

NESA's Response to
the **ParentsNext**,
including its trial
and subsequent
broader rollout
Senate Inquiry

January 2019



About NESA

The National Employment Services Association (NESA) established in 1997 is the peak body of the Australian employment services sector. NESA is dedicated to a vision of opportunity for everyone through employment and inclusion.

The Australian employment services sector plays a critical role in preparing Australians to participate productively in the labour market and connecting them to employment opportunities. Employment inclusion and participation are cornerstones of the economic and social health of society. For the individual, employment participation is more than a means to an income; it provides connection, purpose and inclusion. Employment participation and productivity are key drivers of economic growth and underpin the quality of life of all Australians enabling access to such things as a well-functioning health system, quality education and strong social safety net.

NESA's mission is to lead a sustainable, effective and diverse employment services sector to support individual job seekers and employers and help our nation achieve employment participation objectives.

Our membership

NESA's membership is extensive and diverse, and open to all contracted providers (for-profit, not-for-profit and public). To illustrate, of providers of Australia's largest employment programme – jobactive NESAs members have a collective footprint covering 100% of Employment Service Regions. NESAs members deliver the breadth of Australia's diverse labour market assistance programmes including jobactive, Disability Employment Services (DES), the Community Development Programme (CDP), Transition to Work (TTW), Youth Jobs PaTH, ParentsNext, Time to Work, Career Transition Assistance and Vocational Training & Employment Centres (VTEC). A large proportion of NESAs members deliver multiple programmes with many also being registered training organisations and/or Australian Apprenticeship Support Network providers.

NESA delivers policy, operational and capacity building support to member organisations. NESAs works collaboratively with Government Departments, agencies and non-government stakeholders to support the effective delivery of labour market assistance and social policy. Our extensive membership, and intensive member and stakeholder interaction provide unique insight into the policy and operational settings that underpin labour market assistance.

NESA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout. NESAs has consulted widely with its members who deliver ParentsNext in the preparation of this submission.

Background

ParentsNext is a grant-funded program administered by the Department of Jobs and Small Business. ParentsNext provides specialised support service to help parents with children under six to plan and prepare for future employment when their youngest child is of school age. ParentsNext commenced with a trial with contracted providers operating in 10 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Australia in April 2016. The initial program including eligibility criteria and funding rules were changed and the program expanded nationally from 1 July 2018.

Response to the Terms of Reference

The aims of ParentsNext, and the extent to which those aims are appropriate, having regard to the interests of participating parents, their children, and the community

The objectives of ParentsNext are to:

- target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency,
- help parents identify their education and employment related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve their goals; and
- connect parents to local services that can help them address their barriers to employment.

ParentsNext intends to be a supportive program that mentors parents through preparation for future employment when their youngest child is of school age. Providers strongly support the aims and intent of ParentsNext; however note opportunities to strengthen program design and policy areas to support their achievement.

ParentsNext fills a void providing a pre-employment focus on career direction and employment readiness support. Operationally, the program design and policy settings allow providers flexibility to deliver wrap around tailored services to meet individual parents' needs and circumstances. ParentsNext intends to provide a softer transition to employment programs such as jobactive either, as a volunteer; or when they are compulsorily required to participate. The collaborative nature of the program fosters partnerships with local services to wrap around supports for participants.

The appropriateness of eligibility for compulsory and voluntary participation

The Eligibility Criteria for ParentsNext

Parents are required to participate in ParentsNext as a **Compulsory Participant** if they meet all of the following base eligibility criteria:

- have a child aged under six years,
- have been continuously receiving Parenting Payment for at least six months,
- have no reported earnings from employment in this six month period, **and**
- meet one of the following additional Stream eligibility criteria:

Intensive Stream

For those residing in an Intensive Stream Location, one of the following:

- an Early School Leaver with a youngest child at least six months of age,
- assessed as being highly disadvantaged and has a youngest child at least six months of age, or
- has a youngest child at least five years of age.

Targeted Stream

For those residing in a Targeted Stream Location, one of the following:

- an Early School Leaver with a youngest child at least one year of age,
- assessed as being highly disadvantaged and has a youngest child at least three years of age, or
- has a youngest child at least five years of age and is part of a jobless family.

