



National Disability Services Submission to Employment White Paper: December 2022

About NDS

National Disability Services (NDS) is the peak industry body for non-government disability services. We represent disability service providers across Australia in their work to deliver high-quality supports and life opportunities for people with disability. Our Australia-wide membership includes more than 1000 non-government organisations which support people with all forms of disability. Our members collectively provide the full range of disability services—from accommodation support, respite and therapy to community access and employment. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Federal governments.

About this submission

NDS welcomes the invitation to provide a submission to the Employment White Paper. Focusing on the disability sector workforce, our submission will aim to address the following terms of reference:

1. Full employment and increasing labour productivity growth and incomes, including the approach to achieving these objectives.
2. The future of work and labour market implications of structural change.
 - 2.1 Building a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.
3. Job security, fair pay, and conditions, including the role of workplace relations.
4. Pay equity, including the gender pay gap, equal opportunities for women and the benefits of a more inclusive workforce.
5. Labour force participation, labour supply and improving employment opportunities.
 - 5.1 Reducing barriers and disincentives to work, including the role of childcare, social security settings and employment services.

5.2 Improving labour market outcomes for those who face challenges in employment, including First Nations people, those who live in rural and remote areas, younger and older Australians, people with disability, and those who may experience discrimination.

5.3 Skills, education, and training, upskilling, and reskilling, including in transitioning sectors and regions.

5.4 Migration settings as a complement to the domestic workforce.

6. The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches.

7. Other relevant topics and approaches.

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Executive Summary

The health care and assistance sector is experiencing extraordinary growth, with few signs that this will reduce in coming years. It is estimated that Health Care and Social Assistance is the largest employing industry in Australia. Around 14.8 per cent of workers have their main job in this industry.[1]

The disability sector is a one of the largest and fastest growing in Australia. This has been driven significantly by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Within this industry, Aged and Disabled Carers are the second largest occupational grouping and has the largest projected employment growth (28 per cent) of all occupations in Australia in the five years to November 2026.[2]

A recent report identified NDIS providers employ over 270,000 directly (indirect employment is likely to be far higher) across 20 different occupations and that the NDIS was estimated to have contributed \$52.4 billion to Australia's GDP in 2020-2021.[3]

However, the sector has also experienced significant and long-standing workforce shortages impacting on the availability and quality of supports available to people with disabilities in Australia.

Disability service providers consistently report workforce as being their most pressing issue and this has only been exacerbated by COVID-19. In 2022, 80 per cent of providers responding to our Annual Market Survey received service requests they were unable to provide.⁴ In real terms this means that some people with disabilities were not able to access the vital support that they needed.

Issues related to wages and conditions, the availability of cost-effective training that meets the needs of employers and workers, along with broader issues related to workforce shortages impacting across multiple sectors such as allied health and regional, remote, and very remote areas need to be considered.

There are severe and chronic workforce shortages across the care and health sectors. These require a more coordinated and integrated response to lessen competition for the same workers. This response will depend on improved workforce data.

A multifaceted, national, sustainable approach to the disability workforce and the care and health workforce more generally is critical to ensure that people with disability receive the support they need and to support the growth in demand for care services in the years to come.

NDS and our members welcome the opportunity to provide input into the development of the Employment White Paper. The White Paper must include a focus on the disability sector and explore targeted short, medium and long term strategies aimed at creating a

vibrant disability sector. The adverse implications of not doing so are too significant for members of the Australian community.

This submission makes a number of recommendations which are summarised below (more detail on these recommendations is included in body of the submission):

Recommendation 1

Workforce impacts must be appropriately considered in the current NDIS Review to ensure Scheme design enables secure job opportunities that support full employment for disability support workers.

Recommendation 2

Implement NDIS pricing and funding that enables workers to benefit from life-long learning opportunities and appropriately funds adequate training and supervision for disability support workers.

Recommendation 3

Ensure that funding, pricing, and regulation support innovation uptake and increase digital maturity.

Recommendation 4

Design and implement policy, funding, and pricing settings in the Australian economy that support the disability sector remain sustainable.

Recommendation 5

Ensure that funding models for disability and other care sectors can offer workers secure employment and a salary equivalent to the all-jobs median.

Recommendation 6

Develop funding models for disability and other care sectors that support remuneration frameworks that recognise frontline worker capability to undertake complex care work.

Recommendation 7

Ensure that funding models remove the gender-based undervaluation of care and support work and ensure that changes in funding flow to worker wages.

Recommendation 8

Increase the Child Care subsidy for care workers to allow women to return to the workforce and/or increase their work hours.

Recommendation 9

Fund scalable place-based initiatives that encourage labour force participation from cohorts not currently in the workforce including early retirees, parents, people with disability and carers.

Recommendation 10

Ensure that the interface of tax and welfare schemes (including social housing) do not disincentivise paid employment.

Recommendation 11

Design, fund and implement initiatives to build awareness of the importance of care work and encourage cultural change to encourage young people, men, and diverse communities into the sector.

Recommendation 12

Fund initiatives that support innovative employment models such as FIFO across remote and very remote areas.

Recommendation 13

Support and fund disability providers to develop and implement NDIS service delivery models that increase the use of allied health assistants.

Recommendation 14

Enhance and ensure that existing mechanisms that support job seekers to obtain a driver's license are funded, easily accessed, and remain available.

Recommendation 15

Reduce administrative and other barriers to obtaining worker clearances.

Recommendation 16

Design, fund and implement a specific NDIS Worker Housing Strategy.

Recommendation 17

Incentivise people not in the labour force likely to be attracted to value-based/flexible work, though changes to tax/welfare benefit interface for example by reducing effective Marginal Tax Rates (EMTRs) when people exit welfare and enter work.

