

Down Syndrome Australia Consortium

Next Steps in Supported Employment Submission

1 July 2025

Plain English Summary

This submission is from Down Syndrome Australia and its consortium, and it is about employment. It is to the Australian Government.

The Government has asked what we think about the future for employment for people with disability. We asked people who have Down syndrome and other intellectual disability caused by chromosomal variation. We are sharing this information with the Government because we think the Government should listen to people who are impacted by these decisions.

We are talking about supported employment in this submission. This means places where people with disability work only with other people with disability. Sometimes these are called Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs).

Most people who work in supported employment are people with intellectual disability. The most common disability type for people in supported employment is Down syndrome. People with disability working in supported employment can be paid as little as \$3.01 an hour.

Many people in our community work in supported employment because they can be safe, secure and feel understood. We know this is very important, especially for people with high support needs. We do not believe closing ADEs straight away is okay.

We are telling the Government that in the future all people with disability should be included in everything, including workplaces. For this reason, we are asking the Government to make a 10-year Plan (called a Roadmap), to end supported employment.

To do this the right way, we need to:

- improve services and supports for people with intellectual disability looking for a job or starting a job,
- pay all people in Australia at least the minimum wage,
- fix other things like the Disability Support Pension.

Down Syndrome Australia helps people with Down syndrome to find a job. This is called the Employment Connections Service. We are experts in understanding what to do, like giving people extra support when they start a job. Many people with intellectual disability will work less than 10 hours per week. This gives people time for other interests or appointments. People want a job that provides meaningful and productive employment suited to their capabilities and interests.

We are also telling the Government that it is unfair to pay people with disability lower wages. We believe people with intellectual disability should be paid fairly for the work they do. And we know the community agree. 82% of people who we asked agreed that it is not okay for people with Down syndrome to be paid less than anyone else in Australia.

We are asking the Government to fix some other things as well. One is the Disability Support Pension. People on the Disability Support Pension who want to work are worried about being kicked off or keeping up with all the work. We need to make sure the Disability Support Pension encourages people to get a job.

We believe every person with intellectual disability has the right to access skilled support to explore open, inclusive employment, to work in a job that is right for them and be paid a fair wage for their work. You can watch a video we made about this topic [here](#).

The rest of this document is not in Plain English. If you would like to ask us any more questions about what it says, please email us at advocacy@downsyndrome.org.au and we can talk to you about it.

About the Down Syndrome Australia Consortium

Down Syndrome Australia (DSA) was established in 2011 as the national peak body for people with Down syndrome and their families in Australia. Our vision is that people living with Down syndrome are valued and have full access to social and economic inclusion to reach their full potential. Down Syndrome Australia is one of eleven National Disability Representative Organisations (DRO) and leads a consortium of organisations to represent people with intellectual disability and their families and supporters, with a focus on intellectual disability caused by chromosomal variations.

People with these chromosomal variations experience intellectual disability varying from mild to severe, often accompanied by degrees of physical disabilities, higher rate of co-occurring neurodevelopmental conditions, communication disabilities and health issues.

It is important that the views of people with chromosomal variations and their families and supporters are represented in the development of policies and services that affect their lives. Families and supporters play a significant role in advocacy to skill development and providing supports and care. They are a critical part of the lives of a person with intellectual disability and form an important part of our advocacy work.

All our work is within the human rights model of disability and informed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Our consortium members are:

- Down Syndrome Australia and its' member organisations - ACT Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability, Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability Queensland, Down Syndrome Tasmania, Down Syndrome Victoria and Down Syndrome Western Australia
- Angelman Syndrome Association Australia
- Australian X and Y Spectrum Support
- Cri du Chat Support Group
- Fragile X Association of Australia
- Prader-Willi Syndrome Australia
- Smith-Magenis Syndrome Australia
- Turner Syndrome Association of Australia

People with intellectual disability with a focus on chromosomal variations

Across the DSA consortium, there are an estimated 20,000 people in Australia with these chromosomal variations receiving support, information and advice, of which Down syndrome is the most common.

Our Work

Down Syndrome Australia is also recognised as a Disability Representative and Carer Organisation (DRCO), working with the NDIS.

Many of our Consortium members deliver a range of Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grants and other projects across the country. These projects span information, programs, services and other forms of community supports for people with disability, their families and supporters – including medical professionals and carers.

