



Visual description: A purple Whaikaha logo with a QR scan for the NZSL name.

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For: Working Group on employment

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Key issues and opportunities for disabled people in employment

Purpose

- 1 This paper outlines key issues and opportunities for disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau in employment. It is part of a series of papers examining strategic issues and opportunities to steward better outcomes for disabled people across government and to inform the development of the New Zealand Disability Strategy 2026-30 during 2025.
- 2 These papers are intended to provide a starting point for the working groups that will consider each outcome area in more detail, and propose a prioritised set of well-defined, achievable actions for inclusion in the strategy.

Executive summary

- 3 Being employed can create financial benefits for disabled people, as well as opportunities for social connection, a sense of purpose, and better choice and control in their lives. Being employed can positively affect other life outcomes for disabled people, like health and housing, and vice versa.
- 4 New Zealand's disabled population represents a large untapped workforce. Improving employment outcomes for disabled people would create opportunities for growth in the economy and businesses.
- 5 Disabled people are currently less likely to be working, and those in employment tend to earn less money. People with disabilities or health conditions make up a large proportion of those receiving welfare benefits.
- 6 Of disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori were more likely to be unemployed, and it is likely that Pacific disabled people also have worse employment outcomes.
- 7 There are multiple barriers to disabled people entering the workforce. These include:
 - discrimination and enduring attitudinal barriers, which cast disabled people as costly, difficult to employ, and less productive

- limited or inconsistent support or accommodations enabling safe working conditions
- limited suitable roles for disabled people
- formal education – disabled people are less likely to hold formal qualifications, which can be an impediment to entering employment.

8 These barriers are compounded at the intersections of disability and being Māori.

9 The barriers disabled people face to entering the workforce can also pose challenges to sustaining employment. Disabled people are much more likely than non-disabled people to leave employment due to illness or injury.

10 Disabled people have outlined the need for more and improved, tailored employment support for disabled people and for their employers, work that fosters inclusivity in workplaces and raises expectations of disabled people, and work that addresses net income inequality between disabled and non-disabled people.

11 In August 2024, the Minister for Social Development and Employment released the Employment Action Plan (the Plan), with the aim of supporting people into work and lifting economic outcomes. Many actions in the Plan could make progress to improve disability employment outcomes if implemented effectively.

12 Currently, the Ministry of Social Development (MSD)

funds a range of specialist employment services, job and training supports, and assistance to employers aimed at supporting disabled people into, and supporting them in, employment. MSD is currently undertaking a review and redesign of Disability Employment Services, which is expected to be finalised by June 2026.

13 MSD and the Ministry of Health (MoH) are also

undertaking joint work focused on integrated health and employment support for people with mental health conditions.

14 Whaikaha leads the 'Papa Pounamu: Disability Four-Point

Plan', which aims to reduce barriers to the employment of disabled people in the public service, including tāngata whaikaha Māori and Pacific disabled people.

15 Two of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of

Disabled Persons Committee Concluding recommendations that Cabinet has agreed to progress focus on expediting actions to support disabled into and in employment. Work towards these is underway.

16 Outside of government, there are some emerging shifts in

awareness and support among employers, businesses and non-government organisations to employ more disabled people and harness their talent more effectively.

17 Based on the Ministry's analysis of the issues and current initiatives pertaining to disabled people's employment, we could explore the following broad areas in the next Disability Strategy to make progress on employment outcomes:

- Improve the expectations and aspirations for and confidence in disabled people's ability to engage in employment
- Strengthen interventions and supports prior to critical life transition points to support pathways into work, particularly early in the life course
- Better equip employers to harness the added value that employing disabled workers can bring to their workplaces
- Work across government to undertake analysis of labour market opportunities suitable for disabled people, to better inform private sector and government decisions and supports
- Work to tailor mainstream services and develop specific initiatives for those who experience persistent disadvantage in employment, especially tāngata whaikaha Māori and Pacific disabled people.

- 18 Some of these opportunities could potentially be pursued by leveraging the current priorities of the Government's Employment Action Plan, and Papa Pounamu.
- 19 Working with non-government employers and entities and learning from overseas examples will also be important to making progress in these areas.

Background - Employment as a determinant of disabled people's outcomes

- 20 Being employed can create financial benefits and a wider range of opportunities for disabled people, as well as improved social connections, a sense of purpose, and better choice and control in life.
- 21 Disabled people, Deaf people, tāngata whaikaha Māori, and Turi Māori (Māori Deaf) represent a significant portion of New Zealand's population aged 15-64, at 14 percent. Disability rates for the population aged 15-64 vary by ethnic group: they are highest for Māori (22 percent), followed by Pacific (16 percent), and European (16 percent).¹
- 22 This paper approaches disability in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, defining disabled people as those who have

¹ (Stats NZ, 2023).

long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

23 New Zealand's disabled population represents an untapped workforce. Improving employment outcomes for disabled people would add significant value to society, iwi, hapū, and whānau overall. There are opportunities for growth in both the economy and businesses, as well as for individuals who currently face barriers to reach their potential to work – which affects other life outcomes, such as health and housing.

Overall, disabled people are more disadvantaged than other groups and are much less likely to be working, and earn less money

24 Data from the June 2024 quarter of the Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) showed that, for disabled people aged 15-64 years:²

- the labour force participation rate was 44.7 percent compared with 84.1 percent for non-disabled people
- the employment rate was 39.8 percent, compared with 80.3 percent for non-disabled people

² (Stats NZ, August 2024) (Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha, 2024)

- 66.8 percent of disabled people worked full-time compared with 82.2 percent of non-disabled people
- they were more likely to be self-employed
- over one quarter were underutilised in the labour market, which is more than double the rate for non-disabled people (26.3 percent and 11.3 percent, respectively).³

25 Employment rates for disabled men and women were similar (39.1 percent and 40.3 percent respectively), but the disability employment gap (the difference in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people) was smaller for women (36.5 percentage points) than men (44.7 percentage points).⁴

26 Across three key welfare benefits (Jobseeker – Work Ready (WR), Jobseeker – Health Condition or Disability (HCD), and the Supported Living Payment (SLP)) people with disabilities or health conditions made up at least 61.5 percent of the total number of recipients as at November 2024.⁵

27 While SLP recipient rates have remained relatively steady, Jobseeker HCD recipients increased by 15 percent

³ (Stats NZ, August 2024). 'Underutilisation' measures unused potential capacity, including people who are unemployed but looking, underemployed and want to work more, among others.