A jobless family is defined as a family where the parent (for Parenting Payment single recipients) or the parent and their partner (for Parenting Payment partnered recipients) has no reported employment earnings in the previous six months.

Parents are eligible to participate in the Intensive Stream of ParentsNext as a Volunteer if they are in receipt of Parenting Payment, have a child aged under six years of age and reside in an Intensive Stream Location.

ParentsNext Eligibility Issues

Providers report requirements to validate eligibility are onerous and complex. Eligibility requirements are restrictive preventing parents wanting support to access the program. To illustrate:

- A provider reported having to refuse a mother who was extremely keen to participate and met all the criteria except her child was 3 months old.
- Another participant turned away met all other eligibility criteria but was in receipt of Disability Support Pension (DSP) rather than Parenting Payment.
- In contrast to the initial trial parents may no longer volunteer in the Targeted Stream.
- Where parents circumstances change and they no longer meet the eligibility criteria e.g. the youngest child turns 6, their exit may be blunt.

In keeping with the intent of the program, providers recommend greater flexibility in the eligibility criteria to ensure parents wanting assistance have access to this program. Criteria such as their youngest child's age may be appropriate for determining compulsory participation but should not prevent an otherwise eligible parent from accessing the program when they believe it is appropriate for them.

The program stated aims are to assist parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency. As such, it is inconsistent to exclude parents on DSP from ParentsNext given the labour market disadvantaged faced by people with a disability, higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. ParentsNext offers a unique parent friendly and focused environment that is not available in other programs such as Disability Employment Services or jobactive.

Access to support such as ParentsNext should be equitable and circumstance based. Parents who meet the eligibility for the Intensive Stream should receive this service regardless of their place of residence. Providers note many parents fall into eligibility gaps and mainstream employment services are their only option to receive support. However, employment services, such as jobactive focus on an immediate search for suitable employment in contrast to the time for pre-employment planning and preparation afforded in ParentsNext more suited to parents with pre-school aged children.

The protocol for providers' conduct of Capability Interviews with participants

The purpose of the Capability Interview is to ensure job seekers are capable of meeting the requirements outlined in their Participation Plan and that only those job seekers who are capable of meeting their requirements and who wilfully or deliberately fail to meet those requirements face potential financial penalties.

Providers report the volume of Capability Interviews undertaken in ParentsNext is significantly lower than other programs with most providers noting compliance action is not the immediate response tool when a participant disengages or fails to meet their mutual obligation requirements. Providers invest time establishing and developing rapport and trust with participants and are hesitant to undermine the helping relationship with unnecessary use of compliance action. Providers report that while compulsory participants are often anxious in the initial phase of the program once they understand the program their level of engagement is high as they are motivated to achieve greater financial independence for themselves and their family.

Detailed guidelines outline the protocols for conducting Capability Interviews. The Department of Jobs and Small Business provided training to the sector to support implementation of the Targeted Compliance Framework, including in the conduct of Capability Interviews. In summary, these protocols include:

Capability Interviews must be conducted face-to-face other than in exceptional circumstances where they can be conducted via alternative arrangements e.g. phone or video conferencing.

It is recommended Capability Interviews are conducted, by someone other than the staff member who negotiated the Participation Plan with the job seeker.

When a job seeker commits a Mutual Obligation failure relating to a Job Interview or Job Referral or when a job seeker incurs three Demerits in a six-month period a Capability Interview is triggered.

The Provider must be in direct contact with the job seeker to schedule a Capability Interview and this must be scheduled in the Department's IT system as a re-engagement requirement and occur within two Business Days of job seeker contact and notification must be given either face-to-face or over the phone. Providers must record the reason they did not accept for the job seeker failing to meet their requirement.