We ensure people with disability are at the heart of our work, utilising best practice principles such as genuine co-design and co-delivery across our projects, and supporting the community with accessible information. We have been internationally recognised for our commitment to organisational inclusion – actively involving people with disability across our organisations: within the board, advisory network, ambassadors and project staff.

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Consortium Members



Down Syndrome Australia Members



Disability Representative Organisation endorsements for this
submission



**Children and Young People
with Disability Australia**



**PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY
AUSTRALIA**



**Women
With
Disabilities
Australia**
(WWDA)

Guide to this submission

The structure of this submission is as follows:

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 - Overview of terms
 - Where we are today
 - International and Australian context
 - Our position
2. Responses to the Department of Social Services consultationpage 13

We have organised questions into the following topics:

- The future of supported employment
- Supporting open or inclusive employment
- A Roadmap for reform
- Increasing wages for people with disability

Video submission

It was important that we spoke to our community of people with Down syndrome to listen to their views on supported employment. In the video, we interview members of Down Syndrome Victoria's (DSV) Advisory Network about what employment means to them and what needs to change.

This video also provides a more accessible version of our submission for members of the community who are interested. Thank you to the Advisory Network members and DSV staff that participated in the video. It can be viewed [here](#).

1. Introduction and high-level summary of position on supported employment

Overview of terms

Supported employment

The meaning of the term “supported employment” is not always clear. It is used differently across the disability sector and levels of government, which can make meaningful and clear discussions on the topic difficult.

Internationally, supported employment generally refers to supporting people with disability to find and maintain jobs in open employment. The Department of Social Services discussion paper for this consultation uses the following definition:

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.

We encourage the Federal Government to use one consistent definition across all areas and to avoid repetitive use of key words or acronyms. Regardless of the terms which are used, supports should be provided in all employment options including open employment in the community.

In this submission, for clarity, we will use the term supported employment in the way it has been defined in the discussion paper, to refer to ADEs or segregated employment settings.

Open employment

We will use the term “open employment” to refer to community-based employment settings in which people with disability are working alongside people without disability, with some level of support. This support is a spectrum based on the needs of the individual and can vary from one-to-one support to light touch support from a manager or co-worker.

Intellectual disability

In this submission when we use the term “intellectual disability”, we are referring broadly to intellectual disability caused by chromosomal variation, including Down syndrome.

Where we are today

People with intellectual disability have the right to work on an equal basis with others.¹ Despite this, people with intellectual disability continue to face systemic barriers to finding meaningful employment that pays them a fair wage.

People with intellectual disability want to work - NDIS participants with intellectual disability and Down syndrome have the highest percentage of NDIS plans with a goal to work (77%). Despite this, only 9% of NDIS participants with Down syndrome over 25 years old are in open employment, compared with 54% of participants overall.² We hear consistently from our community that there is an appetite and desire for meaningful employment.

There is significant evidence that open employment leads to better quality of life outcomes for people with disability.³ However, 69% of participants with intellectual disability and Down syndrome who have a paid job are working in supported employment.⁴ In fact, Down syndrome is the most represented disability type in supported employment.⁵ NDIA's supported employment survey found that as of 31 December 2023 a total of 15,153 employees were working in supported employment services.⁶ Under Fair Work's Supported Employment Services Award, people working in supported employment can be paid as little as \$3.01 an hour.⁷

There are many other aspects of the broader systems of support that discourage people with disability seeking open employment and being paid a fair wage. New research from Deloitte Access Economics, in consultation with DROs and disability employment peak bodies, has found that the Disability Support Pension (DSP) is a major disincentive to open employment. This is due to high financial disincentives, recipients' fear of losing eligibility to the DSP and complex administration and reporting. It is critical that these broader aspects of reform are considered alongside supported employment itself as without reform in areas such as DSP, we are unlikely to see a significant increase in open employment of people with intellectual disability.

¹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD)

² NDIA (2022) Employment outcomes for NDIS participants, 31 December 2022, [NDIS231_Participant Outcomes Employment - Full report_fACC\(2\).pdf](#)

³ Foley, K. R., Girdler, S., Downs, J., Jacoby, P., Bourke, J., Lennox, N., ... & Leonard, H. (2014). Relationship between family quality of life and day occupations of young people with Down syndrome. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 49(9), 1455-1465.

⁴ NDIA (2022) Employment outcomes for NDIS participants, 31 December 2022, [NDIS231_Participant Outcomes Employment - Full report_fACC\(2\).pdf](#)

⁵ NDIA (2024) From ADEs to open employment, May, NDIA Practice and Leadership Branch, [From ADEs to open employment Report Accessible \(1\).pdf](#)

⁶ NDIA (2025) Supported Employment Survey Report, March.

