The Guide to establishing

Disability Contact Officers

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# Disability Contact Officers: Supporting staff in the Australian Public Service (APS)

‘In order to achieve positive long-term employment outcomes for people with disability, APS agencies also need to create accessible, innovative and inclusive workplaces for new and existing employees with disability.’

The Hon Ben Morton MP, Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister and Cabinet;   
Senator the Hon Anne Ruston, Minister for Families and Social Services – Ministers’ foreword, *Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy 2020–25*

## Background

A focus area of the *Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy 2020–25* is to attract, recruit and retain more people with disability. The Strategy includes action for agencies to implement a disability liaison officer model. We use the term Disability Contact Officer (DCO) throughout this guide, following feedback from APS employees.

All agencies are responsible for implementing their own Disability Contact Officer model. This should complement, not replace, your agency’s existing arrangements to support staff with disability.

This *Guide to Establishing Disability Contact Officers* outlines the actions you can take to establish Disability Contact Officers in your agency. You can adopt these actions as appropriate to best suit your agency’s circumstances, needs and services.

## The purpose of Disability Contact Officers

Disability Contact Officers provide a knowledgeable point of contact for employees with disability, their colleagues and their managers, to navigate systems and access supports in the APS. Disability Contact Officers are there to:

* provide support, information and evidence-based suggestions to employees with disability, their colleagues and managers—Disability Contact Officers may work with employees with disability, or may collaborate with their managers;
* be impartial and objective, with an understanding of the workplace barriers for people with disability, and systems of support;
* have honest, safe and confidential conversations with employees with disability, to best support resolving their needs;
* play a role in increasing the inclusiveness employees with disability experience in the workplace.

## Key actions for agencies

There are 3 key action areas to establish Disability Contact Officers in your agency:

* **Lead and establish** – secure leadership commitment, confirm accountabilities, plan and rollout the model, consider resources.
* **Build and develop** – identify Disability Contact Officers, educate and empower these officers, provide tools and technology, provide support for Disability Contact Officers and their managers.
* **Communicate and engage** – communicate the commitment, promote to all, embed communications, use networks to engage.

This guide explains these 3 key actions in detail, with examples and potential considerations for implementing Disability Contact Officers in your agency.

# Lead and establish

## Secure leadership commitment

1. Get commitment from your senior leaders to implement, support and promote the Disability Contact Officers model in your agency.

## Confirm accountabilities

1. Define the responsibilities of the Disability Contact Officer role that are appropriate for your agency (see **Attachment A** for example).
2. Establish privacy and confidentiality requirements, consistent with the [Australian Privacy Principles](https://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/australian-privacy-principles/read-the-australian-privacy-principles/) (APPs) and any other relevant practices, procedures, policies and systems.
3. Remember the Disability Contact Officer role is not a legislated role and does not carry delegation authority. Also, the Disability Contact Officer role should not replace the role of a manager in supporting an employee with disability, and it is not a counselling service.

## Planning the rollout

1. Use insights from available data sources (such as workforce demographic data, location details, the *Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy 2020–25*) to inform your rollout plan.
2. Consider whether the Disability Contact Officer role/s will be incorporated into your agency’s Human Resources (HR) function and filled by HR practitioners, or whether a volunteer role, where any employee can nominate, is more suited for your agency. To decide, consider things like organisational culture, proximity of physical locations, and how the Disability Contact Officer role may complement existing support mechanisms for employees.
3. Consider employment conditions in your agency\* to understand the framework under which your Disability Contact Officers will be appointed and operate.
4. Consider how the Disability Contact Officer responsibilities may be recognised and embedded into performance agreements to ensure that they have managerial support to undertake the role.
5. Consider supports for Disability Contact Officers regarding workload such as redesigning their role and backfilling arrangements if they take leave or during peak periods.
6. Consider the classification level from which you draw Disability Contact Officers, taking into account the requirements of the role within your agency, relevant work level standards, and the influence potential required to undertake the role.

\*For advice on creating new allowances, contact the APSC Workplace Relations Group at: [workplacerelations@apsc.gov.au](mailto:workplacerelations@apsc.gov.au)

## Consider resources

1. Consider physical meeting areas for employees to have private conversations (either virtually or in person) to maintain privacy.
2. Consider how Disability Contact Officers can be contacted to make sure they are accessible for employees working remotely and from home.

# Build and develop

## Identify Disability Contact Officers

1. Promote the opportunity to employees, including through relevant networks.
2. Identify employees who will undertake the role/s. You are looking for people who have:

* the ability to be impartial, objective, sensitive and discreet;
* the ability to have honest, safe and confidential coaching conversations;
* experience working with people with disability and/or lived experience with disability;
* ability to collaborate with existing supports within the agency – for example, managers, HR, Information and Communications Technology (ICT);
* an understanding of workplace inclusion and diversity;
* an understanding of the intersectionality\* and differing levels of inequity that can occur; and
* an understanding of the barriers faced by staff with disability.

\*Intersectionality refers to the way a person’s social categorisations can combine to create their unique experience of discrimination (and privilege).