Before conducting the Capability Interview, the Provider must review:

- the job seeker's current Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI)
- the job seeker's record, including:
 - Job Seeker Summary—for information on the job seeker's servicing stream, upcoming requirements and Vulnerability Indicators
 - Capability Management Tool—for information on the job seeker's barriers to work and how these might be resolved or mitigated
 - Job Plan—to ensure the requirements are up to date and appropriate based on the job seeker's circumstances, include an appropriate level of Job Search, do not conflict with each other, do not contain excessive hours and factor in the job seeker's individual circumstances
 - the outcomes of any previous Capability Interviews or Capability Assessments

Providers must ensure the job seeker understands the purpose of the Capability Interview and explain the reason it is required e.g. accrual of demerits or a single event of non-compliance. Job seekers should understand that their provider is seeking to better understand why they have not been meeting their requirements and receive explanation regarding the serious potential consequences of non-compliance.

At Capability Interviews, with ParentsNext participants providers should discuss the following with the job seeker:

- the job seekers understanding of their Mutual Obligation Requirements and what they must do to meet them, the reasons behind the job seeker's recent non-compliance,
- whether alternative activities or requirements may be more appropriate, any undisclosed barriers, any support or assistance the job seeker identifies that might better help them address any barriers to participation,
- the expectation of the job seeker to actively meet their participation requirement and the potential consequences of not meeting requirements in the future; and
- any other relevant issues that may impact the job seekers capability to meet their requirements.

To finalise the Capability Interview the provider must record discussion points with the job seeker in the Capability Management Tool (CMT) in the Department's IT System and retain any/all relevant documentary evidence. The Department's IT System will produce the Capability Interview outcome based on the information recorded.

Steps following the Capability Interview:

If the Capability Interview identifies the job seeker has newly disclosed or changed circumstance the provider must conduct a JSCI Change of Circumstances Reassessment to determine if the job seeker needs a different level of employment servicing based on their current circumstances and capability.

After re-running the JSCI, the result of the JSCI Change of Circumstances Reassessment may be a referral to the Department of Human Services (DHS) for an ESA (Employment Services Assessment).

The provider must explain the outcome of the Capability Interview to the job seeker to ensure they understand what will happen next.

If the outcome of the Capability Interview requires the job seeker's Participation Plan to be updated the Provider must use the CMT to address each identified issue affecting the job seeker and record interventions or other assistance that is to be put in place to assist the job seeker to meet their requirements in the future.

Capability Interview Outcomes:

For job seekers assessed as not capable of successfully meeting their Participation Plan there are various scenarios and steps providers are required to undertake. These scenarios include:

Impact of individual circumstances, change of stream or program eligibility, job seeker considered capable however newly disclosed circumstances render Participation Plan inappropriate. In this scenario providers are required to inform the job seeker of next steps and update the Participation Plan.

Job seekers assessed as capable of successfully meeting their Participation Plan will continue in the Warning Zone. The provider must explain this to the job seeker to ensure they understand including:

- Advising the job seeker that no reason has been identified that would prevent them from meeting their requirements.
- Advising the job seeker that the next instance of non-compliance without an Acceptable or Valid Reason may result in a Capability Assessment with DHS.
- Ensuring the job seeker understands the requirements in their Participation Plan and the consequences of non-compliance.

The design of participation plans, including the range of economic and social participation requirements

Typically, negotiation of Participation Plans commences at the initial appointment. The Participant must sign a Participation Plan within four weeks of the initial appointment. The timeframe includes the provision of 10 days 'think time' to participants to review and consider the proposed plan where they require it. Providers will pace planning based on the needs of the participant deferring planning within the 28-day timeframe to ensure the participant is ready. Providers report the timeframes allow sufficient opportunity to discuss the program with the participant to ensure they have a solid understanding of ParentsNext and the supports available to them. Within this timeframe providers report they are generally able to get to know participants circumstance and explore goals. Updating of the Participation Plan occurs as required ensuring participant experiences, insights and changes in circumstance inform them as they progress in the program.

The Participation Plan will detail the activities the participant agrees to undertake to assist them improve their work readiness. For compulsory participants Participation Plans are required to include **at least one** activity mutually agreed by the participant and provider as the participant's Compulsory Activity. Participation Plans are tailored to individual needs and family circumstance and may include but is not limited to activities such as:

- accredited and non-accredited educational courses
- non-vocational programs
- career advice
- counselling
- drug and alcohol treatment
- other government programs
- connection to community programs or activities
- Concurrent referral/participation in Australian Government employment services, such as jobactive, Transition to Work, New Enterprise Incentive Scheme or the Vocational Training and Employment Centres.

