

Shaping the future of employment services – Discussion Paper

Response prepared by
Whittlesea Community Connections



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Introduction

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government's proposed model for the reform of mainstream employment services to better meet the needs of individuals, employers, communities and the economy.

We support the proposed vision and framework for the future employment services system. We welcome the government's focus on strengthening service quality and a participant-centred approach together with enhanced transparency and accountability for service providers including strong governance, sustainable service delivery and fiscal accountability. Importantly, the development of funding models that support people with multi-faceted and complex needs to gain employment is critical.

We also support the partnership approach which underpins the proposed model. The positive outcomes that participants in our programs have reported has strengthened our belief that partnerships with employers, communities and other service providers are central to providing enduring and stable employment outcomes.

Our response focuses on the key questions posed in the Discussion Paper. Our insights are grounded in more than five years of delivering high-performing, place-based employment programs for people facing the greatest barriers to work — including refugees and migrants, long-term unemployed individuals, women with young children, and people experiencing complex life circumstances. Across all programs, our outcomes demonstrate that relational, trauma-informed, flexible, and locally-connected support delivers stronger and more sustainable outcomes than standardised approaches.

Key Recommendations

Service Streams, quality assessments and triaging

- 1. Face-to-face assessment by qualified staff:** Initial assessment must be delivered one-on-one by trained assessors using trauma-informed, strengths-based practice. Assessors must have discretion in streaming decisions, and no-compliance penalties should be attached to assessment. Assessments must be undertaken face-to-face, without digital or AI assessment. Minimum qualifications in social work, psychology or similar must be mandated.
- 2. Recognition of structural and personal barriers:** Triaging must formally recognise barriers such as language proficiency, transport limitations, lack of local work experience, digital exclusion, confidence issues, caring responsibilities, health recovery and experience of bias. These factors should automatically influence streaming and support planning. Plans should identify and develop strategies to address the complexity of barriers faced by program participants.
- 3. Place-based delivery by multi-service organisations:** Intensive employment services should be delivered by locally embedded, multi-service organisations that can provide wrap-around support, "warm" referrals and integrated pathways (e.g. legal, food relief,

settlement, youth, social enterprises). This model has been demonstrated to consistently deliver stronger outcomes for complex cohorts.

- 4. Funded mentoring and one-on-one tailored support:** Mentoring must be a core funded component across Streams 2 and 3. One-on-one tailored support is essential for confidence building, goal setting, motivation and sustained engagement – especially for participants with trauma histories or long-term unemployment.
- 5. Formal recognition and funding of pre-employment pathways:** Volunteering, social enterprise placements, paid transitional work, learning and skill-building activities, driving lessons and confidence-building programs must be recognised as valid participation and funded as core pre-employment pathways.
- 6. Flexible financial assistance across all streams:** Transport, childcare, clothing, driving lessons, training costs and emergency expenses must be funded flexibly to remove practical barriers. Financial support is essential for building stability and enabling participation.
- 7. Participant-led movement between streams:** Movement between streams should be based on genuine changes in circumstances, confidence, stability or readiness – not arbitrary timelines or compliance triggers. Participants should be able to move to more intensive support without penalty.

Employment Goal Plans

- 8. Co-design with participants:** The plan should document goals that are co-designed with the participant, reflecting both immediate priorities such as stabilising housing, improving English, building confidence, and longer-term aspirations such as preferred industries, career pathways, or self-employment.
- 9. Achievable, realistic goals:** Goals must be meaningful, achievable, and grounded in the participant's lived experience, with realistic timelines. It should highlight the participant's existing strengths, transferable skills, personal qualities and prior experiences.
- 10. Recognition of skills and experience:** The plan should formally recognise volunteering, caring responsibilities, training, health recovery, and pre-employment activities, e.g., driving lessons, digital literacy, confidence-building programs, as legitimate participation that contributes to employment readiness.
- 11. A living document:** The Employment Goal Plan must be a living document that evolves as the participant's capability, confidence, and circumstances change.

Mutual Obligations

12. **Positive engagement:** Changes required must include a shift from punitive compliance to positive engagement.
13. **Recognition of caring, volunteering, training and health recovery as valid participation:** Participation should include caring responsibilities, volunteering, training, skill-building and periods of health recovery. These activities build readiness and should not trigger compliance actions.

Partnership with employers and developing local solutions

14. **Employer capability building and partnership support:** Funding should support employer engagement as well as workplace adjustments and retention strategies.
15. **Industry-specific English, digital literacy and confidence-building programs:** English for industry, workplace communication, digital literacy and confidence-building programs must be funded as essential components of job readiness.
16. **Investment in data infrastructure:** To reduce compliance and reporting burdens on organisations, foster collaboration (place-based, cohort-based, national) and gather evidence-based insights for sector learning and refinement.

Delivery of high-quality services

17. **Mandatory qualifications:** To undertake assessments and deliver Streams 2 and 3 services, formal qualifications in social work, psychology or similar should be a minimum. Consideration should also be given to lived experience.
18. **Expand volunteering opportunities:** Expand the model to include volunteering opportunities for participants, recognising that resources are required to upskill organisations to provide these opportunities and to maintain appropriate support for volunteers on an ongoing basis. National policy should formally recognise volunteering, social enterprise placements, and paid transitional work as valid participation and fund them accordingly.
19. **Expand the model to include partnering arrangements:** Delivering services in partnership with other organisations will provide expanding opportunities for participants locally.
20. **Introduce targeted KPIs that reflect local community profiles:** This will ensure providers are assessed fairly and in context.
21. **Flexible funding streams:** Establish flexible funding streams that take account of local circumstances: Funding should allow providers to address local barriers such as limited transport and access to childcare.

22. Place-based service delivery: Prioritise delivery by place-based, multi-service organisations, particularly for intensive service streams.

Incentives

23. Acknowledge the needs of smaller, multi-service not-for-profit organisations: Smaller not-for-profit organisations are well-placed to deliver high quality, individualised services, using their connections with local communities and their capacity to be agile and responsive. Incentives and funding models must meet the costs for the value-added services of relationship building and participation in local service development networking.

24. Shift focus of performance measures to focus on goals: Performance measurement should be aligned to the extent to which participants' achieve their goals and be determined by locally-driven factors, such as engagement with support services employers.

Commissioning approaches

25. Local service delivery: Locally-based, multi-service providers who are well-connected with the support service system in their local communities are best-placed to deliver employment services.

26. Focus on quality service delivery: Re-positioning the system to preference not-for-profit providers for targeted and intensive support services will provide fiscal and social value that cannot be achieved by for-profit providers.

