

Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the way forward

Introduction

Fighting Chance thanks the Department for the opportunity to provide feedback on the way forward for supported and open employment, particularly options for increasing inclusive employment, raising subminimum wages, and ending segregated employment.

Who we are

Fighting Chance

[The Fighting Chance Group](#) is an evidence-based, quality-driven provider, committed to collaboration and innovation within the disability sector. Through our social enterprises - [Jigsaw](#), [Avenue](#), [Plus](#) and [Base](#) - we support over 1,500 participants across 17 locations nationally, providing pathways to genuine inclusion, meaningful employment, and long-term social impact. Our vision, aligned with that of the NDIS, is a truly inclusive economy where people with disability enjoy unlimited opportunity, dignity and prosperity.

Avenue

[Avenue](#) is a network of coworking spaces setting the new standard for economic and social inclusion for people with significant disability. At Avenue, people are empowered to contribute to thriving microbusinesses and share in the profits; launch their own businesses as entrepreneurs, develop their individual skills, socialise and build networks with their teammates.

Jigsaw

[Jigsaw](#) is a not-for-profit, social enterprise that provides the soft skills, work experience and award wage employment experience required to transition people with disability effectively to mainstream employment.

Established in 2014, Jigsaw currently supports more than 600 people with disability to prepare for work in NSW, QLD, VIC, SA and ACT. We have created over 220 award-wage jobs in Jigsaw and made over 190 placements into open employment. Retention rates for open employment jobs are double those of a Disability Employment Service (DES),

with a 2025 Flinders University evaluation into Jigsaw's model and outcomes¹ finding that 77.8% of placements were ongoing with 63.3% having lasted 12 months or more.

Paul Brown, former CEO of Jigsaw and General Manager of Fighting Chance was part of the October 2022 roundtable discussions with then DSS Minister Amanda Rishworth, where the guiding principles for the future of supported employment were developed. Both Avenue and Jigsaw have since received Structural Adjustment Fund grants for their potential to contribute alternative models and approaches which broaden the range of employment options for people with disability and better meet community expectations.

Jigsaw has also tendered to provide services under the new Inclusive Employment Australia, which we believe is a positive development, addressing many of the shortcomings of the current DES system.

Increasing inclusive employment – Recommendation 7.30

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

Fighting Chance was founded on many of the same values that now underpin the guiding principles for the future of supported employment: that people with disability have real employment options in a variety of settings, with support to access and move between these, that their work is equally remunerated and their rights and dignity respected.

Our ideal future state for disability employment will always be that people with disability have the same range of options and support to pursue these options as all Australians. That people with disability can access meaningful work that they are passionate about through mainstream employment, through microbusiness or entrepreneurship. That we can adapt and redesign work environments, processes and cultures to accommodate people with disability, not the other way around. That people with disability have the opportunity to learn new skills, develop themselves and change direction over the course of their career with full choice and control.

¹ <https://fac.flinders.edu.au/items/6a493e18-e1b6-446e-91b6-97ed1509c97c>

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

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?

It is absolutely possible for people with higher support needs to develop their skills and transition into an open/ mainstream environment (many of the people whom Jigsaw has placed into open employment are part of this cohort). Increased engagement with employers is paramount. Jigsaw conducted research in 2022, in partnership with YouGov, which found that employers recognise the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce, but need support to build inclusive practices and hire people with disability. Of over 500 Australian managers and HR professionals surveyed, 82% were committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace; however, 71% stated that they needed more guidance and support on how to achieve this goal. The opportunity is clear. However, of those who had employed someone through a DES (21%), 91% faced challenges, with nearly half citing that they did not receive sufficient support.

The level of support and engagement required from employers to create lasting employment outcomes, especially for people with high support needs, exceeds what can currently be achieved within either NDIS funding for employment supports or the pre-employment supports and outcome fee structure of the new Inclusive Employment Australia.

For example, in order to create lasting, successful placements in mainstream employers, Jigsaw will engage each employer partner with:

- Consultancy to understand the business and different business units, the roles available and the skills they require.
- Job carving to build roles suitable for Jigsaw's cohort.
- Disability confidence building training for all staff.
- Creation of accessible manuals and workflows for all employer tasks and processes.
- Development of support plans in conjunction with the individual job-seeker, which are then used to train their manager and direct team on their support needs and working style.
- 12 months of ongoing post-placement support to both the person with disability and their employer

- Availability of Jigsaw staff to support the employer ad hoc with any challenges that arise.

This work is primarily funded by philanthropy.

In a roadmap for the future, we would like to see how the Government will facilitate, incentivise and ensure sufficient funding for the level of employer engagement required for successful, lasting open employment outcomes.

We would also like to see more detail on how the Government will promote cohesion between the NDIS, Inclusive Employment Australia and others working in disability employment. This is necessary to ensure flexibility for people with disability to access and scale up or down supports and funding across these areas in response to changing capacity, goals and circumstances.

