



Establishing a Disability  
Employment Centre of  
Excellence

27 November 2023

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Submission to the Department  
of Social Services



Department of Social Services ("Department")

Sent by: online submission

To the Department,

My Pathway is a social and economic development organisation delivering services from the Top End and Torres Strait to Tasmania. We have been developing people, connecting them to opportunities and helping communities to grow since 2007. We are committed to creating and promoting more inclusive employment opportunities to enable people of all abilities to participate in workforces across Australia.

My Pathway employs more than 800 staff, many who identify as having a disability and/ or lived experience. Our goal is to support an inclusive culture, and ensure our systems, policies and physical locations are accessible to everyone.

We deliver a range of employment programs including Disability Employment Services (DES). Since 2018, we have achieved more than 750 DES job placements in regional Australia. We have also employed and developed more than 90 NDIS support workers over three years. They live and work in remote Indigenous communities and have delivered more than 75,000 hours of support.

We agree that a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence should achieve meaningful change that will improve work outcomes for people with disability. It should complement, not complicate, programs that support employment including DES, NDIS, the Community Development Program and Workforce Australia.

A critical factor in achieving an effective ecosystem of support for inclusive employment will be the co-design of a new DES model. Among other concerns, DES inadequately services regional, rural and remote regions, episodic mental health conditions and cases of co-morbidity.

It is encouraging that business, government and the disability community agree that we need to improve outcomes for people with disability and employers, and improve the capacity of employment service providers. We look forward to continuing this important discussion and being involved in ongoing steps to create inclusive workforces across all parts of our country.

Regards,



Nicole Oke

Managing Director



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## 1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

We need more effective strategies and mechanisms to include more people with disability in our national workforces. Current approaches through employment programs and other supports have proven insufficient given the proportionally high rates of unemployment and discrimination experienced by the disability community.

A Centre of Excellence (the Centre) could help to improve employment inclusivity. However, it needs to be established with clear terms of reference and accompanied by co-designed employment service models. This includes Disability Employment Services (DES), the NDIS and consideration of interactions with the Community Development Program (CDP) and Workforce Australia.

Our DES participants (87%) say that finding a job is one of the most important aspects of the service, but they want to be better understood and receive ongoing assistance to do the things they want. A Centre could contribute to achieving improved outcomes for people with disability, but should be cautious to complement, not complicate, employment services.


## 1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

Unfortunately, there remains stigma around employing people with disability and the risks and benefits that creates for businesses. A key aspect of the Centre should be evidence-based advocacy to shift perceptions and generate understanding.

Robust data collection and research could provoke a shift in creating more inclusive workplaces and communities nationally. This information could also advise employment providers of gaps and opportunities in their services, depending on place-based factors especially in regional, rural and remote settings.

Professional development and training are other areas where the Centre could support the sector. Currently there is no industry qualification for DES, nor a specialised qualification for disability carers. Professional development opportunities are limited and could be significantly improved through peer-to-peer collaboration and best practice guidelines.

The quality and compliance of employment services should be contained within co-designed models and allow for regional differences and individual participant choices. There is no benefit in complicating and duplicating mandatory reporting, standards or compliance through the Centre.



The Workplace Gender Equality Agency is a fair comparison regarding research, advocacy and industry development. The prescriptive and inflexible nature of their Employer of Choice certification has unintentionally impeded progress for some organisations. As such, enforced approaches should be avoided in the design of a Disability Employment Centre.

## 2.1 Who can the Centre assist? Are any groups missing?

People with disability, their carers and families are arguably the most important stakeholders in establishing the Centre. We are eager to hear their perspectives on how a Centre can bolster their efforts to secure meaningful and supported employment.

Equally, a network of diverse employment service providers, employers and disability advocates are working to provide better supports and respond to the individual needs of people with disability. An effective support network includes large, mid-size and small organisations with unique specialisations and/ or place-based knowledge. The Centre should provide equitable support that does not disadvantage any groups, especially where they lack scale or operate in regional, rural or remote regions.