Recommendation 18

Fund effective training and case management programs that support disadvantaged local jobseekers to build work-readiness and acquire relevant skills in disability sector work, as demonstrated through the NDS's Entry to Care Roles project.

Recommendation 19

Remove existing financial disincentives for people with disabilities to enter and remain in the workforce.

Recommendation 20

Ensure access to a range of employment supports and options that take account of the career aspirations, individual choices and training and development needs of people with disabilities.

Recommendation 21

Introduce employer incentives as a means to encourage and support the employment of people with disabilities.

Recommendation 22

Implement an initiative that enables supported employment providers to formally partner with mainstream employers to assist them to enhance their disability awareness and provide ongoing employment opportunities.

Recommendation 23

Streamline and refine the delivery of government disability employment policy and programs including raising awareness of policies and initiatives that would assist employers to recruit more people with disability.

Recommendation 24

Invest in industry-led flexible, innovative Vocational Educational Training (VET) courses.

Recommendation 25

Actively recruit experienced, qualified, and motivated care and support workers to Australia.

Recommendation 26

Enable more international students, visa holders and asylum seekers to work in the disability sector.

Recommendation 27

Continue to invest in connector programs such as the WA Job Matching Service, NDS Disability Workforce Innovation Connector Project, 2019 and the NDS Entry to Care Roles Project, 2022.

Recommendation 28

Create mechanisms that support open and constructive dialogue between government, disability employers, and unions.

Recommendation 29

Ensure that findings and recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission are considered and where required supported and funded in the development of disability workforce strategies.

About the Disability Workforce

Growth in the disability sector has been driven significantly by growth in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). It is estimated that an additional 83,000 workers (or a 31 per cent increase in current workforce size) will be required across the NDIS sector by 2024.[5] The disability workforce is currently experiencing significant challenges in meeting the growing demand for disability services. This challenge is compounded by high turnover rates which see many workers leave the sector each year. It is anticipated that the disability sector will lose approximately 213,000 workers by 2025.[6]

Health Care and Social Assistance is the largest employing industry in Australia. Around 14.8 per cent of workers have their main job in this industry.⁷ Within this industry, Aged and Disabled Carers are the second largest occupational grouping, second only to Registered Nurses. The occupation of Aged and Disabled Carer has the largest projected employment growth (28 per cent) of all occupations in Australia in the five years to November 2026.[8]

NDS's State of the Disability Sector report based on data collected in our Annual Market Survey has tracked the operating environment for disability service providers and its impact on service delivery since 2014. The 2022 results show a sector under increasing pressure to attract and retain the workforce required to meet demand.⁹ Disability service providers consistently report workforce as their most pressing issue, and this has been further exacerbated by COVID-19.

In 2022, providers reported a dramatic rise in difficulties recruiting disability support workers, with 83 per cent of providers experiencing difficulty compared to 59 per cent in 2020.[10] Similar increases were reported when it came to being able to retain disability support workers with 56 per cent of providers reporting difficulties in being able to retain support workers compared to 40 per cent in 2020. It is worth noting that shortages of disability support workers existed before COVID-19. In 2017, 57 per cent [11] and in 2018, 63 per cent [12] of respondents reported moderate to extreme difficulty in recruiting disability support workers, indicating that this has been a longer term challenge.

Disability providers are also finding it increasingly difficult to retain staff. Over half (56 per cent) of respondents in the 2022 survey reported difficulties in retaining their existing disability support workforce. This increased significantly from 2020 (40 per cent) and 2021 (44 per cent).[13]

Given that disability support workers provide significant amounts of core daily living supports, in real terms this means that some people with disability were not able to access the daily support that they need.

Allied health

Shortages of allied health staff are well known and have been long standing. However, the 2022 NDS State of the Disability Sector report indicates that conditions have worsened. More providers reported moderate or extreme difficulty recruiting speech pathologists (98 per cent), occupational therapists (97 per cent), psychologists (94 per cent) and physiotherapists (86 per cent). Providers reported that they received limited applications for positions and identified the bureaucratic burden as a barrier to employing international candidates.[14]

As reflected across the disability support workforce, retaining allied health professionals in the sector is also proving a challenge. Respondents to the survey reported difficulty in retaining speech therapists (66 per cent), psychologists (64 per cent) and occupational therapists (60 per cent).[15]

Providers have reported that difficulties in recruiting and retaining allied health workers are driving lengthy wait times for therapy services from six months to up to two years in some locations. These shortages are not just restricted to regional and rural areas but are even occurring on the fringe of capital cities.

No or limited access to allied health services, particularly for regional, rural, and remote participants, is likely to be a factor in the significantly lower NDIS participant utilisation rates for therapy supports (52 per cent) compared to NDIS supports as a whole (71 per cent).[16]

Based on increasing reports of difficulties in recruiting and retaining early childhood educators, the Annual Market Survey included this category for the first time this year. 70 per cent of respondents reported moderate to significant difficulty in recruiting and 71 per cent reported moderate to significant difficulty in retaining staff in these roles.[17] This is consistent with shortages being reported across education generally but is a particular concern for the disability sector given that 16 per cent of participants in the NDIS are under the age of 7.[18]

Our responses to the terms of reference are made in the context of:

- The disability sector is a significant component of the care sector.
- Significant past and projected growth in disability sector jobs.
- Critical current and projected future workforce shortages.
- Significant unmet demand for day-to-day services.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

1. Full employment and increasing labour productivity growth and incomes, including the approach to achieving these objectives.

