



Next Steps in Supported Employment: consultation on the way forward

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The Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Department of Social Services regarding supported employment.

The BCCM is the peak body for co-operatives and mutuals in Australia and is currently delivering the Care Together Program on behalf of the Department of Health and Aged Care.

The Care Together Program supports the development of innovative consumer, worker, provider and community-owned co-operative and mutual care service delivery models in regional Australia and is an important component of the broader rights-based reforms to social care policy in Australia.

The BCCM welcomes and supports the substantial work undertaken in reviewing disability employment practices in Australia in order to ensure better outcomes for people with disability.

We note that the United Nations has declared 2025 the International Year of Co-operatives and called on governments to review and enhance their regulation of co-operatives to mark the year. We encourage the Australian Government to meet the moment and support the growth of co-operatives in supported employment.

This submission will focus on:

The ideal future state for the supported employment sector and employment of people with disability with high support needs.

Additional actions which are necessary to increase employment of people with high support needs in open/inclusive settings.

Workplaces which provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future.

The benefits of supported employment settings being reflected in open employment settings.

One of the most successful disability employment providers in Australia is the Nundah Community Enterprise Cooperative (NCEC) in Brisbane. NCEC was recognised in 2023 as the Best Social Enterprise at the Brisbane [Lord Mayor's Business Awards](#) and in 2020 as Australia's Best Social Enterprise (Large) by [Social Traders Australia](#).

NCEC is a workers co-operative established to create open market comparable, socially inclusive employment for people with intellectual and / or psycho-social disabilities. It started in 1998 as a small jobs club and has grown to employ more than 35 people through a range of enterprises such as Espresso Train Café and Catering, the Good Food Project and Parks and Property Crews. The co-operative is an example of 'place-based' community economics, which transforms the local economy to foster inclusion. It was founded in 1998 and grew largely outside of government funding for twenty years, until the advent of the NDIS which has enabled it to expand.

NCEC has been a leader in the social enterprise space for 25 years, pioneering social procurement with Brisbane City Council, mentoring new social enterprises, and co-founding the Queensland Social Enterprise Council (QSEC), the first peak body for social enterprise in Australia.

A [2019 Research Report](#) prepared by the University of Queensland (published in an international disability journal) found that NCEC has provided meaningful work, a fundamental human need, that people with intellectual disability are often unable to access (Westoby, Shevellar 2019).

The research results and case study conclude that meaningful work and social inclusion are the outcomes of a work environment that empowers members to have their say in key decisions relating to them. The research

highlights the significance of co-operatives - a middle way form of enterprise built on a long tradition of mutuality, and contrasts this to traditional organisation forms based on the 'efficiency tradition'.

The NCEC case study shows:

1. Co-ops can provide meaningful social and economic participation for people with disabilities
2. The co-operative business model has some advantages over mainstream open employment as well as traditional work environments for people with disability
3. It is a community embedded participatory model and there are professional inputs required at multiple levels to ensure the delivery of effective personalised supports.

Co-operatives are well-aligned to market-based programs like the NDIS. This is because co-operative members are both economically and democratically involved in its governance and ownership. Real participation and control by members with disability, such as is central to the co-operative model, means that employment supports delivered are more likely to reflect people's needs and aspirations.

Prior to working with NCEC most workers with intellectual disability had been long-term unemployed despite in many cases repeatedly attempting to secure work for themselves. There is significant unmet demand for employment options like NCEC where there are many more approaches for employment than can be supported. Until economic and social systems in Australia are truly inclusive, options like NCEC are needed to create viable long-term supportive workplaces.

Another example is [Caboolture Workers Co-op](#), a social enterprise creating employment for people with disabilities formed in the City of Moreton Bay in 2006. This co-operative was formed with support of NCEC and has a similar member governed ethos.

A newer co-operative is [TaskABLE](#), a for purpose microenterprise business that performs small to medium tasks for customers and is intentionally founded to provide a niche opportunity for individuals and businesses in the community to provide employment pathways for young adults with an intellectual impairment.

