

2023 / 2024 ANNUAL REPORT



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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

BEST acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we conduct our business and live. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging. BEST are committed to honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

2023-2024 has been a challenging year for everyone involved in BEST Employment Ltd. Firstly, we had the implementation of the Strategic Plan which included a restructure of the Executive and other positions. Then we had the retirement of our long-standing CEO followed by the appointment of Anna Watt to the position.

I acknowledge the whole organisation has been under pressure due to the constraints and requirements of various contracts. I congratulate everyone in the organisation for their commitment to BEST. The BEST ethos has always been at the forefront.

I will be retiring from the Board at the AGM in October 2024. I think that after 44 years it is time to pass the baton on. I would like to thank my fellow Directors, and everyone involved in BEST for the support they have given me throughout the years.

Jon Watts
Chair



MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

This Annual Report provides a snapshot of BEST's achievements and core activities from the past year for our stakeholders.

Under the leadership of the former CEO, BEST revised its vision and developed a new Strategic Plan 2023-2026 which were rolled out as part of our Value's Roadshow "The BEST Way Forward" to all teams across our footprint. In addition, BEST reviewed and implemented a new organisational structure that aligned to the new Strategic Plan.

This new structure was finalised in early October 2023 and I was employed as CEO with BEST shortly after, with the key focus of making that new vision, values, strategic plan and organisational structure a reality.

Early in 2024 Jobs Australia Enterprises Ltd, who shared the New England North West Employment Region with BEST, handed back their Workforce Australia (WFA) Contract to the Federal Government. BEST was asked to take over this contract and as a result experienced significant growth. This unprecedented handover saw BEST welcome over a thousand new customers, which required an internal structural expansion that welcomed 22 new staff to the organisation. Through intensive bulk recruitment, onboarding and training our new staff successfully joined our existing teams and all customers were triaged and commenced with us in April 2024. I would like to congratulate staff and stakeholders involved in this important and unprecedented project.

In February we were honoured to host a Vice Regal visit with Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC, Governor of New South Wales at the BEST Nursery and the BEST Food Garden as part of her New England Regional Visit.

In April, the Federal Government announced it was ceasing Harvest Trail Service (HTS) and Harvest Trail Information Services as of 30 June. BEST had been delivering HTS since 2009 in Stanthorpe, Queensland, later expanding to Gatton. Our HTS teams achieved remarkable milestones, developed strong relationships and had far reaching impact in their local communities.

The BEST Community Services and Social Enterprises team continued to achieve above average referral results in the Casework Support Program, accepting 26% greater referrals than contracted, with 91% of referrals being Aboriginal young people. In finalising financial year claims, the Opportunity Pathways program outperformed previous targets, despite staffing challenges.

We are proud of our wide span of involvement in the community which includes a vast number of programs such as our Breakfast Club and Homework Centre. Amazing fact: we served over 2,600 breakfasts over the year and did over 1,200 homework assists!

A big thank you to our generous volunteers at the BEST Community Shed, who have donated more than forty thousand dollars back into the Inverell and surrounding communities. Our fabulous volunteers manage and operate the Shed, provide food vouchers and support to those who require help or connection to other providers in the community.

A number of sponsorships have contributed to supporting various community programs and events across our footprint, which assist to overcome challenges faced by our rural communities.

Our Information Technology team has been busy relocating us to cloud servers. The Business Intelligence team has created a suite of tailored dashboards so that our various operational teams have key statistical data and comprehensive reporting provided in real time. Our Human Resources team held our inaugural two-day

Leadership Conference in October that was well received and have invested heavily in Leadership Capability across the various teams.

Financially, it must be noted that the Employment Services Industry is experiencing its most challenging time in the last 25 years, substantiated by the numerous government reforms currently playing out. While BEST's financial results for the year were expected, I am committed to working closely with the Board the Executive Team and the wider Leadership Team to be aware of reform movement and the need to flex accordingly. In addition, we will continue to work on our strategic pillar of Performance; to be continuously improving our business and governance processes to enhance our performance and quality of services.

This report is just one of the ways that BEST is able to share the work that we do with our stakeholders and an opportunity for me to acknowledge and thank our volunteers and staff for their valued contributions. I extend particular thanks to the Board and the Executive Team for welcoming me to BEST along with the support you have given me in my first year with BEST.

Anna Watt
Chief Executive Officer



THE BEST BOARD



THE BEST EXECUTIVE



Executive from October 2023 (left to right)
Roger Abbott (Chief Corporate Services Officer), Julie Sills (Chief Human Resources Officer),
Anna Watt (Chief Executive Officer), Natasha Reynolds (Chief Operations Officer),
Katrina Garrett (Chief Financial Officer)

ABOUT BEST

BEST Employment Ltd (BEST) is a not-for-profit company which provides a range of employment services throughout the New England North West (NENW) and Far West Orana regions of NSW and the Darling Downs and Granite Belt regions of Southern Queensland. Along with a range of community services, mostly in Inverell and New England North West.

