



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission to consultation for the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

December 2023

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage to address the fundamental causes of poverty in Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Our approach is informed directly by the people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our services, to develop practical solutions that work. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the release of the Department of Social Services (DSS) Options Paper *Establishing a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence* and is pleased to contribute to the development of the Centre.

This submission is informed by our research, networks and practice in both disability and employment service systems. BSL's work extends across various life stages and has a focus on developing innovative practice models to drive systems change and reduce poverty and inequality. It is also informed by our formal research partnership with the University of Melbourne, and our work with the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology.

Responses

BSL responses against selected questions in the DSS Options Paper are summarised below:

Why do we need a Centre? (Question 1.1)

1. A Disability Centre of Excellence is needed to drive improved employment and labour market outcomes for Australians living with disability.
2. The gap in employment outcomes between people with and without disability in Australia has widened despite more than 30 years of sustained economic growth, ongoing policy reform in disability, welfare and employment services, technological change, changes in the nature of work and currently, the lowest unemployment rate in 50 years. The anticipated economic benefits of boosting the employment rate of people with disability that underpinned the creation of the NDIS have not been realised.
3. Experience suggests the trajectory will not change if governments continue to apply existing policy levers in the current and emerging labour market.
4. The Disability Centre of Excellence offers potential to design and implement policies and services to improve outcomes for people with disability.

These challenges and risks merit significant investment in a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence to guide policy and practice in disability employment. However, its success will hinge on two additional factors:

- People with disability being actively engaged in its design, governance and ongoing management and administration, in both strategic and frontline roles, with coordinated support from government, business, the not-for-profit sector and researchers.
- Employer engagement at scale. The Centre should include a key role for government as an exemplar employer, in line with recommendations from the UN and ILO (International Labour Organization).

What should be the core functions of the Centre? (Question 1.2)

BSL recommends the functions of the proposed Disability Centre of Excellence should include:

1. Building sector capability (enhancing knowledge, skills, networks and tools).

2. Building government capability (strengthening governance, local networks, system stewardship).
3. Facilitating innovation (including trialing and testing of service models to inform decision making around scale) .
4. Supporting quality and continual improvement (including research and evaluation, performance frameworks and ensuring design of services is informed by lived experience in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).
5. Supporting cross-sectoral place-based networks and approaches (including connecting sectors that may be siloed by policy and funding structures).

Introduction

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's consultation on the development of a Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.

Inquiries and reforms are underway across disability (review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme), employment (review of Workforce Australia Employment Services) and aligned service systems. This provides an opportunity to refocus Australia's employment ecosystem to unlock the talent and potential of people with disability and to create an employment system capable of addressing 21st-century needs and opportunities for jobseekers, employers, governments and communities. Improvement will require new ways of thinking and working, grounded in evidence and lived experience, across government agencies, education and training providers, employers and employment service providers, health and social services and community. Enhanced capability must be built across all actors in the employment ecosystem, as each has a pivotal role to play in enabling a joined-up service response to meet the needs of people with disability who face complex and systemic barriers to work.

Employment outcomes for people with disability are significantly worse than for Australians without disability¹. In addition, shortcomings in systems designed to support people to achieve employment (and other) outcomes have been identified in recent inquiries and reviews including the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability² and related review of Disability Employment Services³; the Employment White Paper⁴; and Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training⁵.

BSL's response to this Options Paper focuses on the need for the Disability Employment Centre for Excellence and its core functions (Options Paper questions 1.1 and 1.2). Rigorous consideration – and broad agreement – around these questions will be important to inform the selection of implementation models that are considered in later questions in the Options Paper. This response also complements recent related policy submissions from BSL, including:

- [submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services](#)⁶

¹ ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2003, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2003*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2012, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2012*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2015, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2015*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2020, *Labour Force*, September 2020, 6202.0, ABS, Canberra.

² Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Canberra.

³ *Report finds Disability Employment Services (DES) program failed to provide appropriate support*, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Canberra.

⁴ *Working Future: the Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*, Treasury.gov.au

⁵ *Looking to the Future: report of the Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training*, Department of Education, Canberra.

⁶ Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Centre for Policy Development 2023, [Submission to the Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services](#), BSL, Fitzroy, Vic.

- submissions to the NDIS Review related to Local Area Coordination⁷ (BSL 2023a) and supports outside the NDIS⁸
- [submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#)⁹, which emphasized the importance of inclusion in education
- [submission to the Early Years Strategy](#)¹⁰, which called for clear and closer ties between the Early Years Strategy, Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021–31 and the NDIS
- [submission regarding the National Disability Strategy beyond 2020](#)¹¹ – Department of Social Service Stage 2 consultations
- [submission regarding the New Disability Employment Service Model](#)¹².

