



Australian Government

Department of Social Services

The Future of Supported Employment

Consultation summary report

October 2023



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Introduction

1. The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that people with disability have genuine opportunities to work in a wide range of settings. As part of the 2023-24 Budget the Australian Government announced a \$57 million package of measures that seek to:
 - create ongoing employment opportunities for people with disability with high support needs;
 - assist the supported employment sector to evolve to better meet community expectations; and
 - provide people with disability with high support needs, their families and carers with access to advocacy support and information to build their confidence and understanding about their rights and options at work.
2. This investment includes six initiatives focused on supported employment:
 - Structural Adjustment Fund;
 - Supporting organisations to transition to the new Supported Employment Services Award;
 - Consulting on a disability business procurement policy;
 - Evaluation of supported employment initiatives and trials;
 - Disability employment expos; and
 - Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program.

Purpose of this document

3. Between July and September 2023, the Department of Social Services (the department) undertook consultation on the design of these initiatives. The department developed the Future of Supported Employment Discussion Paper (discussion paper) as the basis of this consultation.
4. The discussion paper was distributed to key stakeholders including Disability Representative Organisations (DROs), Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), social enterprises and other NDIS providers delivering employment supports. In August 2023, the discussion paper was published on [DSS Engage](#).
5. Feedback was provided through:
 - 48 written submissions, including several responses written on behalf of multiple organisations; and
 - 13 meetings with key stakeholders, including two workshops with people with intellectual disability (or other high support needs), and one workshop with families and carers of supported employees.
6. The department would like to thank everyone who provided a submission or engaged in meetings. The department would also like to note that the feedback received does not necessarily reflect the views of the department or Government.



Key Issues

7. Overall, there was a positive response to the initiatives outlined Discussion Paper. Feedback highlighted:
 - the need for increased and clearer pathways to open employment for people with disability;
 - a strong view that supported employment settings/ADEs should continue to be an employment option for people with disability with high support needs;
 - that people with disability and their families would benefit from information and capacity building around employment;
 - that supported employees should not be worse off as a result of any initiatives;
 - the benefits of the customised employment model; and
 - the need for co-design with supported employees and families.
8. This report is structured around the six budget initiatives, with relevant feedback summarised under each one.



Budget Initiative 1 – Structural Adjustment Fund

Priorities

9. Feedback indicated that the Structural Adjustment Fund (the Fund) should prioritise:
- capacity building for supported employees and families,
 - capacity building for employers (particularly mainstream employers), and
 - increasing and improving the pathways to open employment for people with disability.

Capacity building for supported employees and families


10. Projects focused on capacity building for supported employees and their families was consistently seen as the key to opening up career opportunities. For example, submissions emphasised that projects should help supported employees:
- develop employment skills,
 - understand the variety of employment options available, and
 - aspire to open employment.
11. It was noted that capacity building projects benefit from incorporating real work experience, tangible upskilling through qualifications, and peer support and mentoring networks for supported employees.
12. Feedback suggested it would be valuable to include families in capacity building initiatives so as to build wider career aspirations for people with disability. This was reinforced through consultation with families of supported employees, who made clear that they often need to provide decision making supports on behalf of supported employees.

Capacity building for employers and the support workforce

13. Several submissions noted it would be beneficial if projects under the Fund focused on educating employers and support workers, both in ADEs and open employment, about how to provide more individualised support when working with people with disability. These submissions emphasised that such projects can lead to more inclusive workplaces, increased employment of people with disability in open employment, and higher retention rates for people with disability. Educating employers and support workers on the customised employment (CE) model was also seen as a priority.

More pathways to open employment

14. Another key theme was the need to prioritise projects that create clearer pathways to open employment that are sustainable and emphasise an employee's choice and control. Submissions suggested this could be done through partnerships between ADEs and open employers, and by implementing the CE model.
15. The notion of using the Fund to implement partnerships between ADEs and open employers was a theme throughout consultation. Feedback suggested that these



partnerships would provide clear, accessible pathways for supported employees to enter the open employment workforce while maintaining a connection to their ADE, should this be their preference.