Providers consider social activities assist positive engagement with the program and employment preparation. To illustrate, a young mother and her child experienced severe separation anxiety. The ParentsNext provider assisted her to connect to a supported playgroup enabling her and her child to address the separation anxiety and develop strategies to transition into day-care. This allowed the mother time to focus on herself as well as undertake other pre-employment activities. Providers believe that greater recognition of social outcomes within the ParentsNext framework would be beneficial.

It is expected providers assist participants in the Targeted Stream to access activities at no cost whereas an allocation of participant funding is available in the Intensive Stream. This requires providers to draw upon community resources to

enable participants to access the activities intended to prepare them for future employment. Providers may also elect to fund such activities from their fees however factors such as size of caseload and proportion of highly disadvantaged participants results in inequitable access to financial support for activities.

Opportunities for improvement

Timely completion of Participation Plans can be challenging in regional settings, or where program delivery occurs on an outreach, or visiting basis. In such areas, transport is often a barrier and places additional burden on participants. Providers consider relaxing current requirements to conduct initial interviews face-to-face where participants experience difficulty would be beneficial. Allowing delivery through alternative means such as technology would support engagement and potentially reduce compliance consequences associated with non-attendance.

Providers note that eliminating requirements to specify elements such as hours and dates related to compulsory activities would enable greater flexibility to better accommodate participant's day-to-day circumstance and reduce tensions with the compliance system.

The selection of ParentsNext providers

Selection of ParentsNext providers occurred through a competitive open commissioning process undertaken by the Department of Jobs and Small Business. The released Request for Tender outlined the program, service requirements; funding model, tender process and selection criteria; with this information reinforced at various public information sessions.

In summary, the selection criterion included:

Criterion 1: Organisational capacity and capability to deliver and manage ParentsNext and address any risks that may arise

This was a threshold criteria assessed as either Pass/Fail, with failure resulting in an unsuccessful bid. In response, tenderers were required to describe their organisations:

- Governance and reporting framework
- Risk management arrangements and their application mitigating risks associated with ParentsNext
- Demonstrated capacity to work with Indigenous parents in a culturally competent and effective manner
- Cultural capability framework that support culturally appropriate and effective practice with participants of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Indigenous people
- Indigenous business participation strategies related to the Indigenous Procurement Policy
- Economic benefit to the Australian economy if it is selected as a Provider

Criterion 2: The organisation's demonstrated capacity to deliver ParentsNext

Weighted at 50% this criteria required tenderers to describe the organisations experience and/or capability to assist parents in the context of delivering ParentsNext including through leveraging community partnerships and resources. Response requirements included describing organisations:

- Experience delivering similar services, and how this demonstrates capacity to deliver ParentsNext
- Strategies to cater to the needs of parents from diverse backgrounds including Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse and parents with disability
- Strategies to identify and work with support services offered by other local community organisations
- Strategies to identify and address gaps in key support services in the local community

Criterion 3: The organisation's experience delivering services in the local community, which meet the needs of parents, including Indigenous parents

Weighted at 50%; responses to this criterion required tenderers to describe specific strategies for parents residing in the location they proposed to deliver ParentsNext. Response prompts included the organisations:

- Understanding of the needs of parents residing in the Location including Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse, homeless or have a disability
- Strategies to identify and work with services in the local community
- Strategies to establish an environment that is welcoming, accessible and safe for parents and their children, including parents unable to attend offered site(s) in-person

- Experience and/or qualifications of staff who will deliver ParentsNext including supporting parents dealing with family violence and trauma
- Strategies to work with parents to identify and help them achieve their education and employment related goals
- Strategies to ensure parents positively engaged and meet their participation requirements
- Strategies to ensure parents have a say in how services are delivered

Tenderers were required to submit financial and credential information and the names and contact details of two referees who could verify claims in response to selection criteria with the Department reserving the right to contact other organisations or agencies not nominated as a referee in order to verify claims.