Our skilled and passionate staff work hard to achieve our vision, delivering a high quality service that empowers thousands of people each year to address employment, mental health, training and other welfare related needs. Our vast range of programs and services target people with a disability, jobseekers, employers, Indigenous community members, youth at risk and disadvantaged community members.

As a dynamic company based in regional Australia, BEST understands the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by rural communities. We actively pursue projects and collaborative partnerships that result in innovative solutions aimed at overcoming these challenges thereby building more resilient and sustainable communities.

As a Public Benevolent Institution and registered charity with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status, BEST are committed to focusing efforts on initiatives that support disadvantaged and impoverished groups within the community. This framework not only enhances our operational capabilities but also ensures that our projects align with our mission of providing aid and fostering positive change. Our initiatives include, but are not limited to:



BEST Employment – We have contracts to deliver Workforce Australia and Disability Employment Services (DES) from the Federal Government. We help jobseekers to overcome barriers to employment to achieve a sustainable job.



BEST Harvest Trail – We have a Federal Government contract to link jobseekers with growers in the horticulture industry in the Granite Belt of Queensland.



BEST Nursery – We operate a fully functioning retail and production nursery located in Inverell, NSW. The production division propagates native trees/shrubs and grasses and provides onsite accredited training.



BEST Food Garden – We operate a community-focused garden which provides a safe place for people with a disability, the elderly, youth, volunteers and long-term unemployed jobseekers to learn new skills and participate in meaningful activities. Vegetables are propagated and harvested and delivered weekly free of charge to disadvantaged pension-aged, as well as to impoverished residents and Aboriginal Elders.



BEST Community Services – We provide support and referral pathways to local community members via multiple community programs including Indigenous programs, facilitating several programs that include Breakfast Club and Homework Centre for infants and primary-age school students and suspended students program. Several case management programs which include the Case Support Program with Youth Justice working with young offenders, the Helping Hands Program that works with Indigenous youth at risk of incarceration, the Opportunity Pathways Program-Social Impact Investment assisting people in social housing to engage in education, training and employment with a view to access the private rental market and break generational cycles of unemployment and social housing support.



BEST Community Connections – We provide extensive services to people with disabilities, with a strong focus on person centred planning, inclusiveness and independence. We support people to make choices around how they want to live their life, their way, supporting people to have the best life possible.



BEST Community Shed – In collaboration with local volunteers we operate a holistic social initiative, where community-donated clothing, furniture, homewares and other items are sold through our shopfront in Inverell. Proceeds are donated back to the community.



Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC (middle) on her visit to BEST Nursery in February 2024. Also pictured, from left to right: Peter Gaukroger (Board member), Anna Watt (CEO), Rachel McLennan (Board member), Vicki Willis (Nursery Team Leader), Brett Hawkins (Nursery & Community Programs Coordinator), Emily Cairns (Nursery Retail Assistant)

OUR CUSTOMERS, OUR COMMUNITY, OUR COMMITMENT

Our commitment is to demonstrate a fundamental respect for people inside and outside our company and respect for the communities in which they live. People are our most important resource and advantage. It's through trust, respect, and empathy that our people, staff, and service users alike, grow and prosper.

Strong leadership, of our teams and of ourselves, is vital for creating the infrastructure and environment that is necessary for our people to focus on their goals and achieve their potential.

Our commitment is to always remain consistently open, honest, ethical, and genuine. We care about what we do and how we do it. We believe it is important to match words with outcomes.

Passion and positivity are at the heart of our company. We are committed in mind and spirit, to always moving forward, whilst innovating and improving. We utilise this commitment to energise, engage and inspire others.

We look to continuously improve what and how we do things, to remain focused on the achievement of business excellence in every business unit. We are committed to measuring the things that make a difference.



**WE ARE COMMITTED
TO PEOPLE**



**WE EXERCISE LEADERSHIP
BY EXAMPLE**



WE MAINTAIN INTEGRITY



**WE OPERATE WITH
PASSION AND POSITIVITY**



**WE STRIVE CONSISTENTLY
FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE**

BEST'S VISION

OUR VISION

BEST will develop and support independent, thriving, and resilient communities throughout regional NSW and QLD

PURPOSE

To provide inclusive services and supports to assist and empower people and communities to realise their full potential



2023 - 2024 PROFILE

WORKFORCE AUSTRALIA

Customers commenced during the year	3,814
Total Customers as at 30 June 2024	6,610

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT

Customers commenced during the year	333
Total Customers as at 30 June 2024	512

HARVEST TRAIL SERVICES

Participants serviced	600
Farmers serviced	76
Total employment placements	950



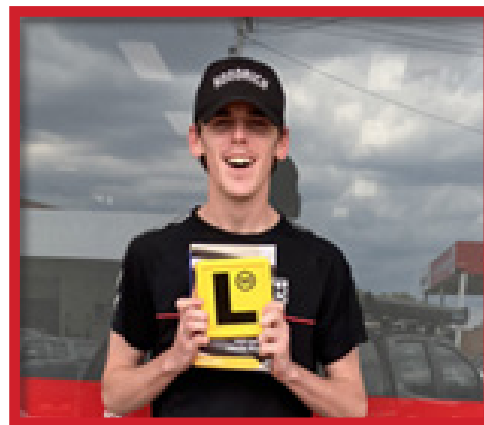
COMMUNITY SERVICES PROGRAMS

CASEWORK SUPPORT PROGRAM

Customers commenced during the year	81
Current Customers as at 30 June 2024	21
Exited goals achieved	65%