16. Using the fund to establish CE in Australia was also a recurring theme throughout consultation. Some feedback described how CE has been established in other jurisdictions such as the United States, and proposed it would be a preferable alternative to segregated employment in ADEs. CE is person-centred, and focuses on customising jobs for people with a disability, based on the skills that individual has to offer, what roles they would enjoy, and how that individual would likely feel valued at work. Several submissions proposed that the Fund could be used to phase out ADEs and work towards customised roles in open employment for all supported employees.

Eligibility (for applicants and types of projects)

17. Generally, feedback saw support for broad applicant eligibility, but there were some that proposed narrowing the eligibility for various reasons. For example, some suggested narrowing eligibility to registered NDIS providers as a quality and safeguarding measure, while others suggested making it mandatory for applicants to abide by the elements of CE in order to focus the Fund in that direction. A significant amount of feedback proposed that ADEs should be the primary organisation type receiving funding.
18. Many submissions suggested the types of projects eligible for funding should be broad in order to encourage innovative applications. Conversely, some feedback indicated that all projects should be required to use evidence based approaches that are proven in Australia and internationally, such as CE and the WISE-Ability model.
19. Submissions also indicated that there should be some projects that target specific cohorts of people with high support needs, including First Nations and/or culturally and linguistically diverse individuals.

Logistics

20. Feedback on funding limits for individual projects was varied. Few submissions suggested specific upper funding limits, but those that did were inconsistent with each other, making it difficult to ascertain a consensus. Generally responses suggested grant amounts of between \$50,000 and \$500,000. There were some outliers who suggested grants of up to \$2.5 million.
21. Those that preferred fewer, higher-value grants argued that this would be more likely to enable lasting change in the sector and would avoid spreading funding too thin. In contrast, those that preferred more, lower-value grants argued this would encourage more innovative projects that could be built upon in the future.
22. The Fund will be provided over two grants rounds and the majority of feedback indicated that both rounds should be competitive processes.



Budget Initiative 2 – Supporting organisations to transition to the new Supported Employment Services Award

23. This initiative is focussed on ensuring the Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE) sector and National Panel of Assessors (NPA) providers can effectively transition to the Fair Work Commission (FWC)'s new wage setting arrangements. Under the changes to the *Supported Employment Services Award 2020* (the Award), the Supported Wage System (SWS) is now the only wage assessment tool available for ADEs to use.
24. The SWS is a wage assessment tool which enables employers to pay wages to an employee with disability based on how productive they are in their job. The SWS is also available in open employment, so long as the relevant award or enterprise agreement includes an enabling provision. Under the Award, the SWS has slight modifications to better suit the cohort of people working in supported employment.
25. As the SWS is administered and funded by the department through the NPA program, the department sought feedback through consultation on how to best support ADEs and NPA providers as they transition to new SWS arrangements.
26. Submissions regarding this budget initiative spoke to the general complexity of the Award and the lack of understanding among ADEs and NPA providers on how to apply the SWS accurately and consistently.
27. Key issues raised with the SWS process included that:
 - some ADEs are not taking their own timings or setting their own benchmarks, which can increase the workload for NPA providers; and
 - there are complexities in the assessment process, such as how to accurately reflect non-productive time spent with a co-worker.
28. Submissions from advocacy organisations expressed concerns with the Award more broadly. In particular, these organisations preferred to see any funding for the sector go towards evolution and progression towards full award wages, as per the guiding principles for the future of supported employment.
29. The below are some items that were proposed by the sector as suitable transitional supports.

Training

30. A consistent theme in submissions was that both ADEs and NPA providers require additional training on how to accurately and consistently apply the SWS under the Award (as well as in open employment). Stakeholders advised training should be clear, accessible, and responsible to the diversity of the disability sector.

31. It was not a major theme, but some submissions went beyond training, suggesting a staffed helpdesk of experts is needed to assist with general enquiries, as well as explore ongoing supports.

Information

32. There was a strong theme in the submissions that independent, accessible information is required about the changes to the Award and the implications these have on supported employees.

33. Submissions also raised a need for more information to be produced and shared regarding the SWS. Suggested information included:

- case studies, such as a step-by-step outline of the assessment process;
- clear timeframes of the changes and what is required by when; and
- ongoing education materials produced by the department.