⁴ (Stats NZ, August 2024) (Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha, 2024) The disability employment gap compares disabled and non-disabled people.

⁵ (Ministry of Social Development, 2024). This excludes the 10,122 people receiving SLP – Carers as at November 2024. It does not include any disabled people on the JS-WR as MSD does not collect disability data about that benefit. 90,375 people were receiving the JS-HCD, 115,536 the JS-WR, and 94,017 the SLP.

in the year to November 2024, compared with a 9.6 percent increase in Jobseeker WR. People on Jobseeker HCD have increased slightly as a proportion of Jobseeker recipients in the last three years.⁶

28 There is limited data about people on benefits disaggregated by disability status, particularly for Jobseeker WR, for which MSD does not routinely collect disability information. However, Jobseeker HCD data for the September 2024 quarter shows that 50.3 percent of recipients were categorised as having psychological or psychiatric conditions, 14.4 percent had musculoskeletal disorders, 6.5 percent had accidents, and 23.8 percent had other conditions, among others.⁷

29 This shows that there is a particularly high number of people with psychological conditions that prevent them from working. This is also evident in the population receiving the SLP, with 39.9 percent receiving the SLP HCD due to a psychological condition (37,491 people out of a total of 93,885).⁸

⁶ (Ministry of Social Development, 2024). SLP HCD rates increased 2.4%, and SLP Carers rates by 6.6%, in the year to November 2024 in comparison.

⁷ (Ministry of Social Development, 2024). In addition for Jobseeker HCD, 4.5% had cardio-vascular disorders and 0.5% had pregnancy related conditions. For example, 44,211 people had a psychological or psychiatric conditions, and 12,621 had musculoskeletal disorders out of a total of 87,858 receiving Jobseeker HCD. There were also 7,692 people with intellectual disabilities receiving the SLP, and a very small number of people with intellectual disability on the Jobseeker HCD.

⁸ (Ministry of Social Development, 2024). National Level data tables – September 2024 Excel document.

Some disabled people, including Māori, Pacific and those with intellectual impairments, are more disadvantaged than others in employment

30 The 2023 Household Disability Survey showed that people with intellectual and learning impairments had higher unemployment rates.⁹

31 Māori are more likely to be disabled than all other ethnic groups.¹⁰ The June 2024 Quarter HLFS shows that tāngata whaikaha Māori experience worse outcomes:¹¹

- the labour force participation rate for tāngata whaikaha Māori was 34.6 percent, compared with 44.7 percent for all disabled people and 78.1 percent for non-disabled Māori
- the employment rate for tāngata whaikaha Māori was 27.2 percent, compared with 39.8 percent for all disabled people and 71.2 percent for non-disabled Māori.

32 Pacific disabled people may face unique barriers to employment, such as cultural expectations to care for family, language barriers and lack of trust in government. Despite limited data about employment rates, it is likely

⁹ (Stats NZ, 2023)

¹⁰ (Stats NZ, 2014) Based on age standardised data.

¹¹ (Stats NZ, August 2024)

that Pacific disabled people also have worse outcomes.

This conclusion can be drawn from research showing:

- Pacific people experience disability at slightly higher rates than other ethnic groups, with the exception of Māori¹²
- Households that include Pacific people experience persistent disadvantage at even higher rates than households with Māori and disabled people¹³
- the Pacific Pay Gap was 24 and 15 percent in 2020 for males and females respectively (compared to NZ Europeans). Combined with a disability pay gap of 7.6 percent in 2024, this suggests that Pacific disabled people may earn less than other groups.¹⁴

33 While we have limited data about the employment outcomes for neurodivergent people (e.g. ADHD, Autism, FASD), it is likely that many of them have difficulty getting or maintaining a job. A 2023 report from the Neurodiversity in Education Coalition estimated that one in three autistic people are unemployed, and at least 50 percent of people in prison have dyslexia and 25 percent have ADHD.¹⁵

¹² (Stats NZ, 2023) Based on age standardised data.

¹³ (New Zealand Productivity Commission, June 2023), page 9-10.

¹⁴ (Stats NZ, 2024)

¹⁵ (Neurodiversity in Education Project, 2023)

Disabled people face multiple barriers to entering employment

34 Many disabled people must overcome multiple barriers to enter the labour market, such as: discrimination and attitudinal barriers to participation, limited or inconsistent support and reasonable accommodations to enable safe working conditions, and a lack of suitable jobs. These barriers increase at the intersections, such as ethnicity (Māori, Pacific), socio-economic status, LGBTQI+.

35 Disabled people's employment outcomes are influenced by how well they are supported to achieve in the education system. Disabled people are less likely to have a qualification; in the June 2024 quarter of the HLFS, 32.7 percent had no qualification compared to 13.1 percent of non-disabled people, and disabled people are much less likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher (15 percent compared to 35 percent of non-disabled people).¹⁶

36 This means that disabled people tend to have fewer opportunities to grow and demonstrate their skills to enter the workforce. Higher unemployment rates may partly reflect lower levels of education: in 2013, disabled adults without tertiary qualifications were more likely to be

¹⁶ (Stats NZ, August 2024)

unemployed. Unemployment was higher for disabled people under 45.¹⁷

37 Data from the June 2024 quarter of the HLFS showed that young disabled people aged 15-24 years were much less likely to be earning or learning, with 46.3 percent Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) – over four times the rate for non-disabled young people (11 percent).¹⁸

38 Other societal barriers also influence employment outcomes, such as access to suitable transport, housing and access to technology.

Disabled people often struggle to thrive in, and maintain, sustainable employment

39 The labour market creates both real and perceived accessibility barriers for people.

40 It is evident that many workplaces and employers' attitudes and biases create barriers to success, which contributes to limited opportunities for disabled workers to progress their careers. While employers may report willingness to employ disabled people, there are enduring societal and labour market perceptions that disabled people are costly, difficult to employ, and less productive.