DOMESTIC FAMILY VIOLENCE

Parents serviced	31
Young People serviced	27
Current parents as at 30 June 2024	12
Current Young People	5



HELPING HANDS

Customers commenced	45
Current Customers as at 30 June 2024	25
Exited goals achieved	56%

OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS – SOCIAL IMPACT INVESTMENT

Customers commenced	87
Current customers as at 30 June 2024	53



THE BEST FOOTPRINT



OPERATIONS

Workforce Australia

Across NENW and Far West Regions the WFA team provided tailored and meaningful support to 6,610 customers. Across the footprint our teams actively engaged in their communities and collaborated with industry partners to provide inclusive services that assisted customers and community alike to realise their full potential.

Jobs Australia Enterprises Ltd who shared the NENW Employment Region with BEST, handed back their WFA Contract to the Federal Government in early 2024. BEST was asked to take this contract and as a result experienced significant growth in April. This unprecedented handover saw BEST welcome over a thousand new customers, which required an internal structural expansion that welcomed 22 new staff to the organisation. Through intensive bulk recruitment, onboarding and training our new staff successfully joined our existing teams and all customers were triaged and commenced with our services.

Our Workforce Australia Leadership team executed projects to enhance our service delivery model, streamline operational processes to maximise efficiencies and developed our collective workforce. There has been a continued focus on ensuring our Workforce service delivery truly embraces a 'customer-first approach', ensuring customer feedback and providing optimal support define the ways in which we work. From this customer first focus we have seen a myriad of good news stories of our BEST Workforce customers successfully overcoming barriers and gaining independence.

Customer Trish has experienced significant social anxiety in her life and eventually decided that the solution was for her and her husband to work for themselves. Trish and her husband Casey had been working very hard to set up their small mobile food and coffee business.

BEST's Employment Fund assisted with their Food Safety Supervisor Certificates through the Tenterfield Connected Learning Centre. Being a very skillful couple, between them they repaired their vintage Morris, and their van was outfitted with all the requirements for council to approve it for food vending. Trish was keen to learn social media skills, her Workforce Adviser helping her to set up an Instagram account to promote the business. After a few test days at the Drake Village Resource Centre it became apparent that the food van needed to provide coffee as well; this was not something either person had experience with, and they contacted BEST to see if barista training was available.



Trish's Workforce Adviser worked with TAFE to have Trish and Casey placed in a course in Tenterfield taught by Honor Griffiths (pictured with Trish and Casey in the TAFE mobile coffee van). Trish and Casey now park their food van three days a week in Drake and attended the famous Tabulam Race Day as one of three invited food vendors.

Throughout this period the Australian Government House Select Committee Inquiry to WFA was released. BEST has actively engaged in industry consultation throughout this process and will continue to, remaining a voice for our team, employers and customers in a time of review and upcoming change. As an organisation BEST welcomes reform and improvement to the WFA contract and are extremely proud of the tangible and positive impact this service delivery has on our customers across our footprint.

Disability Employment Services

The DES team delivered the Department of Social Services (DSS) Employment Support Services Contract across 15 locations in Southern Queensland, Hunter and Western NSW Labour Market Regions. BEST's Vision was honoured with DES investing over \$150,000 to support our valued employers and participants with disabilities. This investment included: courses, training and upskilling, job related tickets and equipment, Medical, Allied Health and Specialist Disability Supports within the communities we operate in.

Other points of note:

- Extensive work has been undertaken post COVID challenges and external factors being experienced in the Disability sector, including National caseload reductions and inflation pressures. A strong continuous improvement focus has been necessary: Process updates and efficiencies captured, priority focus shifts and review of employer and participant quality of service and employment support strategies.
- In partnership with an external stakeholder, our team embarked on a Pilot study, surveying 160 of our participants with disabilities to seek feedback on our customer service, how we could better meet their needs, and providing a selection of enhanced service offerings for them to vote preferentially. In addition to our participant feedback, we sought feedback from our DES staff in order to co-design a Service Delivery Pilot. This Pilot continues, with 63 of our DES participants with the highest support needs having participated in the Pilot to date. Service offerings to participants were extended with BEST partnering with High Quality Allied Health services and training providers. A thorough Pilot review will be undertaken during the first half of next financial year.
- BEST achieved all DES DSS Interim Performance Measures released in April 2024, with over 50 of our participants with permanent verified disabilities being able to celebrate remaining in employment for more than six months since commencing their Open Employment roles.
- BEST welcomed the newly released DES Enhanced Quality Framework, which was rolled out nationally this year, participating in extensive feedback and consultation during its development.
- Significant Disability Employment Reforms continue, with BEST being actively involved in consultation meetings, providing feedback and suggestions to shape the future of Disability Employment.
- Our active membership with peak body stakeholders Disability Employment Services Australia, Jobs Australia, the National Employment Services Association and local Chamber of Commerce and Disability Advocacy Groups has ensured that our team collaborates extensively on BEST practice strategies, continuous improvement and is able to absorb extensive information to ensure our team have broad knowledge relating to the Disability sector and latest developments.

