

Response to: Discussion Paper – Next Steps on Supported Employment

Submitted by:

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1. Introduction

At the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP), we've spent decades working alongside people with disability, their families, and communities to reshape what employment support can look like. Our vision is urgent: a future where all people with disability, including those with high support needs, have access to meaningful, award-wage employment. This submission responds to the Department of Social Services' discussion paper on the next steps in supported employment and outlines a clear pathway for change. Drawing on the Royal Commission findings, the recommendations of the NDIS Review, and our practice-based evidence, we offer a model that's practical, scalable, and firmly grounded in human rights.

2. Response to Consultation Questions

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

Our vision is for a supported employment system that no longer relies on segregated settings or subminimum wages. In the ideal future, all people with disabilities, including those with high support needs, have equitable access to meaningful, inclusive employment that is tailored to their strengths and delivered in open, integrated settings.

This future model would:

- Eliminate subminimum wage employment entirely by 2030.
- Provide early, person-led planning through formalised Discovery processes.
- Ensure all supports are delivered by credentialed professionals, reducing reliance on generalist support staff.
- Reframe 'supported employment' to mean the level of on-the-job support needed to succeed in mainstream employment, not a separate setting.
- Embed robust quality frameworks (e.g., CEQAF) to guarantee participant-centred delivery.

Such a future also upholds human rights and aligns with the UNCRPD Article 27, ensuring every Australian with disability can pursue their employment aspirations with dignity and support. This alignment with human rights underscores the moral imperative of these reforms.

Question 3: What additional actions do you consider are necessary to increase employment of people with high support needs in open/inclusive settings?

- Create a funded NDIS line item for 'Vocational Discovery', including professional planning, observation, and job-matching.

- Mandate minimum professional qualifications for those delivering employment supports (e.g., ACRE training, PACFA or ACA registration).
- Fund a national upskilling initiative to ensure services can transition to CE-based delivery models.
- Implement a tiered outcome-linked payment system, replacing time-based funding, with payments tied to real milestones (e.g., Discovery completion, placement, sustained employment).
- Invest in capacity-building within the social enterprise sector to establish standalone open employment arms.
- Provide workforce transition support for legacy ADEs to redesign services and adopt CE frameworks.
- Prioritise regional delivery by investing in outreach-based CE services and partnerships with local employers.

Question 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?

The roadmap should:

- Set a clear timeline for phasing out subminimum wage arrangements by 2030 and all segregated employment models by 2034.
- Outline the staged implementation of Discovery, CE, and tiered payments within NDIS and Inclusive Employment Australia.
- Allocate transition funding for existing ADEs to restructure as CE-aligned open employment services.
- Include nationally endorsed practice standards and quality measures, such as the Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework (CEQAF) and the Discovery Experience Reflection and Satisfaction (DERS) survey.

This plan must Be co-designed with people with disability, families, First Nations and CALD communities, underscoring the importance of their involvement in this process.

- Prioritise funding and service development in areas of market failure, including regional and remote Australia.
- Detail a governance model with reporting responsibilities to the Disability Reform Ministerial Council.

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

A staged approach is needed to uplift wages while ensuring jobs remain viable and services are sustainable.

Strategies include:

- Introduce a Government wage subsidy to immediately bring all supported workers to 50% of the minimum wage, with a clear transition pathway to 100% by 2034.
- Tie wage subsidy eligibility to participation in a CE-aligned support pathway.
- Replace internal ADE placements with externally negotiated jobs tailored to individual skills and conditions.
- Invest in job carving and systematic instruction to ensure workers with high support needs are set up for success in open workplaces.
 - a. Existing examples: CE-aligned social enterprises in Tasmania and Victoria already offer award-wage roles supported by Discovery-based job design.
 - b. New approaches: Fund 'transitional job developer' roles in ADEs to broker award-wage employment in open markets.

Question 6: Do you see a role for workplaces that provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future?

Yes—but only under specific conditions. These workplaces must be award-wage, inclusive, and designed around individual strengths, not disability.

Criteria for such services:

- They must offer time-limited or transitional pathways toward open employment.
- Employment services must be operationally separate from the commercial entity.
- Supports must be delivered by CE-trained professionals using evidence-based methods.
- Services must be independently audited using CEQAF and must collect and act on participant feedback using DERS.

Such models may be especially relevant in regional communities with limited open employment providers.

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

- Embed structured onboarding and systematic instruction into open employment, particularly in the first 6 months.
- Provide funded job coaching delivered by trained CE practitioners.
- Establish a national CE practitioner network to build employer confidence and increase job customisation capacity.
- Incentivise employers to participate in Discovery activities and support role creation that is aligned with business needs.
- Incorporate person-led planning into every stage of job preparation and ongoing support.

By integrating these elements, open employment settings can become genuinely inclusive and accessible to workers with high support needs.

3. Conclusion

The current moment presents a rare opportunity to fundamentally reset the employment system for people with disabilities. The evidence is clear: participant-led planning, Customised Employment, and professionally delivered supports lead to better outcomes, not just for individuals but for the broader economy and society.

By embracing models like the one outlined here, built on Discovery, supported by credentialed practitioners, and held accountable through tools like CEQAF, we can deliver more than compliance. We can deliver real change. I urge the Australian Government to act with ambition and purpose. Let's not just fix a broken system. Let's build a new one that reflects what people with disability have always known: that they have the right, the capacity, and the desire to contribute through meaningful work.

2.8 The Role of CEQAF in Supporting Government Objectives

The Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework (CEQAF) plays a pivotal role in aligning employment support delivery with the Australian Government's reform objectives in disability employment. As the sector transitions from transactional service models towards outcomes-based, participant-led practices, CEQAF provides the structure necessary to maintain fidelity, measure impact, and promote continuous improvement.

At its core, CEQAF establishes clear standards for the delivery of Discovery, Job Development, and On-the-Job Support, ensuring these supports are not only delivered consistently but also in a way that reflects the evidence-based principles of Customised Employment. It addresses one of the critical shortcomings of previous systems, such as the DES model, by embedding quality oversight into the practice itself rather than as an afterthought.

By integrating the Discovery Experience Reflection Scale (DERS) as a key feedback mechanism, CEQAF also ensures that the participant's voice is not only heard but used to guide service refinement. This aligns directly with the Government's priority of ensuring choice, control, and personalised outcomes for people with disabilities.

Crucially, CEQAF also enables performance-based contracting. With built-in fidelity metrics and clearly defined outcome markers, it supports a shift from hourly billing models to outcome-linked funding. This approach gives policymakers the confidence that public investment is tied to real, meaningful progress in employment outcomes. The framework also supports transparency through a cycle of annual self-assessments and biennial independent audits, providing evidence of quality to participants, providers, and the broader community.

Moreover, CEQAF helps protect the integrity of reform efforts. As new players enter the employment support market, particularly social enterprises and NDIS providers, CEQAF acts as a safeguard against the dilution of practice standards. It offers a roadmap for new providers to align with best practices and ensures that employment supports are safe, effective, and grounded in participant rights.

In supporting government objectives, CEQAF contributes not only to more effective service delivery but also to broader policy goals, such as market stewardship, participant safeguarding, and long-term scheme sustainability. It transforms compliance from a bureaucratic burden into a catalyst for quality and innovation.