Tender conditions included opportunities for various bid types including consortium or joint venture arrangements. Providers could nominate to deliver ParentsNext across whole or parts of a Region. Providers appreciate that this flexibility particularly increased opportunities for small local organisations to participate in ParentsNext. However, in large expansive regional areas limited number of providers covering some areas creates access issues.

While providers have not noted any concerns about the selection process many consider the short time frame to digest and respond to the tender opportunity may not have produced optimum strategies. Release of the Request for Tender occurred on the 13th of November 2017 and closed on the 18th of December 2017. For example, more time may have enabled negotiation of co-location strategies with other relevant services with potential to enhance parent engagement and support.

Providers participating in the Regional Employment Trial are using the trial to develop parent specific initiatives in some regions to assist with service delivery.

As with other programs ParentsNext is more costly to deliver in regional areas; financial support such as regional loading would assist providers to cover these costs and provide enhanced services in these locations.

The interaction between ParentsNext, business, education and training providers, and health, community and social services

Providers of ParentsNext report they have extensive networks within communities that enable them to draw on and connect participants to a myriad of services and supports. These span business, education and training, health, community and social services. However, the availability of community networks varies considerably across Regions. As the Targeted Stream does not include a Participation Fund, it can be challenging to access appropriate supports for participants at no or low cost (paid for by providers). Furthermore, while there may be services available they are not always appropriate to parent's circumstances. For example, many parents have shown interest in connecting to the SEE program (Skills for Education and Employment); however, inflexible start/finish times and attendance requirements do not align with caring responsibilities, school and childcare hours.

The effectiveness of the communication

The effective delivery of ParentsNext requires significant communication between stakeholders including but not limited to participants, providers, the Department of Jobs and Small Business, Department of Human Services, community stakeholders, businesses and services. Providers report that communication has strengthened however, there are some persistent issues that require attention. In summary:

Participants are often anxious when they initially attend ParentsNext. Providers report that participants have a lack of understanding about the program and or incorrect understanding that they attribute to information or lack thereof provided by Centrelink at the point of referral. Providers note that many participants report they were advised ParentsNext was an employment program, rather than pre-employment preparation resulting in their assumption they needed to find a job. Compulsory participants often report that the consequences of failing to participate were the predominant emphasis of communication. The level of anxiety and tension this misinformation creates for some parents is significant and poses immediate barriers to positive engagement.

Efforts to improve communication and strengthen relationships to ensure better understanding of the aims, intent and support provided by ParentsNext have occurred. However, these efforts primarily occur in local areas e.g. providers attending DHS staff meetings. More needs to be done to systemically improve communication and information as it relates to cooperation between stakeholders and most importantly participants.

The protocols for provider contact with DHS are prohibitive and inadequate. During the pilot providers had a direct contact line that was dedicated to ParentsNext and calls were dealt with by dedicated DHS staff members. At the commencement of the national rollout, these arrangements ceased. When there are issues facing a parent particularly related to their income prompt resolution is a priority. Since the cessation of the ParentsNext line, providers note frustration often going in circles to address issues. For example, a single mum with four children was participating in a program and did not submit her childcare form on time. It took days to rectify the issue and required multiple phone calls to DHS. The provider assisted the participant with funds until she received payment. Under the pilot, a single phone call, generally answered with no time on hold, resulted in prompt resolution of these types of issues.

Providers recommend that a dedicated help line is reinstated.

Providers report that communication from the Department of Jobs and Small Business has improved and communication is generally positive, responsive to feedback and issue resolution is efficient.

ParentsNext is an alternative approach adopting a collegiate model rather than a competitive framework typical in employment services programs such as jobactive or DES. Relationships established between providers differ in each location however most report productive and supportive arrangements. The establishment of Communities of Practice (CoP) in most regions have immensely helped to develop collaboration between providers. CoP continue to operate in the initial pilot regions with new providers and local services welcomed since the expansion. Communication and collaboration between providers is positive with examples of providers pooling resources and strategies to benefit participants e.g. co-hosting program promotion events, sharing facilities and other resources, negotiating a coordinated approach to local service/support gaps and isolated communities. CoP are facilitating opportunities for improvement and innovation.