Our ideal future state for the supported employment sector would include more opportunities for people with disability with high support needs to be a member of a worker co-op where they could access meaningful work, social inclusion and empowerment.

We note the deep alignment of worker co-ops with the [Guiding Principles for the Future of supported employment for people with disability and high employment support needs](#), particularly "People with disability have genuine choice and control, which meets their individual needs". The democratic principles of co-operatives ensures this choice and control.

The Ownership Commission in the UK produced a report in 2012 called 'Plurality, Stewardship and Engagement'. It found that having a plurality of forms of ownership provides more opportunity to align the form of ownership with the appropriate business model. In supported disability employment it is important to have a diversity of business models and this includes co-operatives.

Co-operatives are member-owned businesses formed to benefit the people who use them or work in them. A co-operative can be utilised for a wide range of purposes, maintaining the co-operative principles but taking different forms.

This is particularly important with regards to disability as there is diversity across disabilities. Even within a particular disability type there will be a spectrum from 'profound' to 'mild'. There are also the differential social and economic backgrounds of the person with a disability. The barriers facing a young person with an IQ in the 55 to 70 range who has been in the care of Child Protection will be very different to a young person who has a supportive well-resourced family.

This raises an important question about support needs, it is not only a reference to extent of disability, it includes social and economic support. Co-ops are structured to meet the needs of their members and can take on a diverse purpose with greater or lesser levels of support provided.

Fostering the development of worker co-ops is an additional action necessary to increase employment of people with high support needs in open/inclusive settings.

The BCCM through our Care Together project have had preliminary discussions with the Swinburne University Centre for Inclusive Employment (previously Disability Employment Centre of Excellence) on further developing sustainable supported employment co-operative models for people with disability and high support needs. The first step is creating awareness about co-operative solutions.

Co-operative support means people with disabilities can experience the benefits of supported employment settings in open employment settings.

[Supported Independent Living Co-operative](#) (SILC) is a NDIS registered provider that assists families to set up co-operatives to run family governed homes for their family members. In supporting residents with employment SILC focusses on meaningful, individualised work that fosters the co-op member-resident's interests, strengths, and preferences. This often involves establishing a micro-enterprise, or a tailored job role. Examples of people with disability engaging in income-generating activities shaped around them and what they could and want to do include:

- A resident who loves lawn mowing became the regular gardener for multiple co-op homes.
- A resident offers a dog-walking service for several co-op families.
- A number of residents collect recycling from co-op homes and submit it through Return and Earn.
- A resident followed a checklist and, after six months of supported training, works independently as the office cleaner.
- One co-op resident set up a [meal prep and meal delivery service](#) (with the help of SILC and a dedicated Provider):

These are not only meaningful sources of income but also organically foster mutual support and participation across the co-op.

SILC is uniquely positioned to support inclusive employment for people with high support needs because participation and shared decision-making are a focus of co-ops. Discovery, planning, and designing work around the person fits seamlessly with the co-operative model.

Co-ops foster a culture of mutual support and flexibility. The flexibility means that tailored approaches can be developed that can be adapted at home or in the community by the Co-op staff. Co-ops in general value contribution which opens up new ways of thinking about work and roles. SILC and the collaboration supported by the co-op model, between staff, families and participant's circles of supports means unique work ideas that would not fit within traditional employer or DES models, are generated.

We are happy to be contacted to provide further information.

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About the BCCM

The BCCM is the national industry peak body for co-operatives and mutuals, working with governments, regulators, and policymakers to ensure the Australian economic landscape is fully able to benefit from a competitive co-op and mutual movement.

Through its member co-ops and mutuals, the BCCM represents 12.6 million individuals and 60,000 businesses.

The BCCM has supported new co-operatives and mutuals to form in a range of sectors and is a member of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) with access to world-wide networks.

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