



Australian Federation of
Disability Organisations

Next steps in Supported Employment: consultation on the way forward

Response to the Department of Social Services

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AFDO acknowledges people with disability, particularly those individuals that have experienced or are continuing to experience violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation. We also acknowledge their families, supporters, and representative organisations and express our thanks for the continuing work we all do in their support.

Language used in this document

AFDO uses person-first language, like "people with disability," not identity-first language. This is a deliberate choice made by AFDO. This aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It also matches the language used by all levels of government in Australia. Most other peak bodies in the Australian disability sector also use person-first language.

AFDO chooses to use this language because it puts the person before the disability. It values the individual by seeing them as a person, not a condition.

Consistent with this position, AFDO uses person-first language in this document.

We know many people with disability prefer identity-first language. Disability is a part of their identity. This language shows a connection to the disability community and pride in their disability. It also says society is what disables them.

Views on language use reflect people's identities, experiences of disability, and community attitudes. It is a matter of individual choice and agency. AFDO respects everyone's right to choose how to describe their identity and experiences.

"People with disability," means anyone who is d/Deaf (including people who identify as culturally Deaf), or who has a learning disability, or a sensory, physical, hidden, or mental health condition.

Member contributions and endorsements

This document was developed with the assistance of, and invaluable input from, AFDO members. Our response is informed (and, as a result, improved) by the knowledge and expertise of the policy teams of our members, particularly in relation to the issues that affect, or are of particular concern to, the different disability cohorts of their members.

We have also benefitted greatly from hearing, understanding, and amplifying the voices and experiences of the individuals with disability, their families, and carers who, through our members, we are privileged to represent.

We acknowledge the contribution made by the following AFDO members, and to record our thanks:

Amaze Incorporated; Blind Citizens Australia; Deafblind Australia; Deafness Forum Australia; Down Syndrome Australia; NOFASD Australia; and Post Polio Victoria Inc.

In addition, Blind Citizens Australia endorses AFDO's response.

About AFDO

Established in 2003, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) is the peak body in the disability sector. AFDO is the national, cross-disability, peak body and a Disability Representative Organisation (DRO), funded by the Commonwealth government (through the Department of Social Services) to represent and advocate for people with disability and support them to fully take part in Australian life - socially, culturally, politically, and economically.

Many of AFDO's members are national peak bodies representing disability-specific cohorts (for example, Blind Citizens Australia, Deaf Australia, Down Syndrome Australia, and Physical Disability Australia) or State and Territory organisations with population-based memberships, representing people with disability in different locations or who have commonality of intersectionality (for example, People with Disability WA, Women with Disability ACT and South-West Autism Network (SWAN)). Through this membership mix, AFDO is the national "peak of peaks" in the disability sector, having a total reach of over four million Australians.

AFDO is also a Disabled Peoples Organisation (DPO), governed, led, and constituted by people with disability. We are within a disability rights movement that places people with disability at the centre of decision-making in all aspects of our lives.

AFDO is a strong, trusted voice for the disability sector. We advocate on national policy, inquiries, and initiatives with governments at all levels in Australia. We work to build a community where people with disability can take part in all aspects of social, economic, political, and cultural life. This means:

- real participation in community life
- building respectful, valued relationships
- social and economic participation, and
- contributing as valued citizens.

Our vision

All people with disability can take part equally in all aspects of social, economic, political, and cultural life.

Our mission

Using the strength of our member organisations to harness the collective power of uniting people with disability to change society into a community where everyone is equal.

Our strategic objectives

- To represent the interests and united voice of our members and people with disability at a national and international level in all relevant forums.
- To build the capacity, profile, reputation, and sustainability of AFDO through the strength of our member organisations.
- To enhance the connection and influence in international disability initiatives by policy, advocacy, and engagement, focused on the Asia Pacific region.

Our members

AFDO, together with our member organisations, make significant contributions to disability policy, the rights of people with disability, and the reform agenda in all Australian jurisdictions, and across civil society, more broadly. We also advocate for systemic change, and identify and seek to address issues that affect the lives of people with disability in Australia. We understand that disability specific organisations play a key role in the provision of information and peer support to people with disability and their families. This role keeps them closely connected to their grass roots communities. These connections also allow AFDO to understand and faithfully represent the views of people with disability to government.