¹⁷ (Statistics New Zealand, 2014) Page 9

¹⁸ (Stats NZ, August 2024) (Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha, 2024)

- 41 The HLFS shows that disabled people earn less money than non-disabled people. Median weekly income from wages and salaries for disabled people was \$1,155, compared with \$1,343 for non-disabled people. This is likely due in part to disabled people being more likely to work part-time, and working, on average, fewer hours than non-disabled people, and in part due to lower median hourly wages.¹⁹
- 42 For some people, the reality of receiving one or more government benefits may be a higher income than they would receive working, creating a trade-off that incentivises long-term receipt of benefits.
- 43 Disabled people are far more likely to leave employment due to sickness, illness, or injury. In 2024, 63.8 percent of disabled people aged 15-64 who were unemployed but had a job within the last 5 years left work for this reason, compared with 14.4 percent of non-disabled people.²⁰

Disabled people have told us about the need to tailor responses, improve employment support options, raise expectations of people's potential, and address accessibility and attitudinal barriers

¹⁹ (Stats NZ, August 2024) (Ministry of Disabled People - Whaikaha, 2024)

²⁰ (Stats NZ, August 2024)

44 Lifting employment outcomes and experiences is a priority for disabled people. 72 percent of adult disabled people want a job.²¹

45 There are many disability organisations the Ministry could work with to further explore priorities,²² however, a summary of recent feedback from disabled people is outlined below.

46 I.Lead, a disabled youth organisation, outlined key barriers and enablers in their 2024 'Report Card' on Employment and noted four priority recommendations:²³

- An accreditation system to identify accessible and inclusive workplaces supported by educating employers.
- Development of an app for inclusive jobs, alongside employment support.
- Incentivise not-for-profit government-funded organisations to employ disabled people through their contracts as a first step.
- Reintroduce employer wage subsidies to get young people into jobs alongside other recommendations. School to work transition services could be improved.

²¹ (Stats NZ, 2023)

²² Such as the Disabled Peoples' Assembly, Disabled People's Organisations, Te Ao Mārama Aotearoa Trust, Autism NZ, Blind Low Vision, Te Roopu Waiora Trust, Kāpō Māori Aotearoa.

²³ (I.Lead, 2024)

47 In late 2019, MSD consulted on a draft of the previous Disability Employment Action Plan. In summary, the key messages from consultation with disabled people were:²⁴

- Employment supports need to be **tailored**, and integrated (e.g. mental health)
- More and improved **employment support**, including flexibility, is a priority
- **Accessibility** and inclusion in education, transport and the built environment impact employment
- **Raising expectations** of disabled people throughout society is important
- We need more **inclusive workplaces** that enable innovation, tailored practical support for employers, and incentives to employ disabled people.
- Progress should be **monitored**, including **priority groups** who have worse outcomes.
- The **public sector** should lead by example as an exemplary employer.
- The **impact of employment on net income** for people with high support needs and eligibility for other supports should be addressed.

²⁴ (Ministry of Social Development, July 2020)

Work underway

48 The following sections describe current services, initiatives, and work programmes that are relevant to addressing the issues driving poor disability employment outcomes. Appendix A provides a table summarising current initiatives.

Current government work programmes and initiatives

49 The main Government Target in relation to employment is to achieve 50,000 fewer people on the Jobseeker Support benefit by 2030. The Minister for Social Development and Employment released the Employment Action Plan (the Plan) in August 2024, with the aim of supporting people into work and lifting economic outcomes. Many actions in the Plan could make progress to improve disability employment outcomes if implemented effectively.

50 The Plan identifies disabled people as a key group. The Ministry has been involved in the work supporting Action 3 on persistent disadvantage prior to MSD advising the Labour Market Ministers Group in November 2024. This Action is particularly relevant for disabled people because

they were among the groups of households experiencing the highest rates of persistent disadvantage.²⁵

51 In relation to Action 3 on persistent disadvantage, MSD, MoE and MBIE are reviewing the programmes and supports available at life transition points for young people at risk of persistent disadvantage in the labour market, including foundation education, socio-economic skills and work experience, by November 2025.

52 Further detail is included in the attached Appendix. In summary, MSD currently funds a range of employment-related supports for disabled people:

- Specialist Employment Services delivered by 33 providers that help approximately 5,000 people annually who are work ready to gain paid employment and provide ongoing support while they are working.²⁶
- Job and Training Support Funds provide 'cost of disability' assistance to approximately 1,000 disabled people per year, including people with health conditions, to gain or retain employment or employment-related training.
- The Mainstream Employment and Mainstream Internship programmes provides wage subsidies paid

²⁵ (New Zealand Productivity Commission, June 2023). Disabled people (31.1 percent), Pacific peoples (45.7 percent), Māori (26.6 percent), and sole parents (36.4 percent) experienced higher rates of persistent disadvantage in both 2013 and 2018, compared with average working-age households (18.2 percent).

²⁶ These services are based on the Employment Support Practice Guidelines (2018).

directly to employers to help disabled people gain full- or part-time paid work experience. This includes 12-week internships and 12-month wage subsidies and supports around 82 people annually.

- Business Enterprises funds 14 businesses that provide opportunities to work for 900 disabled people and those with health conditions lasting longer than six months who have difficulty finding open employment (though most Business Enterprises utilise the Minimum Wage Exemption Permit Scheme).
- The Transition from School Service helps ORS assessed people with a disability in their final year of school, to plan for a future post school, including options for post-school employment, education and community participation.
- Another example is the MSD-funded Vaka Tautua pilot in Christchurch that is improving employment outcomes for Pacific disabled people. They work with education providers and employers to match aspirations and skills to jobs.

53 MSD provides a Lead Toolkit to provide guidance on employing disabled people, aimed at businesses and employers. Whaikaha is in the process of taking over the Lead Toolkit and will look into updates and improvements.