⁷ FairWork Ombudsman, Supported Employment Services Award 2020, Schedule D, [FWO - Award Viewer - MA000103](#)

International context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) says that Australia, as a signatory, must “recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others. This includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.”⁸

Australia is not meeting its obligations under the UNCRPD,⁹ a view also reflected by the United Nations Special Rapporteur, who has expressed their concern about segregated work settings. United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Professor Tomoya Obokata, visited Australia in 2024 and delivered a statement recommending the abolition of ADEs. The report stated that “the Special Rapporteur regards the ADEs to be discriminatory and therefore they should be abolished. The Federal and state/territorial Governments should also actively promote the employment of persons with disabilities in the open market. In this regard, they should consider temporary special measures, including incentives such as tax credits or wage subsidies in order to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities proactively.”¹⁰ We are not aware that the Government has responded to this statement.

Australian context

In Australia, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person in areas including employment, education and accessing services because of their disability. It is unlawful to discriminate against people with disability in employment, including the recruitment process, deciding on the successful candidate, pay rates, promotion or dismissal.

Many Government policies and program also have goals around inclusive employment for people with disability, including the *Employ My Ability: Disability Employment Strategy 2021* and *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031*. Australia's Disability Strategy includes policy priorities to:

- Increase employment of people with disability, and
- Improve the transition of young people with disability from education to employment.¹¹

⁸ United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), [link here](#)

⁹ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation of People with Disability (2020) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - An Assessment of Australia's Level of Compliance, Research Report, [link here](#)

¹⁰ Obokata, T (2024) United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Country visit to Australia, United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, November 14-27, [link here](#)

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2021) Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, Department of Social Services, [link here](#)

Sadly, few if any of these inclusive employment goals have achieved meaningful progress. There is still much to do.

The *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* (DRC) investigated employment for people with disability. As will be explored further below, they recommended a transition to inclusive employment and fair wages.¹² We support the DRC recommendations and encourage the Government to commit to implementing the recommendations as described.

¹² Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B.

Our position

We understand that within the communities we represent there are a range of views on supported employment. For some people with intellectual disability, working in supported employment provides safety, security and belonging. We acknowledge those experiences and do not believe moving all people to open employment over a short time frame, and without full system reform, is reasonable or safe.

Our vision

We believe every person with intellectual disability has the right to access skilled support to explore open, inclusive employment, to work in a job that is right for them and be paid a fair wage for their work.

A transition towards inclusion

Our goal as a consortium is full social and economic inclusion of people with intellectual disability. One part of that is mapping a gradual transition away from supported employment towards a future in which people with intellectual disability are supported to establish individualised and flexible working lives that suit their needs and interests.

The DSA Consortium believes the Government should design a transition away from supported employment towards an approach in which people with disability work in inclusive employment settings and are paid at least the minimum wage. This pathway, as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission, should be a 10-year transition pathway in which employees, providers and employers are supported throughout the process. People who require support at work should have assistance to explore next steps, which could include open employment with support, social enterprises or other meaningful community involvement in inclusive settings.

The need for broader reform

It is important to emphasise that supported employment cannot be phased out in isolation from the many supports and services that exist for people with disability looking for or engaged in work. This transition must be carefully planned and there must be no reduction in supported employment services until data shows that people with intellectual disability are being properly supported by employment programs and related services. This includes reform to the DSP to encourage employment while allowing recipients to retain the stability of the pension.

A phasing out of sub-minimum wages

We believe people with intellectual disability should be paid fairly for the work they do. And we know Australians agree. In polling undertaken by Essential Media, 82% of a

representative sample of Australians say it is not acceptable for people with Down syndrome to be paid under the minimum wage.

We support the DRC recommendation of a gradual transition over 10 years to pay people with disability 100% of the minimum wage. As with supported employment, this must be carefully planned and considered to ensure that there are no unintended consequences. However, the starting date for this transition must be imminent.

2. Responses to the consultation paper questions

Note: we have changed the order of the questions and grouped them by topic in order for the submission to be more readable and less repetitive.

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

Given the co-occurrence of autism and Down syndrome or other intellectual disability, we believe the National Autism Strategy should be added to this table.

The “Summary of Gov Actions underway” column should also include Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) funded projects like DSA’s Employment Connections project that are supporting the transition to inclusive employment.