Fostering continuous improvement

27. Multiple approaches: WCC recommends multiple approaches to continuous improvement including:

- streamlining reporting processes
- establishing Communities of Practice
- developing flexible funding models
- sharing of data, outcomes and trends
- funding evaluation
- developing local employer feedback loops
- establishing local participant advisory groups.

About Whittlesea Community Connections

WCC is a community-led, not-for-profit organisation, established in 1973, with the aim of addressing community needs in the local area. Since then, WCC has expanded to include a wide range of free services including legal assistance, food relief, volunteering, settlement, employment and youth services, community information and community development initiatives, as well as a portfolio of social enterprises. We use a place-based approach to our work, addressing the different needs across the locations in which we operate. We are independent of any government, political or religious ideology and of any vested economic interests.

We work to:

- Create opportunities that build and strengthen connections
- Identify and break down barriers to accessing information and specialised support services
- Self-enable the community
- Build individual and community resilience.

We deliver high quality, flexible services that:

- Support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the community
- Improve people's lives and life chances
- Support access to appropriate and integrated services and resources
- Encourage everyone to take part.

Our vision is for a community in which people and agencies work together to make a positive difference. This ensures that everyone has equal access to the community's resources and services. Our programs encourage community participation and involvement.

Our experience in building employment pathways and delivering employment programs

In delivering a range of specialist employment services over the last five years, WCC has built significant experience working with different cohorts to overcome barriers to employment and secure sustainable work. WCC has also developed effective employer relationships, developing an understanding of their needs, enabling effective and enduring employment for participants in our programs.

We have focussed on supporting individuals who face the greatest barriers in obtaining employment, particularly those from migrant, refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, people who have been unemployed for more than twelve months and women with young children.

Our services are provided through specific funding programs through Department of Home Affairs (DHA), Department of Employment and Workplace Reform (DEWR), Jobs Victoria and philanthropic foundations. All our services have achieved or exceeded funding expectations.

Importantly, all programs have been evaluated independently, focussing significantly on feedback from program participants. These reviews have provided important information to inform our practice to assist us improve outcomes for participants.

WCC Impact Snapshot

Across our employment programs, WCC has consistently exceeded targets and delivered strong, sustained outcomes:

- **Jobs Victoria Employment Services (JVES):** 191 refugee/migrant jobseekers placed; 97 sustained six months; all targets exceeded.
- **Jobs Victoria Mentor Service (JVMS):** 1,225 jobseekers registered; 370 placed; 207 sustained; 47% full-time roles.
- **Priority Workforce Project with RMA Australia:** 117 sustained jobs created across priority cohorts, most with no prior automotive experience.
- **Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI):** 610 refugees supported; 62% now employed or running a small business.
- **Parent Pathways:** 327 parents/carers supported across six northern suburbs.
- **Social Enterprises:** Over last 12 months 54 people employed or supported into economic independence; \$477,000+ paid in salaries; 51 trained with 61% securing employment.

These outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of wrap-around support, mentoring, volunteering pathways, social enterprise placements, paid transitional work, and strong employer partnerships.

Our response to specific questions

Question 1: What are the key factors that should place a person in online and brief intervention services versus targeted provider services versus intensive services?

Overview of influencing factors

Evaluation of our EPRI program (December 2025) indicated the following factors and barriers that impacted settlement and economic integration. These included:

- English language acquisition, particularly English for industry
- Skills and capacity to independently navigate the Australian job market
- Confidence and skills in relation to language and communication, technology and digital literacy, computer skills, and rights in relation to employment and common issues such as racism and discrimination in the workplace
- Locally relevant vocational skills and experience
- Alignment between overseas experience and skills with employment outcomes
- Sustainable employment outcomes to avoid bouncing between insecure jobs or contracting
- Employer capability and willingness to engage with, and practically support, EPRI job seekers.

Specific factors

Assessment must identify and mitigate structural barriers such as digital exclusion, language needs, caring responsibilities, transport limitations, and experiences of bias. It must also identify and develop strategies to address the complexity of barriers faced by program participants. This is important in ensuring that participants are not unfairly disadvantaged or streamed into inappropriate services.

Specific factors that determine whether targeted or intensive support is required are outlined below. These have emerged from our extensive work in supporting people with complex needs to find sustainable employment.

- **Complexity of barriers:** mental health challenges, housing instability, family violence, disability, chronic illness, substance use, gambling, and caring responsibilities significantly shape a person's capacity to engage.
- **Digital literacy and access:** individuals' ability and confidence using online platforms, and access to devices/internet are critical. Digital-first systems can be discriminatory if they assume equal access to technology, disadvantaging older workers, CALD communities, and low-income households.
- **Work history and labour market context:** recency of employment, local work experience, industry collapse, redundancy, and older workers displaced from long-term roles influence individuals' readiness, confidence, and the level of support required.

- **English proficiency:** impacts ability to engage online, complete applications, and participate in interviews. Language barriers can lead to inappropriate streaming if not properly assessed.
- **Self-reported confidence and motivation:** anxiety, trauma history, confidence levels, and readiness to engage are critical indicators of the type and intensity of support required.
- **Stability of life circumstances:** housing stress, financial hardship, caring responsibilities, and health issues all impact individuals' capacity to seek employment. Crisis or instability should trigger movement into intensive support.
- **Transport and access barriers:** limited transport options can prevent attendance at appointments or employment opportunities, particularly in outer-suburban, rural, or growth-area communities. Streaming must account for this to avoid disadvantaging people based on geography.
- **Time unemployed:** this is a useful indicator but not a decisive one. Over reliance on this to determine access to support can result in inequity, particularly for older workers and people from collapsed industries and does not reliably indicate support needs.
- **Cultural safety needs:** CALD communities, refugees, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants may require personalised, culturally safe support delivered through trusted relationships.

Specific groups

Our experience indicates that some individuals may need tailored approaches, which are best delivered face-to-face. These include:

- **Women** — caring responsibilities, part-time/ casual or flexible work needs, safety concerns, family violence, and gendered labour market barriers.
- **Young people** — limited work history, confidence building, mentoring, and stronger employer engagement.
- **LGBTQI+ participants** — experiences of discrimination, safety concerns, and the need for inclusive workplaces.
- **CALD communities** — language support, culturally safe practice, interpreter access, and understanding of migration experiences.
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** — culturally grounded support, community-led approaches, recognition of intergenerational trauma, and trusted relationships.
- **People with disability** — accessible communication, workplace adjustments, and specialist support.
- **Older workers** — age discrimination, re-skilling, and confidence rebuilding.

Question 2: What types of support should be offered under each of the service streams?

