



EVIDENCE FOR WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

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Introduction

We make this submission as a group of academics working across social enterprise, work and welfare policy and organisational research, including a current Australian Research Council Linkage project, [*Activating Employment Futures Through Work Integration Social Enterprise \(WISE\)*](#) (LP220100323). Some contributors to this submission are also contributors to other Discussion Paper responses.

The *Shaping the future of employment services: Discussion Paper* (p.22) and related ministerial announcements highlight the potential for jobs-focused, or work integration social enterprises (WISEs), to contribute to a renewed employment services system, particularly with regard to Stream 3 aspirations. The paper notes that:

“A key opportunity for the new system is to connect with social enterprises to provide people with an opportunity to gain work or work experience where there are wrap around supports both prior to and after placement into a job.” and

“Social enterprises can provide a bridge between employment services, skills training, and the open labour market for people who need more support.”

However, no specific questions are asked within the Discussion Paper about the role social enterprises will play and related reform considerations. This submission briefly addresses core considerations and evidence related to WISE and their implications for the current employment services reform agenda.

Defining WISEs for the purposes of services system changes

For effective engagement of social enterprises in the employment services system, clear definitions are needed, but understandings of WISEs within government and across the employment services ecosystem are at best uneven (Sykes et al. 2024). This was reflected in the first application round for the WorkFoundations program, with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) adopting a definition of social enterprise inconsistent with common definitions utilised in Australia and other jurisdictions. Specifically, DEWR defined social enterprise in this grant round as:

‘an organisation with an economic, social, cultural or environmental mission that is consistent with a public or community benefit. This includes organisations which exist specifically to create a social impact.

This definition is inconsistent with definitions of social enterprise utilised across other Commonwealth programs and departments. It makes no reference to trading activity/revenue model and reinvestment of profit or surplus in organisational purpose, which are 2 of the key definitional components of social enterprises worldwide (Battilana & Lee 2014; Roy 2021; Barraket et al. 2016; Teasdale 2012).

Practitioner-created international standards for social enterprise define them as businesses that put people and planet first. The People and Planet First global standards (2025) are utilised by most social enterprise peak bodies in Australia and identify 5 key characteristics of these organisations (Social Enterprise Australia 2026):

- Purpose: Exist to solve a social or environmental problem
- Operations: Prioritise people, planet and their purpose over profit in operational decisions
- Revenue: Have a self-sustaining revenue model

- Use of surplus: Reinvest most of any surplus in their purpose
- Structure: Choose legal structures and financing that protect and lock-in purpose long term.

WISEs are a specific sub-type of social enterprise, that provide employment or training pathways for people and places facing barriers to work. This definition is consistent with Social Enterprise Australia's classification of social enterprises and underpinned by Australian-based evidence (see Barraket et al. 2017). These organisations are distinctive in the employment services landscape in offering live work settings in which people advance their employment and employability (Barraket et al. 2019). Beyond this general definition, WISEs are diverse in structure, service(s) model, industry, revenue model, employment goals and the people they seek to support. This diversity is reflected in the following infographic, derived from a recent survey and previous research by authors of this submission.

WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES (WISEs)

A WISE IS A FOR-PURPOSE BUSINESS THAT CREATES JOBS, WORK EXPERIENCE AND/OR EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS FOR PEOPLE FACING BARRIERS TO WORK RATHER THAN MAXIMISING PROFIT FOR SHAREHOLDERS

EMPLOYMENT GOALS

32.5%



DEVELOPING PEOPLE'S SKILLS & JOB READINESS



31.5%

HELPING PEOPLE TRANSITION TO LONG-TERM EXTERNAL JOBS OR SELF-EMPLOYMENT

20.2%



PROVIDING LONG-TERM WISE EMPLOYMENT & CAREER PATHS

8.4%



IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES OF OTHER BUSINESSES

* MANY WISEs SUPPORT GOALS BEYOND EMPLOYMENT, E.G. PROVIDING LOCAL SERVICES OR IMPROVING THE ENVIRONMENT



WHILE WISEs ARE DIVERSE, ALL WISEs ARE TRADING ORGANISATIONS THAT USE BUSINESS ACTIVITY TO CREATE MORE INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR PEOPLE AND PLACES EXCLUDED FROM MAINSTREAM LABOUR MARKETS.

