

First of all, I would like to congratulate the Productivity Commission and the Government on taking up the challenge of how to deal with the ongoing needs of the disabled. The report is comprehensive.

Background

Our son has a mild intellectual disability, autism and medicated ADHD, and first entered the disability sector at the age of 4. He has been assessed numerous times, and each time the diagnosis has been confirmed as being pervasive and unlikely to alter in the next 50 years, although we still get asked!

Our son is entitled to DSP, and is encouraged by his family to 'work' – in fact this translates to 2 days per week **volunteering** as an assistant gardener, one day at a service provider to the disability and aged care sector, and one day at a supported employment gardening service. The latter may lead to limited paid work, which may, perversely, result in a net reduction in his overall 'income' from the DSP/income combination

Having navigated the system for the last 22 years of my child's life, I was anticipating with considerable trepidation the daunting task of setting up long term accommodation via a Special Disability Trust– setting aside the first years of my retirement to deal with this, assuming I lived long enough! (since retirement seems to be a decreasingly likely event these days!!). I also remain concerned about who would ensure that my son would be supervised and assisted in the absence of parents, as he is incapable of independent living.

The Commission has sought comments on Chapter 4. My comments below do not directly address the specific questions, but are a more general response borne out of personal experience.

1. Mainstream OSFA vs specialty – one size does NOT fit all!

The assertion is made that mainstream services should be accessible by the disabled, rather than providing specialist disabled services, fundamentally from an equity perspective. Whilst this is an admirable objective for people with the mental and communication capacity to 'negotiate the system', my intellectually disabled son cannot make a dental appointment for himself – he doesn't have the organisational skills. (he can however get himself to the dental facility on the agreed day, and undergo the process) He, and others like him, therefore need to have a system that recognises their disability and then shortcuts through the processes – which may be a dedicated system with additional assistance.

[Similarly the notion of mainstreaming all children into the one education system totally fails the child with ID / ASD / special needs – the prefab on the other side of the playground for the special kids doesn't actually meet their needs and doesn't get rid of the bullying. I have seen students with ID /ASD etc be delighted at their new 100% specialist school because for the first time in their lives they have friends of their own, rather than fellow students who are 'polite' when teachers are there and bully them when teachers are not - but that is a whole new subject, and outside the ambit of the Commission!]

2. Transition to Work

The experience of the vast majority of my son's specialist school cohort as they transferred to the 2 year transition program from school to possible work was that it could be a revolving door, with a focus on process rather than outcomes.

Certainly, my own experience has been that parents, as their child's advocate, have more effective results than these providers, possibly due to the unbridled and unabashed persistence required when advocating for a person with a disability.

3. Volunteering and Appropriate Mechanisms – Cheaper than more Prisons

So my plea would be that the DSP equivalent in the new NDIS regime would recognise the legitimacy of **volunteering**, with whatever prudent protections are necessary to avoid rorting by the disabled person, as well as by service providers who 'employ' the disabled person.

The concept of mandating employment of a proportion of disabled staff once an organisation reaches a particular size, as has been the case in UK for over 40 years is worth investigating – we already require EOWA submissions for firms employing more than 100 staff.

Volunteering does require effort from both the organisation which receives that assistance as well as the volunteer, but it is certainly cheaper to the community than running a larger prison system, in which persons with a disability and /or mental health issues are over-represented – in the words of the old saying, "the devil finds work for idle hands".

*Elizabeth Coe
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