With the support of funders and partners (government, philanthropic and general public), BSL is committed to improving employment outcomes for people with disability. We are keen to remain actively involved in discussions with government and sector stakeholders about the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence as it unfolds.

⁷ Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2023a, [Fulfilling the potential of Partners in the Community](#), BSL, Fitzroy, Vic.

⁸ Olney, S (2023) Finding support outside the NDIS: issues and opportunities in the aims, design and implementation of ‘Tier 2’ of the scheme. Submission to the NDIS Review 3 May 2023 <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/submissions/sub-r4r6-001162>

⁹ Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2023b, [Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#), BSL, Fitzroy, Vic.

¹⁰ Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2023c, [Submission to the Early Years Strategy](#), BSL, Fitzroy, Vic.

¹¹ Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Mission Australia 2020, [Submission regarding the National Disability Strategy beyond 2020 – Department of Social Service Stage 2 consultations](#), BSL, Fitzroy, Vic.

¹² Brotherhood of St. Laurence 2002b, Submission re the New Disability Employment Service Model, BSL, Fitzroy Vic.

Responses to selected question in the Options paper

1.1 Why do we need a Centre?

A Disability Employment Centre of Excellence is needed to drive improved employment and labour market outcomes for Australians living with disability. There are 2.1 million people with disability of working age in Australia – 12 per cent of Australia’s working age population. Approximately half are in the labour force, either working or seeking work (see figure 1 below). Targeted interventions, investment and incentives intended to improve the prospects of Australians with disability finding and keeping work – underpinned by both rights-based principles and robust economic evidence – have not increased their labour force participation rate in a generation.¹³

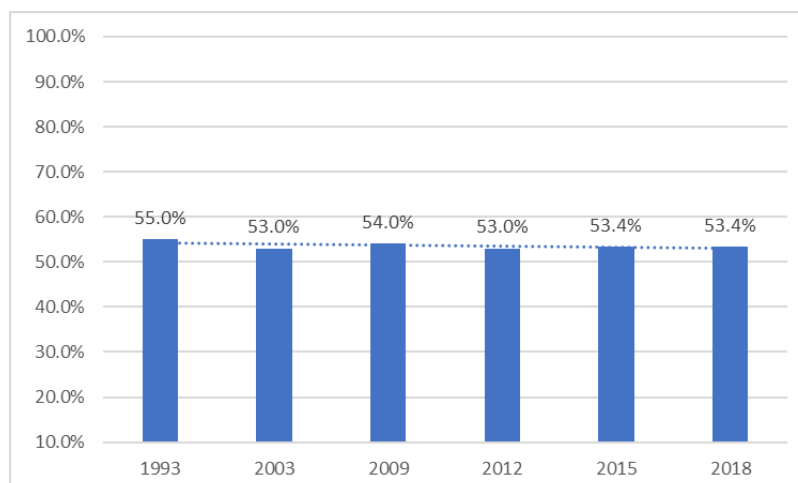
The overwhelming majority of Australians with disability of working age are not NDIS participants.¹⁴ Economic inclusion is a critical factor to reduce, delay or prevent people needing individual support through the NDIS. The expected boost in employment for people with disability both within and outside the NDIS that underpinned economic modelling for creation of the NDIS has not materialised.¹⁵ In fact, the gap in employment rates between people with and without disability has widened despite more than thirty years of sustained economic growth, ongoing policy reform in disability, welfare and employment services, technological change, changes in the nature of work and currently, the lowest unemployment rate in fifty years.¹⁶

¹³ Olney, S & Devine, A 2023, ‘The right to work “on an equal basis with others”’: examining disability employment policies in Australia through the lens of a health and economic crisis’, in Robinson, S & Fisher, K (eds) *Research handbook on disability policy*, Edward Elgar. doi:10.4337/9781800373655.00071

¹⁴ Olney S, Mills, A & Fallon L 2022, *The Tier 2 tipping point: access to support for working-age Australians with disability without individual NDIS funding*, Melbourne Disability Institute, University of Melbourne, Vic.

¹⁵ Productivity Commission 2011, *Disability Care and Support Inquiry*, Report no. 54, pp. 60, 272, 958–965, Australian Government, Canberra.