"[I feel] Very confident because of the support I receive from my Job Coach/ BEST that I will get a job in the future."


Disability Employment Services Participant

"I am confident in BEST. I am very confident, it's a matter of when, not if I get work. I feel supported by BEST and know they will come through for me, they are helpful and supportive."

Disability Employment Services Participant

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the time to hear me out today. It has turned into a very positive step in getting back into the workforce."

Disability Employment Services Participant



Jeff's story demonstrates BEST's commitment to individualised employment support, strong communication, and collaboration to achieve sustainable employment outcomes for all community members. BEST continues to support Jeff.

Jeff's journey to meaningful employment highlights the exceptional support BEST offers to individuals facing challenges. Despite his significant intellectual challenges and a support system located three hours away, Jeff's determination, and BEST's unwavering support, led to a positive outcome.

Jeff dreamed of working in a café, so BEST coordinated a Barista course for Jeff through TAFE QLD, followed by a paid work trial at a local café. While the position didn't continue, it provided valuable insights on how to better support Jeff in finding new employment.

Through ongoing efforts with job applications and employer negotiations, BEST secured another interview for Jeff. This time his DES Job Coach accompanied him to inform the employer about the supports and training Jeff would need, and highlighting his potential as a loyal and motivated employee. With the right support and accommodations in place, Jeff was offered a position as a barista.

Key interventions from BEST included negotiating with employers, assisting with wage subsidies, and providing direct job support during Jeff's initial shifts. Collaborative efforts with Jeff's NDIS Coordinator and Support Manager ensured alignment of resources and support to achieve Jeff's employment goals.

Jeff has been employed for over a year now and is well-loved by his colleagues and café customers. He takes great pride in his work, and working independently has significantly enriched his life.

Disability Employment Services Participant

Harvest Trail Services

BEST's four Harvest Trail Services team members delivered services spanning from Gatton QLD to Boggabilla in NSW. Staff demonstrated impeccable alignment to BEST's Purpose, Vision and Values over the last 12 Months, despite the instability of the Harvest contracts longevity.

BEST Harvest Trail placed an average of 79 individuals per month over the last 12 months into paid employment with 76 different Harvest Growers/Businesses. The team attracted and mobilised suitable candidates to the Harvest Employers area and conducted recruitment screening, Visa Checks and Harvest safe work and Fair Work education prior to their commencement. Suitable candidates sourced ranged from Grey Nomads travelling Australia, local Australians residing in the Harvest Area or willing to travel to the area and Working Holiday Makers on Overseas Working Visas.

BEST's Harvest team operated a 24 hour, seven day per week Harvest Employer contact service to fulfill each Grower's recruitment needs throughout their peak seasons ensuring the produce would end up on supermarket shelves in a timely manner and no produce was left to spoil due to insufficient worker numbers.

In April 2024, the Federal Government announced its decision to cease the Harvest Trail Services and Harvest Trail Information Services contracts nationally on 30 June 2024. Our team contacted all Harvest Employers and offered support around any vacancies they may have, after 30 June, which would be eligible for our Workforce Australia or DES teams to action. In addition, our team offered additional support to employers and Harvest candidates with education regarding the processes after contract cessation.

The Harvest vacancy types most regularly in need of Harvest Trail Services recruitment support over the previous 12 months were: strawberry and berry roles, stone fruit and citrus, apple pruning and picking, grape production, tractor and machinery operation, factory hands, mushroom farm roles, vegetable picking and packing and cotton positions.

The BEST Harvest team members received extensive feedback after the Harvest contract cessation announcement was made public, with many members of the community reaching out to discuss the loss of the support, advice and assistance the team had provided.

"We thank you for your years of labour provision for our farms. You and the team at BEST have been a pleasure to do business with. We will certainly miss your expertise, professionalism and availability in your service and a great gaping hole will be felt by us."

Harvest Trail Services Employer

"We wish you and your team all the best in your future endeavours and thank you again for all you have done for the farming community."

Harvest Trail Services Employer

Community Services and Social Enterprises

HELPING HANDS

Two new caseworkers joined the Helping Hands team bringing a wealth of cultural knowledge with them and achieving great results. We are continuing to build caseworkers skill sets and support growth in their respective positions. This has included training in DARE (domestic and family violence), RAGE (anger management), Child Abuse and Neglect, Aboriginal Mental Health, and Adult Mental Health.

This is an identified program, so 100% of clients are Aboriginal. Client numbers have been maintained with new referrals pathways relationships formed. We are working with local Aboriginal groups to collaborate and develop programs on country.

Other programs and results achieved as follows:

- Cultural programs are being delivered, which include weaving for young females and didgeridoo workshops for you males.
- Nearly 70% of SMART goals set have been achieved, 25% are either partially achieved or still being worked on and 5% have not been achieved.
- Of the 32 referrals received in the past 12-months for young offenders, only four have re-offended and been incarcerated.