Online and brief intervention services

On-line and brief intervention services are only suitable for people who are job-ready, confident using digital tools and with a high level of English proficiency. Care needs to be taken in using AI to support job-matching and / or offering support services. The evidence of the efficacy of using such services has not been established as yet and this could impact negatively on people seeking support. The following service offerings for online and brief intervention could include:

- High-quality resume, cover letter and application templates
- Online interview preparation tools
- Information about training, micro-credentials and job opportunities
- Easy escalation pathways if needs increase.

Targeted provider services

Targeted provider services are best offered to individuals who are experiencing moderate barriers or lower digital literacy. Proficiency in English would be required. Services could include:

- Comprehensive, face-to-face assessment and ongoing assessment
- Regular appointments with the same worker
- Skill and confidence building
- Warm referrals to community supports
- Interview skills training
- Short courses (Excel, digital literacy, AI)
- Work placements and volunteering opportunities
- Post-placement support

Intensive services

People with multiple or complex intersecting barriers require holistic, wraparound support. The following services are integral to effective service delivery for this cohort:

- Comprehensive, face-to-face assessment and ongoing assessment
- Skilled and experienced workers such as social workers, who can provide casework support with ongoing assessment. These workers would be required to build trust and rapport with individuals and be experienced in trauma-informed practice and case-management
- Strong linkages and or active partnerships with housing, health, mental health, disability and family violence services
- Provision of flexible financial assistance (transport, clothing, childcare, debts, driving lessons)

- Pathways to employment, or self-employment, including volunteering and pre-accredited on-the-job skills training
- Work ready and 'soft' skills training, knowledge-building around Australian workplace rights and responsibilities, financial literacy education
- Meaningful, flexible and transitional paid employment opportunities
- Job mentoring and interview readiness
- Employer introductions for external placement
- Holistic and ongoing assessment of strengths, barriers and aspirations
- Flexible post-placement support
- No penalties for non-attendance or compliance.

Specific components

There is some overlap between Streams 2 and 3 - targeted provider services and intensive services. The differences are related to the complexity of issues facing individuals, the duration of such issues and other supports that individuals may be able to mobilise with targeted support. The following description outlines the specific components of the core supports which could be provided with both streams.

A goal-focussed approach with mentoring support

The supports offered under each of the streams need to address the specific needs and requirements of individuals. These would be identified through a comprehensive assessment that engages participants in developing trust to explore with their strengths and the barriers they are experiencing in seeking employment and to engage them to use the resources and services available to best address these (Initial assessment and triaging process).

Feedback from our program participants has indicated that identifying needs and establishing goals to address these have been critical success factors. This process has enabled participants to be focussed and to gain a sense of achievement as they progress.

Use of mentors has proven to be particularly effective in assisting program participants across all our programs and enterprises, providing an important relationship for connection and reflection, a formal process for checking progress, and encouraging ongoing participation and workforce engagement, as well as linking participants to other services. Mentors have also been critical in supporting participants into employment after completing our programs, or on-the-job skills training and transitional employment opportunities in our social enterprises.

Building skills, confidence and connection

Evaluation of our programs has identified the following supports as critical in assisting participants to build their skills and confidence in seeking employment¹:

- **Financial support:** receiving financial support to address barriers to education and employment is an essential component of supporting those with complex needs. This support was found to improve participants' financial security (i.e. relief with day-to-day expenses and support with education costs).
- **Connection with internal and external services:** connection with internal and external support and non-vocational assistance services has also been important in addressing barriers. These include supports such as food relief, English classes, driving lessons, career guidance and digital literacy skills.
- **Access to education and employment pathways and awareness of these systems:** program data show that increasing referrals to education pathways and employment opportunities not only provides skill development and employment opportunities but supports participants to understand how education and employment systems operate, how to access services and build confidence in engaging independently with these systems.
- **Employment skills:** support to build relevant and practical skills to assist with entering employment are important, e.g. CV writing, interviewing skills, as well as work-ready skills such as increased confidence, punctuality and appearance, professional communication and an understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities.
- **Increased support and connection:** Emotional and social support from mentors and other parents/carers has assisted participants' mental health, wellbeing and sense of belonging, and progress towards education and employment goals. For example, several *Parent Pathways* participants emphasised the importance for them in developing increased connection with others and an increased sense of community, facilitated through WCC family events.

Volunteering as a pathway to employment

Volunteering is a proven pathway to employment, skills development, and workforce participation. It provides individuals with opportunities to gain practical workplace experience, develop employability skills, build confidence, and establish professional networks that can support their transition into paid employment. It also provides opportunities for individuals to strengthen community connections, and creates pathways into education, training, and paid work. For many people facing barriers to employment, volunteering is not simply a community contribution: it is the first step towards meaningful workforce participation and long-term economic inclusion.

¹ Where to Research (2024), *Evaluation of the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration Program (EPRI)*; Synergistiq (2026) *Parent Pathways Program Evaluation (draft report)*

WCC provides various volunteer opportunities which play an important role in building job-ready individuals. Through volunteering, people develop essential employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, customer service, administration, and digital literacy. Investing in volunteering as part of the employment services system supports both individual economic participation and broader community outcomes.²

Volunteering is particularly valuable for newly arrived migrants and refugees who face challenges entering the Australian workforce, including language barriers, limited local experience, and difficulties having overseas qualifications recognised.

Placements in social enterprises

On the job skills training and paid, transitional employment pathways in social enterprises operated by WCC has proven to be an effective way for participants to become job ready. Our enterprises provide flexible, supportive and local training and employment environments for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, predominantly women, helping them to build their confidence, understanding of Australian workplace rights and responsibilities, professional communication skills, and linking them with other programs and supports.

The combination of wrap around support, mentorship and professional and flexible real-work training and employment environments has resulted in our enterprises successfully support people with multiple, intersecting barriers to finding meaningful work.

Support to access childcare

Women and other carers of children are limited in their capacity to work if they cannot access flexible childcare and early education services close to their home or employment. While it is acknowledged that it is not the role of employment services to provide or guarantee access to such services, lack of access to such services is a clear barrier to employment. Further discussion about how participants can access affordable childcare services is required as the model is developed.

Mentoring support

WCC has used mentors to support program and social enterprise participants in four of our programs to date. Participants who have contributed to program evaluations have emphasised the importance of the support provided to them by mentors. This is particularly critical for people who are experiencing multiple barriers in gaining employment. A mentor can develop a strong, trusting relationship with the participant and through developing goals and ongoing support and encouragement, assist individuals to remain focussed and achieve their goals.

² See attached paper that focusses specifically on the links between volunteering and employment

Question 3: What factors should be considered to support the development of a new, high-quality assessment and triaging process?

Our experience has demonstrated the importance of face-to-face contact in the initial phases of engagement with participants. An initial person-to-person interview is a far more effective and efficient way to engage an individual and to assess their capacity to pursue self-driven action regarding employment. Critically, use of AI and / or on-line surveys is not an effective way to engage with people who are feeling inexperienced, lack direction or feel anxious about their employment and training opportunities.