54 MSD has funded dedicated support for some groups, such as the 2023 Pacific Employment Action Plan Fund for programmes that improve career pathways and skills, which included prioritising Pacific disabled people.

Mental health-focused work between health agencies and MSD

55 The Ministries of Social Development and Health, alongside Health NZ, are undertaking joint work on mental health and employment focused on:

- Individual Placement and Support programmes that integrate health and employment support for people with severe mental health conditions
- Integrating the Health NZ Access and Choice mental health and wellbeing programme with MSD employment supports.

MSD Disability Employment Services review and schools pilot

56 MSD is currently undertaking a review and redesign of Disability Employment Services, which is expected to be finalised by June 2026. This presents an opportunity to consider the effectiveness of current supports and any gaps.

57 MSD is also implementing a pilot providing Employment Service in Schools services for up to 500 secondary school

students in 5 regions until June 2026. Providers can support people to identify jobs, create CVs, gain work experience and become interview ready. Evaluation of the pilot in February 2023 was positive.²⁷

*Disabled public service employees – Papa Pounamu:
Disability Four Point Plan*

58 Whaikaha leads the public service 'Disability Four-Point Plan' which aims to:²⁸

- increase visibility of and information about tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people employed in the public service
- increase accessibility for tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people
- increase the number of disabled people in the public service
- identify and close inequities (e.g. pay gaps) as measurement allows for tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people in the public service.

*Government response to employment-related United Nations
Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (UNCRPD)
2022 Concluding observations*

²⁷ (Vermillion Peirce, 2023). The pilot is currently available in Otago-Southland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato and Auckland regions.

²⁸ The 4-point plan sits under the Public Service Papa Pounamu Diversity and Inclusion programme, led by the Public Service Commission (PSC).

59 In December 2024, Cabinet agreed to the approach to progress the response to the UNCRPD Committee Concluding Observations from 2022 [SOU-24-MIN-0155 refers]. Employment-related UNCRPD Committee recommendations included:²⁹

- CO 52 (a): expedite the development of the Disability Employment Action plan with involvement of disabled people. The Cabinet paper noted that MSD is considering ways to improve the labour market outcomes of disabled people as part of medium-term planning.
- CO 52 (b): Incorporate concrete measures in the Disability Employment Action Plan, with resources, timeframes and monitoring mechanisms that ensure the transition from segregated employment to the open labour market. The Cabinet paper noted the Employment Action Plan released in August 2024, and actions to improve employment outcomes and reduce persistent disadvantage.

60 The main UNCRPD article on employment is Article 27 Work and Employment, which outlines the right to work on an equal basis with others in a labour market that is

²⁹ In addition, CO 52 (c) recommended repealing section 8 of the Minimum Wage Act 1983 and ensuring disabled people are paid on the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. In May 2024, the Government announced it would continue the existing minimum wage exemption scheme.

inclusive and accessible to disabled people; remuneration for work of equal value; safe working conditions; reasonable accommodations and access to vocational training; among other matters. Other employment-relevant Articles are Article 5: Equality and non-discrimination, Article 9: Accessibility, Article 24: Education.

Non-government initiatives

61 There are some emerging shifts in awareness and support among employers, businesses and non-government organisations to employ more disabled people and harness their talent more effectively. There will be cross-government opportunities to leverage this momentum and find meaningful ways to work with non-government organisations to achieve the Government's priorities and employment targets.

62 The New Zealand Disability Employers' Network (NZDEN) is developing an Accessible Recruitment Model (ARM-Up) to help disabled candidates show their full potential, and equip employers with a menu of accessible recruitment options.

63 NZDEN would support changes to the model of Employment Support Providers – currently disabled people can only register with one provider and organisations

don't have contracts with all 40 employment providers contracted by MSD or ACC. This creates barriers between jobseekers and employers.

64 In October 2024, NZDEN shared information about four new projects:

- They are considering becoming a recruitment support service to broker relationships between Employment Service providers and organisations.
- Letters to recruitment websites to encourage better digital accessibility
- Creating a support phone line/email for NZDEN members to develop FAQs.
- A long-term project 'Business Talent Compacts' to reduce recruitment barriers; by working with employers to identify what skills they need from tertiary institutions with set requirements and criteria.

65 In addition, the public policy advisory firm Iron Duke Partners (IDP) has been working on a proposal to develop employer commitment to employing disabled people, with a focus on the strategic leadership of the business sector.

Critical analysis

Areas we could explore in the development of the next Disability Strategy

66 We could explore the following broad areas in the next Disability Strategy to make progress on employment outcomes. This is based on the Ministry's analysis of the issues and current initiatives pertaining to disabled people's employment.

- **Improve expectations of future employment:** Positively change the expectations, aspirations and confidence in disabled people's ability to reach their potential – within families, communities, education settings, the labour market, and for disabled people themselves.
- **Evidence-based interventions at the right time:** Strengthening interventions and supports that work for disabled people in advance of critical life transition points to bolster pathways into work – particularly early in the life course, transition out of education or training, acquisition of impairment, and entry to welfare benefits.
- **Build employers' capacity and capability:** Equip business and employers to understand, identify and know how to harness the added value that recruiting

and retaining disabled workers can bring to their workplaces (e.g. economic, workplace culture and innovation).

- **Increase availability of suitable jobs and accessibility in workplaces:** Explore options to make workplaces accessible to more disabled people and enable and support them to succeed (e.g. flexible, part-time, remote work).

Find avenues to boost the availability of suitable jobs, such as increasing the employment of disabled people by non-government organisations who are contracted by government to provide services to disabled people

Consider availability and understanding of reasonable accommodations, and the role of services to respond flexibly to different situations. Short and long-term initiatives could be explored focused on accessibility and inclusion awareness raising, incentives, accreditation or awards (e.g. working with Diversity Works NZ to develop initiatives or awards).³⁰

- **Market intelligence:** Undertake analysis of and intelligence about labour market opportunities suitable for disabled people, to better inform the private sector and future government decisions (e.g. availability of

³⁰ (Diversity Works NZ, n.d.)

suitable jobs and willing employers). Options could include life-course based approaches, national, regional or industry specific analysis.