WISEs BUILD WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE INCLUSIVITY, INVESTING IN THE SUPPORTS THESE NEED.



TYPES OF COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS



42.9%

AWARD WAGES



25.6%

UNPAID TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT



19.9%

SUPPORTED WAGE AGREEMENTS



7.7%

SUBSIDISED PLACEMENTS/ INTERNSHIPS

SOURCES OF REVENUE



64.6%

INCOME FROM TRADING WITH BUSINESSES & CONSUMERS



16.2%

INCOME FROM COMPETITIVE GOVT CONTRACTS



19.2%

SUPPORTED TRADE WITH INDIVIDUALS (E.G. NDIS SERVICES USERS)



PHILANTHROPIC & GOVT GRANTS

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

71%



NOT-FOR-PROFIT

15%



HYBRID (E.G. CHARITYS FORMALLY LINKED WITH FOR-PROFIT)

11%



FOR-PROFIT

3%



COOPERATIVE or MEMBER BASED MODEL

* NEARLY HALF OF WISEs ARE STANDALONE BUSINESSES, WITH OTHERS EMBEDDED IN PARENT ORGANISATIONS or BUSINESS GROUPS

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Figure 1 - A taxonomy of WISEs (Khan et al. 2026, p.6). Design by Jessamy Gee

Any integration of WISEs in employment services reforms should recognise the breadth of WISE models and their varying potential to contribute to reform goals. The *Shaping the future of employment services: Discussion Paper* articulates a vision for an employment services system that is more responsive, effective and dignified, to ensure participants are connected to the right supports at the right time (p17). This vision is well aligned with the ethos and flexible modes of engagement employed by WISEs. Most WISEs take a person-centred view when engaging with people facing structural and personal obstacles to paid employment. The agency and dignity of the person is recognised and there is a lack of coercion into a predefined pathway towards paid employment.

Below, we provide a summary of evidence about WISEs that we suggest should be drawn on to inform the future of employment services and the place of social enterprise within an effective reformed employment services system.

Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) evidence

- The Australian Government’s recognition that WISEs can provide employment and employment pathways for people further from the labour market is supported by international and Australian social enterprise research evidence about who is best served by WISEs (Barraket et al. 2019; Elmes et al. 2026; Lysaght et al., 2024; Leslie et al., 2024; Ross et al. 2026; Sykes et al. 2024)
- WISEs directly support workers with complex employment challenges, by providing employment opportunities, experience and training in live work settings as well as engaging other employers in creating more inclusive work and workplaces, and linking people with local job opportunities (Khan & Barraket 2024; Barraket et al 2023).
- WISEs offer supportive and flexible environments that enable people distant from the labour market to enter or re-enter work, or to gain work experience and training that supports their employment goals (Elmes 2019; Sykes et al. 2024).
- WISEs operate on both the supply side, supporting job-seekers’ readiness to enter mainstream employment, and the demand side of the labour market, creating employment for disadvantaged jobseekers (Sykes et al. 2024).
- There is evidence of WISEs successfully supporting jobseekers who face disproportionate rates of unemployment or underemployment (Barraket et al. 2019), including First Nations people (Spencer et al. 2016; Tedmanson & Guerin 2011); young people (Ferguson 2018; Denny et al. 2011), refugees and people seeking asylum (Sahyoun et al. 2019; Barraket 2013), people with disability (Campbell et al. 2024; Meltzer et al. 2018; Buhariwala et al. 2015), and people exiting the prison system (Oswald 2026).
- Research with WISE participants indicates that the live work experience, training or paid work, wrap around support, and individualised assistance with employment goals are strongly valued, and the level of care experienced within WISEs often contrasts with prior negative experiences of employment that were dehumanising or unaligned to people’s needs (Elmes et al. 2023).
- Evidence from Australian and international WISE research demonstrates that WISE employment can contribute to increasing people’s income, social connections, support with employment