As outlined above the Health Care and Assistance sector is experiencing extraordinary growth, with few signs that will reduce in coming years. At the recent Jobs and Skills Summit, Grattan Institute CEO Danielle Wood noted that “Services now account for around 70 per cent of national economic output. And 8 out of 10 workers in Australia are employed in services jobs.” However, she also went on to note that the services sector has often been ignored in terms of initiatives and economic policy aimed at moving toward full employment.[19]

Since COVID-19 both unemployment and under employment has decreased.²⁰ However the disability sector continues to report high levels of casual and part-time work when compared to the greater job market. In the disability sector, full time employment has ranged between 20 per cent and 24 per cent.[21] Casual employment rates have also remained high. Respondents to NDS’s latest Workforce Census reported that 35 per cent of disability support workers were employed on a casual basis.[22]

Issues with predictability of income, economic uncertainty and continuing and constant reform has made workforce planning challenging for disability service providers and have created a reluctance to employ staff on a permanent basis, even in the face of growing retention issues.

NDS notes that a percentage of workers choose to maintain part time or casual working arrangements for personal reasons, including flexible work hours, receiving a higher hourly rate and increased flexibility in their rosters. However, the high level of part time employment and casualisation results in a lack of job security, reduced training and investment in workers, inconsistent wages and hours and resultant high turnover of workers.

Further work is needed to explore the drivers and implications of these trends, along with potential solutions for the disability sector.

Recommendation 1

[Workforce impacts must be appropriately considered in the current NDIS Review to ensure Scheme design enables secure job opportunities that support full employment for disability support workers.](#)

Increasing productivity in the human services sector relies on supporting and developing the capabilities of the people working in the sector. As noted by the Productivity Commission “increased productivity in residential aged care is likely to reflect better care by staff rather than reductions in staffing to resident ratios facilitated by new technologies”.^[23] This is true for the disability sector where innovation, improved service quality and better outcomes will be generated by investing in the skills and capabilities of new and existing workers in the sector. Productive workers in the sector need both foundational skills such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking,

problem solving, numeracy and literacy and specific skills in areas such community services and allied health.[24] These skills also need to be developed and maintained over time.

However, both disability sector workers and employers consistently report that training and development opportunities in the sector are limited. Disability service providers note the cost of training – even where the training may be ‘free’ – backfilling the staff member comes at a cost that is currently non recoverable.

Workers also report a lack of support and supervision in their workplaces.[25] It has been noted that the cost modelling that underpins NDIS pricing allows for little or no [training and supervision costs].[26]

The NDIS support worker cost model assumes a span of control (ratio of workers per supervisor) of 15 to 1.[27] However, the NDIA Annual Pricing Review found that the average span of control among respondents was 11.8 to 1.[28] There is conflict between the pricing assumption that entry level workers need less allowance for supervision (as the calculation is based on hourly rate of worker and not supervisor cost) when workforce research and the [NDIS Commission Workforce Capability Framework](#) highlight the importance of regular supervision to direct, develop and retain a capable workforce.

This is not to say that embracing ways to support the disability sector to engage with and implement technological innovations or improve their use of digital solutions and strategies have no role in increasing productivity or improving services.[29] Funding and policy have a role in support this.[30]

Recommendation 2

Implement NDIS pricing and funding that enables workers to benefit from life-long learning opportunities and appropriately funds adequate training and supervision for disability support workers.

Recommendation 3

Ensure that funding, pricing, and regulation support innovation uptake and increase digital maturity.

2.1 Building a sustainable care economy in the context of an ageing population and other drivers of demand for care services.

The increasing demand for care services has been well documented. It is projected that the number of NDIS participants will increase to 741,077 at the end of June 2026 and to 1,017,522 at the end of June 2032.[31] This in turn will drive demand across the disability sector. In fact, 80 percent of respondents to NDS’s 2022 Annual Market Survey reported that they had received requests for disability services they had been unable to provide.[32]

However, despite this growth in demand, disability service providers continue to operate in a market that is increasingly financially unviable. The State of the Disability Sector report notes that, with the exception of 2019 which could be seen as an anomaly, providers report that operating conditions have worsened year on year (from 36 per cent in 2016 to 67 per cent in 2022).[33] Many factors can be seen to contribute this overall outlook:

- A decreasing number of providers reporting a surplus in 2022 (46 per cent, the lowest reported since 2016).
- Concerns about capacity to continue to provide services at current NDIS prices (59 per cent), even taking into account increases in 2022 NDIS prices.
- Poor NDIS processes increasing administrative burden and a lack of confidence in the current regulatory framework.

Combined this has contributed to 61 per cent of respondents either being unsure of or disagreeing that the benefits of operating in the NDIS outweigh the risks. Similarly, while respondents to the survey identified that growth is required (63 per cent) in real terms many were not intending to commence offering new services.[34]

Ensuring that the disability sector is well equipped to meet demand in the long term is not just critical to ensure that people with disabilities receive the support that they require to fully participate in the community but represents a significant driver of economic prosperity. Too often increase in demand is seen as a cost without considering the direct and indirect economic activity that is stimulated by investing in the disability sector. A report commissioned by NDS identified that a conservative estimate of the value generated by the NDIS would be in the range of \$2.25 for every dollar spent.[35] In others words a sustainable disability sector supported by adequate investment can drive economic growth and positive societal outcomes.

Recommendation 4

[Design and implement policy, funding, and pricing settings in the Australian economy that support the disability sector remain sustainable. Given the projected growth of Australia's care sector this must include a long term, sustainable approach to addressing supply, pay and conditions for workers, removing barriers to employment and strengthening retention of existing workers.](#)

3. Job security, fair pay, and conditions, including the role of workplace relations.

The disability sector is often seen as a sector that is underpaid, overworked and undervalued.[36] Pay and conditions represent a barrier to people entering and remaining in the sector.[37] Aspects of the design and administration of the NDIS can be seen to incentivise a 'gig like economy' consisting of high rates of casual work and

overall reduced job security for frontline disability support workers, with associated negative consequences.[38]

In addition, there are rostering and scheduling complexities to align suitable workers with NDIS participant requirements at the right time/day. While some workers prefer casual work, on average casual workers are much more likely to face irregular and insufficient hours of work and fluctuations in earnings and are much less likely than permanent employees to have access to on-the-job training.