You can access further information about AFDO's members on [AFDO's website](#). You can also find out more about our [policy priorities](#), and our [systemic advocacy and policy work](#).

Acronyms and abbreviations

This list of terms may assist readers and users of this document to understand what we mean when we use the following terms or abbreviations.

ABI	Acquired brain injury
ADE	Australian Disability Enterprise
AFDO	Australian Federation of Disability Organisations
Department or DSS	Department of Social Services
Disability Royal Commission or DRC	Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability
Discussion Paper	The Next Steps on Supported Employment: consultation on the way forward discussion paper issued by the Department in March 2025. This document responds to questions raised in the Discussion Paper.
DPO	Disabled People's Organisation. These are organisations led, directed, and governed by people with disability, for people with disability.
DRO	Disability Representative Organisation. These organisations are funded under a specific funding program of the Commonwealth Department of Social Services to support systemic advocacy for Australians with disability. AFDO is a DRO.
FASD	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
Open employment	Sometimes also referred to as “mainstream” employment. The employment or work settings in which people without disability are employed. Open employment settings become inclusive employment settings when they also employ people with disability on the same terms and conditions, and without discrimination, and the setting provides the necessary adjustments needed by any person with disability to participate fully.

Introduction

The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) welcomes the opportunity to provide to the Department our response to the matters identified in the Discussion Paper, and to inform the future for supported employment in Australia. Our response builds on AFDO's advocacy on behalf of 50+ member organisations over the last 20 years.

What is “supported employment”?

The DSS website states that “supported employment”:

refers to jobs where people with disability **with high support needs** can **receive extra support** while they are at work, (our emphasis)

and

is for people who need **substantial ongoing support** to obtain and/or keep paid employment.¹ (our emphasis)

However, we note the Discussion Paper defines “supported employment” differently to the way the term is used on the DSS website. The Discussion Paper defines “supported employment” as follows:

Ongoing assistance provided by support workers and managers for employees working in supported employment services (historically known as Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs)) or other settings to complete work tasks.²

Both positions are in stark contrast to the position internationally. From the outset, and first use of the description of “supported employment” (more than twenty years ago), elsewhere in the world, supported employment is understood to be, and is recognised as a part of, open, or mainstream, employment. Contrary to the Department's approach, supported employment is

a job in the community working alongside peers without disabilities and being paid a commensurate wage.³

Supported employment is not, and never has been (outside Australia), delivered by putting people with disability in a group employment setting such as a sheltered workshop, enclave, (or ADE) prior to having their own job in the community.

Elsewhere, it is not limited to people with “high support needs”, or providing “extra support”.

Supported employment, implemented as designed and intended, provides the needed supports that allow an individual to better manage, lessen the effect of, or remove, the barriers that prevent or impede the person obtaining or maintaining a job in the community, without that assistance.

Supported employment is grounded in a fundamental premise that:

everyone, regardless of the severity (of social barriers) or the type of disability, has a right and responsibility to **work, live, and play in their community.**⁴

Effective supported employment is customised to each person, providing the wrap-around supports needed by that individual to work in meaningful employment, in the community, with other community members and their peers without disability, and earn a living wage.

AFDO urges the Department to adopt a definition of “supported employment” that is consistent with the understanding and approach internationally. AFDO also urges the government to develop and implement a new supported employment ecosystem aligned with the international approach, and that is co-designed or co-created by people with disability and their representative organisations.

Both two different definitions used by the Department, and the definition used in the Discussion Paper in particular, do not accurately or appropriately describe or identify the requirements of supported employment that people with disability need and want. In particular the definitions fail to consider or include support provided:

- (a) by access to and use of aids, technology, or equipment
- (b) by the family, carers, DPOs, work colleagues and friends of a person with disability,
- (c) to allow or assist the person to participate fully in and reap the benefits of all aspects of the employment relationship, and their role, beyond **completing work tasks**, including:
 - (i) participation in and enjoyment of the community within the workplace, the employer, and across the industry or sector
 - (ii) building and maintaining respectful, valued relationships
 - (iii) having a sense of value and purpose
 - (iv) having a clear career path
 - (v) opportunities for further vocational and professional development and increasing skills and knowledge, and
 - (vi) opportunities to develop other life skills.