34. Forms of information requested included:

- updates to the existing documentation, such as the SWS Handbook and the SWS Guidelines;
- information guides and tool kits;
- periodic webinars and forums;
- online tools and calculators to highlight changes and impacts for supported employees; and
- accessible easy read documentation.

Update

Since the changes to the Award came into effect on 30 June 2023, a number of information resources have been developed or updated. Various information on the Award and the SWS is now publically available at:

- [Supported Employment Services Award pay rates - Fair Work Ombudsman](#)
- [Employees with disability - Fair Work Ombudsman](#)
- [Employees with disability pay rates - Fair Work Ombudsman](#)
- [Supported Wage System Handbook \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](#)
- [Microsoft Word - Supported Wage System Assessment Guidelines \(jobaccess.gov.au\)](#)

Targeted resources and activities have included:

- Fact sheets developed by the department and disseminated to ADEs, supported employees and NPA providers
- E-Learning modules updated for NPA providers
- A provider forum convened for NPA providers
- Good practice guides for ADEs developed by National Disability Services
- Sessions at the NDS Community of Practice on the Award and the SWS.



Budget Initiative 3 – Consulting on a disability business procurement policy


35. Stakeholder feedback indicated there was strong support for a disability business procurement initiative.
36. The majority of the submissions suggested a procurement initiative should focus on benefitting all people with disability, to maximise employment outcomes. Many submissions noted that any initiative should go beyond the supported employment sector, particularly ADEs, to avoid limiting innovation in other areas of the disability employment sector. If a disability business procurement initiative were to include ADEs, it has been suggested that this could be used as an opportunity to improve pay and conditions for employees at ADEs.
37. Feedback suggested that eligibility could include businesses that are owned, operated and controlled by people with disability. This could be done in conjunction with a business database, similar to the one used for the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP).
38. Many stakeholders recommended the department consider and utilise elements of other models when designing the procurement initiative, such as the Victorian Social Procurement Framework. Other stakeholders suggested the new policy could be developed to mirror the IPP model.

Opportunities and strengths of a disability procurement initiative

39. Many stakeholders provided feedback on the opportunities a disability procurement initiative could provide for people with disability and the community, including:
 - providing a lever to increase the number of people with disability being employed at award wages;
 - offering commercial viability to social enterprises and supported employment providers through government procurement contracts;
 - providing an opportunity to set targets for people with disability moving from segregated employment into open employment through the procurement initiative; and
 - higher quality employment opportunities for people with disability.

Risks of a disability procurement initiative

40. Submissions also raised various concerns for the risks associated with developing a disability business procurement initiative, including:
 - some potentially eligible suppliers might lack the capability to respond to procurement opportunities and comply with the procurement assessment criteria;
 - the pool of suppliers that would meet the eligibility criteria of a disability procurement policy could be too small. Stakeholders suggested that this could be mitigated through completing an initial market scan and providing support services;

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- poor policy design could create a tokenistic response from government and supply chains, rather than genuine inclusion for people with disability; and
 - it may result in disproportionate outcomes for some cohorts of people with disability over others, e.g. it may disadvantage people with higher support needs, if it is focussed on all people with disability.



Budget Initiative 4 – Evaluation of supported employment initiatives and trials

41. The evaluation initiative received strong support, including the proposal to engage an evaluation expert to undertake this work. Several submissions emphasised that an evaluation should be happening from the start of the new initiatives, with people with disability being involved in the design of the evaluation.
42. It was noted that the department should keep in mind that success factors will vary between individuals and organisations, and this should be built into the evaluation framework.
43. Organisations suggested a wide range of factors that could be used to indicate success when evaluating the initiatives, including but not limited to:
 - increased transition numbers of supported employees from ADEs to open employment, and retention rates;
 - career progression of supported employees within ADEs;
 - supported employees' perceptions of their choice and control at work;
 - overall supported employee wellbeing;
 - increased uptake of training/development opportunities for supported employees;
 - financial viability of supported employment providers;
 - increased implementation of customised employment;
 - increased wages for supported employees; and
 - increased diversity in employment options for people with high support needs,
44. Submissions also spoke to the need to incorporate the perspectives of people with high support needs in evaluating the success of projects and suggested ways of doing so, including:
 - town hall style meetings with supported employees;
 - on-site interviews with supported employees, utilising plain language, Easy Read, visual aids, audio, etc.;
 - speaking to the families and carers of supported employees;
 - co-designing evaluation tools with people with disability; and
 - ensuring evaluators have received training, or have experience working with individuals with high support needs.
45. Feedback emphasised that success will be perceived differently for each individual. For example, for some supported employees, transition to open employment may be seen as a success, but there will be others who may enjoy working in an ADE and prefer to stay there, meaning that indicator of success may not be universal. This should be taken into consideration in the development of an evaluation framework.