Providers want to offer workers a living wage and career pathways but are constrained by the NDIS pricing framework and associated disability support worker cost model. Existing and prospective workers looking to save a housing deposit, get a bank loan or support a family can get more regular hours, higher pay, and better conditions in other industries.

Median full-time earnings for Aged and Disabled Carers are \$1,382 per week, much lower than the all-jobs median (\$1,593).[39] The important work of disability support workers must be recognised through improved remuneration frameworks.

As highlighted insufficient margin in the NDIS hourly rate does not enable providers to build the capability of their existing workforce through supervision and training. TAFE or even university-based training needs to be supplemented by on-the-job training in professions that are very much relational work. The NDIA current cost modelling [40] allows for extremely limited training and supervision. This results in workers with insufficient support and opportunities for on-the-job coaching. Many new entrants find the experience overwhelming, leading to high early drop-out rates.

These structural barriers to offering workers job security, fair pay and conditions, training opportunities and career pathways need to be addressed as a key component to attracting and retaining a capable disability workforce.

Recommendation 5

Ensure that funding models for disability and other care sectors can offer workers secure employment and a salary equivalent to the all-jobs median.

Recommendation 6

Develop funding models for disability and other care sectors that support remuneration frameworks that recognise frontline worker capability to undertake complex care work.

4. Pay equity, including the gender pay gap, equal opportunities for women and the benefits of a more inclusive workforce.

Four out of five workers in the care and support workforce are women.[41] NDS's Workforce Census which documents key metrics, including rates of casual and part-time employment, employee turnover, working hours, and gender and age cohorts

across the disability workforce estimates that 69 per cent of the workforce in the July to December 2021 reporting period were women.[42]

The important work of all care and support workers must be recognised through remuneration frameworks that remove the gender-based historical undervaluation of this work.

In the recent submission of the Aged Care Work Value Case, the Full Bench of the Fair Work Commission “accepted the expert evidence that as a general proposition work in feminised industries, including care work, has been historically undervalued and that the reason for that undervaluation is likely to be gender based.”[43] The Full Bench also accepted that “the evidence pertaining to gender undervaluation provides a useful context for the assessment of the work value and skills utilised in feminised industries, including in the aged care industry.”[44]

Funding models that remove the gender-based undervaluation of this work and ensure that these changes directly flow to worker wages. As another female dominated and low paid workforce, the implications of these decisions need to be considered for disability workers.

There are economic benefits from investing in the disability workforce. NDS notes that investment in the disability workforce offers a multiplier effect on human capital as skilled disability services build the capability of people with disability and their family and carers to undertake paid work. To date, this impact has been greatest for parents and carers, with an 11 per cent increase in their employment rate at the fifth NDIS plan re-assessment.[45]

Recommendation 7

Ensure that funding models remove the gender-based undervaluation of care and support work and ensure that changes in funding flow to worker wages.

Recommendation 8

Increase the Child Care subsidy for care workers to allow women to return to the workforce and/or increase their work hours.

5. Labour force participation, labour supply and improving employment opportunities

The supply of suitable workers is the dominant issue for the disability workforce. Current workforce shortages are well known and explored within numerous inquiries and reports including the NDS State of the Disability Sector Report 2022. Developing effective strategies to build the supply of workers within current thin markets is critical, noting that this issue is even more acute in regional and remote areas across Australia. NDIS providers are overwhelmingly reporting that they are unable to fill shifts due to supply

and suitability issues. NDIS participants are at risk of missing critical supports altogether or supports being delayed or delivered at a lower level of service.

The occupation of Aged and Disabled Carer has the largest projected employment growth (28 per cent) of all occupations in Australia in the five years to November 2026.[46] The care sector must look at attracting new workers into the sector at a scale never before seen. This can only be achieved by addressing current barriers and disincentives for certain cohorts to enter and re-enter the workforce. Targeted, place-based strategies are needed to encourage and support young people, men, mature, CALD, Indigenous communities and people living with disability into the workforce and to work in regional, remote, rural, and very remote and other thin markets.

Recommendation 9

Fund scalable place-based initiatives that encourage labour force participation from cohorts not currently in the workforce including early retirees, parents, people with disability and carers.

Recommendation 10

Ensure that the interface of tax and welfare schemes (including social housing) do not disincentivise paid employment.

Attracting more men to work in the sector

Four out of five workers in the care and support workforce are women.[47] Strong growth in women's workforce participation has been a significant factor in meeting the demand for care and support workers. Whether the growth in women's workforce participation will continue at this rate is not known. However, of note, between the ages of 25-44, over 44 per cent of females and only 6.5 per cent of males who are not in the labour force are engaged in caring for children.[48] Mothers appear to be more sensitive to perceived work and parenthood trade-offs in their labour supply decisions relative to fathers. Further, the profile of female workers is changing. In Australia in 2020, 62 per cent of 25-34 year-old women had a tertiary qualification compared to 47 per cent of their male peers.[49] Women are becoming more educated and over time may be less likely to be attracted to relatively low paid care and support work positions. Investment is needed to attract more men to the care and support workforce.

Young people

NDS has seen success through [carecareers](#) and more recently through [ThinkSupport](#). Aimed at the 16-24 age group this successful approach was based on research and combined photography and video across a channel mix that included social media, YouTube, Google Ads, and search engine optimisation.