We have been supporting a 14 year old girl who was kicked out of home by her mother. She went to her stepfather who did not have stable accommodation initially, therefore her living arrangements were quite transient and she had a lot of anger issues. In the time she has been engaging with us, we have supported her to complete an Anger Management program, begin learning cooking and weaving, enrol in a Community College course, and get casual employment.

Her journey has not been smooth, and she still has days that are a struggle, but for a young person of 14 years to overcome what she has, demonstrates strength, commitment, and maturity beyond her years. She continues to engage with Helping Hands and we are hopeful of a brighter future for this young person.



EDUCATION AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT (EASE)

SUSPENDED STUDENTS

The suspended students program continues to work with the local schools to provide a safe space for young people to complete work while suspended. This supports their learning, addressing concerns or barriers they may have to education and collaborative practices with education providers.

- There were 12 referrals received during the year.
- 75% of feedback received stated they felt respected by the service and that their privacy and confidentiality was being maintained.
- 100% of feedback received said they found staff friendly and approachable.
- 75% of feedback received rated the program 5 out of 5.

BREAKFAST CLUB

The Breakfast Club service is available every school day to provide breakfast to school age children, as well as ensuring all children are safely at the bus stop ready for transport to school.

- During the year we provided children with over 2,600 breakfasts.
- To participate all children must wear school uniform and attend school.

HOMEWORK CENTRE

The Homework Centre provides children with access to computers and support from staff to complete homework or to increase educational skills such as reading, writing, maths, or educational games.

- The Homework Centre provided assistance to children on more than 1,200 occasions.
- This program is run two afternoons per week, during the school term.
- Afternoon tea is provided.
- We have partnered with the University of Newcastle to have health students deliver interactive workshops to the young people, these have included a speech pathologist, occupational therapist and a physiotherapist. The young people love these visits as they are interactive, and it gives a glimpse of what certain professions do.



During the year the team invited experts to speak with the young people participating in the program. One of the sessions focused on road rules and basic first aid.

The young people then created safety posters (pictured) that were laminated and displayed at the Centre.

CASEWORK SUPPORT PROGRAM (CSP)

- Whilst CSP is funded to accept 64 referrals per funded year, 81 referrals were accepted, being 26% higher than contractual requirements.
- Of the 81 referrals accepted, 91% are Aboriginal young people.
- Of the 337 SMART goals that were set, 61% were fully achieved and 12% were mostly achieved.
- We are currently focusing on collaborating with local Aboriginal services to implement culturally safe programs for participants.
- Staff completed training including DARE (domestic and family violence), RAGE (anger management), bails and AVOs How they work, Cognitive Impairment, Cultural Awareness Training, Adolescence Violence in the Home.



The Moree team received a referral for a young man that had spent only 80 days in the community since 2021 due to being incarcerated. As a result, the young man found it difficult to transition back into life and the community after his latest release. CSP staff began supporting him in December 2023, and from the very beginning he showed a strong commitment to achieving his goals and overcoming barriers - determined to stop re-offending. Since engaging in our program he has secured employment, and proven to be a reliable team member, he is undertaking a traffic control course to provide himself with further employment opportunities, and with the support of his CSP caseworker, he is enrolled to complete his working at heights and confined spaces courses. His caseworker has also supported him to engage in community activities, with one of his highlights being meeting his idol, Cody Walker from the South Sydney Rugby League team. We are so incredibly proud of this young man and all that he has overcome and accomplished at just 17 years of age.

DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE PROGRAM (DFV)

- The DFV program had 37 referrals, with a target of 40 for the year. It should be noted this program was rolled out later than expected with two full time caseworkers, rather than four for the last four months of the pilot.
- Of the 37 referrals accepted, 81% of people are Aboriginal.
- Of the 172 SMART goals set for DFV, 71% were either achieved or mostly achieved.
- The Inverell and Armidale programs have received a further year's funding.
- Staff have completed extensive targeted DFV training including but not limited to Safe Space and DFV modules, Trauma Informed Practice, DARE (domestic and family violence), RAGE (anger management), Victim Services training, Reflective Practices, Supporting young people with disabilities, SAMs training.



This is an excerpt from an email was sent to one of our Family Workers, from Youth Justice Management:

*"Afternoon Kiel [pictured],
I just wanted to acknowledge the work that you have done with a young man and his family this week when he was experiencing suicidal ideation and was self harming. Your professionalism and gauge of the situation was excellent, you went the extra mile to make the young man feel safe and supported which lead him to make the decision to seek help... In speaking with both the young man and his Grandmother today they are both very grateful for your support and your measured thinking. The success of the DFV Program in our area has come from the connection you easily make with young people and their families, your ability to deliver program work and our collaborative work together. Absolute pleasure to continue working with you..., yourself and Nancie and all her amazing work she does. We are very lucky to have this service for our young people."*

OPPORTUNITY PATHWAYS - SOCIAL IMPACT INVESTMENT

- Despite the reduction in staff members, we achieved our best quarter of claims for the period from April to June.
- 67% of referrals received were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander decent.
- 54% of the participants that either achieved an outcome or are tracking towards an outcome are of Aboriginal decent.
- Staff have continuously marketed the program throughout the New England area, nurturing established relationships and building new ones to increase program participation. This includes giving presentations at Womens Refuges, Corrective Services, Rehabilitation Services, Housing providers, Employment Providers and many more.
- Staff training includes Accidental Counsellor and Domestic Violence Aware.