Raise subminimum wages – Recommendation 7.31

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?**

An alternative model: profit-share equivalent to wages

Fighting Chance's enterprise Avenue is an example of an alternative approach which targets people who do not have a goal of mainstream employment. NDIS-funded, people with disability choose to attend Avenue in place of recreational day programs to access meaningful work, or in place of traditional supported employment to have greater skill development, choice and community participation as part of their work. Currently, Avenue's microbusinesses generate over \$245,000 in revenue, all of which is returned directly to the people with disability who contribute. The Structural Adjustment Fund is supporting the development of Avenue's microbusinesses to increase profitability and, therefore, profit-sharing.

When former Fighting Chance General Manager, Paul Brown, attended the October 2022 round table on the future of supported employment with then DSS Minister Amanda Rishworth, one of the key concerns he heard from people with high support needs and their families was that they wanted continued access to work, whilst realistic about their own potential to earn an award wage. They were nervous about phasing out

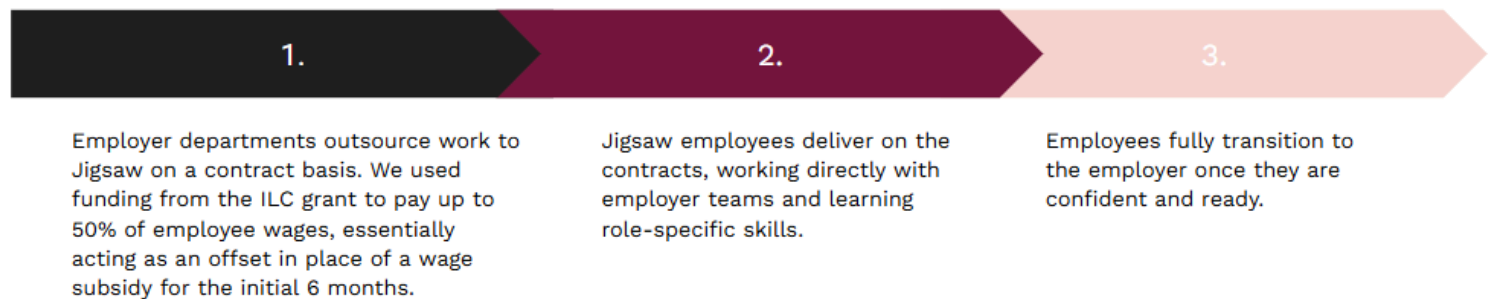
supported wages, as for them, the sense of purpose that came from working was more important than the level of remuneration. A profit-share model, such as Avenue's, gives people with disability far greater ownership over their work contributions, whilst meeting community expectations for the future of supported employment. It could pave the way for a greater choice of employment options beyond those outlined on page 6 of the discussion paper, to include NDIS-funded day program alternatives and cooperatives.

Work trials: transferable learnings from a successful transition pathway

Jigsaw pays full award wages to the employees with disability who deliver on contracts for corporate and government clients through our social enterprise. We

We have developed an innovative "work trial" transition approach to mainstream employment in collaboration with our employer partner, Allianz Insurance, and with support from a DSS Information Linkages and Capacity Building - Building Employer Confidence (ILC) grant. We believe this work trial pathway could be effectively applied to increasing subminimum wages to award wages.

The work trial pathway:



← This model is underpinned by Jigsaw's NDIS-funded "prepare for work, through work" training pathway, which ensures people with disability have the core, transferable work skills and work experience they need to succeed in the mainstream workplace. →

Benefits to employers

- > Decreased risk: 6 months to ensure the person is a good fit for the team
- > Increased productivity: their new employee is already trained and productive before joining the company's headcount.
- > Ongoing benefits of a diverse and inclusive workplace.

Benefits to people with disability

- > Increased skills and confidence for a smoother transition

Avenue
 A workplace for all

Jigsaw

Plus **Base**
 Housing Collective

empowered by fightingchance.org.au

Read more about the work-trial partnership between Jigsaw and Allianz [here](#).

This case study demonstrates how a social enterprise pathway can successfully work with an employer to train employees directly for available roles and remove risk to the employer. It also demonstrates how funding can be used (in this case, grant funding) to act as a tapered, time-limited wage subsidy, whilst people with disability build their capacity to be fully productive in their jobs. A work-trial approach that includes the gradual increase of supported wages in line with capacity-building could protect people with disability against job losses.

Ending segregated employment – Recommendation 7.3

Do you see a role for workplaces which provide specialised employment opportunities for people with disability in the future?

c. If so, what should these workplaces look like?

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

Avenue: integrating community participation into the working day

Avenue is a day program alternative which provides a purposeful work option. People attend Avenue using NDIS funding for centre-based activities (often textbook examples of segregated settings). However, community participation, alongside economic participation, is a cornerstone of the Avenue model.

At the start of each day, people with disability (the majority of whom have high support needs) meet at the Avenue hub. Through the course of their work day in microbusiness teams, they are encouraged and supported to access the community and build relationships with customers and the general public.

For example:

- Team members in Avenue's order fulfilment microbusiness interact with business partners and individual customers via email each day, and access the community to take completed orders to the post office.
- The Animals microbusiness team members provide dog day-care services, taking dogs out to local dog parks for walks and sending updates to owners.

