



National Disability Services Submission: NDS Feedback on DES Reform Process 2024

About National Disability Services

National Disability Services (NDS) is Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing more than 1000 non-government service providers. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS provides information and networking opportunities to its members and policy advice to State, Territory and Commonwealth governments. We have a diverse and vibrant membership, comprised of small, medium and larger service providers, supporting thousands of people with disability. Our members collectively provide a full range of disability services, from supported independent living and specialist disability accommodation, respite and therapy, to community access and employment. NDS is committed to improving the disability service system to ensure it better supports people with disability, their families and carers, and contributes to building a more inclusive community.

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1.0 Introduction

NDS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the DES reform process and possible reforms to the DES model as recently identified by the Department of Social Services. These proposals are intended to address some of the recommendations related to Disability Employment Services (DES) from recent reviews made by the Disability Royal Commission, the NDIS Review and the Select Committee on Workforce Australia.

However, NDS notes that providing feedback on some important elements of DES reform has been difficult due to the lack of sufficient detail or context about the program's intent and purpose and the design of interrelated elements such as:

- the payment model,
- participant obligations
- the service delivery model

2.0 Summary of Recommendations

- Take an investment approach to DES and monitor this through an SROI model
- Broaden eligibility and access for all people with disability who would benefit from participation in DES and allow greater flexibility and tailoring of services
- Remove the 8 and 15 hour benchmarks and introduce a three hour benchmark for NDIS participants
- Consider carefully feedback identifying unintended consequences arising from any simplification of the DES program, especially combining ESS and DMS
- Simplify Mutual Obligation to active engagement within the DES program with a view to preparing for, seeking and undertaking employment
- Simplify the administrative burden on Ongoing Support and simplify Work Assist to allow more timely responses from providers through provision of service fees
- Adopt Customised Employment models as a core component of DES, as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission

3.0 NDS proposals for DES Reform

The government should take an investment approach to DES and allow more people with disability, especially NDIS participants, to participate in the labour market. NDS has previously advocated the use of a Social Return On Investment (SROI) model that identifies and demonstrates that participants with disability who gain employment will create cost savings for society in several key areas. These savings include the following:

- DSP income test recoveries
- Tax paid by employees
- Savings on the provision of community participation programs
- Carers potentially gaining employment
- Improved mental and physical wellbeing arising from employment

Eligibility and access for all people with disability who choose a DES provider with access to the service for as long as they need it, with suitable checks on progress.

NDS agrees that there needs to be greater flexibility and tailoring of services with appropriate funding and servicing expectations, to meet the needs of particular participant cohorts and provide quality servicing, with funding to support increased staff capability where necessary. A voluntary participant stream could also be considered. Options other than the full service offering should by their very nature, have reduced administration.

NDS recommends a three hour minimum weekly work benchmark for NDIS participants not currently eligible for DES. More flexible job outcome definitions will broaden participant access to DES. A paid job at an Award wage which meets a “minimum shift” definition should be sufficient. Allow for current labour market conditions where varied (or irregular) hours are normal. The 8 and 15 hour weekly working benchmarks should be removed. The key emphasis should be on placing people with disability in suitable jobs.

NDS notes the Department has been gauging support for combining the ESS and DMS streams in DES. NDS considers that an unintended consequence of combining the two DES streams could be a greater number of current DMS participants being streamed to

workforce Australia or digital servicing, which may result in them receiving a service less able to meet their needs. Simplification of DES is fine in principle, but it shouldn't have an unintended consequence of excluding participants who require a DES service.

NDS remains adamant that prescriptive mutual obligation approach for those with benefit participation requirements need to be suitably relaxed. Active engagement within the DES program with a view to preparing for, seeking and undertaking employment should be sufficient. Enforcement of mutual obligation requirements should not be the role of DES providers.

Ongoing Support needs to be protected as a key feature that sustains employment. It needs adequate funding and less prescriptive compliance administration. Work assist should be available to anyone with disability who is working via an appropriately funded reengagement in ongoing support and this should be readily available to ensure protection from potential loss of employment. Removing the emphasis on outcomes for Work Assist and allowing providers to quickly access service fees would also reduce administrative burden.

The Disability Royal Commission in its Final Report Volume 7, Inclusive Education, Employment and Housing recommended that the new DES model adopts customised employment models as a core component of service provision. NDS agrees with the Recommendation.

4.0 Conclusion

It is important that more detail on proposed reforms to DES is made available to help inform the design of the new DES program and to ensure stakeholders can contribute positively through a true co-design process.

NDS is committed to collaborating with government the DES sector and other relevant stakeholders to ensure Australians with disability have access to a DES program that best meets their needs when seeking, gaining and maintaining employment.

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27 February 2024