



# A new specialist disability employment program

## Submission to consultation

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

September 2024

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

**Emma Cull**

Senior Manager Service Development

Adult and Youth Transitions

Phone: 0421 876 500

Email: [ecull@bsl.org.au](mailto:ecull@bsl.org.au)

**Kelly Fawcett**

Senior Policy Advisor - Disability

Social Policy and Research Centre

Phone: 0482 169 921

Email: [Kelly.fawcett@bsl.org.au](mailto:Kelly.fawcett@bsl.org.au)

## 1 The Brotherhood of St. Laurence and disability employment services

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working towards an Australia free of poverty. BSL runs the National Collaboration of Employment and Disability (NCED), which works to build the capability of the people who work within the employment, education and training systems to enable successful post-school transitions into mainstream employment for young people with disability. The NCED does this through translating research and evidence into policy solutions and practical resources that build workforce capability across the youth, disability, employment, education and training ecosystems.

## 2 Meaningful engagement

BSL welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the future direction of disability employment services. There is an opportunity to build a system that is people centred and place centred, with effective and empowering pathways to economic and social participation, especially for people with disability who often face additional barriers to employment.

A critical part of the new request for tender for disability employment services is the introduction of the concept of meaningful engagement between people with disability, providers and job plan requirements. BSL welcomes the shared accountability and person-centred focus that meaningful engagement can bring to employment services. For this potential to be realised, there needs to be a clear plan and process to operationalise meaningful engagement at the provider level that includes roles and responsibilities of the provider and accountability mechanisms.

BSL recommends that service providers genuinely co-produce the Jobs Plan with people with disability and utilise reciprocity-based practice. This would ensure the plan is tailored to the person with disability's own unique goals, needs and circumstances. This approach holds both providers and people with disability accountable for achieving the goals set out in their Job Plan and ensuring the goals are aligned to their aspirations and interests. This approach has the benefit of utilising a person's intrinsic motivation and allows the person with disability greater agency and choice over their employment pathways.<sup>1</sup>

BSL has demonstrated this approach through several of our programs and services including the National Youth Employment Body, NCED, Transition to Work (TtW) Community of Practice model and Education First Youth Foyers. This is detailed in the below case study of 'the Deal' which outlines how this practice works and how it can transform the relationship between provider and jobseeker. This is also consistent with the recommendations from the Inquiry into Workforce Australia and presents a significant opportunity to drive positive reform and provide consistency for jobseekers across both systems.

## Implementing mutual accountability in employment services through 'the Deal'

'The Deal' is a practice mechanism that BSL has used to demonstrate an alternative to mutual obligation approaches, particularly for jobseekers experiencing disadvantage.

Providing jobseekers, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, with greater agency and choice over decisions about their employment pathways is intrinsically motivating. People are more persistent in their pursuit of an employment, education and training goal if they have chosen to pursue it and it is linked to their interests and aspirations. This leads to better and more sustainable outcomes, as well as increased wellbeing and self-confidence. When employment services hold high expectations of jobseekers, they also express belief in them and instil a sense that jobseekers are valued members of society with something to contribute.

'The Deal' seeks to rebalance the traditional focus of employment services on a 'push' approach to the activation of jobseekers with 'pull' factors that invest in people's potential and build their capability. 'The Deal' does this by upholding both the rights and responsibilities of jobseekers and employment services. It enables participants to have agency over their progress toward employment outcomes, with agreed support and access to necessary opportunities and resources from the employment service. In turn, both are accountable for their actions and a culture of reciprocity and shared ownership is fostered. This sentiment is expressed by participants in the TtW Community of Practice who utilised 'the Deal' in their engagement with the TtW service:

It's a really great idea. Because it's not pressure ... it encourages me to get it done, reach my goals and prove to these guys that I can do what I promised and if they fulfil [their end of the Deal], it's not just them, it's both. [We] meet halfway. (Ella, Vocational Partnerships Group)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This approach is detailed in BSL's Submission to the Workforce Australia Review and can be found here for further detail:

[https://library.bsl.org.au/bsljspui/bitstream/1/13391/1/BSL\\_sum\\_joint\\_subm\\_to\\_Workforce\\_Aus\\_Review.pdf](https://library.bsl.org.au/bsljspui/bitstream/1/13391/1/BSL_sum_joint_subm_to_Workforce_Aus_Review.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Bond, S & Keys, D 2020, *Finding that spark: what works to achieve effective employment services for young people?*, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

## Key characteristics of ‘the Deal’

- ‘The Deal’ is a voluntary, non-punitive mutual agreement between service providers and the person presenting to the service.
- ‘The Deal’ outlines the expectations providers hold of people accessing services, and participants hold of providers in return. It outlines the mutual investment required by participants and the provider.
- ‘The Deal’ expresses value and respect through mutual investment expectations.
- ‘The Deal’ recognises people’s capacity for accountability, taking account of their diverse circumstances, and values their ability to contribute to and shape what support looks like for them.
- ‘The Deal’ is about holding people in high regard – services can have expectations of people while recognising the different contribution each party makes to ‘the Deal’.

While ‘the Deal’ can set out some service requirements, it is critical that it is not used as a tool for compliance. ‘The Deal’ reframes participation in the service as an opportunity for participants to pursue their goals, while getting access to the support they need. In turn they are expected to show up and work towards their goals.

‘The Deal’ has been tested within the National Youth Employment Body, the National Collaboration of Employment and Disability, Transition to Work Community of Practice model and Education First Youth. Reframing policy principles to support a mutual accountability approach has the potential to transform employment services and the lives of jobseekers.

It also critical that engagement activities include a broad spectrum of options that may include supports for wellbeing and recovery, work in the community, education, training, (re)entering the labour market, employment guidance and job-matching, and post-placement. When creating individualised Jobs Plans, providers could help people access a mix of supports from across this spectrum, relevant to their needs and circumstances.

Additionally, where meaningful engagement is not achieved, rather than taking a compliance approach, the initial plan can be revisited, assessing whether the goals are still relevant and whether the provider has also been accountable in their role in supporting the person with disability. This role includes sourcing and connecting people with disability to opportunities relevant to the goals articulated in their plans.

**Recommendation: BSL recommends that the Department of Social Services adopts the above principles into their definition of meaningful engagement for the new specialist disability employment services**

## 3 Next steps

BSL would welcome a meeting with the relevant team at the Department of Social Services who are overseeing the development and implementation of the new disability employment services to share our knowledge.