The measures, if any, in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims and/or survivors of family violence

A cornerstone of the ParentsNext program is client centred practice. ParentsNext providers were required to demonstrate their knowledge of, experience with and capacity to service the needs of vulnerable and diverse parents within their tender. This included demonstrating their capacity and protocols to ensure delivery of trauma informed and culturally competent practices and appropriate linkages with relevant stakeholders to meet parent's individual needs.

The prevalence of participants in family violence is significant, with some providers reporting up to 80% of participants are in such situations. Participants engaging in ParentsNext have varying degrees of support related to their family violence circumstance in place. Those without existing supports often require end-to-end assistance. Others come to the program with comprehensive family violence interventions and support networks in place. These participants often require minimal intervention in relation to family violence but do need emotional support and a high degree of attention to their Participation Plan to align with interventions and avoid family violence triggers.

ParentsNext program settings allow providers to apply an exemption for up to 16 weeks when issues such as disclosure of family violence occurs. Providers report applying exemptions according to individual participant preference and need with some expressing benefiting from continued face-to-face support. This has included ParentsNext supporting participants to develop stay safe and exit plans.

To illustrate, 'Mary' a young mother in an escalating family violence situation had a controlling partner who restricted her movement from the family home and constantly monitored her communication with others. Mary and her ParentsNext consultant agreed that her consultant would telephone her and advise her she was required to attend an appointment or

face payment suspension. To avoid loss of income her partner let her attend appointments, in which an exit strategy was developed and consequently implemented with support of other community services.

A ParentsNext provider in agreement with a young mum 'Katy' arranged for police officers discrete attendance at appointments to enable her to provide a police report and obtain an intervention order. With support of the police and other local services engaged the young woman and her child escaped the family violence situation.

While the compulsory participation in ParentsNext is questioned by some observers the opportunity to engage parents living in family violence situations, controlled and/or isolated as the examples illustrate, is beneficial.

Providers report they support vulnerable participants in collaboration with local services and agencies to ensure specialised support as needed. Regional areas pose more of a challenge when attempting to source appropriate supports.

Providers note that following an exit from family violence situation greater challenges often emerge. Exit strategies often leave participants without many of their or their children's personal belongings including ID, Medicare card, licences, birth certificates and other documentation. Following exit, significant efforts are generally needed to assist the parent and their children in transition and navigate requirements to replace documentation and arrange practical support as required such as housing, rent or bond assistance, legal matters and children support services. Given the prevalence of women living in family violence engaged in this program, access to emergency funding support would be highly beneficial.

All providers report significant investment into equipping staff with tools, resources and connections in the local community to adequately deal with and support participants who they suspect or come to report family violence. Access to national resources and training such as 1800Respect, DV Alert, White Ribbon and the NESAs Family Violence Toolkit support providers to respond appropriately to family violence situations. For example, an organisation has engaged with White Ribbon to gain accreditation and all staff are required to complete DV Alert training. Many providers ensure that staff have access to additional expertise and supervision if they require guidance and such personnel conduct case reviews and debriefing sessions.

The appropriateness of the aspects of the program specifically aimed at communities with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and the appropriateness of the broader program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents outside target communities

Providers have strategies in place to support Indigenous participants, i.e. Indigenous staff, working with local elders, connections to Indigenous organisations for cultural and social support and offering environments with appropriate recognition of traditional custodians and décor. For example, in some cases providers have established relationships with local Aboriginal services to provide wrap around servicing to address issues such as housing, purchasing school uniforms and educational choices.

Access to the Participation Fund is a huge benefit in servicing Indigenous participants. All providers unanimously agree the Participation Fund should be available to all participants. It is inequitable that an Indigenous participant with the same circumstances as a peer in an Intensive service location is offered less support on the basis of their postcode of residence.

Lack of participant funding affects access to services and supports required by participants in Targeted Streams and places additional burden on community resources. Providers frequently fund the costs of activities from their own resources for Targeted participants, however this is not always sustainable and participants are disadvantaged.

The effectiveness of the program in supporting the long-term wellbeing of parents and children, and the longer term skills and earning capacity of parents

ParentsNext supports parents to develop capacity using innovative and supportive methods. ParentsNext services those who may be disempowered, unsure of where to get help or of what is available, have little to no work experience, limited education or are lacking in motivation and direction.