Supports are or may be needed throughout the person’s working life (and so, are “ongoing” in that overarching sense). However, the worker’s needs, and therefore, necessary supports, may change throughout their working life. The need for some supports may lessen; some may increase; additional, new needs may develop; the type, frequency or timing of work, or duties, may change (along with other circumstances) over time. A worker may no longer need a specific support, and may need different supports. In these many and varied ways, the types, frequency, and delivery of supports is not “ongoing”.

Support can be structured, and provided through formal processes. But support can also be informal, ad hoc or unstructured.

In AFDO’s view, a more inclusive, and comprehensive, definition must be the starting point for consideration of any change to the supported employment ecosystem and for all future discussions, decisions, and actions. The definition must extend beyond any role ADEs may have in that future. It must recognise that an ADE is only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

Open employment does not equal inclusive employment

It is important to always keep front of mind that open employment is not, in and of itself, inclusive employment.

Open employment is also different to accessible employment or an accessible culture.

It is important to make this point, to remind everybody that Australian governments, businesses, civil society, and the general community must continue to work hard to remove the many barriers that hinder people with disability from fully participating in Australian life.

Even with a new form of supported employment, open employment will still need to make changes to improve and embed an inclusive culture, and to ensure that all jobs, workplaces, industries, and sectors of our economy are accessible by all people with disability.

The issues are contentious

AFDO recognises that discussions that centre around supported employment in Australia are contentious, to say the least.

We know that for many people with disability, working in an ADE provides purpose, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging.

AFDO's response **does not** seek to deny or diminish these experiences. We also do not think, and do not want to categorise, the choices made by people with disability and their families and carers as wrong or contrary to the best interests of any individual person with disability. We do, however, believe that as a society and an economy, collectively, we must aspire for more opportunities that are centred in community and align with the experiences of workers without disability (or the Australian population broadly, when it comes to employment).

We also recognise that for some people with disability continuing to work in an ADE is their genuine, free, choice. This may be particularly so where friendships and connection have been established over many years. Transition to new places of work may not be the right or best choice for some people with disability currently working in an ADE. This must be acknowledged and respected.

This response to the DSS discussion paper **is** designed to elevate the conversation about what supported employment **could** be with appropriate investment and how we (as a society and an economy) get to that point. It is also about marking a "red line" that we must not move, and which we must not cross, as we plan and then move to implement those plans, to move to employment opportunities and workplaces that are fully inclusive, and one (of many) components or structures within the Australian workforce and our employment settings.

In this document, we provide some guidance to the questions that DSS has asked. This response does not seek to provide all the answers. AFDO recognises that there is inherent complexity, and multiple stakeholders, in building a successful supported employment ecosystem as a part of open employment.

ADFO welcomes, and is willing to participate in and contribute to, continued conversations among government, other DROs, DPOs, our disability communities, and business, to co-create this ecosystem.

AFDO's response to questions in the Discussion Paper

1. Is there any other existing work that is missing from the table at Appendix 3?

AFDO recommends that the following existing strategies, plans, or reform programs are included in the assessment of the government's response to, and mapped against, the recommendations of the DRC. These documents and their implementation outcomes must also be considered within the scope of future design and policy and program activity development.

National Autism Strategy⁵

As of March 2025, 38% of participants (almost 275,000 Australians) in the NDIS were autistic, up 18% from the previous year⁶. Of these, 21% of participants are aged 15-24⁷, highlighting a significant population of young people who are currently in, seeking, or about to navigate. employment options. The options presented to these young people, and the independent support available to understand these options, is essential.

The National Autism Strategy references the need for meaningful employment options, employer awareness and support, workplace training (including role modelling), education and career development. Further consultation is needed with DPOs led by and representing autistic people to ensure that supported employment reform fully considers and properly responds to the needs of this diverse cohort.

