



NESA's response to the  
**ParentsNext National  
Expansion Discussion  
Paper**

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Presented by:

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## About NESA

NESA is dedicated to creating opportunity for all through employment. Our mission is to lead a sustainable, effective and diverse employment services sector.

NESA is the peak body for all of Australia's world-renowned contracted employment services, which provide labour market assistance to improve opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged job seekers and employers. Our members include not-for-profit and for-profit organisations that have extensive coverage of jobactive, Disability Employment Services (DES), the Community Development Programme (CDP), and other complementary programmes such as ParentsNext and Transition to Work (TTW).

## Background

Since the introduction of ParentsNext in 2016, the programme has successfully assisted over 16,000 participants into education, non-vocational support or paid work.<sup>1</sup>

Providers are positive and complimentary about the programme and feel that in its current format, it is an effective model. Success of the programme is attributed to its flexible nature and its focus on and investment into preparatory activities of participants as opposed to being a strict outcome-based model.

With the expansion of the programme and the inclusion of some modifications – specifically, targeted streams and a strong focus on Indigenous participants – providers are keen to continue the good work whilst maintaining the true intention of the programme.

NESA's response to the discussion paper explores key programme elements, based on member feedback.

## Summary of key points

- Indigenous participants would benefit from a multi-pronged approach with strong linkages to local support networks, mentorship and culturally appropriate servicing arrangements.
- Organisations can demonstrate cultural competency in a variety of ways, including but not limited to strategic organisational planning, strong linkages with community, sponsorship, staff training and mentorship.
- The programme should retain its intended purpose, i.e. remain a preparatory programme to support parents to move closer to attaining education or securing employment.
- Opportunities and benefits for co-location with employment service providers should be explored further.
- A formal evaluation of the expanded programme should be conducted to review the effectiveness of the programme and analyse the benefits and disadvantages of the differing service arrangements.
- Proposed quarterly servicing arrangements are sufficient, noting less engagement from participants during school holidays.
- Targeted Stream participants should have the same access to the various funding support arrangements as Intensive Stream participants. This includes the Participation Fund, Wage Subsidies, outcome payments and Relocation Assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> ParentsNext presentation – National jobactive Forum July 2017

- Providers welcome further guidance and clarity around Participation Fund expenditure, without introducing overly prescriptive requirements.
- Consideration should be given to reducing the average 20 hour per week requirement to access a wage subsidy.
- The Department of Human Services messaging to participants upon referral to the programme needs to be strengthened.
- Providers recommend maintaining compliance requirements in their current form.
- Improved reporting and caseload monitoring mechanisms would be beneficial.
- Consideration should be given to transition arrangements to other programmes: successful transition would best be supported by a formal handover process with the ParentsNext provider, the participant and the new programme provider.
- An option to retain a participant on the caseload if they have an active referral to employment or education would be welcome.
- Provider performance should be measured by tangible outcomes and consider the inclusion of measures that not only demonstrate an individual's progress towards educational attainment or employment, but also recognise the development of soft skills and social outcomes.
- An opportunity for providers to contribute to the development of the ParentsNext Quality and Performance Framework would be welcome.

### Indigenous Employment Focus

Indigenous participants have been identified in all key employment programmes as a priority group. Recognising that each region has varying demographics, labour market challenges and community support opportunities, and that when supporting Indigenous participants into work there is no single strategy that will be all-encompassing. Solutions need to be flexible, localised, and cannot be a 'one size fits all approach' which has the potential to become embedded within the micro-policy settings.

### *Culturally Appropriate Servicing*

Demonstration of cultural competence is broader than a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) or an Aboriginal Employment Strategy (AES). Achieving cultural competency is not solely about mandating training for staff.

For an organisation to truly demonstrate cultural competence there needs to be an overall checklist of requirements that it must be able to demonstrate, which would include:

- Existing Aboriginal Employment Strategy
- Existing Reconciliation Action Plan that includes a commitment to IPP
- A formal on-boarding process for Aboriginal staff that could include an Indigenous mentoring program
- An internal training strategy that would involve staff completing cultural competence training annually
- Demonstration of Aboriginal community engagement e.g. sponsorship, NAIDOC events, Community Events etc.

Where demographic data shows a high Indigenous population / caseload, the following should also be considered:

- Indigenous representation on the board to demonstrate cultural competency in governance
- The establishment of an Aboriginal advisory group

- The establishment of an industry strategy targeting Aboriginal employment

Although Indigenous participants are a priority group, cultural competence also extends to other marginalised groups such as refugees and providers should also be able to demonstrate culturally appropriate servicing, mentoring and linkages to supports for these cohorts.