pathways, and improved mental and physical wellbeing (Barraket et al. 2019; Macaulay et al. 2018). This can also reduce costs to taxpayers through upstream interventions that reduce reliance on social security (Elmes 2020, p63-65) contact with the justice system (Oswald 2026), and healthcare use (Sultan-Taïeb et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2009).

- Because WISEs prioritise their social purpose of creating employment outcomes for those experiencing labour market disadvantage alongside their commercial trading activities, they incur operating costs that other businesses do not (Pullen et al. 2023). One source of the impact costs incurred by WISEs relates to the additional training, support and employment transition pathways provided to WISE employees/participants (Pullen et al. 2023; White Box Enterprises & Social Enterprise Australia 2025). However, WISE impact cost structures include other fixed and variable costs (see submission by Melbourne Business School Centre for Social Purpose Organisations). Research indicates that WISE impact costs “cannot usually be recovered through trading income alone” (Westpac Foundation & GoodWolf Partners 2026, p.7). This means that some external funding may be necessary for social enterprises to adequately support their participants and deliver on their social purpose (Pullen et al. 2023; Barraket et al. 2023; Lysaght et al. 2024; Oswald 2026), and there are calls for government to meet the costs of the public value WISEs create (Barraket et al. 2025; White Box Enterprises & Social Enterprise Australia 2025).

Barriers to WISE involvement in the employment services system

- The current mutual obligations and service commissioning frameworks stand as major institutional barriers to WISEs playing a more formalised role in the employment services system (Sykes et al., 2024). The current commissioning framework imposes an enormous administrative burden on providers to document activities and outcomes with participants, report against contract milestones and performance targets, and supply verifying documentation to claim servicing fees and progress and outcome payments. Notably, in a 2023 Survey of Workforce Australia Employment Services Staff, frontline staff reported spending almost a third of their time each week on administration and contract compliance reporting (Ball et al., 2023, p.18). As small to medium sized enterprises, WISEs are seldom positioned to absorb these transaction costs and the volume of compliance reporting required to deliver employment services under government contract in the prevailing policy settings.
- A related obstacle to WISEs playing a more formalised role in the employment services system is the current mutual obligations and jobseeker compliance framework. Concerns have been raised in recent research conducted by us that integration without true system reform could replicate the negative aspects of other employment programs like Work for the Dole or disability enterprises, such as lack of choice, unpaid / low paid work, segregation and limited employment pathways (Sykes et al. 2024). In particular, representatives from WISEs and the broader social enterprise sector were highly concerned about the risk of ‘mission drift’ were WISEs to become involved in administering mutual obligations or be required to report participants for non-compliance and payment suspensions. Were WISE workers to be subject to the threat of payment suspensions or penalties for missing shifts or work placements, this could risk blurring the boundary with Work-for-the-Dole activities and jeopardise WISE models (Sykes et al., 2024, p.6).
- If integration of WISEs into the mainstream employment services model reproduces punitive conditionality, then the distinctive value of WISEs, such as relational models of working with

people will be eroded, resulting in poorer outcomes for the unemployed. Safeguarding flexibility and innovation and avoiding ‘mission drift’ will require careful and holistic design of needs assessment tools and close monitoring of the contractual requirements that shape on the ground service delivery and effective advocacy. The tension between advocacy and service delivery has been a long-standing issue in employment services in Australia. The new employment services system will need to avoid any notion of ‘gagging clauses’ that have previously been written into contracts with employment service providers funded by the Australian Government, which explicitly prohibited employment service providers being critical of government policy settings (Marston and McDonald, 2007).