National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy⁸

An extensive number of research studies have demonstrated a strong association between intellectual disability and mental health conditions, including research recently published by the National Centre for Excellence in Intellectual Disability Health in Australia.⁹ People with intellectual disability are significantly more likely to experience depression, anxiety, psychosis, bi-polar disorder, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

Evidence based strategies to address mental health in addition to the person's primary disability, in line with the commitments within this Strategy, must be considered as part of the reform and delivery of supported employment.

National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028¹⁰

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability caused by prenatal alcohol exposure, present in 3.64% of the general population. High rates of FASD have been documented in vulnerable populations, including youth in detention. A 2018 WA study¹¹ found 36% of young people diagnosed with FASD and 89% with at least one severe neurodevelopmental impairment.

The National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018–2028 calls for the implementation of targeted education, therapeutic justice interventions, and supported employment pathways tailored to people with FASD, including those involved in the criminal justice system. This reflects a national commitment to improving life outcomes through inclusive, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate services across sectors.

Employment pathways need to consider justice-involved youth with cognitive disabilities, offering

post-release employment models linked with therapeutic support.

2. What is the ideal future state for the supported employment sector and employment of people with disability with high support needs?

AFDO recommends the consistent application of the following four key principles will deliver the ideal state of an effective, equitable, consistent, trusted, and sustainable supported employment ecosystem:

1. “Open employment first” for all people with disability where disability specific and individual needs are recognised and supported
 2. Significant capability building of mainstream employers to open up new opportunities, including within small to medium sized businesses
 3. Genuine efforts to support transition, including retirement options, for people currently in ADEs who wish to transition, and
 4. A ‘red’ line regarding new entrants to ADEs, with a firm cut-off date, consistent with the DRC recommendations.
- ## 3. What additional actions are necessary to increase employment of people with disability with high support needs in open/inclusive settings?

3.1 Investigate and replicate nuanced best practice

Much of the current conversation around supported employment focuses on the needs of people with an intellectual disability, noting their significantly high representation within ADEs¹². While this is warranted, it is critical that the investigation and implementation of best practice extends to other disability groups experiencing significant and entrenched unemployment and under-employment.

Just 11% of NDIS participants aged 25-34 with an acquired brain injury reported that they had a paid job at their latest re-assessment (as compared to 23% of overall participants at March 2025)¹³. People who are deafblind and people with multiple disabilities are also significantly less likely to be employed. How a person with deafblindness is supported will differ greatly from a person with an intellectual disability, or a person with ABI.

These examples are not exhaustive, recognising that these are other groups experiencing high rates of unemployment. Intersectional challenges, such as age, location, cultural background and incarceration further compound the need for more intentional support.

Tailored employment interventions and customised models of support must be considered within supported employment reform to assist cohorts most likely to experience poorer employment outcomes.

3.2 Resource age-appropriate planning and support

Age-appropriate planning is essential to assist people with disability and their families to identify the best employment pathway for each individual. This must start in school for young people to create a blueprint for employment and post-school study.

In addition to young people entering employment for the first-time, age-appropriate independent information and support is needed for people with disability (including those

currently in ADEs) to plan for the future. This needs to include open employment, social enterprises, micro businesses, and other employment pathways, such as work experience.

Knowing what is possible in open employment - supported by real case studies and outcomes - enables people with disability and their families to make more informed choices. AFDO supports the continued allocation of funding (currently provided to Inclusion Australia) to ensure independent information, mentoring and support.

3.3 Adequately resource employment sampling

Employment sampling is the ability to try different jobs in different sectors. AFDO recommends that this is available to all people with disability, commencing from year 7, to maximise employment experience for young people with disability and increase their likelihood of securing open employment.

Models must be able to demonstrate supporting people with disability into open employment to avoid sampling for the sake of it.

3.4 Increase opportunities for people with disability to undertake formal volunteering to build skills, confidence, and networks in mainstream settings

As with employment, volunteering rates among people with disability remain persistently lower than the general population, with people with disability reporting similar accessibility barriers to those they experience in finding, securing, and retaining meaningful employment.

