

The Hon. Bill Shorten MP  
Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

cc: The Hon. K. Ellis MP, Minister for Employment Participation.

Dear Minister Shorten,

**Subject: labour force participation of people with autism**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that labour force participation for people with “autism” is substantially worse than the outcomes reported for people with a disability generally and for Australia’s indigenous population (see Annex A below).

Government schemes that “bring forward strict new work tests, update the definition of incapacity, introduce new requirements for younger recipients” [2011-12 Budget Speech] and so on, do not increase employment of people with “autism”.

Most people with “autism” are keen to work but they do not have jobs because:

- a) Australia’s education systems do not prepare them for employment;
- b) the support they need in employment is not available; and
- c) policies and practices in government and business HR departments prevent people with autism spectrum disorders from getting, or making it through, a job interview.

Your Government could increase supported employment places and improve services to address the needs of a growing number of people with severe or profound “autism” who leave school each year (see Annex B below).

*Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia (A4)* would like to know what your Government is doing to:

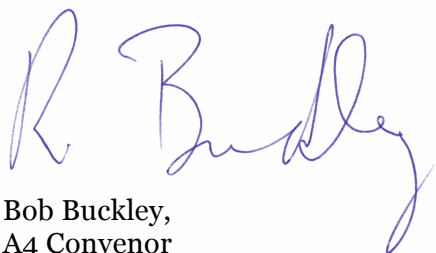
1. recognise or acknowledge the disappointing outcomes reported for participation of people with autism Australia’s labour force; and
2. improve participation of people with autism spectrum disorders in the labour force.

A4 acknowledges the Government is developing a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), however unless autism is a particular focus of the NDIS, labour force participation for people with autism spectrum disorders may not progress.

3. Will the proposed National Disability Insurance Scheme directly improve employment of Australians with autism spectrum disorders? If so, how?

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Bob Buckley,  
A4 Convenor

14/8/2012

## Annex A: Background and references

### ABS Autism Report

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported<sup>1</sup> on data collect in 2009 for its Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC).

- The 2009 SDAC showed an estimated 64,600 Australians had autism. This is an increase of 34,200 from the 2003 SDAC, or more than double the prevalence identified in 2003.
- Of people with autism, 74% reported having a profound or severe core activity limitation (that is, they need help or supervision with at least one of the following three activities - mobility, communication or self-care).
- Data from the SDAC suggests the difficulties experienced in the education system continue after school. Of people with autism who had finished school, 77% had not completed a post-school qualification. This is well above the rate for both the rest of the population with disability and people with no disability.
- As with restrictions in education, autism also correlates with restrictions in participating in the labour force. In 2009, the labour force participation rate for people with autism was 34%. This compares with 54% labour force participation rate for people with disabilities and 83% for people without disabilities.

The number of people with autism has more than doubled in the period from 2003 to 2009. Data from previous SDAC showed autism increased from 13,200 in 1998 to 34,200 in 2003.

These increases seen in the SDAC are consistent with increases seen Carer Allowance recipients for Autistic Disorder and Asperger's Disorder ("autism") since 2004. The number of young children with autism spectrum disorders who are registered for the services funded through the *Helping Children with Autism* package has also risen; in fact it rose enough to required a substantial increased allocation of funds in the last federal Budget.

The Health Department is "confused" over the issue of increasing numbers of children with autism spectrum disorders. On 7/8/2007, an email<sup>2</sup> from the Department's Director of Children and Youth Mental Health Programs Section to staff in FaHCSIA (subject: Summary Paper on Autism Spectrum Disorder Proposals from DOHA, importance: High) said ...

Of very great concern is the increase in the reported prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in Australia and overseas. A recent Australian study in the Barwon region of Victoria found a 10-fold increase in the prevalence of autism diagnoses over a 16-year period. ...

But the Health Department told a Senate Estimates ...

... The Department is not aware of any evidence of any major shifts in prevalence of autism in Australia.

(Answers To Estimates, Questions On Notice, Health And Ageing Portfolio, Additional Estimates 2010-2011, 23 February 2011, Question: E11-184<sup>3</sup>.

The AIHW reports that for boys in 2003, autism was second highest "burden of disease and injury". The growth in autism/ASD diagnosis since 2003 lifts autism/ASD to close to the top on the list for both boys and girls in Australia. Remarkably, the federal Health Department essentially ignores the substantial health service needs of many Australians who experience the highest burden of disease and injury.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4428.oMain%20Features72009>

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.dpmc.gov.au/foi/docs/ips/disclosure\\_logs/2011-068\\_80\\_Interagency\\_email\\_re\\_summary.pdf](http://www.dpmc.gov.au/foi/docs/ips/disclosure_logs/2011-068_80_Interagency_email_re_summary.pdf) page 6

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee-/clac\\_ctte/estimates/add\\_1011/doha/184.pdf](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee-/clac_ctte/estimates/add_1011/doha/184.pdf)

Labour force participation outcomes reported for people with “autism” are substantially worse than the labour force participation reported for people with a disability generally and for Australia’s indigenous population<sup>4</sup>. In 2009, 74% of people with “autism” had severe or profound disability. Many of these people will need substantial support in any workplace. However, your Government has not increased supported employment places to address the needs of a growing number of people with “autism” who leave school each year.