## Educate and empower Disability Contact Officers

1. Provide guidance to Disability Contact Officers on their role and responsibilities, including clear boundaries of the role – for example, a DCO is not responsible for the wellbeing of an employee, this may instead fall to your agency’s managers and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider.
2. Set expectations in line with confidentiality, privacy, recordkeeping, impartiality and APS Values. [The Australian Privacy Principles](https://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/australian-privacy-principles/read-the-australian-privacy-principles/) (APPs), agency policies and employee confidentially standards may assist with this. Remember, a person may not choose to disclose their disability status or specific concerns outside of their contact with a DCO.
3. Induct your Disability Contact Officers to their new role and provide relevant learning and ongoing coaching opportunities. Relevant learning may include:

* disability awareness and disability confidence training;
* mental health awareness and/or mental health first aid training;
* diversity and inclusion training;
* suicide prevention awareness training;
* psychological first aid training;
* cultural capability/awareness training;
* knowledge of employment conditions, your agency’s Enterprise Agreement, and relevant policies and legislation;
* accessibility support available in your agency;
* privacy, confidentiality and recordkeeping training; and
* Understanding of the roles of HR, EAP and other services for specialist advice and support.

1. Consider existing learning resources that are available to employees in your agency.

## Provide tools and technology

1. Provide your Disability Contact Officers with information about resources available in your agency, including supportive tools, software and assistive technology, as well as contact details for ICT support.

## Provide support for Disability Contact Officers and their managers

1. Provide clear guidance on what is and what is not within the scope of the role.
2. Ensure your Disability Contact Officers are aware of, and have access to appropriate supports. This can be a challenging role and agencies are responsible for ensuring their Disability Contact Officer are fully supported. If a DCO requires personal support, it is important they do not disclose any information that is considered confidential or private and must not disclose information regarding the employees they are supporting in their role as a DCO, except in circumstances required or authorised by law.
3. Ensure your Disability Contact Officers are aware of appropriate ways to escalate issues and who to contact – for example, ICT Support, HR, Health and Safety Officers, Harassment Contact Officers, Indigenous Liaison Officers.
4. Ensure managers have access to adequate resources and linkages to HR to understand and support employees undertaking the Disability Contact Officer role.
5. Ongoing disability awareness and disability confidence should also be an integral part of management learning, induction sessions and other learning and development activities for managers in your agency.

# Communicate and engage

## Communicate commitment

1. Enable your senior leaders to communicate their commitment to an inclusive and diverse workplace, including the benefits of the Disability Contact Officer model, by providing them with insight into the successes of the model.

## Promote to all

1. It’s important for every employee to be aware of the Disability Contact Officer role and its importance – not just employees who currently disclose their disability.
2. Raise awareness of the Disability Contact Officer model and appropriate contact details through relevant channels like newsletters, posters in common areas, and any time your agency promotes the EAP and wellbeing or support services.
3. Ensure Disability Contact Officers have a forward work plan that includes key meetings, such as Disability Contact Officer networks, employee networks, Disability Champions meetings, as well as awareness days and agency awareness activities.

## Embed communications

1. Review key ‘touch points’ when your agency communicates with employees to make sure the DCO role is communicated, and that employees are aware of the support available. Key touch points may include:

* recruitment processes;
* induction and on-boarding;
* Health Case Management/return to work;
* return from Maternity/Parental leave;
* transition to part-time or flexible ways of working; and
* role changes and organisational change.

## Use networks for engagement

1. Link in with supports or connect your DCOs to the network for Disability Contact Officer across APS agencies.
2. Connect your Disability Contact Officers with your agency’s [Disability Champion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3-2unUTZSg) (or equivalent).
3. Connect your Disability Contact Officers with established staff diversity and inclusion networks, and support representatives, such as Indigenous Liaison Officers, Departmental Harassment Officers and Mental Health Support Officers.
4. Identify issues and challenges of the Disability Contact Officer model, record and escalate them to the appropriate decision-maker, for discussion and action.
5. Provide platforms and opportunities for your Disability Contact Officer to contribute to improving people policies, processes, culture and disability confidence capability. This may include opportunities to report to your agency’s Executive, or through your monitoring and evaluation framework for diversity and inclusion.

## Evaluate and continually improve

1. Make sure everyone who needs to know understands that agencies are responsible for monitoring the delivery of the Disability Contact Officer model and ensuring the planned benefits are achieved.
2. Undertake monitoring of the Disability Contact Officer model against planned benefits to ensure that the model remains relevant to your agency’s ever-changing operating environment.

## Attachment A: Example of Disability Contact Officer role and responsibilities

**Provide support**

1. Provide support, information and referrals to employees with disability, their colleagues and their managers.
2. Have honest, safe and confidential conversations with employees with disability, to best support resolving their needs.
3. Be a point of contact for employees with disability and managers at any stage of the employment lifecycle, to navigate systems and policies, programs and information.
4. Connect staff to supports and resources related to accessibility, workplace participation and inclusion of people with disability.

**Raise awareness and promote inclusion**

1. Raise awareness of disability inclusion, such as adjustments, policies, legislative requirements and disability discrimination within the organisation.
2. Promote inclusion and disability confidence within the workplace.
3. Provide feedback on agency policies and procedures to systematically enhance disability inclusion.

**Support accessibility and workplace adjustments**

1. Provide information and suggestions about applying for workplace adjustments.
2. Assist with understanding how to make reasonable workplace adjustments.
3. Assist with identifying workplace accessibility issues and needs.

**Provide information**

1. Provide resource recommendations, or direct people to organisational resources including policies.
2. Provide knowledge and information about on-boarding new employees with disability, including adjustments to recruitment and assessment processes.
3. Provide assistance and information to managers regarding employees with newly acquired or newly disclosed disability.

**Note, the Disability Contact Officer role is not:**

* a counselling service;
* a replacement for manager responsibilities or routine support for employees with disability;
* a replacement for existing services such as HR or EAP.