



Woolworths response to National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) discussion paper on the Indigenous, Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP)

The Woolworths Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NIAA [discussion paper](#) on the new Indigenous, Skills, Employment and Engagement Program (ISEP). Today Woolworths has a footprint of over 1,000 supermarkets across every state and territory in Australia and employs more than 160,000 team members, including more than 4,500 who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (First Nations people).

As one of Australia's largest private-sector employers we recognise the important role we play in creating opportunity for many Australians. We are committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to close the gap, increase economic opportunities for Indigenous Australians and to create an inclusive workplace.

To bring our commitments to life we need to engage genuinely and to hold ourselves to account against our purpose and values. We have not always got this right. In April 2021 we announced we would not proceed with a proposed development of a Dan Murphy's in Darwin following an Independent Panel Review (IPR) of the proposal. This review criticised Woolworths' approach, highlighting issues of corporate purpose and trust, which has given us much to reflect on.

Our attention since then has been on listening and learning, and considering what we can do to strengthen our foundations for deeper, more thoughtful relationships with First Nations people. This will include looking at improvements to our recruitment, training and advancement of First Nations team members as well as resourcing our leadership capability on First Nations issues. This is in addition to our public support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and initiatives to elevate the voices of First Nations people in our decision making.

In this submission we share our experience to date with the Government's Employment Parity Initiative since 2015, as well as our own employment programs over time. Based on these experiences we provide responses to the themes raised in the discussion paper, but in doing so, highlight that we still have significant work to do in realising our own aspirations for First Nations employment and building stronger relationships with First Nations communities.

Recent history of First Nations employment at Woolworths

In 2011, we started working with Diversity Dimensions (a Sydney based, non-Indigenous organisation), who were part of a government panel to provide First Nations recruitment to large corporate organisations. Then in 2015 we joined the Government's Employment Parity Initiative, with Diversity Dimensions, to create our *Resourcing the Future (RTF)* program.

Woolworths also hires many First Nations people through its public recruitment channels. In total, we currently employ 4,791 team members who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (noting that self-identification is optional). These team members work in a range of frontline and management roles in stores, distribution centres and support offices.



Resourcing the Future (RTF) Program and the Employment Parity Initiative

Woolworths has received funding from the Employment Parity Initiative (EPI) over the past five years for our RTF program, which has now supported 3,372 job seekers. RTF is named after our push towards sustainable and meaningful employment where it is needed most, and has been designed for people who met the criteria set out in the EPI funding categories, including disadvantaged, long-term unemployed or candidates who have never worked.

The funding received under the EPI has been passed onto our employment service partner, Diversity Dimensions, who use the funds to identify jobseekers and offer them extensive support including pre-employment training, application and placement support and ongoing mentoring during the first six months of employment. The program helps to get participants job-ready, allows them to skip formal interviews, understand what the job is about and get comfortable in their surroundings.

Woolworths pays the full wage costs for the team members as well as invests in related activities to try and maximise the prospects of a successful employment experience. Woolworths does not profit financially from the program.

Key program insights

The program has been well received by teams across Australia. Key findings include:

- The flexible hours and availability of part-time roles Woolworths can offer appears to suit many candidates identified through our partnership with Diversity Dimensions, particularly those looking to enter the workforce for the first time or after a break.
- 65 per cent of the EPI-funded roles were offered in regional or remote Australia.
- Since the program began, the retention rate up to 6 months is more than 70 per cent. Of the team members who reach 6 months with us, 80 per cent have gone on to reach one year.

Other Employment Partnerships

As a way to connect more with local First Nations communities, we have also established a partnership with Clontarf Foundation - a non-Indigenous organisation working to improve the education, life skills and employment prospects of young First Nations men. We had initially worked with Clontarf informally at a store level and in 2020 we formalised this partnership. One of the benefits we have seen from this program is the longer term mentorship support for students from Clontarf as they enter the workforce, particularly where mentors are connected to the local community.

Responding to the key themes in the discussion paper

- **Building employment initiatives with communities for communities**

In the past, for some regional and remote stores where we have vacancies, we have not always been successful recruiting First Nations team members, despite a higher



representation of First Nations people as a proportion of the population in those areas.

Our experience and learnings, including through the recent IPR review on the Dan Murphy's proposal in Darwin, have reinforced the need to have a localised rather than a national approach to First Nations engagement.

We are currently seeking ways we can work more closely alongside local stakeholders to build cultural understanding as well as share our workforce plans and projected vacancies, and learn about what changes we can make to better support prospective job seekers.

- **Creating a culturally safe and inclusive workplace**

Organisations are the main beneficiaries from the experiences, skills and perspectives of First Nations employees and should therefore invest in creating an environment where First Nations people want to join and are supported. We understand that significant barriers to employment and maintaining employment can be driven by an organisations' cultural understanding and approach, rather than by the circumstances of job seekers themselves. There is more learning and work for us to do in this area. We are starting with:

- Strengthening cultural awareness across the Group and making 'Learning for Reconciliation' training available to all team members and leaders.
- Developing a First Nations employment strategy that articulates a stronger Employee Value Proposition (EVP) for First Nations team members.
- Creating a framework, funding and support for a voice for First Nations team members that supports co-creation, connection, advice and feedback at a number of levels across the organisation.

- **Working with local communities to measure success.**

While retention, career progression and salaries are important factors, they are not the only ways to evaluate program success. Broader measures of success can be determined with local communities to ensure that the programs are meeting the community needs and are culturally appropriate.

For example, measuring retention alone could have the effect of putting candidates who require more support at a disadvantage. Similarly, a measure of linear career progression may not be right for all candidates, particularly those who could benefit from a number of different entry level work experiences before they have the skills and self belief to make a longer term contribution. Other factors that could be considered include how empowered, included and supported an individual feels along their employment journey.

- **Support for workforce readiness, mentoring and support**

In addition to our focus on creating an inclusive and culturally safe workplace, we



recognise that not everyone's journey from unemployment to employment is linear. Candidates who have experienced significant disadvantage and long term unemployment may require more culturally-led and individually tailored support.

Through our existing programs we have seen the positive impact a strong mentor has with our team members, especially when provided in partnership or consultation with local communities.

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