The future of supported employment

2. What is your ideal future state for the supported employment sector and employment of people with disability with high support needs?
6. Do you see a role for workplaces which provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future?
 - a. If so, what should these workplaces look like?

What is important for employees with intellectual disability?

Supported employment services operate throughout Australia and largely employ people with intellectual disability.¹³ Many people in our community work in supported employment because it offers safety, security, belonging and a sense of purpose. We understand that these elements are essential to achieving good outcomes, especially for people with high support needs and their families.

However, we also know that these elements are what supported employment is “supposed” to offer, but many do not. Supported employment is a segregated setting which is not only discriminatory but can create risk and stifle inclusion.

Though most of the open employment market is not inclusive for people with intellectual disability currently, we believe that with the right plan an inclusive, safe, stable and flexible open employment market for people with intellectual disability can be created.

¹³ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B. [Link here.](#)

Why ending supported employment as a segregated form of employment is important

Supported employment environments are not always inclusive and safe for people with disability. The Disability Royal Commission found that ADE settings and culture are not only conducive to abuse, but people who provided evidence to the DRC spoke about instances of exploitation and discrimination they experienced in ADEs.¹⁴ The DRC described ADEs as 'closed settings' in which power imbalances between workers and managers, as well as a lack of independent monitoring and oversight, can mean people working in ADEs do not know that they can raise concerns about their treatment or who to speak to, or even what is appropriate behaviour in the first place.

Ending supported employment goes beyond segregation and remuneration; people with disability want to work to feel valued, productive and to be a part of their community. It also aligns with commitments that the Government has made at many levels, from the UNCRPD to Australia's Disability Strategy to the Disability Employment Strategy. Employment offers structure, identity, and a sense of achievement, boosting self-worth and social connection. Open employment normalises inclusion and creates a broader culture of accessibility and acceptance.

The Disability Royal Commission's final report stated that "Australia's long-term objective should be to ensure all people with disability have opportunities to gain employment in the open labour market, earning no less than the minimum wage for their labour. This objective must necessarily encompass people with intellectual disability, who are currently most represented in ADE settings."¹⁵

A gradual transition

As we have mentioned throughout this submission, a transition away from supported employment must be gradual, well planned and designed to minimise job losses. This transition must be guided by a principles-based approach – the Department of Social Services 'Guiding Principles for the Future of Supported Employment' provide strong person-centred approaches to navigating reform in this area.¹⁶ This transition must be carefully planned and there must be no reduction in supported employment services until data shows that people with intellectual disability can be properly supported in employment programs and services.

While the transition away from supported employment is occurring, supported employment providers may have a role in supporting and upskilling people currently

¹⁴ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B.

¹⁵ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B. [Link here.](#)

¹⁶ Department of Social Services (2023) Guiding Principles for the Future of Supported Employment, [link here](#)

working in these settings. Many people currently working in supported employment will benefit from support to build skills and confidence in blended or more inclusive environments as a stepping stone. This could include sharing physical spaces with mainstream business or providing training or work experience open work environments. Some of this work is already occurring with supported employment services through the Structural Adjustment Fund (social firm model).

A properly planned transition will also involve improving services and supports for people with disability looking for work. Existing employment supports such as Youth Employment Assistance (previously known as School Leaver Employment Supports or SLES) and the Disability Employment Services (DES) program often fail to successfully support people with intellectual disability into open employment. There must be a recognition that the needs of people with intellectual disability are different and require customised programs of support. This will be explored in more detail later in this submission.

Supporting open or inclusive employment

3. What additional actions do you consider are necessary to increase employment of people with high support needs in open/inclusive settings?
7. How could the benefits of supported employment settings be reflected in open employment settings?

Increasing employment of people with high support needs must be a cross-departmental approach that meaningfully includes providers, employers and people with disability and their families. A thoughtful and gradual approach is essential to ensure sustainable employment outcomes.