- **Improve interventions for key groups:** Work with disability and tāngata whaikaha Māori-led organisations to explore opportunities to tailor mainstream services or develop specific initiatives for those who experience persistent disadvantage in employment as part of the Employment Action Plan.

In particular, this includes tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific disabled people, and people with intellectual and psychological impairments. This could include school, higher education and vocational training to employment pathways.

67 A report from Australia's Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology, highlighted that research evidence identifies six intervention areas that influence employment outcomes for young disabled people:³¹

- Family involvement and high expectations of positive employment outcomes
- Student focused transition planning that starts early

³¹ (Crosbie, 2024)

- Skills development in and post-school, including vocationally
- Work experience and paid employment during school years
- Employment supports e.g. individual placements and supported employment
- Inter-agency collaboration e.g. multiple integrated strategies.

Opportunities within current Government initiatives

Employment Action Plan and MSD-funded employment supports

68 There are opportunities to leverage the current priorities of the Government's Employment Action Plan to lift disabled employment rates, such as through:

- **Action 1** – community providers, obligations and targeted incentives to get young people off welfare and into work (MSD). This could include ensuring accessible and appropriate case management and individual job plans, and community-based job coaches who understand disability and mental health.
- **Action 2** – focus the welfare system on effectively supporting people who can work into jobs (MSD). Ensure that new approaches, such as seminars for

jobseekers, are accessible and effective for people with different impairments – and consider programmes specifically for disabled people.

- **Action 3** – address persistent disadvantage. Agencies could prioritise disabled youth in upcoming advice (by November 2025) about life transition points for young people at risk of persistent disadvantage.
- Taking a disability-specific approach to education and training-related **Actions 4-7**, and **10-11**, such as Action 5 – reform vocational education and training to respond better to the needs of learners, industries and communities.

69 Employment Action Plan work could also more explicitly prioritise support and interventions that work for people with mental health conditions, given the high number of people receiving main benefits due to psychological conditions. MSD and health agencies are undertaking joint work on this issue.

70 In addition, MBIE, MSD Stats NZ, and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) could work towards producing better intelligence about opportunities suitable for disabled people within the labour market, to facilitate longer-term planning in training and employment initiatives.

71 Promotional campaigns could be explored to highlight the supports and services for employers and/or that target better outcomes for disabled people. This could include public awareness campaigns aiming to shift attitudes within wider society.

72 More could be done to support young disabled people to gain experience and enter the workforce early. We could explore ways to expand the options for young disabled people to access work experience and other pathways into employment – and could focus on those receiving benefits and leaving school or training. For example:

- Consideration could be given to expanding the MSD and MoE Employment Service in Schools beyond the current pilot regions.
- MSD advises that the needs of youth will be considered as part of their review and redesign process for Disability Employment Services, as well as the delivery of the Mainstream Internship Service for people finishing study.³²

Wider application of tools developed through Papa Pounamu: Disability Four Point Plan

³² MSD's Mainstream Internship Service is for people to gain paid work experience in their chosen field, for people in their final two years of study or who have finished study in the last year.

- 73 The Ministry of Disabled People could consider setting guidelines or standards about best practice recruitment and employment of disabled people which could be applied in the public and private sectors, through the Four Point Plan.
- 74 We intend to establish a public sector Community of Practice on disability inclusion, to support agencies to learn from each other and build their capability.
- 75 Later in 2025, we may also consider developing a mid-career programme to support experienced disabled people to establish and succeed in public sector careers.

Working with tāngata whaikaha Māori and whānau to lift employment-related outcomes

- 76 Taking a wider whānau-based and collective wellbeing approach to employment outcomes is likely to be more effective for many tāngata whaikaha Māori. Agencies could work more closely with tāngata whaikaha Māori, Tūri Māori (Māori Deaf) and their whānau to identify what approaches work well, understand any gaps in current service provision, and how to consider them within government priorities.
- 77 Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) emphasises the importance of relationships between people, nature and the interconnectedness of collective wellbeing. Te Ao

Māori concepts like manaakitanga (demonstrating kindness, care, and support to others to reach their potential), mana (the ability to use your talents and station in life to support and empower others to reach their potential), and rangatiratanga (the power of self-determination) will influence Māori and their whānau values and preferences for how improving the employment outcomes of tāngata whaikaha Māori and Tūri Māori can be achieved.

78 It is important that tāngata whaikaha Māori, Tūri Māori and their whānau can choose a Māori-led or kaupapa Māori support, such as Employment Services or job support if they need it to access a job. Government already funds a number of Employment Services designed and delivered by Māori and for Māori.

79 As part of MSD's review and redesign of Disability Employment Services, work could be undertaken with tāngata whaikaha Māori and their whānau, and Māori employers, on how employers can attract and retain tāngata whaikaha Māori. These services should be made available to non-Māori employers.

Pacific disabled people and communities have identified areas of focus, which may apply to other disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori

80 Engagement with Pacific disabled people and families in 2024 identified focus areas relevant to the employment outcomes in their communities, such as:

- Consider targeting training programs and professional development opportunities for Pacific disabled people.
- Improve access to and suitability of transition programs, higher education, and vocational training pathways, including tailored approaches for Pacific disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori.
- Improve available information and awareness to allow disabled people to navigate and access appropriate employment services e.g. MSD Job Support funds. Consider a dedicated focus on tāngata whaikaha Māori and Pacific disabled people..

81 There are some services focused on Pacific disabled people and employment, such as Tupu Aotearoa offered by the provider Your Way-Kia Roha in the Wellington region. We could examine such approaches to understand what is working well.

Opportunities to leverage non-government initiatives

- 82 There is a societal shift required to embrace the strengths and skills that disabled people bring to the workplace - rather than focusing on barriers. For example, there is growing awareness of the skills and value that many neurodiverse people can bring to workplaces; such as problem solving, high productivity and creativity.
- 83 We could engage with businesses and employers to encourage flexibility in the labour market. Labour market flexibility that may work for some disabled people could include options for remote work, role sharing, part-time roles, among other employment models that improve the accessibility of jobs.
- 84 Recent Workforce Development Council research about the construction, engineering, infrastructure and manufacturing industries identified opportunities to:³³
- Support employers with industry specific knowledge, skills and tools for disability-friendly workplaces to address bias and accessibility, and help to access, navigate and apply tools to attract and retain disabled people.