Meanwhile, formal volunteering within organisations across Australia continues to decline.¹⁴ This presents significant challenges for organisations in meeting community needs, from mental health support, cost of living relief, addressing loneliness to creating social opportunities via sport, art, environmental action and more.

Federally, DSS is responsible for volunteering policy and programs. “Services to help people with disabilities obtain employment” (including supported employment) is also a matter for which the Department is responsible.¹⁵ It makes sense for an integrated strategy to be developed seeking to harness the interests of people with disability, with efforts to increase and sustain volunteering.

In addition, the Employment Assistance Fund does not recognise volunteering¹⁶. As a result, people with disability are significantly limited in their access to any needed aids, support, or resources that facilitate, enable, or support their participation and skills development in a volunteer or non-paid setting.

AFDO recommends the eligibility rules for the Employment Assistance Fund are expanded, to give the Fund the ability to fund the provision of assistance to people with disability who, in a voluntary capacity, are engaged in or undertaking work, or an activity that has a work or employment related purpose. Relevant activities or purposes can include obtaining experience, developing new or further knowledge or skills, or as part of formal or informal professional, vocational, career, or employment development. This change is likely to:

- (a) significantly increase the visibility of people with disability in mainstream settings
- (b) build awareness and capability of organisations to welcome and genuinely include people with disability as part of their paid and volunteer workforces
- (c) build the skills and networks of people with disability, and

- (d) generate meaningful employment pathways for people with disability over the longer term.

3.5 Apply an intersectional lens

It is crucial that an intersectional lens is applied to all actions to increase employment of people with disability in open employment contexts. People with disability have varied diverse identities (including race, gender, sexuality, age, socio-economic background, and geography) that intersect with our identity of disability. Each identity, and each intersecting point, shape our unique experiences and needs.

In planning and implementing a new supported employment ecosystem within an open employment context, we must not conflate all people with disability as having the same identity, experiences, or needs, and we must avoid generalisations or oversimplification.

Further, by acknowledging how different forms of oppression (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) intersect and compound ableism (and one another), this new supported employment ecosystem will support how people with disability, and Australian society more broadly, respond to, and deal with, these interconnected systems of oppression.

3.6 A transition path for ADE employees nearing retirement

AFDO recognises that as we (as a society and an economy) plan, develop and implement necessary supports for people with disability, within a supported employment ecosystem as part of open employment settings, we must also consider, and meet, the support needs of people with disability in ADEs who are nearing, or considering, retirement during the transition and development phases.

It is essential that this transition process includes processes and activities that provide the people within this cohort with:

- (a) clear, accurate and timely information
- (b) supports that help the people within this cohort identify, assess, and choose between, the available options
- (c) access to additional services or supports specifically addressing the individual needs that arise (or that are likely to arise):
 - (i) as part of the decision-making process
 - (ii) during the period between deciding to retire and the end of employment, and
 - (iii) after employment has ended.

The planning, processes, information, supports (and the conversations or other communications) must identify and provide information about the retirement process, financial implications, and life after work. It is essential that this includes identifying other roles or opportunities for engagement and interaction within and as part of the community, that align with the person's own experiences and values. The process must recognise, support, and celebrate that stopping work at an ADE is not an end, but the start of the next stage, and new opportunities for participation in, enjoyment of, and meaningful contribution to society or community.

4. The Royal Commission recommended the development of a Plan or Roadmap to guide further reform in the supported employment sector. What would you like to see included in such a plan?