Changing the default employment pathway

The first step in this process must be to address the pathway of people with intellectual disability into supported employment. For many people with intellectual disability, supported employment is positioned as the default option for employment after school – a safe, predictable option that is understood by providers and families. The DRC calls it “a default employment pathway for some people with disability (that) constrains genuine choice and control”.¹⁷ In addition, NDIA research states that participants with experience working in an ADE reported being funnelled into ADEs without exploration of other options.¹⁸

Instead, all elements of the disability employment service system must use an open employment first approach. This means positioning open employment as an option for every person interested in work, and supporting them to explore the different options that exist that suit their needs and interests. NDIA research tells us that person-centred employment planning was identified as a key enabler to supporting participants to achieve their career aspirations, as was starting employment and planning conversations early (e.g. while in school), and within the participant's own networks and using informal supports.¹⁹

The needs of people with intellectual disability

In all areas of the employment supports system, there must be recognition of the different needs between people with intellectual disability and or complex neurodevelopmental conditions from others who have physical or sensory disabilities but no cognitive or intellectual impairment. If people with disability are treated as a

¹⁷ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B.

¹⁸ NDIA (2024) From ADEs to open employment, May, NDIA Practice and Leadership Branch, [From ADEs to open employment Report Accessible \(1\).pdf](#)

¹⁹ NDIA (2021) 'Achieving a 'sense of purpose': pathways to employment for NDIS participants with intellectual disability, on the autism spectrum and/or with psychosocial disability', Research and Evaluation Branch – Policy, Advice and Research Division, NDIA,

homogenous group in programs and supports, it will serve to disadvantage people with intellectual disability who are underrepresented in these programs and the employment sectors more widely.

One element that is often neglected in discussions about employment for people with intellectual disability is the importance of a hybrid employment system or schedule. We recognise that many people with intellectual disability do not seek to work full time and have other interests or needs that must be accommodated in their routine. In general people with intellectual disability are likely to have lower work capacity – from a small sample from our Employment Connections project, initial work hours averaged 6.5 hours a week.²⁰ People must be supported have an individualised schedule - to work the amount that suits them, alongside other activities such as community participation, volunteering and skill building activities. Open employment must not be viewed as a 1:1 replacement for supported employment or full-time respite for families or carers of people with high support needs.

Increasing open employment of people with intellectual disability

The work of DSA's Employment Connections Service has shown that specialised employment opportunities that are customised for people with high support needs can and do exist in open employment settings.

The Employment Connections Service connects employers to people with Down syndrome, and provides support with recruitment, job carving and mentoring. An evaluation on the Employment Connections Service identified the 6 elements that ensured the success of a job placement:

1. Specialisation – Tailored employment support that leverages extensive knowledge about people with Down syndrome and individual needs.
2. Presence of a trusted intermediary – Employment Connection Service act as trusted link between people with Down syndrome, employing organisations and families.
3. Support for Employers - Engaging employers about Down syndrome capabilities and providing ongoing assistance.
4. Building deliberate support systems – Placing the person with Down syndrome at the centre, establishing an effective support system involving family, employers and the local Down Syndrome Association.
5. Flexible delivery of the program - Adapting support to the specific needs of each person-and-employer relationship.

²⁰ Wilson, E., McCrory, E., Walsh, C. & Crosbie, J. (2025). Down Syndrome Australia, Employment Connections Service: Investigating a pathway to sustainability. Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.

6. A growth mindset – Employing organisations, families and Employment Connections Service staff hold a growth mindset for people with Down syndrome.²¹

In addition, research and lived experience has demonstrated what people with high support needs including intellectual disability may need in the workplace. These include:

- Employers understanding fluctuating capacity and how that impacts employment.
- Appropriate supports available to employees on an ongoing basis. This is based on the needs of the individual and can range from one-to-one support to incidental support from a manager or co-worker.
- Flexibility. Reduced demands and rigidity ensure focus can be on the work, not on rules that may cause dysregulation.
- Quieter or low light environments to reduce sensory overload.
- Using accessible tools to break down tasks to better support learning. DSA's 'A Guide for Employers' includes many examples such as task analysis, chaining and visual guides.²²

Employer education and capacity building

It cannot be overstated the importance of not only focusing on the person with disability but also acknowledging the role employers play in the outcome of this work. Substantial work must be undertaken to build the capacity of employers to understand the immense opportunity that exists in employing a person with a disability and in creating an inclusive workplace.

To support inclusive employment, employers must be provided skilled support and training. This could include education on intellectual disability and adaptive behavioural challenges from a strengths-based perspective or resources explaining reasonable adjustments and flexible working conditions. Employers must understand tools that support employees with intellectual disability - tailored recruitment processes, job-carving, the need for ongoing communications between the employer, employee and their support network and ongoing facilitation by the employer to maintain the success of the placement. This support could also include financial incentives such as being able to claim for training activities and support for inclusive recruitment practices.

