



Employment Connections Service

A study investigating costs, revenue and sustainability in the Australian employment services system



Down Syndrome Australia's Employment Connections Service (ECS) provides tailored employment services to jobseekers with Down syndrome. It is delivered locally through state/territory Down syndrome associations and is a trusted employment service for jobseekers, families and employers.

This study assesses the delivery model, cost, and financial sustainability of ECS including how existing Commonwealth funding can support it.

The ECS model

ECS is an evidence-aligned specialist employment model that delivers award-wage open employment for people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disability.

ECS is an evidence-aligned specialist model

How it works



Discovery



Job development



Job-site training



Ongoing support

The model's four key areas of service delivery reflect international research and practice evidence of "what works" to support employment for people with intellectual disability and aligns with best-practice models.

What ECS has achieved

ECS achieves meaningful employment outcomes for people with Down syndrome who are significantly marginalised from open employment, and who have largely been left out of other employment services.

ECS delivers real outcomes



140+

supported into
open employment
(award wages)



6.3

hours/week
average hours

Over three years, ECS supported more than 140 people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disability to enter open employment at award wages. Placements are commonly for low hours reflecting both participant preference and capacity, and employer onboarding approaches.

What it costs to deliver ECS

Modelling has estimated the costs of delivering ECS. In line with international models, the cost of securing a role is high relative to the much lower cost of maintaining employment outcomes once a role has been secured. The regional/rural cost estimates are higher due to travel time and the greater effort required to develop, secure and maintain employment opportunities when employer density is lower and service catchments are broader.

Indicative cost per employment placement
(including Year 1 ongoing support):

\$30,111

Metropolitan

(including \$8,313 in Year 1)

\$39,625

Regional/rural focus

(including \$11,093 in Year 1)

Ongoing support cost per placement per annum
(from Year 2 onwards):

\$5,668

Metropolitan

\$7,720

Regional/rural focus



Funding feasibility

Modelling shows that under current rules neither NDIS nor Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA) funding covers the full cost of delivering ECS — particularly for participants working under 15 hours per week, and especially under 5 hours per week.

In other words, the ECS model that reflects evidence on “what works” for this cohort doesn’t match how mainstream funding is currently structured.

Some cost savings are possible through scale efficiencies and alternative delivery models supported by long term funding, such as shared overheads across states or more efficient rural and regional delivery. But these savings alone won’t close the funding gap.

The current Commonwealth systems don’t fund what works

<15

hours/week

<5

hours/week



Core sustainability risk

People with Down syndrome experience significant exclusion from open employment. ECS delivers award-wage open employment for people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disability. Without reform to Commonwealth programs or a blended funding approach, services like ECS will likely keep depending on time-limited grants and philanthropy. This limits the program's ability to support more jobseekers with Down syndrome and intellectual disability.

Immediate areas for reform

- 1 Clarify the opportunity to blend IEA and NDIS funding in the delivery of employment services.
- 2 Target an increase in the allocation of NDIS – Capacity Building employment funding across cohorts with low assessed work capacity.
- 3 Encourage and protect utilisation of NDIS – Core 'Assistance with social, economic and community participation' funding for employment service delivery, such as ECS.
- 4 Review program and funding guidelines in IEA to ensure providers are incentivised to support people with low assessed work capacity (0-7 hours per week).
- 5 Extend Moderate Intellectual Disability payments (a component of IEA) to job outcomes below 15 hours per week.

Read the full report

Down Syndrome Australia, Employment Connections Service: Investigating costs, revenue and sustainability in the Australian employment services system

 **DSA-Employment-Connectors.-Investigating-a-Business-Model-June-2026-Final-21-June.pdf**

Disclaimer

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