³³ (Hanga-Aro-Rau manufacturing, engineering and logistics, and Waihangā Ara Rau construction and infrastructure Workforce Development Councils. In collaboration with All is for All, November 2024)

- Support disabled learners in education and in their transition to work
- Shift from supporting individuals to enabling collective employer responsibility by tying funding to workplaces (through incentives for employers to attract disabled workers), and more accessible and affordable transport options.

85 The Ministry could continue to work with other agencies to find opportunities to leverage and progress the work that the NZDEN facilitates, including building accessible employer capability, and engaging with willing private sector businesses.

Approaches taken overseas

86 NZDEN has proposed that we consider a 'Job Market Redesign and Talent Compact' approach in NZ. It aims to bring disabled jobseekers and employers together to drive better demand and supply of disabled talent; shifting from a 'push' to 'pull' labour market supports approach:³⁴

- empower mainstream employers and training organisations to enable disabled people to meet the demands of the job market

³⁴ (Scott-Parker, October 2022). For example, in 2022 five Networks in Asia mapped the digital skills most 'in demand' by employers as a first step.

- establish a structured partnership between employers and mainstream training providers; to link match disabled talent to the labour market.³⁵

87 Further detail on overseas research and initiatives is covered in Appendix B.

Next steps

88 We will update this paper following consideration by DPOs and Working Groups. We will also include further information as we receive it, such as from Iron Duke Partners' proposal to develop employer commitment in the business sector.

End

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³⁵ A ready pool of potential candidates - who are known by the employer, who are suitable and/or qualified, and who are interested.

Appendix A: Key initiatives

Government initiatives

Lead agency: MSD and MBIE

Initiative: Government Employment Action Plan (mainstream)

Objective: To support more New Zealanders into work and give them greater opportunities to realise their potential.

Disability perspective: Action 3 led by MSD is to address persistent disadvantage by exploring a focus on key points in people's lives when interventions are more likely to be effective. Key deliverables:

1. Develop a life-course-derived approach to help reduce persistent disadvantage in the labour market (complete
2. Provide advice identifying medium to long-term work to reduce persistent disadvantage.

(Deliverables 1 and 2 are complete, but further advice is planned for November 2025).

3. Publish a refreshed Child and Youth Strategy

Indicators: N/A – work is ongoing.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Mana in Mahi (mainstream)

Objective: To enable people to get paid while training on the job.

Mana in Mahi acts as an incentive for employers who are willing to hire a person in receipt of a main benefit and offer that person an industry training qualification, including apprenticeships.

Disability perspective: Disabled people not on a Jobseeker benefit participate voluntarily. As JS-HCD recipients have only part-time or deferred work obligations they are usually not referred to employment case management, which is a common gateway onto mainstream employment programmes. SLP recipients have no work obligations and therefore no obligation to engage in employment products and services.

Indicators: Overall participation of 950 people in 2023/24. 8% of the people who access Mana in Mahi are receiving JS-HCD, and 1% are receiving SLP.

Mana in Mahi is rated effective overall, but there has been insufficient uptake of HCD clients in the programme to evaluate effectiveness specifically for disabled people.

Note that fewer places are available in 2024/25.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Skills for Industry (mainstream)

Objective: To provide short-term job-focused training for people receiving income support who require up-skilling for specific requirements identified by industry. The programmes are designed to:

- be short
- be cost effective
- address skill and labour shortages
- provide assistance with in-work support.

Disability perspective: See above.

Indicators: Overall participation of 2,286 in 2023/24. 10% of the people who access the Skills for Industry programme are receiving JS-HCD, and 2.5% are receiving SLP.

Evaluation showed the programme results in positive impacts on both employment and income. In line with the programme's design, participants showed an increase in study enrolment over the initial six months after starting the programme. 7,724 participants left their main benefit or declared part-time earnings.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Flexi-wage (mainstream)

Objective: To help jobseekers to get the skills they need to meet the requirements of a job. Employees can get training and ongoing support if needed, and employers can get a wage contribution to help them pay their employees. Flexi-wage supports job seekers by:

- contributing to an employee's wages
- providing job specific training

- providing ongoing support.

Disability perspective: See above.

Indicators: 11% of the people who access Flexi-wage services are receiving JS-HCD, and 0.3% are receiving SLP. Flexi-wage is rated effective overall and is identified as effective in improving employment outcomes for SLP and JS-HCD clients specifically

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Oranga Mahi (disability-specific)

Objective: A programme of cross-agency trials and services delivered in partnership with Primary Health Organisations, District Health Boards, Iwi, and Community Providers. The aim of Oranga Mahi is to support New Zealanders with health conditions or disabilities to:

- improve their health and wellbeing
- increase skills, confidence and independence in the job market
- become work ready and achieve sustainable employment outcomes
- support with wider wellbeing for lasting positive social outcomes.

Note that funding for Oranga Mahi is time-limited and currently ends in June 2025.

Disability perspective: Target audience for Oranga Mahi services are those on a benefit or at risk of coming onto a benefit because of health condition or disability. These services work with them to better manage their health and wellbeing and build skills to bring them closer to the labour market.

Indicators: In FY 2022/23, 2,118 individuals were supported through Oranga Mahi. In FY 2022-23, 726 people completed* an Oranga Mahi Employment service. 168 of these exits had an off-benefit outcome. Of these:

- 137 were supported into employment
- 75 people remained in employment after six months
- 16 people entered full time study/training.

*Exit numbers include those who enrolled prior to July 2022.

* Exit numbers do not include participants in Oranga Mahi programmes who are not MSD clients.

*Exit numbers do not include participants in the Oranga Mahi remote pastoral care services which do not report on employment outcomes or individual level data.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Mainstream Programmes (disability-specific)

Objective: Mainstream Programmes provide a range of wage subsidies that are paid directly to employers to help disabled people gain paid work experience. These programmes include the:

- Mainstream Employment programme - a package of subsidies, training and support programmes to help disabled people, including people with mental health and other health conditions, gain paid work experience
- Mainstream Internship programme – provides an opportunity for a disabled student or student with a health condition (including mental health conditions and/or neurodiversity) to gain work experience in their chosen field.