Avenue
A workplace for all

Jigsaw

Plus 
Housing Collective

Base
Housing Collective

empowered by fightingchance.org.au

- The gigs and flyers team carry out letterbox drops in the local community, delivering flyers for businesses to people's houses.
- The markets team curates a range of products to sell at local markets, managing all aspects of customer service and sales.

Supported / specialised workplaces of the future can focus on designing workflows and processes that promote inclusion and mainstream participation.

Jigsaw: social enterprise as a pathway to mainstream employment

Fighting Chance is pleased to see growing support for social enterprise employment pathways across both DSS (outlined in the discussion paper as part of the model for increasing choice and control in employment, and included in the new Inclusive Employment Australia) and DEWR. In particular, in the FY2026 budget, we welcomed extended support for SEDI, and the introduction of the Social Enterprise Loan Fund. Jigsaw is participating in the DSS-funded Payment by Outcomes trial, run by Whitebox Enterprises, which pays Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) based on their employment outcomes. We have also applied for a WorkFoundations grant to provide paid work placements for 20 Workforce Australia participants who identify as having a disability.

We believe social enterprises can have the greatest impact through a pathway model such as Jigsaw's, which builds people's skills, confidence and experience to transition to mainstream employment. Many social enterprises are still segregated settings, which, depending on the type of work, can offer exposure to mainstream settings. Building in increased exposure to mainstream settings whilst building mainstream employer confidence around disability (such as through the work trials pathway outlined above) supports transition out of a segregated environment. For those with high support needs, the benefits of supported employment can be replicated in open settings through the intensive, long-term collaboration between employer and the person with disability and their supports, as outlined in our response to "Increasing inclusive employment – Recommendation 7.30" above.

A pathway approach also increases impact by increasing reach. For example, Jigsaw currently employs over 100 people with disability. However, this year, we will transition 100 people into mainstream employment. If we backfill each role within Jigsaw, this enables the creation of 100 jobs for people with disability per year, rather than as a total number that the business can support.

Conclusion

Fighting Chance welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the national conversation on the future of supported employment and commends the Government for its commitment to reforming the sector through initiatives such as Inclusive Employment Australia and investments via the Structural Adjustment Fund. We are strongly aligned with the Government's vision of a future where people with disability have full choice, control, and access to meaningful, inclusive employment opportunities. As a social enterprise group embedded in evidence-based practice and innovation, we are proud to share the insights and outcomes from our experience across Jigsaw, Avenue, and our broader network.

To ensure a supported employment system that is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable, we make the following key recommendations:

1. Articulate and fund a future vision for inclusive employment

The future state must be one in which people with disability, including those with high support needs, enjoy the same employment rights, career pathways, and dignity as all Australians. This includes access to mainstream employment, microbusinesses, and NDIS-funded alternatives. A Government-endorsed Roadmap should outline how inclusive practices will be scaled, employer engagement funded, and employment supports integrated across NDIS, Inclusive Employment Australia, and other agencies.

2. Invest in intensive employer engagement to support transition pathways

Our experience at Jigsaw demonstrates that lasting open employment outcomes, especially for individuals with high support needs, depend on intensive and sustained collaboration with employers. Job carving, inclusive training, workplace accessibility adaptations, and long-term support are essential. These supports currently fall outside NDIS or Inclusive Employment Australia funding and must be adequately resourced to enable genuine change.

3. Expand and legitimise alternative models to award wage employment

Not all individuals seek or are able to sustain award-wage employment, yet still value the purpose and structure of work. Avenue's profit-sharing model demonstrates an inclusive, person-led approach that reinvests value back into participants. We advocate for such models to be recognised in policy as viable and empowering alternatives to traditional supported employment, especially for those with complex needs.

4. Implement work trials to phase out subminimum wages

Work trials, such as those piloted by Jigsaw and Allianz, offer a scalable and effective transition to open employment. By combining on-the-job skill development and tailored support, this model de-risks the transition for both employers and employees while supporting progression to award wages.

5. Redesign supported workplaces to maximise inclusion

Segregated work settings can and must evolve. Avenue's community-based microbusiness model integrates social and economic participation, offering a blueprint for how supported settings can increase engagement with the broader community. Meanwhile, Jigsaw's social enterprise pathway demonstrates how transitional, supported employment can lead to genuine participation in the open labour market.

6. Leverage social enterprises as scalable employment engines

Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) such as Jigsaw deliver high-quality, evidence-based employment outcomes. These organisations should be central to the Government's strategy, particularly where they provide transitional pathways to open employment and backfill roles to expand access and impact year-on-year.

The Fighting Chance Group is committed to partnering with Government, employers, and people with disability to co-design and deliver an employment system that meets the aspirations of a truly inclusive Australia. With the right policy settings, funding mechanisms and sustained collaboration, we believe this vision is well within reach.

Please don't hesitate to contact us for further discussion or information.

Nina Murphy

CEO

Fighting Chance Group

0408 025 313

nina@fightingchance.org.au

www.fightingchance.org.au

Avenue
A workplace for all

Jigsaw

Plus

Base
Housing Collective

empowered by fightingchance.org.au