AI and digital assessments in other areas of assessment, such as aged care and disability services, have demonstrated that this approach is not effective³. There is also minimal evidence of the efficacy of such approaches. Importantly, many individuals do not understand nor trust the digital systems and thus may be reluctant to respond honestly, a core aspect of directing the individual to the services best suited to their personal circumstances. After an initial assessment conducted face-to-face, individuals can be directed to the service stream that best meets their circumstances.

An initial and ongoing focus on participant-driven needs identification and goal development are essential.

A focus on employing experienced, skilled and appropriately trained staff to undertake assessment and training process is critical. This includes setting minimum qualifications in Social Work or psychology.

Factors recommended high-quality assessment and triaging process

- Person-centred, strengths-based and trauma-informed
- Delivered by assessors (e.g. social workers), trained in trauma-informed and strengths-based practice
- Assessment based on capturing strengths, aspirations and goals, and not be a checklist – narrative and context are critical
- Multiple modes to be available for contacts: online, phone, in-person
- Use of interpreters/bilingual staff where required
- Assessor discretion
- The process must identify and mitigate structural access barriers (transport, digital exclusion, language needs, caring responsibilities)
- No compliance penalties attached to assessment.

³ Royal Commission into Aged Care (2019-2021); NEDA, October 2021, *The experiences & perspectives of people with disability: joint submission to the Royal Commission into violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability*

Question 4: What information should be collected during the assessment process to support better identification of barriers to employment and triaging to the right service?

Assessment should collect only information relevant to support, using a trauma-informed approach. Our experience indicates that a comprehensive assessment requires the following:

- Active engagement with participants to develop a trusting relationship
- Exploration with the participant of their strengths, goals and aspiration and the barriers they are experiencing in seeking employment
- Exploration with the participant of their personal family circumstances and how these impact their employability: this includes current life circumstances - housing, finances, caring responsibilities, etc.
- Exploration of self-reported barriers to finding a job, including any health and mental health impacts
- Exploration of the individual's family and personal situation, including history of family violence, substance use or gambling
- Identification of services previously or currently used for support by the individual
- Assessment of any other risk factors that may impact the individual's capacity to engage in the services offered
- Cultural and linguistic background, including migrant and refugee status
- English language proficiency, particularly English for industry
- Past education and employment experience, including local work experience
- Skills and capacity to independently navigate the Australian job market
- Assessment of the participant's confidence and skills in relation to language and communication, technology and digital literacy, computer skills, and rights in relation to employment and common issues such as racism and discrimination in the workplace
- Locally relevant vocational skills and experience
- Assisting the participant to understand the alignment between overseas experience and skills with employment outcomes
- Assisting the participant to understand how best to match employment interests with required training
- Engagement with the participant in developing specific employment-focussed goals and identifying resources and services available to support achievement of these.

Question 5: What factors or circumstances should result in a participant moving between service streams?

- **Participant-led movement:** Movement between streams should be participant-led wherever possible and tied to genuine changes in circumstance or readiness, not administrative convenience. For example, participants engaging with WCC's social

enterprises require intensive support in the first 2–12 weeks of engagement. This window is a critical, evidence-based point at which to review whether a participant’s placement remains appropriate.

- **No punitive triggers:** Movement should never be triggered punitively for lack of progress within an arbitrary timeframe. We know from our EPRI and social enterprise participants that support duration varies significantly and legitimately. Triaging reviews should accommodate this diversity rather than imposing uniform timelines across all cohorts.
- **Escalation due to emerging complexity:** Movement to more intensive support should occur when new or worsening barriers emerge, including crises, hardship, housing instability, mental health deterioration, family violence, or other complex circumstances that reduce a participant’s capacity to engage independently.
- **Escalation due to stalled engagement:** Long periods without progress, stalled engagement, or difficulty sustaining participation may indicate that a participant requires more structured, relational, or wrap-around support. This should be treated as a need for additional assistance, not a compliance issue.
- **Participant-reported need:** Participants should be able to request movement to a more intensive stream when they feel overwhelmed, under-supported, or unable to progress. Self-reported need is a critical indicator of readiness and should be respected as a legitimate trigger for re-streaming.
- **Movement to lighter support:** Movement to less intensive support should occur when participants demonstrate increased stability, improved confidence, stronger self-management skills, or readiness for more independent job search. This transition should be gradual, supported, based on shared decision-making and linked to the established goals.

Question 6: What elements should be captured in the Employment Goal Plan?

- **Individualised short- and long-term goals:** The plan should document goals that are co-designed with the participant, reflecting both immediate priorities such as stabilising housing, improving English, building confidence, and longer-term aspirations such as preferred industries, career pathways, or self-employment. Goals must be meaningful, achievable, and grounded in the participant’s lived experience.
- **Realistic milestones aligned to the support pathway:** Milestones should reflect the expected level of support, particularly for Stream 3 participants who may require extended timeframes. Milestones must be flexible, responsive to changing circumstances, and designed to build momentum through small, achievable steps.

- **Wrap-around supports required for progress:** The plan should clearly identify the non-vocational supports needed to enable progress, such as mental health services, housing assistance, family violence support, food relief, digital literacy training, driving lessons, or settlement support. These elements are essential for stabilisation and work readiness.
- **Flexible minimum hour expectations:** Engagement requirements should be tailored to the participant's circumstances, allowing gradual increases in activity rather than assuming fixed timelines. This flexibility is critical for people rebuilding confidence, managing caring responsibilities, or recovering from trauma or health issues.
- **Strengths and capabilities:** The plan should highlight the participant's existing strengths, transferable skills, personal qualities, and prior experiences. Recognising strengths builds confidence and ensures the plan is not solely deficit-focused.
- **Aspirations and preferred industries:** Participants should be supported to articulate their interests, preferred sectors, and longer-term career goals. This ensures the plan is motivating and aligned with meaningful employment pathways rather than short-term job placement alone.
- **Barriers and strategies to address them:** The plan should identify structural, personal, and contextual barriers such as language, transport, confidence, caring responsibilities, discrimination, or lack of local work experience. Each barrier should be paired with practical strategies and supports to address it.
- **Confidence levels and support needs:** Confidence is a critical predictor of engagement and should be explicitly assessed. The plan should outline the mentoring, coaching, or supported activities required to build confidence over time.
- **Steps and milestones:** The plan should break down goals into clear, manageable steps, such as completing a short course, attending English classes, undertaking volunteering, participating in a social enterprise placement, or practising interview skills. Each step should have an indicative timeframe and linked supports.
- **Recognition of valid participation:** The plan should formally recognise volunteering, caring responsibilities, training, health recovery, and pre-employment activities, e.g., driving lessons, digital literacy, confidence-building programs, as legitimate participation that contributes to employment readiness.
- **Dynamic, revisited regularly:** The Employment Goal Plan must be a living document that evolves as the participant's capability, confidence, and circumstances change. It should be reviewed collaboratively at regular intervals, not treated as a static compliance artefact completed once and filed away.