#### *Specialist Indigenous Providers*

There are numerous ways in which providers can strategically engage with Indigenous communities. These may vary depending on location, population of Indigenous clients and differing community support services and structures. Some suggestions for engagement include, but are not limited to:

- Development of an organisational strategy that outlines how providers can engage with local Aboriginal organisations, which would include shared goals and ensure that local Aboriginal organisations understand how providers can support them.
- Exploration of the value of an outreach model where providers co-locate staff in Aboriginal organisations to break down barriers. This could be rotated to ensure that clients are accessing multiple services.
- Identification of local Indigenous events – e.g. sporting and cultural events, Elders luncheons, art exhibitions – and opportunities for engagement such as sponsorship, planning, promotion and attendance.
- RAPs and AES are standard methods of engagement however they need to be followed up with tangible outcomes. Providers need to identify a recruitment strategy that has real jobs allowing the engagement of local community support. For organisations looking to provide ParentsNext services who may not currently have RAPs and AES in place, guidance and support offerings need to be considered to ensure consistency in service delivery.

A contributing factor to achieving success is strong engagement and linkages with local Indigenous businesses and organisations. There are Indigenous organisations across most facets of business delivery. As a first step, providers need to identify where the need is, determine what this represents and look at how they can work with these organisations to provide opportunities for employment but also more broadly to provide support and connection within the community.

Resources such as Supply Nation provide access to a comprehensive network of Indigenous organisations. This can assist providers to identify who operates in their local region and to cultivate relationships that in turn have mutual benefit for the participant, the organisation and the community.

Providers can also engage with NESA which has a national network of Indigenous consultants who can work directly with organisations to foster strong and productive relationships with Indigenous organisations.

#### *The ParentsNext Service Offer*

Given the considerable level of investment into expanding the programme, there are several key areas requiring consideration and further guidance.

As outlined in the discussion paper, ParentsNext is an engagement and referral programme. Noting that there may be some changes within the proposed design, the essence of the programme, i.e. that it is preparative in nature, should remain true to its existing form.

Success factors in the current programme are attributed to foundational structures including flexible servicing and support arrangements, strong local connections and innovation in service delivery.

Providers do not want to see this programme become bound by micro-policy settings and restrict servicing options and opportunities for participants.

### *Location*

Co-location of services provides an opportunity for greater participant engagement. Further consideration should be given to co-location with employment service providers. The paper states “ParentsNext services should not be co-located with employment services unless there is a clear physical delineation between the two services”. Although there may be advantages to having separate service locations or co-locating with other community services, providers report locating services within an employment service can be beneficial to engaging ParentsNext participants.

Employment service providers advise that there are a number of modifications and enhancements that can be made to the physical site of an office to make it inviting and engaging, i.e. colourful decor, designated areas for children etc.

Providers can also utilise their space flexibly by implementing scheduling arrangements to accommodate both parents and job seekers alike. For example, a training room can be used to deliver job clubs for job seekers and group sessions for parents with designated play areas for children at different times.

Additionally, some employment services already have co-location arrangements in place with other services such as allied health providers. Separating ParentsNext by location may not be conducive to ease of access to these other services.

With the expansion, further guidance needs to be provided in relation to the geography of the programme. Providers would like clarity around what factors the department will be using to determine the number of providers required in a region, i.e. will allocation be based on caseload numbers.

### *Streams*

Initially the ParentsNext programme was implemented as a trial across 10 sites with equal servicing arrangements, eligibility and programme supports. With the expansion anticipated to service approximately 63,000 participants annually and the inclusion of the Targeted Stream, NESAs suggests that there needs to be an evaluation to consider the benefits and effectiveness of this component in comparison to the Intensive Stream and potential enhancements that could be made to future servicing arrangements.

### *Regular contact*

The proposed quarterly servicing arrangements are adequate. In some cases, providers report that they currently see participants more often than this – i.e. monthly – to ensure continued engagement dependent on an individual’s circumstances and goals. Providers report that there is little activity in the school holidays. Although the programme is reasonably flexible, this is something to be noted by the Department.

### *Financial Assistance*

The notable difference between the Targeted and Intensive streams is the exclusion of access for Intensive Stream participants to the numerous financial support options available for the Targeted Stream. The servicing arrangements, programme requirements and outcome demands are the same, but providers working within the Targeted Stream will not have access to the same funding options. These proposed arrangements are restrictive and disadvantage providers delivering the Targeted Stream as they will be required to utilise servicing fees to make up for the lack of access to the

Participation Fund, outcome payments, Wage Subsidies or Relocation Assistance. If providers are having to use their own funds to deliver services, this raises questions around programme sustainability and equity.

NESA asks for further consideration be given to these arrangements, with opportunities for provision of financial assistance and comparative resources to be explored, to ensure all job seekers are provided with equal, robust and supportive servicing.

The ability for providers to claim an outcome fee in circumstances where a participant is connected to a ParentsNext provider and a jobactive or Vocational, Training & Employment Centre and is placed into a job is a welcome incentive for providers.

#### *Participation Fund*

Overall, the nine broad categories for expenditure appear to be appropriate. Providers would like to retain flexibility in relation to expenditure without becoming overly prescriptive or constrained. Further guidance such as an outline of expenditure inclusions would be beneficial.

We note several areas for clarification and guidance, specifically in relation to the Participation Fund.