There are many existing, successful programs that can support this work, for example Employer Innovation Lab led by Children and Young People with Disability Australia and Social Ventures Australia.²³

²¹ Wilson, E., McCrory, E., Walsh, C. & Crosbie, J. (2025). Down Syndrome Australia, Employment Connections Service: Investigating a pathway to sustainability. Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.

²² Down Syndrome Australia (2018) A guide for employers: practical strategies for training and support, [link here](#)

²³ Children and Young People Australia (CYDA) and Social Ventures Australia (SVA) (2024) Voices on Work: Young People with Disability in Greater Melbourne, [link here](#).

Government programs and supports

Governments at all levels also have a role to play in supporting inclusive employment. This includes reform of ongoing services and supports, as well as new areas of opportunity. The design and implementation of any reforms must include genuine co-design with people with disability and their families.

Public Sector Employment Targets

The Government must take a leadership role in hiring people with disability. The DRO Economic blueprint advocates for the following public sector employment targets:

- Set a 15% disability employment target for the public sector with specific targets for marginalised people with disability.
- Ensure a minimum of 3% of roles within the public sector disability employment target are designated specifically for, and filled by, people with an intellectual disability.²⁴

Disability Employment Services or Inclusive Employment Australia

The disability employment support system is a crucial element to supporting inclusive employment. Though the system is in the midst of reform, to date it has not worked for people with intellectual disability. Fewer than 10,000 people (3.1%) supported by Disability Employment Services (DES) are people with an intellectual disability.²⁵

The creation of the new Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) is an opportunity to centre the needs of people with intellectual disability. Though some details of the IEA model are not yet known, we have some concerns whether the model will appropriately support people with intellectual disability. Swinburne University's work on DSA's Employment Connections project has identified that at present, there is the lack of payment for job placements of less than 5 hours per week, which are commonly people with intellectual disability. In addition, the current IEA program model does not enable access to additional payments for the supports provided to people with Moderate Intellectual Disability who work less than 15 hours per week. Despite IEA acknowledging that supporting people with intellectual disability requires specific expertise, there is a lack of information on who the specialist providers will be and how they will address the gaps in existing employment services to people with intellectual disability.²⁶

²⁴ Disability Representative Organisations (2025) Economic Justice for People with Disability: A National Blueprint, [link here](#)

²⁵ Labour Market Information Portal DES Data 30 November 2021.

²⁶ Wilson, E., McCrory, E., Walsh, C. & Crosbie, J. (2025). *Down Syndrome Australia, Employment Connections Service: Investigating a pathway to sustainability*. Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology.

Disability Support Pension

The Australian Government must prioritise reforming the Disability Support Pension (DSP) as without change we are unlikely to see a significant increase in employment of people with intellectual disability. New research undertaken by Deloitte Access Economics, in consultation with Disability Representative Organisations including Down Syndrome Australia and disability employment peak bodies, highlights the major barriers to employment built into the DSP. These are high financial disincentives to earning a modest salary, fear of losing eligibility to the pension and complex administration and reporting. These act as powerful deterrents for recipients to consider open or inclusive employment.

The report finds that there is a clear opportunity for Government to act. The Deloitte modelling recommends two practical changes to DSP rules. First, reduce the taper rate applied to income earned above the free area of \$212 per fortnight—from the current 50 cents in the dollar to 30 cents. Second, extend the DSP suspension period from two years to ten years, allowing people to stay attached to the safety net while they build confidence in open employment. Deloitte estimates that the recommended changes could support between 3,200 and 14,700 additional DSP recipients into employment each year and generate up to \$2.3 billion in net economic benefits over the next decade. We would be happy to share more details on this report and proposed changes with the Department.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The NDIS funds some employment supports for participants in both open and supported employment. These fall into two main categories:

- Individual support items: These assist a participant in their job, accommodating their disability-related needs or providing employment related assessment. This could include on-the-job training and direct supervision and/or group-based support to enable participation at work.
- Programs for specific cohorts, such as the Youth Employment Assistance (previously known as School Leaver Employment Supports or SLES) that supports participants navigating the transition from school to employment.

Whilst many people with intellectual disability may have employment goals in their plan, it is likely that their access to suitable NDIS employment related funding is still limited. There is a lack of standardisation in funding allocated for employment supports, and allocation is highly variable, or even non-existent, across individuals. Unless sufficient funding is allocated to achieving employment outcomes then participants will be unable to access the services they need to obtain employment.

The NDIS must take an open employment first approach and support the participant and their family to understand and explore open employment before considering supported employment settings.