Question 7: How can the system encourage effective use of the Employment Goal Plan?

Our experience has indicated that Employment Goal Plans are most effective when the following factors are implemented:

- Make the plan collaborative with participant-led goals, not provider-driven or focussed only job attainment, regardless of its applicability to the participant's situation. This will ensure that the plan remains grounded in what is realistic and meaningful for the individual.
- Employ staff with lived experience who can work collaboratively with participants in plan co-design.
- Review and update the plan regularly.
- Integrate the plan into every appointment, using the plan as a tool to guide actions.
- Use plain language and visual tools.
- Link goals to real opportunities such as training, volunteering, placements.
- Remove compliance pressure so the plan is meaningful.

Question 8: How do we change engagement with mutual obligations to support positive progress toward employment?

Our experience demonstrates that the system should reward moving people towards or into suitable, lasting jobs. Employment supports must be focussed on assisting participants to obtain sustainable, long-term employment.

This is the most cost-effective strategy for the economy – for employers who can rely on their staff and for job seekers, who are enabled to gain stability in their personal lives and thus retain long-term employment. The changes required include:

- A shift from punitive compliance to positive engagement
- Replace rigid requirements with goal-based activities, focussed on participant-led pacing that recognises individual readiness
- Recognise volunteering, caring, training and health recovery as valid aspects of participation
- Use motivational interviewing rather than sanctions
- Build trusting relationships with one consistent worker
- Measure and reward sustained engagement in real work to better align system incentives with what the factors that drive sustainable outcomes.

Question 9: How can employment services best partner with industry and large employers?

Place-based community organisations and social enterprises are well-positioned as trusted intermediaries that can manage the risk of hiring for large employers by providing pre-placement skill-building and ongoing mentorship.

WCC has been successful in linking participants to employers, both large and small, across the northern region. One specific project with a large employer, RMA Automotive Australia, provides a good case example of how success can be achieved.

With funding support from Jobs Victoria as part of the Priority Workforce Projects stream, WCC committed to creating 50 jobs for jobseekers across all Jobs Victoria priority cohorts in the automotive sector with a focus on women over 45 and CALD backgrounds experiencing barriers to employment. This was over-achieved with 117 jobseekers gaining work through this project. The key success factors included:

- Developing good working relationships with open and transparent dialogue, utilising weekly steering committee meetings
- WCC familiarising itself with the employer's needs through site visits, building a better understanding RMAA's aims and workforce needs over time
- WCC providing on-going information and support regarding inclusive work practices in addition to RMAA's commitment to achieving these outcomes for their workplace. In response, RMAA developed practices including second interview chances for people whose main language spoken at home was a language other than English
- WCC providing on the job skill development including communication, advanced OH&S and mental health first aid
- To encourage and support women to take on and sustain employment, RMAA identified roles along the manufacturing process that would be more suitable, *i.e.*, did not require heavy lifting or higher levels of knowledge of automotive manufacturing
- Provision of community transport to work as no public transport was available to enable workers to get to work for the commencement of their shifts.

Developing partnerships with employers requires specific planning, development and ongoing engagement. This is an essential additional cost to establishing locally-based, long-term and sustainable employment opportunities for program participants. The funding model for employment support providers must recognise this – it is additional to individual brokerage funding.

Question 10: How can employment services best support small to medium enterprises?

Developing good working relationships with open and transparent dialogue is as critical for developing employment opportunities in small and medium enterprises as with larger ones. However, small and medium enterprises do not have the same resources as large enterprises. Consequently, additional financial incentives to employ program participants should be available where required. The funding model should include:

- A payment for small and medium enterprises to employ and support a person facing significant barriers to work. This recognises the additional supervision and/or support the employee may require
- Financial support for employment service providers to provide the resources to support a program participant once employed. This support should include pre-employment training, development of enterprise appropriate occupational health and safety (OH&S) training, and ongoing support to maintain employment
- Payment for employment service providers to build and maintain strong working relationships with local employers.

The role of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)

Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs), a distinct category of social enterprises, create jobs and pathways to employment and self-employment for those most shut out of work. Such enterprises play an important role, providing public value and create savings for each participant through supporting them to develop employment skills⁴.

The delivery of WCC's own WISE's highlights the importance of these enterprises for individuals experiencing difficulties in obtaining employment.

WCC delivers several social enterprises which earn revenue from selling goods and services in the market. Our social enterprises also provide employment or training pathways for participants in our employment support programs. The employment outcomes they generate for people facing the greatest barriers in obtaining sustainable employment are a distinct and additional form of value for which there is currently no routine payment mechanism.

As with most WISEs across Australia, to deliver employment outcomes, our social enterprises incur impact costs that standard businesses do not. These include additional supervision and coaching, job-readiness training, linking participants to other services, and external employer engagement. At present, WCC cannot recoup impact costs - this hampers our ability to sustain and scale our impact.

We support Social Enterprise Australia's recommendation to pay WISEs for the public value and savings they create per participant. This would comprise two payments for such enterprises, one recognising the role of the social enterprise as employer, providing

⁴ <https://www.socialenterpriseaustralia.org.au/what-is-a-social-enterprise>

employment for participants, as well as a pathway provider payment via an ‘impact subsidy’ system, comprising of:

- An employer payment recognising the impact costs WISEs carry as direct employers - a one-off payment available to WISEs that directly employ and support a person facing significant barriers to work
- a specific payment for pathway-providers for WISEs supporting a person’s progression toward employment – a payment linked to progression milestones against the agreed Employment Plan

This would be available to WISEs of all sizes, recognising that employment for complex cohorts needs to be flexible (part-time or casual) and therefore not fixed to a certain number of weekly hours from day one, with minimal viable compliance burdens, and potentially including loadings for those working in thin markets, e.g. regional areas, or particularly complex needs participants.

In addition, we recommend government investment in shared data infrastructure that reduces the compliance burden and reporting requirements for enterprises and allows for increased collaboration across the sector (place-based, cohort-based, national), as well as evidence-based insights to inform sector-wide learning and refinements.

Question 11: What is the value of having a government matching platform? How can we increase this value?

Evidence from employers and program participants about the value of the site in facilitating employment should guide the decision-making process. The other resources on this site, such as preparing job applications are important.