A participant was referred to the Opportunity Pathways program as she was struggling to find consistent work after previous employer had cut her hours. We assisted her with her resume and supported her in applying for a role at McDonalds. The participant was unsure about the role as her children had told her it was for young people. The participant decided to give it a go and successfully gained a delivery driver position. With the ongoing support of the Program, the participant has maintained her employment for over six months and has successfully 'graduated' Opportunities Pathways. With her now stable income the participant has been able to move from Transitional Short Term Temporary Accommodation, where she has been for 12 months, into a private rental.

CENTRELINK AGENT

We continue to effectively deliver the Centrelink Agent contract in Wee Waa, playing a critical role in supporting community members with mutual obligations, self-help navigation, and payment processing. Our dedicated agent, Sue, has fostered strong relationships within the community, ensuring a welcoming environment where individuals feel comfortable seeking assistance. Reports from Service Australia commend Sue's exemplary work ethic and organisational skills. Our staff undergoes rigorous training, including National Disability Service programs, reinforcing our commitment to quality service in the community.

BEST COMMUNITY SHED

The BEST Community Shed continues to be a cornerstone of community support, embodying a model of sustainability and generosity. Throughout the past year, the Shed has diligently worked to collect, refurbish, and sell donated goods, ensuring that their operations not only sustain themselves but also significantly contribute to local initiatives. The strategic allocation of funds, as demonstrated by generous donations to organisations such as the Friendly Faces Helping Hands Foundation and the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Drover Run, underscores their commitment to enhancing community welfare. The involvement of dedicated volunteers has further elevated the Shed's outreach, particularly through enhanced social media campaigns, which have broadened their support network and engaged a more extensive audience. The Shed's activities and contributions exemplify a service-oriented ethos, dedicated to strengthening the Inverell community through thoughtful collaboration and impactful financial support.



During the year, the welfare ladies supported a woman who became homeless due to domestic violence. Initially, they supported her with food and clothing. After she secured accommodation, they helped with furniture and additional clothing. In addition, the lovely ladies also offered priceless emotional support and referral pathways to connect her to additional resources.

Donations made by 'The Shed' to the community during the year included:

Operation: Operating Room	\$20,000
Friendly Faces Helping Hands Foundation	\$10,000
Inverell Pioneer Village	\$1,500
Inverell Community Radio	\$228
Westpac Rescue Helicopter - Drover's Run	\$10,000

The BEST Shed are a proud supporter of the Friendly Faces Helping Hands Foundation (FFHH) in Inverell, linking people in rural communities to major hospitals, health facilities and resources in city areas, by assisting people with access to quality information in times that may be trying or traumatic. 'The Shed' was proud to assist in their endeavours this year.



BEST NURSERY

BEST Nursery and BEST Food Garden have once again demonstrated their commitment to community enrichment and environmental sustainability over the past year. BEST Nursery received over 840,000 pine saplings which undergo a hardening process, ensuring top-grade quality that enhances the vitality and resilience of our forests. This achievement underscores our dedication to environmental stewardship and the meticulous care involved in our operations.

Over a nine month period seeds have been collected for the Windemere property project. This project entails collecting seeds from the property, propagating them at BEST Nursery production, and then planting back at Windemere. This method ensures genetic strains that are viable to that area are planted, which increases viability and resistance to disease. The Windemere project is an innovative initiative that plays a crucial role in preserving the genetic diversity and ecological resilience of the region.

During the year all of our Nursery Retail Staff completed their certificates in Horticulture, with some opting to continue studying, ensuring that our team continues to provide the best service when it comes to our community's sustainability and environmental needs.

Alongside our nursery efforts, BEST Food Garden continues to positively impact the local community by collaborating with BEST Community Connections and other Disability Support Providers, and providing fresh produce to vulnerable families in Inverell. This initiative not only supports food security but also fosters community spirit through volunteer engagement. Our collaboration with local services like Connections and the active involvement of trained staff enhances the delivery of our mission to nurture both the environment and our community.



Above: 840,000 pine seedlings before they were unloaded.

Below: 2023 Spring Plant



Disability Services

2023-2024 has seen much uncertainty in the NDIS industry as a whole, with potential policy changes, financial viability concerns and staffing shortages being front of most providers' minds. Despite this we have continued to focus on our strengths and on key service delivery areas to provide a safe, individualised service for people with a disability in our communities.