It is important to note that people with intellectual disability and high supports needs will still require NDIS plans that meet their needs, regardless of their employment status. Working in open employment provides a range of personal and social benefits but typically does not mean participants will require less support and should therefore have their plans reduced.

An independent analysis of the former SLES program found that while it has a slight positive effect on employment outcomes, participants also identified high levels of inadequate support.²⁷ A major gap was that SLES was time-limited and provided no support options beyond the two-year program. It also provided no employer-facing employment supports to meet the needs of young people with intellectual disability.

Our DRO colleagues, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), recommends that the new NDIS Youth Employment Assistance Program be a viable, time un-limited channel for support to young people with high support needs in learning about employment options and securing employment. This must include working with employers to develop open employment pathways including tailored opportunities for customised roles, work experience, and job carving. We also suggest expanding access to the program beyond NDIS participants—for example, by including it as part of the broader Foundational Supports system.

²⁷ Wilson et al. (2022) [Paper 3: School Leaver Employment Support \(SLES\) – Reshaping the Approach, Explaining the Evidence for Reform Series](#). Centre for Social Impact.

A roadmap for reform

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 Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability recommended the development of a National Inclusive Employment Roadmap (recommendation 7.32).²⁸ We support the Roadmap as described.

In particular, we support the following elements of the DRC's Roadmap:

- Have a staged and slow approach to transition over 10 years.
- Set out the roles, responsibilities, milestones and targets to implement towards the goal of phasing out of supported employment services and supported wage.
- Developed by the Department of Social Services and overseen and regularly reviewed by the Disability Ministerial Reform Council.
- Require partners to use evidence-based supports to facilitate job readiness, participation and ongoing development, particularly for people with intellectual disability.

Given the lack of success of existing pathways and employment programs, especially for people with intellectual disability and low work capacity, transitioning individuals from supported employment within a short timeframe is neither practical nor equitable. A rapid shift could disadvantage both employees with disability and their families, potentially leading to unintended consequences. A thoughtful and gradual approach is essential to ensure sustainable employment outcomes.

This transition must be carefully planned and there must be no reduction in supported employment services until data shows that people with intellectual disability can be properly supported in open employment programs and services. This could include significant increases in the number of people with intellectual disability supported into open employment through IEA.

Additional elements that will support a successful transition:

- Utilising co-design throughout the 10 year transition period to monitor and modify the Roadmap as needed.
- The removal of financial barriers for individuals of moving to open employment, including removing the impact on benefits such as healthcare cards and DSP.

²⁸ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B.

- Review successful existing supported-to-open employment models or programs and fund an expanded rollout to increase impact.
- Financial safeguards ensuring that small business owners are not economically disadvantaged when employing individuals with disability.
- Programs to develop skills and knowledge within mainstream organisations to champion and implement open employment.
- Mentoring both formal and informal to support people with complex needs, develop skills, enter and maintain employment.

Increasing wages for people with disability

5. How could the sector best increase wages for people with disability while avoiding job losses?
 - a. Are there examples that currently exist that can be leveraged?
 - b. Are there new approaches that could be tested?

People with disability should be paid equally for the work they do not only because it is Australia's obligation under the UNCRPD, but also because people with disability have a right to earn money that provides financial freedom. Charlotte Bailey, a DSA Employment Ambassador said: "I want to work so I can earn money so I can save for special trips, or special clothes or go out with friends and family. That is very important to me." Earning a fair wage is an essential element of full economic inclusion of people with disability.

Increasing wages for people with disability is also supported by the recommendations of the DRC. They recommended that the Government should first fund a subsidy to ensure that employees with disability are paid at least half the minimum wage, then develop a model and pathway to lift wages for employees with disability to 100 per cent of the minimum wage by 2034 (recommendation 7.31).²⁹

The Commissioners noted that "neither an assessment of the economic value of work performed by employees, nor the capacity of employers to pay their employees full minimum wages, should be considerations in determining appropriate levels of remuneration for people with disability in employment, whether in ADEs or elsewhere. The minimum levels of remuneration must take into account the principles stated in the UNCRPD, particularly respect for the inherent dignity and independence of people with disability and acceptance of people with disability as part of human diversity and humanity."³⁰

There are many examples of a transition away from a supported wage that can be drawn on in the development of a plan, including the Traineeship and Apprentice wage categories. These awards recognise that some people or jobs need a pathway that involves learning and building skills along the way towards a qualification. A wage for a person with disability could use this same structure in which there is a clear pathway to full award wages. Another example is the NDIA, who will no longer be using supported wages under its recent enterprise agreement.³¹