At present there is provision for providers to access “Professional Services”, however it is unclear as to what the intended use of this category includes. In some cases, providers may have higher costs for particular services, for example, interpreting costs: a provider operating in one region may have a higher proportion of non-English speaking participants on the caseload requiring interpreting services, whereas this may be a non-existent cost for a provider operating in the next region. At present, providers are paying for these services out of service fees, however this is not an even playing field and needs to come from a distinct allocation of funds.

In relation to participant support expenditure, it is unclear whether there is allocation to provide financial assistance to parents to address needs in relation to their children. For example, purchasing of baby items such as carriers or prams, or paying for a portion of hours of childcare to allow a parent to engage in education or employment. Categories should be broad enough to include items such as vouchers and other indirect but relevant supports.

The list of prohibited purchase items is deemed fair by providers, however, the paper refers to “goods or services that should be delivered using the service fee” as part of this list. Further clarity and guidance around this statement and the Department’s expectations is required.

#### *Wage Subsidies*

Wage subsidies operate as a key part of a provider’s tool kit in assisting individuals into work. Noting that ParentsNext is about supporting people to transition into employment over time, and taking into consideration caring and other responsibilities, attainment of a 20 hour per week position over a six-month period may not be common. As a result, the opportunity to support individuals and employers via a wage subsidy will not be accessed.

Consideration should be given to reducing the average 20 hour per week requirement for access to a wage subsidy.

#### *Providers*

Providers currently delivering ParentsNext services report high levels of enthusiasm about the programme. With some adjustments to the proposed expansion model they are confident that the programme will be effective and complimentary to existing employment programmes.

### *Department of Human Services Role*

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is a primary referral conduit to ParentsNext. Providers have reported that the briefing to participants from DHS needs to be strengthened to ensure comprehensive understanding of the service they are being referred to.

Providers put in a lot of effort to work with this cohort and a critical success factor to engagement is a participant's understanding of what programme they are being referred to, which sets a level of expectation of the services they will receive.

In a number of instances, job seekers have been ill-informed prior to attending a ParentsNext appointment and providers have met with resistance and have had to spend additional time building trust and rapport to alleviate any concerns the participant may have about engaging in the programme.

### *Engagement – Compliance and Caseload Monitoring*

There is a need for compliance measures within the programme and providers recommend to maintain these as they currently are. However sanctions are not always effective as an engagement strategy and should not be an inevitable consequence for non-compliant participants.

Providers report flexibility and the 'right approach' are more effective. If the pending legislative changes for the new targeted compliance framework are implemented on 1 July 2018, they should be applied in the same manner that they currently are, i.e. only in circumstance of continual non-attendance or disengagement from agreed activities.

Providers report that there needs to be better insight into the servicing requirements of participants. Typically, a parent leaves a caseload for one of two main reasons: their oldest child turns six or they change location. Providers have access to a report to identify parents nearing the end of the programme due to the age of their child and in some cases can facilitate a warm handover to a new service. However, when participants move to a new location, which can be due to an unforeseen circumstance, they are simply transferred by DHS and disappear off a caseload with minimal warning.

Providers employ internal tracking mechanisms to monitor any movement of their caseload. Enhancements could be made to the Department IT system to alert the provider when a participant's details change. The benefit of this change would be that it allows providers to follow up with the participant more immediately and to facilitate a handover to their next provider.

Also to note, there are some design elements that could be adopted from the Transition to Work programme and applied within ParentsNext to support transition to a new employment service provider. These include:

- *A formal face to face handover process at the initial interview*  
This is beneficial to all parties. Participants will feel supported in their transition to a new programme, rapport can be developed quickly with the new provider, participants will not have to re-tell their entire story as their ParentsNext provider can facilitate the discussions, provide any documentation such as resumes and assist with the disclosure of sensitive information if the participant requires support to do so.
- *An option to retain a job seeker on the caseload where there is an active referral to a job but the participant may be nearing the end of their time in ParentsNext.*  
Providers invest a lot of time and energy into supporting participants towards education and employment. In some cases, this work can be lost or disrupted by a participant being transferred to another programme. In circumstances where providers are on the cusp of

securing employment or commencing a participant into education, they should have the ability to demonstrate an active referral is in place and have the option to continue to support the participant.

### Quality and performance

When determining appropriate performance measures, the Department needs to consider retaining the essence of the programme without complicating service delivery. If some performance measures from existing employment programmes were to be adopted into ParentsNext, the programme may lose some of its distinctive elements and become mired in micro-policy and red tape which may in turn compromise its intended outcomes.

To directly measure provider engagement with participants, measures need to be tangible and easily observable.

The current performance measures are adequate to encourage providers to achieve good outcomes without being prescriptive. Any changes to the existing framework should only include minor adjustments to accommodate the new elements of the programme.

In addition to this, consideration should also be given to achievement of social goals, development of soft skills, increased motivation and general progression towards an overarching goal of employment. These could be measured through the use of data retrieved from work readiness assessments, such as the WorkStar instrument. Inclusion and measurement of such elements would support the intention of the programme and recognise the work that providers do to support participants.

An opportunity for providers to contribute to the development of the ParentsNext Quality and Performance Framework would be welcome.