Budget Initiative 5 – Disability employment expos

46. Feedback demonstrated varied support for disability employment expos (the expos). Several stakeholders questioned the benefit of the holding expos, particularly if they do not include mainstream employers who have experience hiring people with disability and can offer real job opportunities. This feedback highlighted the importance of carefully designing the program, and having a strong focus on providing accessible information and supports as well as facilitating connections to suitable employers.
47. Many stakeholders emphasised the need for a variety of employment information at the expos. The consultation highlighted that people would like to receive information about:
- employment supports available (NDIS and other), including how NDIS funds can be used;
 - preparing for work, career pathways and reasonable adjustments;
 - contemporary models of employment such as CE and self-employment; and
 - the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and SWS.
48. It was also suggested that the provider could develop resources to support people with high support needs (including those with intellectual disability) to effectively obtain the information they need from the expo. This could include easy read documents such as “Questions you can ask a stall holder”.
49. Several submissions suggested that a proportion of stallholders and exhibitors be made up of employers with positive experiences of hiring people with a disability with high support needs. One submission suggested that it would be beneficial for employers to share success stories around hiring people with a disability.
50. It was noted that for the expos to be successful they would need to be accessible and accommodate a range of support needs and demographics. It was suggested in one submission that in order to do this, consultation with a reference group would be beneficial.
51. The following accessibility considerations were brought up in submissions:
- quiet spaces/rooms;
 - audio/ tactile presentations for people with vision impairments;
 - interpreter services available on site for cultural and or linguistically diverse cohorts;
 - written information translated for culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts;
 - easy-read versions of written information; and
 - braille, accessible toilets and close captions.
52. Submissions emphasised that the expos should have a strong focus on local supports and services, with local employers invited. This is because information can be tailored to specific locations rather than taking an umbrella approach to the supported employment sector. It was indicated that this way, there will be an increased opportunity for people with disability to network with employers local to their community.



Budget Initiative 6 – Disability Employment Advocacy and Information Program

53. Feedback received from stakeholders on the proposed approach to the disability employment advocacy and information program (the advocacy program) was generally positive and supportive of the approach proposed in the Discussion Paper.

Information and supports

54. Feedback highlighted that the advocacy program needs to include:

- information for people with high support needs, their families and carers about their working rights;
- information on financial decisions such as how wages impact the DSP;
- information on the range of employment options available for people with high support needs; and
- capacity building and job readiness workshops to assist people with high support needs to have choice and control over their employment.

55. A handful of submissions reinforced the need for capacity building of people with high support needs and their families and carers, so that they can understand their employment options, describe their employment goals, and make informed choices regarding their employment options.

56. Feedback acknowledged that it is crucial that mainstream employers are open to hiring people with high support needs to ensure there are options available for employment.

Target audience

57. Feedback highlighted that whilst it will be important for advocacy supports be available for people working in supported employment (including ADEs), there should be a strong focus on young people with high support needs transitioning from school to work. The department heard that conversations around employment options should start early for young people as the transition from school to the workforce is a big leap in a person's life and may require significant preparation for the young person, and their family and carer.

58. Additionally, some submissions advised that from the outset, the advocacy program should be broader than supported employees and in addition to young people transitioning from school to work, should include people in day programs who want to transition to employment and other people with high support needs who may be looking for employment.

Unbiased advocacy support

59. Feedback emphasised the importance of the successful organisation being able to deliver the program with unbiased views regarding employment options for people with high support needs. The department heard that it will need to ensure the successful organisation provides accurate information about all employment pathways and options.