²⁹ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B. [Link here.](#)

³⁰ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report, Volume 7: Inclusive education, employment and housing, Part B. [Link here.](#)

³¹ Australian Council of Trade Unions, (2024), 'Workers with Disability', ACTU Congress, [link here](#)

Wage increases and job losses

The discussion linking wage increases with job losses implies that people with high support needs would be unable to find work outside of supported employment setting. Though we acknowledge that currently much of the open employment market is not inclusive for people with intellectual disability and high support needs, we do not believe this cannot be changed. A flexible and individualised approach is crucial. For some, non-traditional workplaces will work best, such as social enterprises or meaningful community involvement. But for others, open employment with supports in place will be suitable. With the right plan, an inclusive, safe and flexible open employment market for people with intellectual disability can be created.

Shortcomings of the Taylor Fry approach

DSS consultation paper references the research and modelling by Taylor Fry into the impacts and costs of the proposed wage increase. It is important to note the limitations of this work:

- The scenario modelled an immediate transition to full minimum wage, which was not recommended by the DRC. A scenario of an ongoing subsidy was a much more positive outcome.
- The research only considered increasing wages and no other reforms necessary to support this change outlined in this submission, including DSP reform.
- The extent to which the minimum wage impacts employment was described by Taylor Fry as “by far the most important (assumption) in the model, and unfortunately one of the most uncertain”. So, though it’s important to consider it cannot be the factor upon which action is taken or abandoned.
- The DRC Commissioners were also concerned about the job losses identified in Taylor Fry report which is why they recommended an initial transition to 50% of the minimum wage. And crucially, the length of the transition period to full wages – effectively 11 years – allows for a measured approach to transition and provides sufficient time to monitor and review impacts and risks.
- There are legislative and regulatory tools that, though flawed, are designed to protect against job losses for people with disability, in particular the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

For these reasons we do not believe it is appropriate for the government to base their decision making solely on this report without considering any additional research, modelling and examples.

To achieve success, what additional reforms must be considered?**Disability Support Pension**

In addition to those outlined above, with any reform to wages for people with disability, changes to the Disability Support Pension must also be considered. This includes a review of the taper rate and of the administrative burden on recipients, as described in the 'government programs and supports' section of this submission. The government must also consider changing the administration of DSP so that people with permanent disability can remain 'on the DSP' even if they are in paid work and receiving no payments. It is disappointing that when there have been previous opportunities to reform the DSP, there has been no action or no response from Government.

Wage support for employers

An increase in wages for people with disability will have an impact on employers. To ensure success, employers could be supported in the following ways:

- As recommended by the DRC, the Government pay a subsidy to employers to cover the difference between an employee's wage and 50 per cent of the minimum wage during the transition period. A similar structure exists with some apprenticeships.
- Financial incentives for retaining workers with disability.

Productivity assessments

Any reform to wages for people with disability must involve research and modelling of productivity assessments. If they are to remain a mechanism by which a person with disability's wage is set, the DSA Consortium believes this work must be designed as a collaborative assessment of work output, based on actual tasks performed in the role. Output should be reassessed over time as the person becomes more competent and confident and may have engaged in training and skill building. If a person is given more responsibility and scope of work increases, that should also be recognised and rewarded.

Examples

Though the work of DSA's Employment Connections service, we have many examples of people with Down syndrome being paid award wages for their work. The service has connected 89 people with Down syndrome to jobs in the community. This success points to the need for individualised support that can be the connect between prospective employees and employers to establish a transition to work and salary arrangements that works for both people involved. We have included a success story below.

Case study: Sian is successfully employed as an Administrative Assistant at Curtin University's School of Allied Health. Sian was well-prepared for the role through prior training through the Employment Connections Project at Down Syndrome WA, which helped her transition smoothly despite challenges. Sian expressed joy in her work and independence, while the university praised her enthusiasm, organizational skills, and positive attitude, highlighting plans to further support her development in 2024. Sian said "I work with Ana, Marg and Trish – I get to welcome students, help them find the things they need, I help keep the learning space clean and tidy, I help make up resource kits and file books away. I love my job and am saving to go on a holiday to Ireland with my family."

There are many national and international models that could be leveraged - we encourage the Department to reference the submission from the Centre for Inclusive Employment Australia for robustly researched and tested models.