



Response to National Disability Strategy Consultation Paper May 2021

Thank you for providing Bedford with the opportunity to respond to this Consultation Paper.

As a provider of employment supports in an inclusive employment setting to over 1,100 people with disability, Bedford strongly believes in the rights of people with disability to have choice and control over their employment and careers. Bedford believes that people with disability should have access to all employment options available to people without disabilities - be that open employment, supported employment in an inclusive employment setting, self-employment or any mix of these.

Bedford notes the National Disability Strategy (**NDS**) refers to Australian Disability Enterprises, a program previously funded by the DSS, which has since been overtaken by the NDIS. The NDS also highlights the differing opinions of stakeholders regarding supported employment, and notes those concerned with this model “suggest all people with disability should be supported to work in a setting of their choice, with equitable employment conditions.” Bedford’s submission is that receiving employment supports in an inclusive employment setting is a valid choice for people with disability and should continue to be included in the NDS.

Background

Bedford is a provider of services and supports to adults with disability in metropolitan Adelaide and across seven regional South Australian sites. Bedford has been in operation since the 1930s and now has a cohort of Clients who, in the main, have intellectual, neurological or cognitive disability or are on the Autism spectrum. More than 1,100 people with disability, aged between 18 to mid-70s, are employed by Bedford and work in the following areas:

- Landscaping and grounds maintenance, including constructing an Adventure Playground and planting nearly 3,500 trees and native plants, in Adelaide’s inner northeast;
- Hospitality, providing cooking, waiting and barista services at three of Bedford’s metropolitan sites;
- Commercial packaging solutions, including providing packing and repacking to a number of high profile South Australian food and beverage suppliers and, utilising clean rooms on site, assisting with the COVID-19 Response by producing packets for distribution by SA Health at border checkpoints;
- Advanced Manufacturing, particularly timber processing for furniture and kitchen fit outs, with Ready to Assemble Furniture a key product sold through Bunnings nationally;
- Commercial cleaning, laundry and maintenance services, including in regional areas and servicing local Aged Care facilities; and
- Finance, administration and clerical roles.

In parts of regional South Australia, Bedford is the only provider of employment supports to people with disability in the local area and, as such, have become an integral part of the community as well as contributing to the economic life of the region.

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As well as on the job training and skills development, Bedford also provides its supported employees with a wide range of critical supports that are not typically provided by employers to workers without disability. These supports include informal advocacy (such as liaising with Centrelink or utilities providers), referrals to formal advocacy supports, informal counselling for work-related and personal issues, assistance with home and personal issues, crisis support, information and support on health, welfare and nutrition, and residential and retirement planning.

Employment for People with Cognitive Disability

Bedford notes the NDS states “Research ... indicates the vast majority of people with disability require no additional support in the workplace” based on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s report stating “Over 1 million working-age ... people with disability participate in the labour force through work or looking for work.” However, the NDS also acknowledges that the Australian Disability Enterprises program was established to cater for approximately 20,000 people with moderate to severe disability, or 2% of working age people with disability.

It is Bedford’s view that most Australian Disability Enterprises have moved beyond this model and, like Bedford, have transitioned to be a provider of employment supports in an inclusive employment setting. Bedford believes inclusive employment settings must be considered as one of the many options for employment of people with disability, whether as a transition to other forms of employment, or as a permanent option for those that cannot, or do not wish to work elsewhere.

Open employment and self-employment are worthy goals but are not necessarily careers that all people with disability wish to attain, nor is it achievable for all people with disability. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that many open employers do not have the skills, resources and capacity to support a person with a cognitive disability, being the minority within people with disability in needing additional supports in the workplace. In addition, extreme social isolation is often experienced by a person with a cognitive disability in open and self-employment. In contrast, when working in an inclusive employment setting a person works beside people who have inherent knowledge of their shared experience and can see themselves represented in Team Leaders and Leading Hands who provide a role model for career progression.

Case Study: Louis*

Louis started employment with Bedford in 2008 in a part time position. He expressed an interest in food services, so was placed in Hospitality, where he was supported and trained to gain skills in food preparation and presentation, food service, HACCP and Food Safety Practices requirements, operating registers and training as a barista. As his skills increased, Louis was elevated into a more senior position, taking on responsibility for managing the coffee area, stock rotation, menu planning and ordering and administration tasks, including marketing of the weekly menu to the entire site. Louis is now employed full time as a Leading Hand and works side by side with the Hospitality Operations Manager and the Kitchen Supervisor to train and supervise other team members and manage the day to day operations of the Café at Bedford’s Panorama site serving breakfast, morning tea and lunch to over 500 people a day.

Within the supportive employment environment at Bedford Louis’ skills and interests were harnessed and he has achieved a significant role within the workplace, one which he is understandably proud of. In addition, he has been a role model to other employees with disability that they, too, can take on leadership positions and will be supported to both achieve and perform that role.

Bedford continues to support Louis in his career goals and, should Louis elect, will support him to move to open employment by supporting him to undertake formal training and providing him support in his new workplace, should he need. However, it must be acknowledged that without the ongoing support and specialised skills of an employer such as Bedford, it is unlikely that Louis would have achieved the level of Leading Hand in the open employment environment. As such, it is vital that the sense of achievement that people in inclusive employment settings experience should not be tarnished or diminished simply because they did not occur in open employment.

To consider or represent the inclusive employment setting support model as somehow being a lesser option for people with disability is to denigrate the real choices and wishes of that cohort. Clients can and should be able to choose to have successful and meaningful careers in a supported, inclusive employment environment.

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The Choice of People with Disability

As part of the transition to the NDIS' New Employment Model, and through funding received from the DSS' Temporary Viability Support grant, Bedford has developed a comprehensive discovery process designed to investigate and understand what people with disability want to achieve in their careers. The comprehensive engagement model is being used to establish demand for employment options including open employment, micro businesses or social enterprises, self-employment, or working with Bedford in existing or new commercial businesses.

Of the nearly 500 Clients engaged to date, some 97% have stated that their overall preference would be to remain in an inclusive employment setting (not necessarily Bedford). Where a level of interest in trying other employment options has been expressed, Clients have indicated this would only be desirable if there is an option to return to the inclusive employment setting should the experience not be sustainable.

For many people with cognitive disability, an inclusive employment setting is where their skills and strengths are recognised, valued and utilised. As such, the ongoing offering of this employment model is critical for people with cognitive disability to maintain participation and self-worth and to be assured they can continue to choose to work part of, or their entire careers, in an inclusive setting where they are able to work alongside their peers and have meaningful and valued careers.

Conclusion

Like many other providers, Bedford is responding to the challenges of, and opportunities offered by, the NDIS funding model and has developed a contemporary strategy that will deliver expanded career options, training and apprenticeships and employment supports. Our peers in this sector are also changing, adapting and innovating but as part of the NDS the employment opportunities offered in inclusive employment settings must be valued and, more importantly, the contribution and achievements of the people with disability who work in inclusive employment settings must be recognised, valued and supported as those who work in other employment settings.

For people with disability to have real choice and control over their employment, a range of flexible options that suit their individual needs must be made available to them. Inclusive employers such as Bedford are person centred, holistic disability service providers, educators, employers and more, and to be successful the NDS must recognise these unique qualities and ensure contemporary policy and funding structures are in place.

Bedford strongly recommends a collaborative approach to accelerate the opportunity to develop national strategies to expand training, career and employment options and increased remuneration for people with intellectual, neurological or cognitive disability or are on the Autism spectrum.

If there are any questions or you would like to engage further, please contact me via phone on 0478 313 794 or email mdowling@bedfordgroup.com.au

Yours sincerely



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