The 2012-13 Budget claims to provide \$10.3 million for Australian Disability Enterprises Sector (see [http://www.budget.gov.au/2012-13/content/bp2/html/bp2\\_expense-09.htm](http://www.budget.gov.au/2012-13/content/bp2/html/bp2_expense-09.htm)), funding that may not even keep pace with inflation. Possibly, cuts (“efficiencies”) to the Job Capacity Assessment will not improve labour force participation for people with autism.

The 2011-12 Budget Speech says

“To slow the growth of Disability Support Pension numbers and get more people in the workforce, we will bring forward strict new work tests, update the definition of incapacity, introduce new requirements for younger recipients, provide more wage subsidies, and allow more hours to be worked before payments are suspended.”

The Government aims to restrict access to DSP (essential support) for people with severe and profound disability, forcing them onto New Start instead (a substantial cut in support) when there is little or no prospect that they will ever get or maintain a job. This approach did not work in the past – surely the Public Servants told you this. Or did the bureaucrats push this policy hoping better luck will win through 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> time round? It appears to have failed, again. This gamble did not work out for Government and it may appear that no real harm was done ... except making the lives of some of Australia’s most vulnerable citizens significantly more difficult.

The Budget Speech may appeal to big business; but it vilifies people with severe or profound disability – it implies people with a disability are bludgers: that they **choose** to not work, that their problem is laziness or indolence rather than disability and lack of support.

Vilifying people with a disability is not an effective approach to improving labour force outcomes for people with autism spectrum disorders.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/6287.0~2010~Chapter~Participation>

## Annex B. Supported employment example

Following is an example showing how the supported employment systems that our Governments fund actually operate in practice. The names are coded to protect privacy: M is the mother of A, a 30+ year old with severe/profound disability due to autism; V manages services supported employment in a well-established “supported employment” service provider called K. This is M’s most recent attempt to engage her son A (who has never been included in supported employment) in Government funded supported employment.

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**From:** V  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 10 July 2012 3:11 PM  
**To:** M  
**Subject:** A Work Trial

Dear M

I have spoken with my Director and unfortunately we will not be able to facilitate A having an extra support worker for the period of his work trial.

K has a policy which does not allow the inclusion of one on one support staff in the supported employment environment. We must also consider the other supported employees who work for us and are likely to find the arrangement disruptive and also question why they were / are not able to bring an additional support themselves. There are also insurance and OHS considerations with having an additional person, who is not a K employee, in the workplace.

The employment environment in which A has been offered a work trial is a supported work environment and K staff endeavour to ensure that all people undertaking a work trial have the maximum available support time to ease them into the work environment.

If you would like to progress A's work trial please advise and I will update the site that he will be commencing from Monday 16th July, for the days and hours outlined in the letter previously sent to you.

Kind Regards

V  
**Compliance & Policy Coordinator**  
K  
**P: 5555 5555**

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**From:** M  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 10 July 2012 23:53  
**To:** V  
**Subject:** RE: A Work Trial

Dear V,

My question was whether A’s support worker could be in sufficient proximity to the premises to provide reassurance to a person with anxieties and be available to A and be a resource to his employers as required.

This question was asked in the specific and reasonable context of a possible transition to work arrangement and for the purposes of establishing a mutually agreed “setting up for success” approach to the trial.

I did not request that his support worker be physically in the work area/workspace/work environment of A and any other co-workers.

I look forward to your response to my question.

Thank you  
M

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**From:** V  
**Sent:** Wednesday, 11 July 2012 11:46 AM  
**To:** M  
**Subject:** RE: A Work Trial

Dear M,

Thank you for your response. I understand the reasoning behind your request as we have had similar ones in the past, for reasons of anxiety rather than work performance. Equally, as we were unable to facilitate these requests we are not able to facilitate your request. For reasons of fairness, the nature of the work trial and insurance and OHS considerations A is not able to have a support worker with him at K for his work trial. What if the support person were to call A throughout the day of his work trial?

Kind Regards

V  
**Compliance & Policy Coordinator**  
K  
**P: 5555 5555**

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**From:** M  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 14 August 2012 12:30 AM  
**To:** V  
**Subject:** RE: A Work Trial

Dear V,

Thank you for response, though it leaves me quite puzzled.

I approached you about the possibility of supported employment for my son, A, who is severely, perhaps profoundly, disabled by his autism. As I indicated to you, he is regarded as non-verbal and he needs substantial support.

You proposed "trialling" a person with a substantive disability that you have not met or requested to meet, for a possible future position funded specifically for people like A, who meet the criterion for supported employment, their being unable to find employment other than in "supported" employment such as that provided by your organisation.

From your response, I understand that someone with a disability who needs support from a support worker cannot access your service, even if the support worker is for an initial training and settling in period, or as a transitional element in getting someone "work-ready".

Could you please specify what disability supports people with a disability who access your service are allowed while accessing your service, or even during their "transition to work"? For example, can a person who normally depends on a wheelchair for mobility access your supported employment service? If they cannot have the support of a wheelchair in your supported employment service, can they use their wheelchair during their "transition to work"? Can a person who gets support from a guide-dog use your service? Are people who wear a hearing-aid as a form of disability support able to access your supported employment service?

Could you please advise exactly how "insurance and OHS considerations" limit access to supported employment for people with a disability who need substantial levels of support, citing relevant clauses, provisions and interpretations of the Act as they apply in your workplace.

You ask "What if the support person were to call A throughout the day of his work trial?" As previously advised A is non-verbal and cannot communicate effectively for that purpose using a telephone. A support person calling A to verbally enquire after and engage in a conversation about his welfare would be ineffective.

Sincerely

**M**