Strategies aimed at school leavers have also proved successful. NDS has delivered [projectABLE](#), a high energy, interactive workshop program, designed to inspire senior

school students to consider a career in disability. Led by a regional network of 56 presenters with disabilities, *projectAble* enjoyed outstanding feedback and acknowledged social impact. Over 6500 students have experienced the program and 84 per cent report feeling inspired to “now think about a career in disability”.

NDS is also currently delivering the [Gateways to Industry Schools program](#) in Queensland which works to link schools with Vocation, Education and Training (VET) and industry and to strengthen the pipeline of students into priority areas such as disability support work. The Gateways program is seeing huge successes in breaking down the misconceptions around care work and in building critical connections between the education system, school students and parents with VET and Industry.

Recommendation 11

[Design, fund and implement initiatives \(including those outlined above\) to build awareness of the importance of care work and encourage cultural change to encourage young people, men, and diverse communities into the sector.](#)

Strategies to address remote and very remote workforce issues

Innovative employment models including telehealth, Fly-in-Fly-out (FIFO) and Drive-in-drive-out (DIDO) are being piloted in remote and very remote regions. Specifically in Western Australia, new models are being attempted in regions where high cost-of-living is deterring or preventing workers from relocating (e.g.: Wheatbelt, Goldfields, Pilbara, Kimberley, Western Desert, and remote border regions). In locations where there is a lack of suitable, affordable worker accommodation, disability funding models must include capability to cover the costs of worker travel to those locations.

Recommendation 12

[Fund initiatives that support innovative employment models such as FIFO across remote and very remote areas in Western Australia and the Northern Territory](#)

Innovation in Allied Health services

Currently, therapy service delivery models in disability services depend heavily on the employment of allied health professionals (AHPs). Providers offering therapy services continue to report challenges recruiting AHPs. This issue is particularly acute in regional and remote areas. The shortage of AHPs is recognised through their inclusion on the Australian skilled occupation list.[50] Growing the AHP workforce is challenging as these professionals complete four-year degree programs and there is global competition for these workers. Increased employment of Allied Health Assistants (AHAs) in the disability sector could assist to meet the demand for therapy services and improve labour productivity in this area.

Transition supports for providers of therapy services to develop and implement NDIS service delivery models that increase the use of allied health assistants in the delivery of

allied health supports are needed. This support could include training in delegation frameworks and supervision models, funding support for system changes and place-based recruitment and training of new AHAs in regional and remote areas that includes disability specific information, skills, and case studies.

Concurrently, in consultation with industry, government could incentivise the use of allied health assistants in the delivery of disability services through changes to the NDIS price guide.

Recommendation 13

Support and fund disability providers to develop and implement NDIS service delivery models that increase the use of allied health assistants.

5.1 Reducing barriers and disincentives to work, including the role of childcare, social security settings and employment services.

Entry pathways into the disability sector need to be more clearly visible, easy to understand, easy to access and given the roles are not highly remunerated, affordable. There is a misconception that disability work is relatively easy to get into, however the barriers and disincentives to joining the sector are significant, especially for some jobseeker cohorts.

Some existing barriers to entering the sector are explored below:

Driver's Licence requirements

Due to the community based focus of disability support work, a common entry level requirement to the disability sector is a driver's licence. In 2021 the Department of Skills Education and Employment estimated that one third of job seekers on the Job Active lists didn't have a driver's licence.[51] Many otherwise suitable jobseekers are precluded from employment as disability support workers as they do not have a driver's license and/or access to a suitable vehicle for work purposes.

Recommendation 14

Enhance and ensure that existing mechanisms that support job seekers to obtain a driver's license are funded, easily accessed, and remain available.

NDIS Worker Screening Requirements

The NDIS Worker Screening Check (required for most direct support roles in NDIS registered providers) poses a particular barrier for job seekers. The cost and time needed to obtain the mandatory NDIS Worker Screening Check is a barrier to new workers joining the disability workforce. This is particularly the case in a highly competitive labour market where jobseekers can immediately commence work in other sectors such as retail and hospitality with comparable pay and working conditions.

Providers report a significant number of cases where high-quality applicants have found alternative employment in other industries or with unregistered NDIS providers due to delays of months in receiving their NDIS check.

Further challenges with the NDIS check process relates to demographic changes to the pool of potential workers. The tight labour market has prompted many employers to tap into previously underutilised cohorts in the labour market, including recruiting inexperienced and low-skilled workers to fill gaps in rosters. Many of these new recruits are long term unemployed, from migrant or refugee backgrounds, of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage or from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Many of these individuals face significant difficulty in utilising online NDIS Worker Screening application processes due to holding international documents, having handwritten documents, or not having the identity documentation required to complete the online application. This forces these applicants to use the manual application process, which is time consuming and often plagued by delays of more than 12 weeks. NDS has heard recent reports of applications that have been delayed by more 6 months. While these may be outliers, the impact of these delays for service providers, workers and participants are very real.

Registered NDIS Providers are committed to the requirement for relevant worker screening as a safeguard for people with disability. However, the administration of these must not preclude suitable workers from joining the sector and increasing the diversity of the disability workforce.

Recommendation 15

Reduce administrative and other barriers to obtaining worker clearances through:

- Streamlining checks for care workers to enable workers with a recognised check to work across the care sector.
- Including Working with Children Checks in care sector Checks.
- Allowing applications for NDIS Worker Screening Check prior to an offer for employment.
- Removing the cost for a NDIS Worker Screening Check or provide a 'one-off' payment of \$500 to assist job seekers in starting in the disability sector to cover costs associated with the NDIS Check, First Aid, CPR, Working with Children's Check and Car Insurance.
- Implementing a national approach to the NDIS Worker's Clearance and consistent relaxation of the "No Check, No Start" policy which currently exists in some states. This should be codesigned with job seekers and offer online and paper-based options that work, are easy to use and are speedily processed.