## 2.2 How can the Centre work with stakeholders to increase the employment rate for people with disability?

A central function of the Centre should be to advocate on behalf of all stakeholders involved in the disability employment sector. This would include promoting the contributions of employers, service providers and employees to improve the rate and quality of employment for the disability community.

The Centre should be prepared to use best practice research and data to identify and bridge gaps. This will be especially relevant for regional, rural and remote areas where a participant's choice of service and/ or employment type may be limited.

Stakeholders from DES, NDIS, CDP and Workforce Australia should all be in scope to receive support from the Centre to improve outcomes for people with disability.

## 2.3 What can the Centre do to increase the capability and capacity of employment service providers?

The Centre's ability to support employment providers requires a new, co-designed DES model to be implemented. The current service cannot meet the [Guiding principles for the future of supported employment](#), especially when it comes to 'genuine choice and control' and 'real options for employment'.

For example, there are many regions that have a low number of participants and cannot sustain multiple providers. And any non-metro region will probably lack the jobs, training, mental health and medical support needed to meet individual employment goals.

Once a new, co-designed DES model is agreed and remote disability employment is accommodated (e.g., officially within the NDIS), the Centre would be able to have a much deeper impact.

A significant challenge for the Centre will be how it can reduce the gap between the supply and demand of employment in regional, rural and remote communities. Providing best practice guidance to employers and providers to increase capability and capacity needs to be thoroughly considered. This includes how that support will be delivered and how success will be measured.

### Existing DES outcome issues

#### **Regional, rural and remote services:**

- Employment demand and supply mismatches
- Small and/ or geographically dispersed caseloads limiting the number of providers and increasing servicing costs
- Gaps in local training options, mental health support, medical specialists

#### **Episodic mental health conditions:**

- Participants may only sustain employment for bursts, meaning providers cannot claim any outcome payments
- Unless long-term employment is sustained, other progress by participants is not recognised

#### **Co-morbidity:**

- The program fails to identify potential co-morbidity, especially where a physical disability will impact mental health
- A focus on one disability could come at the expense of another



3.1 What are your views on the models presented?

3.2 Are there any models for a Centre to consider that are not included in this paper?

3.3 What can the Government take from existing models of Centre of Excellence? What should be ruled out?

A statutory agency with clear terms of reference could be an effective model to deliver research, training, best practice guidance and enhance capacity. There should be no role for the Centre in compliance, regulatory enforcement or any other responsibility within employment services' contract management.

4.1 Where could a Centre be best placed (for example, within a government agency, a university, or as a stand-alone institution)?

A logical place for the Centre to be positioned would be within the Department of Social Services with Ministerial oversight. This could protect funding arrangements and retain equitable access to support.

4.2 Are there any other implementation issues that should be considered?

If the Centre is to focus on evidence-based, best practice guidance, training and capacity building, there should be sufficient investment in a data collection platform. If research and data collection efforts become too cumbersome on the disability community, peak bodies, providers or employers it will undermine the intentions of the Centre and potentially disengage its stakeholders.

Improved disability employment outcomes will be achieved differently depending on available jobs, supports and individual goals. The Centre could have a negative impact in regional, rural and remote areas if its influence drives a homogenised disability support network.

## 4.3 What elements of the proposed role of the Centre or its functions should be prioritised?

The [Establishing the core functions of the Centre diagram](#) (p.11, Options Paper), is a good starting point for initial phases of implementation. We support the process of establishing an evidence base, tools and resources and delivering training and support. Improved capacity for employment service providers and improved outcomes for people with disability and employers are ideal results.

Greater clarity is required when considering how the Centre will interact with DES, NDIS, CDP and Workforce Australia, including expected collaboration between the service providers.

### Recommendations

- 1 A new, co-designed DES program is required to enable the Centre's effectiveness
- 2 The Centre will not enforce compliance, regulations, quality or any other responsibility managed within employment service contracts
- 3 The Centre will address capacity issues especially for regional, rural and remote areas
- 4 Support by the Centre will be equitable, it will not disadvantage groups or homogenise the sector
- 5 The Centre will operate to improve outcomes for people with disability and employers, and improve the capacity of employment service providers