Disability perspective: The primary outcome of the Mainstream Programmes is to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment.

To be eligible for the Mainstream Employment Programme:

- the client must have a disability or health condition that severely restricts and significantly disadvantages their employment prospects, and which requires assistance in addition to other universal (front-line) services
- the disability or health condition must have been present for a minimum of 6 months and it must be expected to continue for at least four years.

In addition, the client must be sixteen years of age or older.

Indicators: In FY 2022/23, 82 people were supported by the Mainstream Programmes.

The effectiveness of this service is not known.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Specialist Employment Service (disability-specific)

Objective: To support disabled people or people with a health condition to gain sustainable employment and move closer to financial independence.

The service is based on the Employment Support Practice Guidelines (2018) and provides case management, placement into open and inclusive employment as well as ongoing support during employment.

MSD contracts with 39 providers across New Zealand for delivery of these services.

Disability perspective: To be eligible for the Specialist Employment Service, participants must:

- have a disability or health condition, including a mental health condition or neurodiversity, and this is likely to continue for six months or more
- have a disability or health conditions that affects their ability to work
- be ready to work.

Indicators: In FY 2022/23, 6,432 people were supported by the Specialist Employment Service. The effectiveness of this service is not known.

The Specialist Employment Service is focussed on the following outcomes:

- supporting people into work
- supporting people to stay in work.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Sustainable Employment Trial

Objective: To support and encourage SLP clients who want to move into employment or increase their hours of work, to establish whether they can sustain that employment.

The Sustainable Employment Trial allows a person receiving SLP to work 15 hours or more per week in open employment for an agreed period of up to 6 months without losing their entitlement to SLP.

Disability perspective: The option of taking part in an employment trial is available to any SLP client whose ongoing entitlement to benefit will be affected if they regularly work 15 hours or more.

There is no restriction on how soon after being granted SLP a client can take part in an employment trial.

Indicators: 139 participants.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Transition from School Services

Objective: Provides support to young disabled people in their final year of school to plan for what they will do when they leave school, and to connect them with the services and supports they will need to achieve that. This may include connecting people with employment services or Community Participation services.

Available to young people who have been assessed as having High Needs or Very High needs through the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme.

Disability perspective: Available to young people who have been assessed as having High Needs or Very High needs through the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme.

Indicators: In FY 2022/23, between 250 - 400 people were supported by Transition from School Services.

Transition from Schools service focusses on the following outcomes:

- community participation
- vocational training
- employment preparedness.

The effectiveness of this service is not known.

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Job Support Funds:

- Job Support
- Training Support

Objective: The purpose of Support Funds is to increase disabled people and those with health conditions participation in employment by meeting the additional costs incurred as

a direct consequence of the disability when undertaking the same employment or training as a person without a health condition or disability.

Through Support Funds, people can access funding to meet the additional costs related to their employment, which are typically related to assessment, car parking, equipment, interpreters, productivity allowances, support persons, transport, and workplace modifications.

Support is available for both employment (Job Support) and employment focussed training (Training Support).

Disability perspective: To be eligible to receive Support Funds, a participant must:

- have a disability or a health condition that has lasted or is likely to last for at least six months
- the disability or health condition must present a barrier to new or continued employment or training that cannot be overcome by support available through the Ministry's other services such as Flexi-wage or Mainstream Programme funding.

Indicators: In FY 2022/23, 686 MSD clients received Job Support Funding and 28 MSD clients received Training.

The primary outcome of Support Funds is to support disabled people and those with health conditions to retain employment.

The effectiveness of this service is not known.

Lead agency: MSD/MoE

Initiative: Employment Services in Schools for disabled secondary school students – Pilot until June 2026

Objective: To promote employment and employment-related training as 'best options' for disabled learners; improve learners' self-belief and work-preparedness and help learners make a pathway towards employment.

Disability perspective: Focused on young disabled people in secondary school. Available in the Otago-Southland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato and Auckland regions.

Indicators: In FY 2022-23, around 500 people were supported by Employment Service in Schools.

Evaluation of the pilot in February 2023 showed that it was effective at making progress towards its goals, which are to promote employment and employment-related training as 'best options' for disabled learners; improve learners' self-belief and work-preparedness and help learners make a pathway towards employment. It also showed that learners were empowered and it was delivered coherently in line with Enabling Good Lives principles and alongside school activities.³⁶

Lead agency: MSD

Initiative: Job and Training Support funds and Employment Services for people with a disability or health condition lasting longer than 6 months (disability specific).

Objective: To support disabled people, including people with health and mental health conditions or neurodiversity, to prepare for, get and maintain a job.

³⁶ (Vermillion Peirce, 2023). The pilot is currently available in Otago-Southland, Canterbury, Wellington, Waikato and Auckland regions.

Job and Training Support funds are for disabled people who face extra disability-related costs to get or stay in a job.

Disability perspective: Job and Training Support for disabled people who need to pay for extra support to get or stay in a job. MSD also funds Employment Service providers to prepare and connect people to job opportunities.

Depending on a person's support needs, Job Support funds can include equipment, workplace modification, a support person, parking costs, transport, NZSL interpreters, a productivity allowance, or a short-term job coach. Training Support Funds can pay extra disability-related costs faced in training to get or continue in a job; including equipment, NZSL interpretation, a support person, and transport.

Indicators: TBC

Lead agency: Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)

Initiative: Updated Career Education and Guidance Guidelines

Objective: This resource aims to support schools' decision making for designing and delivering careers education and guidance. It will empower school leaders, careers staff, and teachers to support young people and their whānau to access quality careers education and guidance.

Disability perspective: The Ministry will work with Whaikaha to assess how to strengthen disability responsiveness in careers education and guidance through the Guidelines. The Ministry has worked with Whaikaha on the resource's design principles and criteria to date.