Critically, job matching processes such as AI or other algorithm-based matching systems, do not take account of individuals’ personal circumstances and can potentially impact negatively on their confidence.

Question 12: What supports do employers need to recruit and retain people?

Our experience indicates that the following are critical for employers to recruit and retain people:

- Continued access to mentorship for program participants and wrap-around support that extends beyond the point of placement, recognising that capability-building does not stop once someone starts work
- Funding to cover additional onboarding and supports costs - usually concentrated in the first 12 weeks of engagement - as detailed in our response to employment goal planning
- Ongoing support relationship between the employment support provider and employer, particularly in the first twelve weeks. This would enable the mentor to work collaboratively with the employer and program participant if required. Funding for this should be incorporated into the model.

Question 13: What qualifications and experience should be expected of frontline staff within each stream?

To undertake assessments and deliver Streams 2 and 3 services, formal qualifications in social work, psychology or similar should be a minimum. Consideration should also be given to lived experience.

Question 14: How could the future service accommodate the needs of diverse cohorts, including better linkages to other services?

Facilitating the development of more volunteering opportunities

There is an opportunity for government to enhance the important role of volunteering in providing opportunities for individuals to develop their work-ready skills. Supporting for-purpose organisations to extend their volunteer opportunities to focus on employment development skills is one way to expand such opportunities. Volunteers require support and training as do organisations providing such opportunities. Volunteers are not “free labour”. Resources are required to upskill organisations to provide these opportunities and to maintain appropriate support for volunteers on an ongoing basis.

The service model that government has proposed for employment services could consider specific volunteer-focussed support roles specifically funded to enhance employment skill development.

WCC has invested significant effort in supporting other organisations that provide volunteer opportunities, to create inclusive and accessible roles for people facing barriers to employment.

By working closely with not-for-profit organisations, we help build their capacity to design volunteer roles that provide meaningful skill development, flexibility, and support. This approach has resulted in more organisations welcoming volunteers who may otherwise have missed out on such opportunities. Feedback from partner organisations consistently highlights that, with a little more support, creativity, and inclusive practice, there is a place for everyone to contribute and build valuable skills through volunteering. A detailed analysis of the value of volunteering in employment support programs is attached in Appendix One.

Multi-service organisations

One of the strengths of WCC is that we provide multiple services. These have changed and developed over time as the needs of the communities we serve have changed. We have expanded from a volunteer resource organisation to provide a wide range of free services including legal assistance, food relief, volunteering, settlement, employment and youth services, community information and community development initiatives. We also operate a farm that provides resources for our food relief program as well as providing opportunities for volunteers and students to develop horticultural skills.

In addition, we operate four social enterprises, spanning childcare, a driving school, a wholesale plant nursery and a café and catering business.

We believe that providing employment services within the context of a multi-service organisation enhances our capacity to address the complex and varied needs of people seeking assistance to gain sustainable and meaningful employment.

We would encourage the government to expand its provider base to preference providers which are multi-faceted in their approaches to service delivery and community engagement. This has proven to be effective in improving outcomes for those seeking sustainable employment.

Partnership development

Working in partnership with employers, communities and other organisations is critical for WCC to achieve its objectives. This includes working closely with employers to understand their needs and respond accordingly, working with other organisations to provide varied volunteer opportunities for employment program participants and engaging with social enterprises to offer employment experiences.

We strongly encourage the government to expand its approach to the service model to consider partnering arrangements across organisations. This would expand the opportunities for skill development for program participants.

Question 15: How can a nationally consistent service respond to local circumstances?

A nationally consistent employment service can only be effective if it is designed to flex around local realities. Place-based organisations are uniquely positioned to translate national policy into meaningful local practice because they operate within, and are accountable to, the communities they serve. They bring deep knowledge, trusted relationships and integrated service systems that cannot be replicated through centralised models. Details of specific models are outlined in Appendix 2.

Place-based organisations are uniquely positioned to:

- understand local community needs and employment challenges
- provide personalised support and referrals
- build relationships with local volunteer-involving organisations
- develop strong working relationships with local employers and specific approaches to addressing their unique needs
- assist individuals who may require additional guidance and encouragement
- create pathways from volunteering to employment, education, and training.

People facing multiple and complex barriers need more than job search assistance — they need stability, connection, and coordinated support. Place-based models provide:

- the right environment for trauma-informed practice
- the ability to respond quickly to crisis
- deep knowledge of local supports
- flexible, relationship-based engagement

- pathways that reflect local realities rather than generic program design.

This makes place-based delivery the strongest model for intensive services and a critical component of an equitable employment services system.

Many program participants require more than access to an online volunteer platform. They benefit from direct engagement, tailored advice, and local connections that help them navigate opportunities, build confidence and develop the skills they need for sustainable employment.

At WCC, we use a place-based approach to our work, addressing the different needs across the locations in which we operate. This has increased our capacity to respond to the needs of our community and those seeking sustainable employment.

We believe that developing the following would assist the government to develop a consistent service that is able to respond to local needs:

- **Establish key principles centred around participant engagement.** Principles should emphasise relational practice, trauma-informed support, cultural safety, strengths-based approaches and one-on-one mentoring – ensuring consistency in quality while allowing local flexibility.
- **Introduce targeted KPIs that reflect local community profiles,** to ensure providers are assessed fairly and in context. These should consider:
 - demographic characteristics
 - cultural and linguistic diversity
 - local industry composition
 - employer needs
 - transport availability
 - childcare access
 - local volunteering and social enterprise opportunities
- **Establish flexible funding streams that take account of local circumstances:** Funding should allow providers to address local barriers such as:
 - limited public transport (e.g. community bus partnerships with employers)
 - childcare shortages (e.g. childcare relief, on-demand childcare services (such those offered through WCC's Women in Work social enterprise) or partnerships with early learning centres)
 - digital exclusion (e.g. device lending, digital literacy programs)
 - lack of local work experience (e.g. paid placements in social enterprises)
 - flexibility ensures providers can tailor supports to local realities rather than force participants into unsuitable activities.
- **Prioritise delivery by place-based, multi-service organisations, particularly for intensive service streams:** Organisations with integrated service systems are best

positioned to deliver holistic support, respond quickly to emerging needs, and build long-term relationships with employers and communities.

- **Support local employer engagement strategies:** National consistency should include structured expectations for employer engagement but allow local providers to tailor approaches based on industry mix, workforce needs, and employer capability.
- **Recognise local volunteering and social enterprise ecosystems:** National policy should formally recognise volunteering, social enterprise placements, and paid transitional work as valid participation and fund them accordingly.

Question 16: How should providers be incentivised to support participants into suitable, sustainable jobs?