Worker Housing

Housing shortages continue to present a substantial barrier in attracting and retaining workers in regional/remote areas, particularly in Western Australia [52] and the Northern Territory but this is a problem throughout Australia.[53] In regional areas in particular, accommodation shortages mean that even if workers are available and willing to relocate, they have nowhere to live. Allied health professionals and workers employed on full time salaries cannot find and/or afford rental properties in regional areas.[54]

Large resource companies are practised and resourced to resolve their housing needs. Major projects such as the NDIS require a dedicated housing solution, however the marketised delivery of the NDIS has pushed the worker housing problem onto small to medium not-for-profit organisations who are not equipped to meet this challenge. Housing solutions all levels of government for regional and remote disability workers are urgently needed.

Recommendation 16

[Design, fund and implement a specific NDIS Worker Housing Strategy.](#)

5.2.1 Improving labour market outcomes for the range of people who face challenges in employment

While the care sector is one of the largest employers in Australia it needs to be supported to strengthen its current capacity to recruit and onboard workers from communities facing challenges in employment. Wrap around support services for job seekers to address barriers to entering the sector are critical in ensuring workers from disadvantaged communities are welcomed into the sector. Data also suggests that retention of these workers is improved if onboarding and induction processes are thorough and supportive.[55]

Examples of wrap around type projects include NDS's Entry to Care Roles project. This project is a Local Jobs Program initiative, supported by the Inner Metropolitan Melbourne Employment Region (IMMER) Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce, funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Working within the IMMER region, the Entry to Care Roles project seeks to create a sustainable and scalable collaborative model to support the transition of people from long term unemployment into entry level disability support worker roles. It aims to build long-term, sustainable, relationships between Workforce Australia providers and disability employers to establish a pipeline of suitable workers, who hold the values sought by the sector.

Awareness campaigns, such as [A Life Changing Life](#), [Work That Matters](#) (Victoria) and NDS's [#ThinkSupport](#) Campaign (Western Australia), that directly promote the values alignment between the care workforce and people with experiences of giving/receiving

care are an important part of increasing attraction to the sector. These campaigns have variously used advertising on billboards, bus backs and state-wide social media channels and direct job seekers to the job boards and websites. Through these websites, job seekers can access information about training, the range of roles and career pathways in the sector, the characteristics that disability sector employers are seeking in their employees and much more.

Recommendation 17

Incentivise people not in the labour force likely to be attracted to value-based/flexible work, though changes to tax/welfare benefit interface for example by reducing effective Marginal Tax Rates (EMTRs) when people exit welfare and enter work.

Recommendation 18

Fund effective training and case management programs that support disadvantaged local jobseekers to build work-readiness and acquire relevant skills in disability sector work, as demonstrated through the NDS's Entry to Care Roles project.

5.2.2 Improving Labour market outcomes for people with disability

There is a challenging opportunity for people with disability to help Australia meet the current, critical, workforce shortages. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey of Disability Ageing and Carers (SDAC) 2018 included the following data on employment of people with disability of workforce age compared to people without disabilities:[56]

- workforce participation rate is 53.4 per cent compared to 84.1 per cent.
- the unemployment rate is 10.3 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent.
- and the employment rate is 47.8 per cent compared to 80.3 per cent.

Research from Neil Eastwood suggests that having a lived experience involving care, whether that be caring for a loved one or experiencing care provides significant emotional intelligence and the 'soft skills' required to be a care worker.[57]

The benefits of employment for individuals are well known. Employment enables wider engagement with society as well as giving our lives both meaning and purpose. For example, for a jobseeker with disability who gains employment, the outcomes can include improved health and overall wellbeing, a wider social circle, and the opportunity to learn new skills, which are likely to further enhance their career prospects and participation in rewarding, sustainable employment.

People with disability may face a range of barriers to both labour force participation and obtaining employment.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has identified the following barriers faced by people with disability when seeking to access employment:[58]

- Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours during recruitment and in the workplace
- Low levels of awareness of rights at work
- Lack of available of jobs
- Lack of assistance in finding, securing, and maintaining employment
- Difficulty in accessing skills training and education
- Potential reduction/loss of the Disability Support Pension due to earned income
- Difficulty experienced in accessing flexible work arrangements
- Health issues
- Difficulty in negotiating reasonable adjustments/accommodation in the workplace
- Poor availability of accessible transport and workplace technology and design

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability has identified four key barriers to employment:

- Attitudinal barriers towards people with disability that include low expectations and employer misconceptions about employees with disability.
- Structural barriers that arise from the design and implementation of employment programs for people with disability.
- Physical/environmental barriers including access issues arising from building design, incompatible technology, and a lack of communications options/supports.
- Organisational barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion of employees with disability in the labour market, especially the provision of reasonable adjustments.

Disincentives to work for people with disability include the impact of the pension income test and increases in the cost of subsidised housing due to earned income. The pension income test currently recovers 50 cents in the dollar for any earned income above \$95 per week. It is important to note that disability pensioners do not have access to the pensioner work bonus, which allows for example, aged pensioners to earn up to \$245 per week before having any pension recovered through the income test.

People with disability will often also incur increased accommodation costs if they earn additional income. In NSW for example, the rate of increase is 25 cents in the dollar for each additional dollar of income earned. For a DSP recipient in employment, combined

with the pension income test, this would equate to an effective marginal tax rate of 75 per cent - a clear disincentive to earning additional income.

Recommendation 19

Remove existing financial disincentives for people with disabilities to enter and remain in the workforce including:

- Extending the pensioner work bonus to people receiving DSP who are in work.
- Reviewing policies at all levels of government that create a negative financial impact on people with disabilities in employment.

