity or considered as only as a token of corporate social responsibility and firmly recognise the skills, value and experience that comes with having a truly inclusive workforces that are representative of the communities in which we live.

## **National Disability Employment Strategy Priority Areas**

### **1. Lifting employer engagement and capability**

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WDEA agrees that actions like using role models, mentoring and storytelling and case studies, as well as developing and promoting information tools and resources will support increasing employer confidence and normalising people with disability as a target talent pool. We would note however that the suggested actions rely heavily on employers being motivated and prepared to actively engage with these outputs, while being, as the paper notes, time poor, overloaded by expectations and not having the resources they feel they need to be successful in this space.

As a provider of employment services, we have a key role in supporting employers to recruit and retain employees with disability. This role should not be underestimated. We work closely with employers to understand their business needs, and to help them understand what inclusive workplace practices that fully accommodate people with disability look like in their business. We help with all aspects of the process, provide information, resources, access to other government supports and initiatives such as the Employment Assistance Fund, and become a partner standing beside the employer and job seeker in their

employment journey. We do this not because we are directly funded to support employers, but because we need to ensure employer buy in and good job fit if we are going to achieve a quality job match for our participants.

There is often much discussion about employers having limited brand awareness of DES or other employment related services. We believe that more can be done generally to promote the supports and services available to help employers employee people with disability and agree that developing and promoting targeted employer facing information, tools and resources is important. Most employers we work with are small to medium enterprises, and often we work in a way that may mean employers don't recognise the degree of assistance and support that they are receiving is through a government funded program. Providers might not realise we are a DES, but they know that WDEA is available to meet their local recruitment needs.

We also agree that buy in from the top of organisations is important, which is why a focus on senior management in large national employers is often targeted, but experience tells us that it's the local, frontline relationships between providers and employers that yield the greatest results and most successful and outcomes for businesses and people with disability.

The consultation paper notes that the majority of people with disability require no additional support in the workplace. Our experience differs, and many people accessing supports and services to help them gain and maintain employment we work with require some form of support at work. While in some instances the support may be simply be within the realm of reasonable adjustment, or provided indirectly, many of the people we work with need more intensive, regular support both on and off the job in the first 6 – 12 months of employment, and for some, support may be ongoing. The opportunity to offer ongoing support through DES, and the recent changes to funding for more intensive Supports in Employment in any workplace under the NDIS means we can provide the help employers and co-workers need to become disability confident, and to support workers with disability to become their most productive and engaged at work. This type of support should remain a key aspect of any program reform under the NDES.

We also agree that Government needs to lead by example. At WDEA, as both a DES and ADE we walk the talk when it comes to being a disability confident employer. More than 25% of our workforce identifies as having a disability, and we use our own experiences as an employer to promote the opportunities and benefits to other businesses. Given the Australian Government is one of the largest employers with a highly diverse range of career

paths, increasing the rate of employees with disability – and particularly those with higher support needs, in the public sector can make a significant difference.

## 2. Building employment skills, experience and confidence of young people with disability

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WDEA provides transition to work supports to young people with disability through both DES and NDIS funded School Leaver Employment Supports. Our focus is on intervening early to build aspiration and normalise the pathway to work along the same timeframes as it occurs for young people without disability. Currently, most supports are only funded to intervene at the point of transition (or very shortly before). We would like to see a focus on services and supports that can be delivered earlier, to ensure young people with disability get to think about and start to experience work at the same time as their non-disabled peers. In the past, DES had been able to provide supports to assist with outside school hours and weekend work, a key intervention that had the ability to reduce the need for long term supports and increased the likelihood of ongoing connection to the labour market.

The best supports will not just help build individual capacity and confidence, supporting young people identify as potential workers, navigate their options around employment supports and ultimately lift their aspirations around having a career, but will also ensure families, carers and other networks of influence build the same aspiration and confidence and embrace the dignity of risk that is a part of this crucial transitioning to work.

We agree that early and inclusive career development opportunities need to be improved for young people with disability. A key component of this is access to quality and meaningful work experience, that acknowledges the additional time that is often needed for a young person with disability to truly try and test their skills in a work like environment and make the most of work-based learning opportunities. Work experience also provides an opportunity to expose employers to people with disability in the workplace and help them build their experience and confidence. Barriers to work experience such as insurance, workplace law and access to supports should be addressed as a priority through the NDES.