The focus of employment support services must be to support participants to develop the skills and independence to obtain sustainable and long-term employment. Obtaining a job that is not aligned to the skills, aspirations and complexity of individuals' situations will not be successful. This goal must be the basis for any incentives for providers. The following should be considered:

- Reward job retention (3, 6, 12 months), not just placement.
- Incentivise quality matches aligned with participant goals.
- Recognise placements in flexible, inclusive workplaces.
- Value post-placement support and employer capacity-building and fund accordingly.
- Include outcomes for training, skills development and volunteering.

It is also important to recognise that smaller, multi-service not-for-profit organisations are well-placed to deliver high quality, individualised services, given their connections with local communities and their capacity to be agile and responsive. This requires additional costs to provide supervision for staff, technology infrastructure and maintain ongoing relationships with local employers and support organisations. Incentives and funding models must meet the costs for these value-added services.

Question 17: How should employment outcomes and progress be measured?

A fundamental outcome for all participants should be the participation in a comprehensive face-to-face assessment and development of participant-driven goal-focussed employment plan. The following employment outcomes and progress should be measured over time by:

For Targeted Services:

- Quality of job search activity
- Skills gained
- Confidence improvements
- Short-term employment outcomes

For Intensive Services:

- Stabilisation of circumstances
- Engagement with support services
- Incremental steps toward employment readiness (improved wellbeing, routine, confidence, volunteering, pre-employment activities, reduced crisis episodes)
- Employment outcomes recognised when they occur, but not used as the primary success metric

Question 18: What commissioning approaches will best support increased provider diversity?

WCC recognises the importance of implementing a transparent and accountable tendering process in the selection of providers. This should be the basis for any approach to commissioning.

Priority should also be given to:

- **Local service delivery:** Locally-based, multi-service providers who are well-connected with the support service system in their local communities. Place-based service delivery is particularly effective for people with complex barriers because it is embedded in the local community, responsive to local conditions, and able to coordinate support across multiple systems. It creates the conditions for trust, continuity and meaningful engagement — all essential for participants who face structural disadvantage (see Appendix 2)
- **Not-for-profit providers:** WCC acknowledges that the current system depends on for-profit providers and it may not be easy to shift from this approach. However, a re-positioning of the system to preference not-for-profit providers for targeted and intensive support services will provide fiscal and social value that cannot be achieved by for-profit providers. The experience in the delivery of childcare, disability services and aged care, as investigated by relevant Royal Commissions, has shown that the major costs of delivering such services is in staffing and consumables. The same applies to employment support services. To achieve a profit from the delivery of such services, the funding must cover the profit as well as the costs of delivering services.

Question 19: How can employment services foster continuous improvement? For example, what strategies would improve the sharing of best practice?

WCC is committed to explore a range of strategies to foster continuous improvements across our services and the service system more broadly. The following potential strategies have emerged from experience:

- **Streamlining reporting processes:** streamlining of reporting processes and performance measures is required to reduce the administrative burden on providers.
- **Establishment of Communities of Practice:** Communities of Practice (CoP) seek to strengthen collaborations that build collective capability and capacity, and work towards

shared goals and provide a platform for shared learning. They have the potential to foster innovation and partnerships and to increase understanding across sectors – community services, social enterprises, government and employers. They are also able to advocate for policy, program, funding and system reform.

The EPRI CoP, facilitated by Social Enterprise Australia⁵, enabled increased sharing and understanding of effective practice which informed implementation. It also enabled discussion of critical policy, practice and partnership priorities that enhanced effective economic and social inclusion support for refugee and humanitarian entrants with low English language proficiency and/or low skill levels.

Development of a similar model for the employment support system would strengthen collaboration across the sector and improve outcomes for participants. This could be funded and commissioned as a separate funding model/stream. Consideration could also be given to developing a learning platform to share case studies and support the development of regular reflective practice sessions.

- **Flexible funding models:** Within the context of established performance measures that focus on delivering participant-driven goals, flexible funding models would recognise the difference between localities and the complexity facing participants.
- **Sharing of data, outcomes and trends:** This is important for facilitating learning across the sector and determining service and system policy and approaches to strategic service delivery. Developing this approach within the context of similar localities, in terms of socio-demographic composition, would enhance the value of this.
- **Evaluation:** The model should include funding for place-based evaluations that include employer and participant feedback. Organisations themselves should not be expected to meet the cost of such evaluations or apply for competitive funding for such work.
- **Employer feedback loop:** This would provide regular feedback about the needs and experiences of employers, to inform practice.
- **Participant advisory groups:** Development of participant advisory groups would provide a critical process for continuous improvement locally and across the system.

For more information or clarification please contact:

Alex Haynes

CEO, Whittlesea Community Connections

ahaynes@whittleseacc.org.au

0408 255266

⁵ Social Enterprise Australia (2024), Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI): Program Insights and Impact Stories, www.socialenterpriseaustralia.org.au

Appendix One: Volunteering as a Pathway to Employment

Volunteering is a proven pathway to employment, skills development, and workforce participation. It provides individuals with opportunities to gain practical workplace experience, develop transferable skills, build confidence, and establish professional networks that can support their transition into paid employment.

For many people facing barriers to employment, including young people, newly arrived migrants and refugees, women returning to the workforce after caring responsibilities, international students, and people with disabilities, volunteering offers a supportive and accessible environment in which to demonstrate their capabilities, explore career pathways and gain valuable local experience.

Beyond its contribution to social connection and community wellbeing, volunteering plays an important role in building job-ready individuals. Through volunteering, people develop essential employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, customer service, administration, and digital literacy. Investing in volunteering as part of the employment services system supports both *individual economic participation and broader community outcomes*.

Evidence from Whittlesea Community Connections Volunteer Resource Service

As the Volunteer Resource Service for the City of Whittlesea, Whittlesea Community Connections sees firsthand the impact volunteering has on workforce participation and employment outcomes.

During this April to June quarter, our Volunteer Resource Service received 63 applications from individuals seeking volunteer opportunities. Of these, 50 applicants (80%) identified that they were actively looking for work. Many applicants belonged to cohorts that experience significant barriers to employment, including:

- Women re-entering the workforce after caring for children
- Young people seeking job readiness skills
- International students
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Newly arrived migrants and refugees
- People with disabilities

These figures demonstrate the strong connection between volunteering and employment aspirations within our community.

Volunteering as a Skills Development Opportunity

Expressions of interest received through our service consistently demonstrate that community members view volunteering as a way to gain practical experience and improve their employment prospects.

One young person recently seeking an administration volunteer role stated:

“I love helping people within the community. I am seeking administration-related employment, and this experience will support me to improve my skills and find the ideal job in the future. I look forward to engaging with people face-to-face and assisting others where I can.”