AFDO recommends a plan that covers an initial period of five years, and that:

1. is developed through a genuine process of co-design or co-creation by people with disability, their representative organisations, government, and other key stakeholders, under a timetable that provides sufficient, reasonable time, and a process that is appropriately resourced and funded by government
2. is consistent with the DRC recommendation
3. clearly articulates the plan's goals, and includes:
 - (a) well-developed activities and projects (Activities) aligned to, and designed to achieve, the goals
 - (b) a consensus within and among disability communities of the characteristics, elements, or indicators of progress over time and ultimate success for each goal and each Activity
 - (c) well-defined, relevant, and objectively determinable measures of progress and completion of Activities and goals, including the characteristics and numbers of each of the following (and any conclusions that can be drawn, and any trends that can be identified, from this data:
 - (i) people with disability employed in an open employment context
 - (ii) people with disability entering employment in an open employment context for the first time
 - (iii) the types of roles held, and the types of duties performed
 - (iv) the category of employer, including the different public sectors; statutory corporations; local government; public companies; small and medium enterprises; family businesses; sole traders; education bodies; charitable or religious institutions; other for-purpose bodies; non-government organisations
 - (v) broad ranges of the levels of remuneration received
 - (vi) the representation of different disability cohorts, including people with intellectual or cognitive disability, acquired brain injury, and Down Syndrome, and
 - (vii) transition pathways, and timing, for people working in ADEs.
4. sets targets for the number of people with disability:
 - (a) to enter open employment (school leavers or those seeking a job for the first time)
 - (b) to:
 - (i) exit ADEs, and
 - (ii) transition to open employment, or
 - (iii) undertake options that are alternatives to open employment, and

(iv) employed in the Commonwealth public sector

5. growing expectations of employment, with people with disability actively choosing and succeeding in open employment. This can be measured by
 - (a) increase in the percentage of NDIS participants including open employment in their NDIS plans, and
 - (b) open employment rates growing 10% per year
6. like for like availability in the types of employment supports people with disability can access irrespective of employment setting (e.g. employment coaches are setting agnostic and available for the same number of hours in mainstream and ADE settings)
7. consistent measures to monitor 'churn' by Inclusive Employment Australia providers. 'Churn' refers to short term placements to meet outcome payments, rather than support for the individual to maintain longer term employment
8. diminishing expenditure by the Commonwealth directed to ADEs (in the form of sector development, grants for example) as open employment outcomes increase, and
9. re-alignment of government priorities (of policy, programs and funding) to preference open employment, with funding of programs that are demonstrated to maximise inclusion or integration.

5. How could the sector best increase wages for people with disability while avoiding job losses?

Are there examples that currently exist that can be leveraged? Are there new approaches that could be tested?

The elephant in the room is that job losses are inevitable, noting that the majority of ADEs undertake routine and repetitive tasks which are under threat by increased automation, offshoring and technology developments.

We need to reimagine what supported employment is and how roles within mainstream settings can be undertaken by people with disability requiring more intensive support.

While 'reimagining' sounds ephemeral, there are many examples¹⁷ of people with disability who have been supported to establish their own businesses (with and without circles of support) that meet genuine commercial needs. From blue collar work to service industries, there will be a continued need for people to address the things we all need to make life easier.

Regarding wages, AFDO recommends that the Commonwealth:

1. examines, in detail, the proposed modelling by Impact Economics and Policy¹⁸, developed on behalf of Inclusion Australia, to move to full minimum wage, including rollout implications; as well as other modelling
2. assesses the likelihood of job losses of people with disability working in supported employment over the longer term, and how this can be mitigated (noting the Taylor Fry modelling and its limitations)
3. ensures all other aspects that underpin inclusive employment undergo reform alongside

proposed changes, particularly the Disability Support Pension, and

4. presents a working model for feedback by disability representative organisations, relevant stakeholders and industry to progress fair remuneration, with a gradual planned transition over an extended period as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission¹⁹.

We also urge the Department consider the specific views of Down Syndrome Australia and Inclusion Australia, noting that both people with Down syndrome and people with intellectual disability are more likely to be receiving sub-minimum wage.

6. Do you see a role for workplaces which provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future? If so, what should these workplaces look like?

There is an opportunity to harness the talents of support coaches and staff currently working in ADEs to identify, create and support opportunities within mainstream employment. This should include:

- recognition and re-orientation support of the existing skilled workforce currently supporting people working within ADEs
- knowledge transfer/capability building to increase the number of professionals that can support people with disability within mainstream employment
- funding to roll out professional development in best practice inclusive employment, building the specialised skills that are required²⁰, and
- building and resourcing of programs that recognise ADE employees who have the capability to become mentors, role models, coaches, and support staff to other people with disability.