Recommendation 20

Ensure access to a range of employment supports and options that take account of the career aspirations, individual choices and training and development needs of people with disabilities. This includes recognising the Disability Enterprise employment support model as an ongoing, legitimate option for people with more severe and profound disabilities.

The number of people with disability of workforce age in Australia constitutes a vast underutilised pool of labour. It is imperative that employers be able to utilise the skills of people with disability to alleviate barriers to their employment, enhance workplace diversity and overcome labour shortages.

It is extremely important that assistance is available to help employers adopt a disability confident culture and understand concepts such as reasonable adjustment. Enhanced disability confidence of employers will also help minimise the instances of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people with disability in employment settings as well as reducing discrimination in employer recruitment practices.

However, if an accreditation system identifying the disability confidence of employers is considered, it should ideally not impose additional compliance on employers.

Assisting employers with their disability confidence could be achieved through additional support for service providers to engage constructively with employees to meet their needs and encourage flexibility in employment practices.

Where larger employers are involved, if the role of the National Disability Recruitment Coordinator (NDRC) continues, initiatives such as assistance with the engagement of internal disability employment advocates located within large employers should be considered.

Careful consideration needs to be given as to how the government can stimulate the labour market to increase the demand side of the employment equation for jobseekers and employees with disability.

Recommendation 21

Introduce employer incentives to encourage and support the employment of people with disabilities. These are more likely to drive better outcomes than quotas or linking the employment of people with disability with additional compliance and reporting.

Effective recruitment and job matching strategies

These are best achieved by ensuring the employment engagement process is simple, flexible, and easy to navigate. In addition, there should be investment in people with disability that allows them to better meet employer needs. This can be achieved through the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy; employment transition supports and models such as Customised Employment.

Career planning will also ensure jobseekers better match employer needs, especially if it is personalised and goals are identified by the individual. This planning should consider a person's disability type and relevant labour market conditions.

Creating an enabling work environment

It is vital that information on assistance measures such as wage subsidies, workplace modifications, specialist advice and personal support is widely available and easily accessible. These measures (such as the Employee Assistance Fund) should be retained, integrated with other sources of support, and made more widely available.

Harnessing the knowledge and experience of Supported employment providers

It has long been acknowledged that Disability Enterprises are the most “disability confident employers” in the country. They possess a wealth of knowledge and practical firsthand experience in the following aspects of disability employment:

- Recruitment.
- Provision of work experience.
- Transition to work supports for young people.
- Vocational training.
- Workplace health and safety.
- Provision of on-the-job support that maximizes employee skills and productivity
- Provision of non-vocational training and support, e.g., travel training.

Recommendation 22

Implement an initiative that enables supported employment providers to formally partner with mainstream employers to assist them to enhance their disability awareness and provide ongoing employment opportunities.

Recommendation 23

Streamline and refine the delivery of government disability employment policy and programs including raising awareness of policies and initiatives that would assist employers recruit more people with disability.

5.3 Skills, education, and training, upskilling, and reskilling, including in transitioning sectors and regions.

There is currently no mandated minimum qualification for the disability sector. Ongoing government investment in industry-led flexible, innovative Vocational Educational Training (VET) is critical. VET courses offer pathways for jobseekers to join the disability sector and support for NDIS Providers to skill, develop and retain their existing workforce. However, the recently released Care Workforce Labour Market Study noted that currently nearly two individuals need to be enrolled in a relevant VET qualification to place one individual into a relevant care and support job.[59] Ongoing innovation and investment in VET pathways is needed to increase the conversion rate from course enrolment to employment in relevant work.

Proportionally more people with disabilities enrol in VET than people without disabilities.[60] Training offered via VET must be accessible and support students with disabilities to successfully complete their training and enter the workforce.

Traineeships in the sector are generally not well used as providers find it difficult to release staff from direct support from a cost perspective. As previously noted, current NDIS pricing assumptions do not adequately provide for the cost of providing training and therefore training tends to be on a just-in-time minimalist approach. Given this environment there is an appetite for good quality content that relates more directly to worker streams that is delivered in an efficient manner. There is interest in the sector in a traineeship approach if barriers such as the funding required for flexible supervision models when staff are working remotely and with participants on a one-to-one basis.

Employing a targeted training approach focussing on key skills for the sector can avoid duplication of training efforts, where the same training may be delivered across multiple providers. This supports a more efficient use of training funds and will result in a better equipped workforce.

Better onboarding and induction and the provision of mentoring have also been highlighted as strategies that can improve the disability workforce, particularly in retaining staff. [National Disability Practitioners](#) (NDP) is a group of more than 14,000 members of the Australian disability sector workforce. Its purpose is to inspire, support and develop the disability workforce in Australia, equipping members with the information and tools they need to upskill, connect, and learn from each other, and deliver the best services to people with disability. The NDP platform, www.ndp.org.au, features a learning hub of courses, resources, and professional development assets

from across the sector, as well as news and events. There are plans to revitalise the existing platform to embed online community elements for mentoring and connections in the next financial year.

Recommendation 24

Invest in industry-led flexible, innovative VET courses. Specific strategies could include:

- Setting a target conversion rate of 75 per cent of students enrolled in care-related VET courses entering employment in care and support jobs.
- Free/low fee Existing Worker Traineeships to support providers build the capability of their existing workforce and offer career pathways for interested workers at the Certificate IV or Diploma level.
- Develop and deliver an evidence-based suite of supports “VET+” that could include:
 - student onboarding programs;
 - flexible course start dates and training delivery models;
 - support to obtain necessary identification documents/NDIS Worker Screening Check, fee- free training in basic digital literacy;
 - concurrent case management/work readiness student support packages;
 - support to graduates to obtain relevant jobs; and
 - post-placement supports.
- Develop and deliver a communication strategy to Certificate III in Individual Support students and Registered Training Organisations to promote the option for students who have completed their knowledge and simulated performance evidence assessments to move directly to employment opportunities in the sector. Workplace learning and assessment could be completed during the first few weeks of employment. This could mitigate the need for providers to deliver extensive supervision over and above that provided to any entry level worker and reduces the onboarding time of new workers into the sector.