¹⁶ Olney, S 2021, ‘Inclusion, Work and Wellbeing: shifting Perceptions of Disability and Employability Through the National Disability Insurance Scheme’, in Cowden, M & McCullagh, C (eds) *The National Disability Insurance Scheme: an Australian public policy experiment* (1 ed., pp. 285-304) Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-981-16-2244-1_15; ABS (2023) Media release: Unemployment rate remains at 3.5% in March <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/unemployment-rate-remains-35-march>

Figure 1.1 Labour force participation for people with disability aged 15–64 in Australia 1993–2018¹⁷

This evidence suggests the trajectory will not change if governments continue to apply existing policy levers in the current and emerging labour market.

Efforts to improve employment outcomes for people with disability must address factors beyond labour supply and demand that keep people with disability on the margins of the labour market.

These include:

- conscious and unconscious bias about the skills and capability of people with disability in career education, work capacity assessments and recruitment processes
- discrimination against people with disability that discourages them from disclosing disability either in applying for work or in the workplace after they are employed
- socio-economic disadvantage that keeps many people with disability living in places where affordable and accessible services and support, housing options, transport options and employment opportunities are limited
- hurdles for people with disability who are only able to work part time or episodically, in relation to moving in and out of income support and maintaining access to concessions to cover extra costs of living that people without disabilities do not incur.

An additional factor for young people with disability relates to contracting and funding models for service provision that shape decision-making processes. Service providers in employment services, and Registered Training Providers, commonly have a 'compliance – funding focus' in working with young people with disability, which sets them on a well-worn path from school to low-level or generalist vocational education and training (VET). A research report tabled at the Disability Royal Commission revealed that this approach produced poor employment outcomes for young people with disability, treating VET as a holding pattern that did not build new skills for

¹⁷ ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2003, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2003*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2012, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2012*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2015, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2015*, 4430.0, ABS, Canberra.

work.¹⁸ At each step of a young person's transition from school to work, there was generally a downward bias away from 'best-practice' towards 'compliance-driven' decision-making. There were few forces directing individuals into quality and supported training that could lead to meaningful and sustainable work. The report concluded that '[g]ood leadership as well as appropriately resourced professionals are both required for high quality services (and instances of both were limited)'¹⁹.

This persistent unemployment and underemployment of people with disability has both private and public costs. Firstly, a significant risk to governments is that only around 15 per cent of Australians with disability of working age are NDIS participants.²⁰ Inclusion of people with disability in mainstream social and economic activity is a critical element of the NDIS insurance model, to prevent, delay or reduce the need for people to seek disability-specific support, and to improve outcomes for them and their families. Secondly, in addition to increasing pressure on the NDIS and other government services, the anticipated economic benefits of boosting the employment rate of people with disability to increase GDP and reduce reliance on the welfare system that underpinned the creation of the NDIS have not been realised.²¹ Finally, the Australian Government is not meeting its obligations as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities under Article 27.²² (United Nations 2006).

These challenges and risks merit significant investment in a Centre of Excellence to guide policy and practice in disability employment. However, its success will hinge on two additional factors:

- People with disability being actively engaged in its design, governance and ongoing management and administration, in both strategic and frontline roles, with coordinated support from government, business, the not-for-profit sector and researchers
- Employer engagement at scale. The Centre should include a key role for government as an exemplar employer, in line with recommendations from the UN and ILO (International Labour Organization).²³

1.2 What should be the core functions of the Centre?

In line with disability representative organisations Inclusion Australia (IA) and People with Disability Australia (PWDA), BSL recommends there is need for a national enabling and capability building hub that can build and scale up skills, knowledge and practice expertise across the

¹⁸ Buchanan, J, Smith-Merry, J, Yen, I, Drinkwater, A & Smith, B 2020, *Disadvantage, disability and vocational education and training: a research report*, p. 129, Centre for Disability Research and Policy, Sydney.

¹⁹ Buchanan, J, Smith-Merry, J, Yen, I, Drinkwater, A & Smith, B 2020, *Disadvantage, disability and vocational education and training: a research report*, p. 12, Centre for Disability Research and Policy, Sydney.

²⁰ Olney S, Mills, A & Fallon L 2022, *The Tier 2 tipping point: access to support for working-age Australians with disability without individual NDIS funding*, p. 11, Melbourne Disability Institute, University of Melbourne.

²¹ Productivity Commission 2011, *Disability Care and Support Inquiry*, Report no. 54, pp. 60, 272, 958–965, Australian Government, Canberra.

²² United Nations 2006, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, [Article 27](#).