Current evidence gaps

- More evidence is needed on the scale of participant transitions to mainstream employment after engagement with intermediate labour market model WISEs. There is some evidence (Suchowerska et al. 2026; Elmes et al. 2023, p.41-43; Lysaght et al. 2022), but transition rates across the full WISE sector currently remain unknown.
- There is a huge gap in longitudinal understanding of Australian social enterprises and their social and economic contributions. The new National Social Enterprise Research Project commissioned by the Department of Social Services is a positive initiative and it would benefit the proposed reforms to ensure awareness and learning from this work is joined up across Australian Government departments and policy portfolios.

Summary of recommendations

- Definitions of social enterprise in general and WISEs in particular for the purposes of public procurement and funding should adopt internationally recognised features, be consistent across Commonwealth departments, and align to public funding and procurement requirements. While evidence of social enterprise certification (Social Traders) or verification (People and Planet First) may be considered in some government programs, we note that social enterprises’ adoption of certification or verification is not universal and the standards and their maintenance are not government-owned, verified or resourced.
- WISEs should be recognised and enabled to engage in the employment services system for both their capacity to support people to move into mainstream employment, and their capacity to provide flexible and supportive destination employment where needed.
- WISEs and related active labour market initiatives add novel value which the system needs – particularly in terms of supporting people facing complex barriers in returning to work, or entering work for the first time (Barraket et al. 2019; Evans & Wilton 2019). The reform process needs to protect and enhance this distinct role rather than turn WISEs into mainstream providers in a broken system.

- To best leverage the inclusive work environments, wrap around support and community connections that WISEs offer, inflexible restrictions should not be placed on who can receive employment support through a WISE. For example, some jobseekers may have been unemployed for less time, but have other complex employment challenges that make a WISE well suited to supporting them with employment goals (Barraket et al. 2019; Evans & Wilton 2019; Hall & Wilton 2011). All relevant factors driving employment challenges should be considered in triaging participants into the correct support stream. Participants' own views should also be considered in the triaging process (Elmes et al. 2021).
- Integration of WISEs in the employment services system must take into account procurement and performance measurement approaches that don't end up eradicating the key ingredients of effective WISEs and their distinctive contributions.
- For jobseekers and workers, placements in WISEs should be on a voluntary basis and not subject to negative incentives through threats of payment suspensions and penalties for non-attendance. Workers' engagement in WISEs should be motivated principally by the positive incentive of remunerated employment and training and development opportunities facilitated by WISEs. People should not be compelled to work in WISEs through mandatory activity requirements and as a way to comply with their mutual obligations.
- Outcome measurement within the reformed employment services system should reflect the consultation's recognition that progress towards employment goals is not always linear and may involve multiple steps such as connecting to supports, increasing confidence and job readiness skills and gaining work experience or engaging with further learning. This means there is not always a binary outcome such as coming off income support, but there may still be significant progress towards employment outcomes (Sykes et al. 2024).
- Payments to providers should account for the level of support required – for example, providers of intensive services supporting people with more complex employment challenges need to be adequately resourced to provide this level of support. Requirements and suggested payment approaches for social enterprise should involve specific consultation with social enterprises to ensure they are fit-for-purpose and don't create unrealistic administrative burden or perverse incentives due to competition between WISEs and traditional employment service providers (Sykes et al. 2024).
- Some participants in our research argue that funding both providers and WISEs could reduce downstream costs for health and other support services. A partnership approach was suggested where providers and WISEs share outcome payments when the skills developed in a WISE were valuable to employers, and when providers brought employers in to work with WISEs (Sykes et al. 2024). This approach may be worthy of consideration in the current reform process.
- WISEs have a unique contribution in terms of their ability to reduce "actual and perceived risks" for employers in engaging people from the employment services system caseload (Workforce Australia review 2023, in Khan & Barraket 2024). Some WISEs provide pre- and post-employment support, working in partnership with employers to support work transitions in ways that support sustainable outcomes (Barraket et al. 2025). These kinds of successful approaches could be

used to inform future plans to better support employers.

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