5.4 Migration settings as a complement to the domestic workforce.

Migration is a critical component in increasing supply of workers to the care and support workforce. 40 per cent of the current care workforce is born overseas, higher than across the overall Australia workforce (32 per cent).[61] These workers are mainly people who migrated to Australia and ended up working in care and support, rather than migrants who arrived intending to work in care and support.[62] Of note, around 38 per cent of migrants working in care arrived on student visas and 64 per cent are on temporary visas.[63]

Under current settings, the care and support workforce is demonstrably dependent on migrant workers, but there is no dedicated migration scheme to attract qualified, experienced, and motivated applicants or to retain this workforce through targeted longer-term visas or pathways to permanent residency.

This is of concern, when in recognition of growing competition for these workers, other OECD countries have implemented measures to attract migrant care and support workers.[64]

Recommendation 25

Actively recruit experienced, qualified, and motivated care and support workers to Australia. This could be done by either adding Aged and Disabled Carer to existing temporary and permanent skilled migration lists, or through the creation of a new 'Care Worker Visa.' Such a visa could be modelled on the recent New Zealand Essential Skills visa.[65],[66] These workers should be offered pathways to permanent residency that recognise extended tenure in care and support worker roles.

Recommendation 26

Enable more international students, visa holders, and asylum seekers in Australia to work in the disability sector by:

- Permanently increasing the number of hours international students can work in care and support occupations.
- Adding care and support work to the specified work requirements to extend 417 and 462 working holiday visas and allow these workers to remain with one employer for more than six months.[67]
- Allowing individuals seeking asylum to be able to work a minimum of 20 hours a week/40 hours a fortnight in care and support occupations.

6. The role of collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches

Connector programs such as the [WA NDIS Job Matching Service](#) are an essential part of the current training and employment landscape, ensuring disability organisations – in particular small to medium enterprises – are well connected with the complex suite of pathways through which jobseekers bridge to jobs. In addition, connector programs such as the NDIS Job Matching Service offer place-based workforce attraction capability, with expanded reach to cohorts of potential workers, including people classified as not in the labour force (NILF) such as early retirees, non-working parents, people with disability and carers. This informed matching of prospective workers with specific job opportunities facilitates effective onboarding and supports worker retention.

Initiatives that serve to connect key stakeholders within the market are key in supporting vulnerable job seekers into the care industry.

Strategies that see key stakeholders such as employment service providers and disability employers in the sector come together to address barriers to entry are also effective in attracting new workers. The potential from addressing these barriers was demonstrated by the NDS Disability Workforce Innovation Connector (DWIC) place-based pilot in Bendigo in 2019. The DWIC partnered with DESE to bring together all the local Job Active and DES (Disability Employment Services) providers to educate them about the jobs growth and shortages in the disability sector. They arranged for two service provider CEOs to brief on what the sector needs were and how best to work with their organisations. The process achieved transition to a 'recruitment partner' relationship that is still delivering batches of 15-20 new employees for local providers.

Recommendation 27

[Continue to invest in connector programs such as the WA Job Matching Service, NDS Disability Workforce Innovation Connector Project, 2019 and the NDS Entry to Care Roles Project, 2022.](#)

In addition to the wages and conditions across the sector, it is vital that initiatives designed to grow and support the disability sector workforce are aligned with current award and other industrial instruments. Developing ongoing opportunities to work collaboratively with Fair Work Australia, unions and NDIS employers to identify how to better balance participant needs with the needs of individual workers and employers are critical, however mechanisms to support these relationships and discussions are required.

Recommendation 28

[Create mechanisms that support open and constructive dialogue between government, disability employers, and unions.](#)

7. Other relevant topics and approaches

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

Part of the work of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission) represents a forensic look at disability service provision and what needs to be done to ensure the highest quality of services are provided to people with disability.

The Disability Royal Commission has already highlighted workforce issues such as:

- how organisations recruit and screen workers;
- policy settings incentivising casualisation;

- the importance of worker training; and
- challenges in consistency of incident reporting.

Several witnesses have given evidence about the profound difference an experienced, well-trained, empathetic worker makes.[68]

The need for greater training of disability support workers was recently highlighted in the Disability Royal Commission’s report on psychotropic medication, behaviour support and behaviours of concern. Witnesses noted the potential to reduce behaviours of concern among service users given appropriate training among disability support workers.[69]

A lack of Positive Behaviour Support practitioners of high quality was also suggested.[70]

The Aged Care Royal Commission recommended a mandatory minimum qualification of Certificate III for the personal care workforce and this may have implications for the disability sector workforce. The Disability Royal Commission will hand down its final report in September 2023.

Recommendation 29

Ensure that findings and recommendations from the Disability Royal Commission are considered and where required supported and funded in the development of disability workforce strategies.

Conclusion

The care and support sector is one of the largest employers in Australia and holds incredible potential to support Australia’s economic and social well-being. Within this sector disability support is one of the fastest growing areas. However, the sector is experiencing critical widespread and long-standing workforce shortages. This presents both challenges for government, providers, and the community generally, but also significant opportunities. However, the potential of the care sector and its contributions to the community have tended to be ignored in government economic and workforce strategy and policy making.

This submission outlines the most pressing issues facing the disability workforce along with recommendations for a range of solutions that, if explored and implemented, will support a vibrant and sustainable sector that meets the needs of and makes a valuable contribution to the Australian community.

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