²³ United Nations 2006, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, [Article 27](#) (step g); ILO 2019, *Promoting Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities*.

employment ecosystem to support people with disability to access meaningful jobs, develop careers and build the foundations for long-term economic security and wellbeing.²⁴

It is also recognised that for young people in particular, the transition from education to employment is critical. Early exclusion from the labour market can have lifelong consequences. An important element to enable effective transition to employment for young people with disability is local cross-agency collaboration²⁵. A Centre can support evidence-based building of agency and sector capability, and continual improvement of best or promising employment practice for people with a disability.

BSL has relevant experience and lessons to contribute from performing a hub/enabling organisation function in settings related to employment and disability.

1.2.1 Insights from BSL services

BSL services that have a hub/enabling function include Ticket to Work and the National Collaboration on Employment and Disability (NCED).

Ticket to Work is summarised in case study 1 below.

Case Study 1: Ticket to Work

Ticket to Work is an initiative that was established in response to poor and falling numbers of young Australians with disability successfully transitioning from school to work. This has lifelong economic and social implications for the individual, their families and our society. Ticket to Work transitioned from National Disability Services to BSL in 2022.

Ticket to Work grew out of research that showed participation in work and career experience during secondary school are key indicators of employment success for young people with disability.

In recent years, the Ticket to Work model was delivered through local networks, which typically include schools, employment services, post-school service providers and employers. In total there were about 370 network members, 1900 employers and 261 schools across those 31 networks. Currently BSL convenes Ticket to Work Communities of Practice to support member organisations to deliver a common, evidence-informed model that can be adapted to local contexts to offer quality services for young people to improve education, training and employment outcomes.

The role of Ticket to Work includes:

- **Practice:** supporting evidence-based practice that improves outcomes for young people with disability, including workforce development
- **Policy:** influencing employment and education policy development at local, state and national levels
- **Research:** research around school-to-work transition for young people with disability.

The Ticket to Work initiative has demonstrated that young people with disability can thrive in open employment, when prepared and supported through a collaborative approach. Since 2014,

²⁴ People with Disability Australia and the Antipoverty Centre 2022, *Ask what we want: ensure employment services encourage meaningful work for people with disability*, People with Disability Australia, Sydney; Inclusion Australia 2023, [Disability Employment Centre of Excellence](#), Canberra.

²⁵ Meadow, D 2019, *Collaboration – the key to unlocking a successful future for young people with disability*, tictetowork.org.au

over 1600 students with disability have been supported into their first job and over 3500 young people with disability have participated in career development and work preparation activities.

Evaluation of the Ticket to Work model²⁶ found participants (relative to non-participants) were:

- twice as likely to finish school
- three times as likely to be in open employment
- 50% more likely to participate in the workforce, and twice as likely to be employed
- twice as likely to feel they have ‘about the right level of independence’
- half as likely to be disengaged from work or study.

Subsequent evaluation found that the program delivered an average net financial benefit per participant of \$27,100 over three years, including increased income for participants, reduced NDIS costs and reduced disability employment assistance costs²⁷.

To build on the work of Ticket to Work, BSL has recently established the National Collaboration on Employment and Disability (NCED), summarised in case study 2 below.

Case Study 2: National Collaboration on Employment and Disability (NCED)

The National Collaboration for Employment and Disability (NCED) extends the work of the National Youth Employment Body (established by BSL in 2018) to support young people with disability to successfully transition from education into secure and meaningful employment.

NCED stakeholders include employers and industry, education and training sectors, communities, and young people.

A key plank of the NCED is implementation of Inclusive Pathway to Employment (IPE) pilot, a three-year initiative that has three components:

- **An IPE pilot program delivered in four regions** to provide individualised support to young people with disability through an expanded version of mainstream employment services
- **An IPE hub** to provide evidence-based practice resources, workforce development and research to policy makers, employers and schools
- **Policy and research:** A research and policy development program in collaboration with the Department of Social Services (DSS), DEWR and the National Insurance Agency (NDIA). This includes workshops to review evidence from the pilot and analyse future policy and service options.

More broadly, BSL’s research and service experience also suggest that key life stages shape employment trajectories for people with disability including early childhood, education and training, transition to adulthood, preparing for and transition to work, health changes, movement between jobs, and movements into and out of the labour market. Moving people smoothly through these transitions calls for whole of government policy coordination and flexible, hybrid service models – and not just for people with disability. This is a major focus of ongoing research within the BSL-University of Melbourne partnership.