Indicators: N/A

Lead agency: Whaikaha

Initiative: Disability Four Point Plan – public sector workforce focus (part of the Public Service Papa Pounamu Diversity and Inclusion programme, led by PSC).

Objective: To improve public sector workplaces for disabled people and increase the number of disabled employees.

Disability perspective: The Four-Point Plan aims to:

- increase visibility of and information about tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people employed in the public service
- increase accessibility for tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people
- increase the number of disabled people in the public service
- identify and close inequities (e.g. pay gaps) as measurement allows for tāngata whaikaha Māori, Pacific and disabled people in the public service.

Indicators: TBC

The Ministry is also working with PSC to include disability in the Gender and Ethnic pay gap and recruitment guidance focused on accessibility and accommodations.

A pilot government Disabled Summer Internship programme is planned for 2025-26.

Lead agency: MOH and other agencies

Initiative: Neurodiversity interagency group

Objective: To provide effective interagency coordination on the Government's work programme on action on neurodiversity.

Disability perspective: Many neurodivergent people will identify as disabled and benefit from progress made in neurodiversity-focused initiatives.

Indicators: N/A, agencies have been preparing a stocktake of neurodiversity related activities.

Non-government initiatives

Organisation: NZ Disabled Employers Network (NZDEN)

Initiative: Employer focused Network – disability specific

Objective:

- Employer communities of practice for discussion of what works well
- Accessible Recruitment Model (ARM-Up) for disabled candidates as well as recruiters
- Considering becoming a recruitment support service broker between Employment Service providers and organisations

- Encouraging recruitment websites to be digitally accessible
- Considering a phone line / email for NZDEN members and development of FAQs
- Possible long-term project on Business Talent Compacts to reduce recruitment barriers and identify skills required from tertiary institutions

Disability perspective: Focused on employers of disabled people or prospective employers to share best practice.

Indicators: N/A

Lead agency: Hanga-Aro-Rau and Waihangā Ara Rau Workforce Development Councils

Initiative: Research the construction, engineering, infrastructure, logistics and manufacturing industries.

Objective: Research to better understand the enablers of and the barriers preventing a disability-inclusive workforce for these industries.

Disability perspective: Research specifically focused on disabled people. It noted opportunities for employers to consider in these industries.

Indicators: N/A – research

Appendix B: Further detail on employment barriers and overseas approaches

2019 MSD consultation on Disability Employment Action Plan

89 In late 2019 MSD consulted on a draft of the previous Disability Employment Action Plan. In summary, consultation with disabled people raised:³⁷

- **Tailored options:** Recognise diversity through tailored employment responses and options, with bottom-up and top-down support from employers. Integrate mental health support and don't target support by diagnosis type.
- **Job and employment support:** More and improved employment support is a priority, including better operational processes. Job support funding should be reviewed, including for part-time and self-employed people.
- **Accessibility:** Accessibility and inclusion in education, transport and the built environment all impact employment. Priorities: pathways to work, transitions

³⁷ (Ministry of Social Development, July 2020)

to/from education, and transition or retraining at all life stages.

- **Raise expectations:** Expectations and public education is important - for disabled people, families, community, workplaces and employers.
- More **inclusive** employers, workplaces and enabling innovation:
 - Partner with employers to promote inclusive workplaces. Employers need practical tailored support to improve recruitment and provide flexible in-work arrangements. Others noted the impact of bullying.
 - Fund and enable innovation and business development, e.g. co-design innovative approaches with tāngata whaikaha Māori.
 - Other feedback suggested incentives to employ more disabled people, engaging experts with lived experience to help employers.
- Monitoring **priorities:** There should be monitoring of progress, including for priority groups like those with learning disability, Māori and Pacific people, and those with mental health conditions.

- Public sector: It should lead by example as an exemplary employer.
- Other support: The impact of employment on net income for people with high support needs and eligibility for other supports should be addressed.

Disabled people and tāngata whaikaha in technology industries

90 The Toi Mai Workforce Development Council also released research about disabled people and tāngata whaikaha in Tech, noting:³⁸

- There are enormous business advantages available through diversity
- Disabled people experience higher rates of digital exclusion overall, and often encounter ableism and bias in recruitment processes which must be addressed
- Data suggests that disabled people are significantly underrepresented in the tech workforce.

Approaches taken overseas

91 A recent Deloitte survey on disability inclusion at work globally, showed that most respondents disclosed their

³⁸ (Tim Worth, 2025)

disability at work (nearly 90%), and one fifth of people who chose not to were concerned about discrimination. 74 percent who requested workplace accommodations had at least one request denied, with 41 percent of that group were told it was too costly, and around 30 percent told it was unreasonable. 41 percent reported issues like bullying or harassment.³⁹

92 The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is promoting disability inclusion as a strategic advantage, noting it is good for the organisation, increasing resilience, productivity, effectiveness and sustainability.⁴⁰

93 An initiative 'Job Market Redesign and Talent Compact' has been developed by Scott-Parker International and NZDEN has proposed we consider it NZ. This approach is worth exploring for disabled people closer to the labour market, but different approaches would be necessary for those with persisting disadvantage. It aims to bring disabled jobseekers and employers together to drive better demand and supply of disabled talent; shifting from a 'push' to 'pull' labour market supports approach.⁴¹

³⁹ (Deloitte, 2024) The Survey included 10,000 people with disabilities, chronic health conditions and neurodivergence across 20 countries.

⁴⁰ (ILO, n.d.)

⁴¹ (Scott-Parker, October 2022). For example, in 2022 five Networks in Asia mapped the digital skills most 'in demand' by employers as a first step.

- empower mainstream employers and training organisations to enable disabled people to meet the demands of the job market
- establish a structured partnership between employers and mainstream training providers; to link match disabled talent to the labour market.⁴²

94 The UK civil service has developed a wide range of different schemes (employment pathways) for people who face barriers to employment, including autistic people, so they have the chance to be selected for entry or advisory level civil services jobs.⁴³

⁴² A ready pool of potential candidates - who are known by the employer, who are suitable and/or qualified, and who are interested.

⁴³ (Civil Service Careers UK, n.d.)

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