ParentsNext is able to function flexibly to provide tailored solutions to meet tangible need of both parents and their children. For example, a single mother with two young sons requested assistance accessing a male mentor to help her sons with reading as they were struggling in school and their father was incarcerated and unable to assist. Using the Participation Fund, the provider was able to provide a reading service in the afternoons that allowed the mother to attend mentoring sessions whilst assisting her and her children to improve their literacy levels.

Providers offer a myriad of informal educational activities, such as cooking classes, positive parenting, budgeting and other non-vocational supports to enhance overall wellbeing and social connections. The need for mentoring and budgeting training have been recognised as essential by many providers and core to achieving parents goals e.g. gaining employment, completing education, improving resilience and financial security. Providers note parents are developing increased capacity to navigate service networks and access supports resulting from ParentsNext engagement and mentoring.

Barriers to employment can include children's preparedness for transition or change if their parent gains employment. Many providers have developed strategies to assist children prepare and are working with the entire family unit.

Best practice pre-employment programs for parents

Mentoring is an essential element of ParentsNext and is highly regarded as an investment. Providers note consistent positive changes whilst a participant receives mentoring and amplifies confidence and motivation in pursuit of their goals.

Resilience is another key element that majority of parents need to work on to prepare for employment. Managing change including that involved in transition to employment is challenging and requires a range of skills with resilience being central to sustained progression.

The program settings need to accommodate parents lifestyles e.g. courses cannot be more than a couple of weeks in duration, limited to school hours or provide childcare or a crèche-like setting to support parents continued participation.

The appropriateness of the application of the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) to ParentsNext, and the impact of the TCF on participants

Providers consider that the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) in the context of ParentsNext is inappropriate and unnecessary. The majority of providers agree on the benefits of some element of compliance. Most consider that arrangements under the pilot, prior to the implementation of the TCF were adequate. For example, compliance action was only taken when a participant did not attend their appointment and this was considered effective.

The TCF is disruptive in developing good relationships with participants. In most cases due to initial messaging from DHS participants are under the impression that they have no choice or options. This is a challenging attitude to overcome and takes a lot of time and investment on building trust with participants.

In the pilot the level of interest and participant engagement was more genuine, this seems to have diminished with the introduction of the TCF. Providers report their preference is to avoid compliance and tend to apply the TCF in certain circumstances.

Providers note that they rarely need to action a compliance issue however there are a range of automated systems in play. There are some examples of where the automated processes within the system have triggered suspensions inappropriately in most cases these are dealt with swiftly and income reinstated. Providers note they spend a lot of time undoing suspensions resulting from automated systems and providing reassurance to participants regarding reinstatement of their payments. For example, a host called in sick for an activity being run at a community centre, did not notify the providers and there was no one else available to run the activity. When parents turned up and the community centre was closed they assumed they had met their obligations without needing to result their attendance at the activity and as such had their payments suspended for non-attendance.

Another example, a young Indigenous mother was participating in a retail course, she forgot to report her attendance regularly therefore her payments were suspended overnight, and she would have to contact her provider each morning who would then have to follow up with DHS and reinstate the payment and alleviate the participants concerns.

Payment suspensions are more of an issue for regional or outreach sites. As these are not fulltime sites the process of repealing a suspension is not as simple as re-engagement appointments cannot be scheduled within the allowed timeframes.

Further to the issue of automated system actions, a common observation across the caseload is an insufficient understanding of self-reporting and the impact of automated compliance action as a result. In some cases parents may not have the skills to adequately and diligently self-report therefore further consideration on an individuals' capability to self-report should be strongly considered before a fully automated self-reporting system is solely relied upon.

The administrative burden of the TCF is time consuming. Providers would prefer to spend more time working with participants than following up on compliance action. One participant who is not actively engaged puts a formal complaint in every time they are facing compliance action, the consultant is having to spend time reporting on non-compliance and management are having to deal with an irate job seeker regularly which takes time to resolve each instance.

Participant reporting requirements are also onerous. Participants are connected to a provider and are having to unnecessarily report attendance to both their provider and DHS. The requirement to create an activity for every single participant is administratively heavy and unproductive.



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