As we have already mentioned, the disability employment ecosystem is complex. The suggestion of targeted information, resources and supports, the use of role models and peer-based learning opportunities is a positive action. We believe case studies that demonstrate how people with a variety of support needs and work skills can have successful experiences in employment and navigate the pathway to work could form the basis of a national campaign that would help more young people start think about and plan for work and a career post school. This type of campaign would also challenge assumptions and low expectations the broader community has related to people with disability and work.

Tools and resources should be targeted beyond families, carers and schools and think about all the key touchpoints of influence a young person with disability might have in their lives – for example health and medical professionals, sporting and community groups, other disability service providers (outside employment).

### **3. Improving systems and services for job seekers and employers**

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WDEA recognises that this consultation process is just the start of what will become a future reform process for DES, with the NDES setting the overarching strategic direction that will then be translated into policy and program. Overarchingly, we support the notion of reforming and streamlining the system and services, improving linkages, and reducing duplication. We also look forward to the continuing opportunity to engage in the redesign process for DES as we draw closer to 2023.

We understand that the department has received feedback that the system fails to adequately support job seekers and employers and agree that the current system is complex, and that any redesign should ensure that the system works for both job seekers and employers. We think it is also important to recognise the achievements of DES and the positive outcomes that the program has delivered for many people with disability and employers. Since July 2018 more than 159,000 26-week outcomes have been achieved, and we have personally seen many lives changed through the program. But the system is more than just DES.

As mentioned in our general feedback and highlighted through the key issues raised in this section of the paper, for real improvements to be achieved they need to include a focus on the interplay between employment services and the welfare/income support system. In our experience, issues related to assessment and referral to services occur before a person ever connects with DES but have considerable influence on their perception and experience. We can't understate the importance of the role of Services Australia (SA) in ensuring participants understand the role of assessments, the intersection between income support mutual obligation and participation in services, and that SA staff are given the information and resources they need to help job seekers understand the pathway they are being set on.

Simplifying the system also needs to address disincentives to work because of income support policy. We often see the aspiration to work countered by real and perceived costs of participation. This cost includes the impact of earnings on income support and related benefits such as health care and other concessions, or the perceived risk that things like their Disability Support Pension is at risk by demonstrating a capacity to work. While we work hard to explain and allay fears, it is often difficult to work out what the true cost of



participation will be. Tools that help clearly calculate the benefit of work and formal information that addresses the fallacies related to DSP and employment would help.

A key reform principle in for DES 2018 - 2023 was increasing choice and control, and person-centred service delivery. We support this principle and believe that it is a foundation that any future reform must consider, especially as we navigate the intersection between the NDIS, DES and other mainstream services. As a provider of both NDIS services and DES, we see a continuum of supports and believe that the NDIS provides an important opportunity to build the “readiness” of participants with higher support needs to fully benefit from DES. A key example of this is using school leaver employment supports to bridge the gap we often see young people transitioning from school to work have – making sure they have work goals, confidence and an understanding of their skills and knowledge of employer expectations before they come to DES to actively job search.

The transition of funding for employees working in ADEs into the NDIS also opens a range of opportunities that should be considered as part of the disability employment system. Highly supportive environments where people with disability can try and test work, build skills and confidence could make a significant difference to the pathway to work. Changes to the funding approach under the NDIS also expands the opportunities for employees with high support needs in terms of where they choose to work and how they are supported at work. This further extends the continuum of supports and options for people with disability and employers and making sure all supports along the continuum are clear and easy to understand will help raise engagement and ultimately employment outcomes.

#### 4. Changing community attitudes

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If Australia is going to improve the rates of employment for people with disability, it is critical that we tackle the most pervasive and entrenched barriers – the impact of perception, misconception, and low expectations. WDEA supports the suggested actions outlined in the consultation paper to help break down those misconceptions and challenge conscious and unconscious bias and raise expectations.

As noted in the paper, direct experience with disability is one of the most powerful ways of overcoming stigma and stereotypes. Along with campaigns, education and media content, the NDIS and disability employment services are powerful stakeholders in building disability confidence through engagement and experience for employers and the community at large, and we would encourage the NDES to think further about how services can be supported through policy, strategy and resources.

## In Summary

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We hope the above responses contribute positively to the discussion moving toward effective change and look forward to continuing engagement in the conversation as the process develops. There has never been a more turbulent time in the employment landscape, the impacts of which have serious implications for our most vulnerable community members already marginalised from opportunity in many areas. As always, we make ourselves available to discuss any of the issues contained in this response and thank the Department for the opportunity to participate in the discussion.