²⁶ ARTD Consultants 2019, *Ticket To Work outcomes evaluation: customised employment report*. tickettowork.org.au

²⁷ SVA Consulting 2020, *Ticket to Work, Valuation of Key Outcomes*. tickettowork.org.au

1.2.2 Recommended Core functions

Informed by these lessons, BSL considers that the Centre should include enabling and capability building functions including research, data, practice expertise and facilitative leadership to build the collaborative capacity of local communities to drive change and share learnings with stakeholders. This requires work across multiple service systems and dimensions of practice, targeting change at a number of levels:

- **Frontline practice and service redesign** of human service provision and in community services, to co-design and deliver more inclusive services that draw on lived experience and build the capacity of individuals and communities.
- **Policy reform** in legislation, regulation, investment and commissioning that shapes people's lives.
- **Social change** in attitudes, behaviours, values, relationships, power, social interactions, culture and aspirations.

To achieve this, BSL has identified the following functions as key to an effective Disability Employment Centre for Excellence. These functions could be further refined in future consultations and feedback from stakeholders to the DSS Options Paper is considered and tested.

Recommended function 1: Build sector capability

- Conduct and collate research and translate knowledge based on research findings; work with stakeholders to identify research priorities to build this evidence base.
- Build the capacity and capability of organisations through evidence informed skills training and professional development.
- Provide technical assistance and customised support to diverse actors in employment ecosystem (e.g. employers, employment services, education and training providers).
- Drive data-led learning for shared practice and improvement across the employment ecosystem.
- Centralise knowledge that is currently dispersed and fragmented between different providers.
- Translate research and evidence in conceptual models, practice frameworks and practice tools and resources.

Recommended function 2: Build government capability

- Support the establishment of governance mechanisms that connect government with community to improve the two-way flow of information and decision making between the policy level and what is happening on the ground, and drive practice improvement, policy reform and systems change.
- Translate learnings from local networks, service providers, employers and jobseekers into advice for policy and system design/adaptation recommendations.
- Enable governments to act as system stewards to enable a shift in their role away from that of 'contract manager', towards bringing coherence across systems; work 'horizontally' across government agencies and 'vertically' across different levels of government.
- Provide a secondary consultation capability for government.

Recommended function 3: Facilitate innovation

- Work with actors in the system to develop, Trial, test and evaluate innovative approaches, supports and models.
- Build the capacity of the system to innovate through the development of contemporary tools and resources.

Recommended function 4: Support quality and continual improvement

- Facilitate quality and continual improvement and support future proofing to societal/labour market changes through research, evaluation, performance frameworks, and the collection and analysis of data.
- Support the development of service-system-level mechanisms to ensure lived experience informs broader policy and system design solutions.

Recommended function 5: Support cross-sectoral place-based networks and approaches

- Facilitate the establishment of place-based networks with influential local stakeholders and participants with lived experience to enable community leadership in the design and implementation of local responses/initiatives.
- Facilitate collaboration between providers and within communities to coordinate effort, share learning, and connect providers and communities into government and policy.
- Connect sectors that may be siloed by policy and funding structures to enable cross-sectoral work on the ground, build capability for collaborative action, activate relationships and networks that can drive reform in communities and identify and avoid service duplication, including the blending, braiding and sequencing of supports.

Risks and potential limitations of the proposed Centre

The proposed Disability Employment Centre of Excellence offers promise to improve employment outcomes for disability. BSL has outlined above recommended functions that can contribute to this important objective. However, it is also important to consider potential risks and limitations that may be associated with the proposed Centre of Excellence. Based on the DSS options paper, BSL notes the following issues that require careful consideration to ensure risks are recognised and mitigated:

- The creation of a centre for ‘Disability Employment’ may inadvertently perpetuate segregation of jobseekers on the basis of disability, especially in the minds of potential employers.
- Known barriers to work faced by people with disability require coordinated action beyond disability-specific and employment-specific policy and practice, to address intersectional disadvantage.
- The options paper does not engage with important policy areas and settings that influence the labour-force participation and employment of people with disability – for example, welfare conditionality and workplace relations.

- The important roles of educational institutions (schools, TAFEs, RTOs and universities), families, social and cultural capital, and personal resources in building pathways to employment are not clearly considered.
- BSL's research and practice suggests that the Centre may be intervening too late to change career trajectories for some young people. Factors leading to exclusion from the labour market can emerge early in life, well before a person with disability is of working age (15–64 years).
- There is little discussion of non-vocational barriers to work for people who acquire disability later in life or who have debilitating chronic illness that limits their capacity to work. Women aged 50 years and over in this category are one of the fastest growing cohorts of long-term unemployed jobseekers in the mainstream employment services system.

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