In late 2023 and early 2024 we saw the conclusion of the Royal Commission, the completion of the NDIS Review and the tabling of potential new NDIS legislation. All of this points to new directions and policy changes, but with the exception of changes signalled in new legislation, no significant guideline changes have come into effect. A comprehensive review of potential changes has been undertaken and indications are that Connections is well-placed to adapt to these. This is due to our focus on individualised servicing, participant goals and integrity in service delivery, which is very compatible with the future direction signalled. One exception is Support Coordination, which we will likely need to discontinue once new guidelines come into effect. This represents a very small fraction of our current business and will have no significant impact on the success of our program.

Industry financial benchmarking has indicated yet again that more than 50% of providers are expected to make a loss in the 2023-2024 financial year. This is largely due to rising costs (particularly wages as well as general overheads) which are not adequately covered by current NDIS fees. This is likely to continue in the coming financial year: as of 1 July 2024 minimum wage increased by 3.75% while NDIS fees received a 3.19% increase. We have undertaken several initiatives aimed at reducing costs in key areas, including regular reporting and roster analysis to reduce non-face-to-face and broken shift costs.

In June 2024 the decision was made to discontinue services at our Tamworth site from 31 July 2024. Twelve participants will be assisted to transition to other providers, and four casual staff are impacted.

We have continued to focus on high quality individualised service delivery for participants in Inverell. Other than arranging daily supports which meet participants' needs and NDIS goals, we have ensured that participants continue to have access to a wide range of experiences and activities. Over the past year, this has included hosting Christmas in July and Christmas lunches, excursions to events such as AgQuip, participation in the Joeys Mini World Cup, and continued support of the UnstopAbility drama group.



HUMAN RESOURCES

BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

Investing in leadership capability has been a priority for HR this year. Recognising the critical role that leaders play in our organisation's performance and future, we initiated several key programs:

External Leadership Programs: Over the 12-month period, our leaders participated in two externally facilitated programs.

Internal Leadership Workshops: Facilitated by the HR team, workshops on Developing and Managing teams focused on developing leadership competencies to support them in better leading their teams.

Leaders Toolbox: February 2024 saw the launch of the Leaders Toolbox. The toolbox is a comprehensive suite of resources designed to equip our leaders with the tools they need to succeed. Developed by the HR Team, this online resource empowers leaders by providing them access to resources to increase knowledge and capability. It is designed for continuous updates, with new topics and resources to be added on a regular basis.

Our focus on building leadership capability has resulted in a stronger leadership team, supporting BEST in achieving our goal to be an employer of choice with an engaged and capable workforce.

ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN

In response to the evolving needs of our business, we undertook a thorough review of our organisational structure. The goal was to align our design with our strategic objectives, streamline operations, and enhance efficiency. Key initiatives included:

- **Departmental Changes:** Realigned divisions, departments, and units to increase efficiencies, improve communication, and foster cross-functional collaboration.
- **Role Clarification:** Redefined job roles and responsibilities to ensure clarity, accountability, and alignment with organisational goals.

Following implementation of the structure, the new leadership team met for our inaugural two-day Leadership Conference in Inverell. The conference brought together leaders from across the whole organisation to engage in intensive workshops, panel discussions, and interactive sessions focused on developing critical leadership skills. The agenda included topics such as Strategic Plan overview, leadership development, and leading teams through change. The conference provided an invaluable opportunity for our leadership team to strengthen their capabilities, align on organisational goals, and return to their roles with renewed confidence and a clearer vision for driving success.

Below: Leadership Team November 2023



Workforce Australia (WFA)

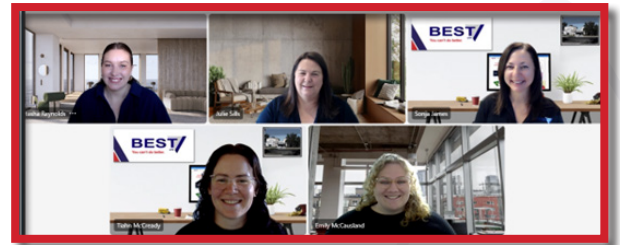
Following the announcement of us taking on Jobs Australia's WFA contract, the HR team commenced a bulk recruitment process. Receipt of 472 applications, followed by 73 interviews saw the selection, commencement, and onboarding of 23 new employees.

REMOTE TEAMWORK

With team members at various locations, the HR Team has been effective in fostering positive teamwork through collaboration and communication, utilising tools such as video conferencing and instant messaging.

The HR division is proud of the progress we have made in developing leadership capability, redesigning our organisation, and fostering effective remote teamwork. As we move forward, we remain committed to building an engaged and capable workforce.

We look forward to another year of growth, innovation, and collaboration.



CORPORATE SERVICES

The Corporate Services division was created in October 2023 during BEST's organisational redesign. Functions of the previous Business Excellence unit (Quality, Training and Psychology) were revised and additional functions including marketing, information technology and data analytics were added.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The previous Training and Support Officers transitioned into their new roles of Resource Creation and Management Officers. Since transitioning to their new roles, the team have focused efforts on five areas of support:

- Developing new operational procedures and resources for Workforce Australia;
- Reviewing and updating operational procedures for Disability Employment Services;
- Redesigning the layout of BEST Help and streamlining the content to support but not replace operational procedures;
- Development of a Learning Management System using existing functionality within Employment Hero to support managers in the delivery of training to staff, and
- Continued management of documents and forms on the BEST Hub and conversion to Adobe format for ease of use.