AFDO recognises that not all ADEs have had the same trajectory, with some ADEs making impressive progress in transitioning to more inclusive work settings, with genuine open employment pathways and opportunities for people with disability to step into senior roles. While these exceptions should be rightly acknowledged, this is not the majority of ADEs and has come at the cost of decades of transition investment by the Commonwealth with very little transition or increased sustainability.

It is our view that we can aspire to better outcomes that are inclusive, integrated and lead to an ordinary life.

7. How could the benefits of supported employment settings be reflected in open employment settings?

7.1 Social connection and cohesion

One of the more frequently raised concerns among people with disability, their families and of ADEs themselves is the loss of connection and friendships should ADEs be forced to close. This is not a trivial consideration; in fact these are considerations many of us have in whether we stay in a workplace. These are also considerations for where we choose to play, with people with disability finding connection and belonging with others with a disability – and those without – outside of work.

In the early 2000s, the closure of the Vision Australia workshop in High Street, Prahran, Victoria

created significant tensions within the blind community. Older members were angry at its pending closure and campaigned for a reversal of the decision. Many had, or were currently working at the workshop, finding purpose and camaraderie.

Others within the blind community who had attended blind schools and worked in similar settings, as well those working in mainstream employment, actively supported its closure. For these individuals, its existence was a continued hallmark of institution.

The concern about loss of connection was real. Blind Citizens Australia, the Blind Workers Union and Vision Australia stepped in to fill the connection gap, with highly customised employment support, peer support groups, interest-based groups and social connection activities established and promoted.

Twenty years on, the unemployment rate of people who are blind or vision impaired has marginally shifted²¹, as has been the case with the rate among people with disability more broadly²². This highlights broader systemic barriers required to shift employment rates and opportunities. Critically, working within mainstream settings has become the expectation for young people who are blind and vision impaired.

While the camaraderie that has been built in ADEs cannot be replaced, connection to community, shared lived experience, and opportunities to meet around shared interests can be built, and re-built, evidenced by countless diagnostic groups and networks across Australia.

A considered approach can be adopted to ensure that existing relationships are respected and nurtured, and new relationships with people with and without disabilities can be formed.

7.2 1:1 support to build employment skills and new relationships

ADEs can offer more intensive, one to one support, getting to know each individual over time and helping to build skills and connections. There is no reason why this cannot occur well in mainstream settings.

There is the capacity to extend this role to mainstream settings, with capability building of colleagues and co-workers to build their confidence to engage and connect and provide informal support to people with disability.

Conclusion

AFDO recognises that progressing the vision outlined in this response requires careful planning, aspiration, investment and a “red line” marking the end of ADEs.

It also requires some loss – we cannot keep doing things the same way if we want to change the trajectory of young people with disability entering the world of work and to offer something more to those already working in an ADE.

We want to see more people with disability entering open employment with the right, customised supports.

We want open employment to be the starting point for all people.

We want transition pathways for people who would like to try open employment, with a commitment of resources and time to achieve a successful transition for each person to a role that is fairly remunerated.

We want genuine alternatives in how people with disability can contribute in the small number of instances where employment may not be the right fit.

And we want genuine investment first and foremost in open employment initiatives to give this a red-hot go.

We can only do this together. We welcome continued conversations to execute a new way forward.

Endnotes

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- 4 Note 3.
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- 14 Volunteering Australia (2021) Submission to the consultation on the National Disability Employment Strategy, May 2021, retrieved from <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/154/2021/25080/may-2021-submission-to-the-consultation-on-the-national-disability-employment-strategy.pdf> last accessed 9 June 2025.

- 15 Commonwealth of Australia (2025), Administrative Arrangements Order, 13 May 2025, p. 35.
- 16 Department of Social Services (2025), Who is eligible for Employment Assistance Fund, retrieved from <https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/i-am-a-person-with-disability/looking-applying-job/government-services-help-you/funding-workplace-changes/who-eligible-eaf>
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