This example highlights how volunteering enables individuals to build workplace skills, develop confidence, and gain experience that can strengthen future employment opportunities.

Supporting Newly Arrived Migrants and Refugees

Volunteering is particularly valuable for newly arrived migrants and refugees who face challenges entering the Australian workforce, including language barriers, limited local experience, and difficulties having overseas qualifications recognised.

Recently, our service supported a woman who had migrated from Ukraine. Although she is qualified as a lawyer in her home country, she is currently studying English at TAFE and undertaking aged care training while exploring pathways to have her legal qualifications recognised in Australia.

After connecting with her at a local refugee expo, we assisted her to access volunteering opportunities that would allow her to practise English, gain Australian workplace experience, develop community connections, and build confidence while working towards her longer-term career goals. Volunteering provides an important stepping stone for individuals like her, helping them remain engaged, develop local networks, and progress towards meaningful employment.

The Importance of Place-Based Volunteer Resource Services

These examples demonstrate the critical role that locally based Volunteer Resource Services play in connecting people facing barriers to employment with meaningful volunteering opportunities.

Place-based organisations are uniquely positioned to:

- Understand local community needs and employment challenges
- Provide personalised support and referrals
- Build relationships with local volunteer-involving organisations
- Assist individuals who may require additional guidance and encouragement
- Create pathways from volunteering to employment, education, and training

Many community members require more than access to an online volunteer platform. They benefit from direct engagement, tailored advice, and local connections that help them navigate opportunities and build confidence.

Alignment with Employment Services Reform

We have also observed increasing recognition of volunteering within the employment services sector. Recently, discussions with representatives from MatchWorks, one of Victoria’s leading employment service providers, highlighted challenges including reduced

availability of casual employment opportunities and declining engagement with training courses among some job seekers.

As a result, employment providers are increasingly encouraging participants to undertake volunteering as a practical way to gain current workplace experience, build networks and improve employability.

Our service has experienced an increase in referrals from employment agencies, reflecting growing recognition of volunteering as a valuable workforce participation strategy.

Recommendation

The ongoing success of volunteering as an employment pathway relies on sustained investment in local Volunteer Resource Services.

Recent changes to volunteering funding have meant that more support is being directed towards national programs and peak bodies, while local Volunteer Resource Services face increasing uncertainty about their future funding. As a result, many Volunteer Resource Centres across Australia have reduced services or faced the risk of closure. While peak bodies play an important role in leading and supporting the sector, local volunteer services are often the first point of contact for jobseekers, migrants, refugees, people with disabilities and others who need personalised support to connect with volunteering opportunities.

The Employment Services Reform agenda presents an opportunity to formally recognise volunteering as a pathway to employment and to invest in community-based Volunteer Resource Services that deliver measurable employment, skills development and social inclusion outcomes.

Conclusion

Volunteering should be recognised as a core component of employment participation strategies. It provides practical experience, develops employability skills, strengthens community connections, and creates pathways into education, training, and paid work. For many people facing barriers to employment, volunteering is not simply a community contribution; it is the first step towards meaningful workforce participation and long-term economic inclusion.⁶

⁶ Sources: "Volunteering provides an important pathway to employment and is recognised in Workforce Australia Employment Services as contributing to key work-related skills and experience." Volunteering Australia, *Volunteer Workforce Capability* <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/volunteer-workforce-capability/>; "Volunteering can help you develop and strengthen skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving." It can also help people understand different careers, build confidence, increase networks and gain hands-on experience. Workforce Australia, *Volunteer in the Community* <https://www.workforceaustralia.gov.au/individuals/training/work-experience/volunteer>; "Volunteering helps people to connect with others, build their skills and feel more confident. It can also be a pathway to a new job or career." Victorian Government, *Volunteering in Victoria* <https://www.vic.gov.au/volunteering>; Work experience and volunteering are "great ways to improve your workplace skills and experience, boost your résumé, build a network and increase your chances of getting a new job." What's Next (DEWR), *Work Experience and Volunteering* <https://whatsnext.dewr.gov.au/take-next-step/work-experience-and-volunteering>; For young people, volunteering is a way to "develop skills and experience," explore careers, and gain achievements that can be included on a résumé., NSW Government, *Volunteering in NSW* <https://www.nsw.gov.au/community-services/volunteering>

Appendix Two: Place-based models

As indicated in this submission, WCC is committed to place-based service delivery. It has formed the basis of our employment support programs and has been demonstrated to be the most effective way to engage participants and build and maintain strong working relationships with employers and important support services for our participants. The following outlines the aspects that we have found to be central to delivering locally-based service models for participants experiencing significant barriers to employment.

- 1. Wrap-around support** Place-based models enable coordinated responses across housing, health, mental health, disability, family violence, financial counselling and community services. This integration reduces duplication, prevents people from falling through gaps, and supports stabilisation before employment becomes realistic.
- 2. Local partnerships** Providers can build strong relationships with councils, neighbourhood houses, social enterprises, community organisations and specialist services. These partnerships allow for warm referrals, shared case management, and collaborative problem-solving tailored to local needs.
- 3. Employer connections** Place-based providers understand local labour markets, employer expectations, and emerging opportunities. They can build employer capability around inclusive hiring, create supportive pathways into work, and broker placements that align with participant strengths and aspirations.
- 4. Understanding of community context** Local providers have insight into transport barriers, cultural dynamics, safety issues, and community strengths. This contextual knowledge ensures participants are not disadvantaged by geography, digital exclusion, or limited local opportunities.
- 5. Reduced discrimination** Community-embedded support helps counter systemic biases faced by women, young people, LGBTQI+ participants, CALD communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, older workers and people with disability. Place-based workers can advocate directly with employers and services to ensure culturally safe, inclusive and equitable pathways.
- 6. Accessibility** Locating services where people already go — community organisations, neighbourhood houses, libraries — reduces transport barriers and increases engagement. This is particularly important in outer-suburban, rural and growth-area communities.
- 7. Trust and continuity** Participants in intensive services often require time to build trust. Place-based models allow for consistent relationships with workers who understand the community, its challenges and its strengths. This continuity is essential for trauma-informed practice.
- 8. Community activation and participation** Place-based services can connect participants to volunteering, community projects, social enterprises and local initiatives that build confidence, routine and belonging — critical stepping stones toward employment readiness.

Why this matters for intensive services

People facing multiple and complex barriers need more than job search assistance — they need stability, connection, and coordinated support. Place-based models provide:

- the right environment for trauma-informed practice
- the ability to respond quickly to crisis
- deep knowledge of local supports
- flexible, relationship-based engagement
- pathways that reflect local realities rather than generic program design

This makes place-based delivery the strongest model for intensive services and a critical component of an equitable employment services system.