QUALITY

Our commitment to maintaining applicable standards is reflected in results from internal and external audits conducted during the reporting period. Of note, were external audits against the Quality Assurance Framework, National Standards for Disability Service, Quality Management Systems ISO 9001 and Information Security Management Systems ISO 27001. The Department of Employment and Workplace relations advised that we had successfully maintained our Right Fit For Risk accreditation. BEST Community Connections continues to maintain NDIS Practice Standards accreditation.

Feedback received from our stakeholders during audits provides tangible evidence of the quality of services delivered, including the following statement from external auditor BSI Australia "There was a high level of satisfaction noted as a result of interviews with the DES customers across all sites visited and staff relayed a commitment to the organisational values and vision".

Internal audits and monitoring activities continues to play an important role in maintaining our quality management system and providing continuous improvement opportunities.

"There was a high level of satisfaction noted as a result of interviews with the DES customers... and staff relayed a commitment to [BEST's] values and vision"

BSI Australia - External Quality Auditor

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT)

The year was a challenging yet rewarding period for the IT department. The team uplifted the corporate environment from physical servers located in Inverell to the cloud. This has resulted in an enhanced security posture for our corporate environment and the decommissioning of the physical servers. The uplift has enabled the IT team to take on increased responsibility for the daily management of our corporate network.

The security review of Microsoft 365 tenant identified a number of controls that we could implement to prevent various methods employed by attackers to perform phishing attacks and password spray attacks. Staff are currently working through the recommendations to implement these controls.

MARKETING

Our team understands the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by rural communities. Through innovative projects and collaborative partnerships, we strive to overcome these challenges, building a more resilient and sustainable community.

BEST provided local organisations with over \$28,141 in sponsorship. These contributions have been instrumental in supporting various community programs and events, with many of these in small towns in the region. Examples of organisations or events that have been sponsored include: Tingha Tigers Football Club, Moree Cricket Association, Glen Innes Christmas Lights, Lightning Ridge Bull and Bronco Ride, Dubbo Business Chamber membership, Inverell Eat, Drink, Live, Narrabri and District Chamber of Commerce and a Broken Hill Fireworks event.

BEST proudly sponsored numerous regional Business Awards, including those in Dubbo, Narrabri and Tamworth. These awards celebrate and recognise the achievements of local businesses, promoting excellence and innovation within our communities. Cultural events and activities were also supported including sponsorship provided to assist with the 2024 NAIDOC Debutante Ball in Tamworth, celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the Indigenous community and providing an opportunity for young people to shine.

A vast majority of our advertising efforts were focused on organic social media messaging, with the addition of radio advertising in Inverell, Tenterfield and other locations. These channels have helped us reach a broader audience and further raise awareness of our services and programs to the broader community.

We are in the process of coordinating a new Marketing Plan, one that will increase our presence online and in person.

PSYCHOLOGY

Our internal Psychologist assisted 181 individuals, comprising of BEST Employment customers, staff and community members referred via services such as Medicare, Department of Veterans Affairs, WorkCover, NSW Victims Services, NDIS, Opportunity Pathways Program and BEST's Domestic and Family Violence program.

There has been a diverse range of client presentations including people seeking support, understanding, encouragement, and coping strategies for matters that were impacting their mental health or having adverse impacts on their wellbeing and participation in life. Some of the presenting issues affecting referred individuals included grief, victims of domestic violence, people going through or adjusting to divorce or separation, stress, anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, ADHD, Autism, major life adjustments following injury or illness, low self-esteem, low confidence, phobia's, personality disorders, Bipolar, Schizophrenia, anger management concerns, legal difficulties, victims of home invasions, difficulties adjusting to retirement, and drug and alcohol abuse or dependencies.

Looking for work can be a challenge, physically and mentally, but during the year one Armidale customer discovered that if you don't give up the prize could be just around the corner. As a four wheel driving, fishing and camping enthusiast, Kristian thought that Christmas had come early when he landed his dream job at BCF right before the holidays!.



Tania has always been a ball of sunshine in my office, so you can imagine the shock when she came in one Monday morning with tears in her eyes telling her DES Coach she was giving up. Tania spoke about what was going on and her coach was determined to not let her give up on finding the right job. There was a position available at a nearby news agency and her Coach asked if Tania felt she could go and apply. While she left the office apprehensive, she had a plan. By Tuesday Tania had gotten an interview, Thursday she was getting her references checked, and as predicted, by Friday Tania was over the moon announcing her offer of employment. Tania is thriving and back to being a ball of sunshine.



When Bruce first started with us as a job seeker, he was not very communicative, quite shy and he was struggling to overcome grief. With the help of BEST, Bruce started to come out of his shell and was enrolled into several courses such as white card, skid steer operations and forklift. Bruce has completed these as well as gain his driver's license. He is now job ready, thanks to BEST.



