

General comments

NESA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the design and implementation of the Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program.

The Discussion Paper invites responses to a number of questions, some of which ask about what success would look like, while others relate to very detailed aspects of service delivery, such as considering what participants need from the program while transitioning out of remand or prison (in the first 4 weeks), or how often the provider should be in contact with a participant during the first 4 weeks.

Our ability to comment is limited by a lack of fundamental detail in the paper.

Time to Work Employment Services ended on 30 June 2024 in non-remote areas but was extended to 30 June 2025 in remote locations. The following information is required for detailed comment and feedback:

- whether the REAL program will be delivered in both remote and non-remote locations.
- information regarding services REAL may deliver in the 12 months post-release, for example will these be personal support, or will they be similar to services delivered in other employment services programs?

If REAL post-release services are intended to be personal support rather than employment/community participation, it is possible that a person returning to a remote community without a REAL presence could be precluded from receiving 'personal support' services.

The Discussion Paper also notes that the program will have a two-stage implementation, commencing on 1 July 2025 with full implementation on 1 July 2026. However, no information is provided in relation to the scope or plan regarding either stage of implementation. Given these limitations, NESA's feedback focuses on what we consider are 8 essential conditions for success, namely:

1. Clear program scope
2. Streamlined Government support in and across remote and non-remote locations
3. Seamless transition between services and supports
4. Consultation and genuine co-design
5. Government stewardship and accountability
6. Clear principles guiding government decision-making
7. Financial viability
8. Enabling providers

1. Clear program scope

For the program to be successful the scope and objective of the program need to be clearly defined.

The discussion paper invites responders to comment on very specific concepts such as the around frequency of contact in the 4-week post-release period; however, there is no guidance on proposed scope of the program. The Time to Work Employment Services (TWES) had a very specific objective – to facilitate the participant’s transition to post-release employment services. TWES also had a clearly defined role - to add value as a conduit between the in-prison support programs delivered by State and Territory governments that build vocational and non-vocational capability and post-release supports including health, housing and safety, and the employment services providers who then assist participants towards employment or remote community participation.

However, it is not clear what the intent, purpose and role of the new program will be, or any thinking on this that emerged from the first round of consultations. Given this program is due to commence on 1 July 2025 clarity on the scope of the program is urgently required, particularly in understanding how it will operate alongside of other Federal employment programs. For example, it is proposed that REAL assistance may continue for up to 12 months post release, but given the lack of understanding of its scope, it is not clear how it will co-exist with Workforce Australia Services (WFAS), Transition to Work (TTW), the new specialist disability employment program (NSDEP), and the new remote employment services program? How will REAL co-exist with WFAS First Nations and ex-offender specialists? Is it the intention that REAL providers do the work that is currently done by employment services providers in the first 12 months? Or will the program run concurrently with other programs?

A condition of success is that the REAL program complements and supplements, rather than duplicates, other supports and programs. A risk to the program is where the ‘lines become blurred’, and the REAL program becomes an alternative to existing supports and programs. The concept of a continuum of service with a single provider has great merit, but a successful program will need to address the scenarios where, for example:

- A continuum of service is not possible due to a participant returning to a remote community post-release.
- A participant in a non-remote location chooses an alternative service such the specialist disability program or WFAS services, noting that in some non-remote locations WFAS may be delivered as a First Nations or Ex-Offenders specialist service.

2. Streamlined Government support in and across remote and non-remote locations

To be successful, the program requires consistent and streamlined government and agency support.

If REAL is to be administered by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) in both remote and non-remote locations, then it has to operate seamlessly alongside of remote employment regions where the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is responsible for services. It needs to be very clear how REAL will operate alongside the new Remote Jobs and Economic Development program (RJDEP), particularly, the new remote employment services. How will these programs co-exist in remote Australia? Will there be a situation in communities where some people receive services under the RJDEP, while others receive services under REAL? Will a remote community be responsible to both DEWR and the NIAA if both programs operate in the community?

A condition of success will be that in the participant and provider experience, programs complement and supplement each other. It's important the stakeholders know how these programs will co-exist.

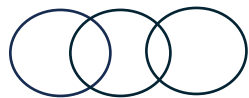
3. Seamless transition between services and supports

Transition from incarceration to REAL to other programs must be seamless, with warm 'handovers' and connections and follow up to ensure that the referral has been successful.

The concept of up to 12 months of post release REAL participation will not always be achievable and must ensure that where a participant transfers from REAL to another program the transition the transition is as seamless as possible.

We have proposed some scenarios below to explain this concept further.

Scenario 1: a Participant is incarcerated in Kalgoorlie and has received in-prison vocational and non-vocational assistance under State/Territory programs. The participant receives pre-release REAL assistance, which is administered by DEWR. Upon release the participant returns to their home in a remote Gibson Desert community and receives assistance through a remote employment service, which is administered by NIAA. A condition of success is that the participant experience is seamless, with the participant seeing the programs and providers working together. There are no gaps in service. There is no re-telling of their story. Each provider adds value to the work done previously. To achieve this, the REAL provider will have been involved during the in-prison program, and the remote employment service provider has been introduced to the participant during the REAL program. The participant sees each as a member of 'Team Participant' – they all play connected roles in a continuum of service in line with the image below. With the participant's permission, information could be shared electronically between each provider, with programs intersecting (through warm handovers), rather than as 'stand-alone' program.





Scenario 2: The participant is incarcerated and lives in non-remote Australia. The location of both the participant and the REAL provider means that it's feasible for the REAL provider to continue to deliver services for 12 months post-release. However, the participant may choose to exit REAL and receive specialist disability services or WFAS / TTW services. Once again both the REAL and employment services provider are connected in a continuum of service.

4. Consultation and genuine co-design

The greatest challenge in designing the program, is ensuring that REAL complements, and does not duplicate what is being delivered through state/territory pre and post release programs; across multiple different Commonwealth agency programs, including DEWR, NIAA and the Department of Social Services, in both remote and non-remote Australia.

There also needs to be sufficient flexibility with the program models to reach the broad cohort proposed (namely young people, veterans, women, parents, and people with disabilities). These are all vastly different cohorts, with vastly different needs and concerns. There needs to be sufficient flexibility under the grant program to enable providers to deliver service models that appropriately support these cohorts and their needs whether as specialists for a particular group (eg., youth), or as a generalist.

There also needs to be on-going co-design, including with respect to the infrastructure and mechanisms needed to deliver the program such as the development of IT systems, data and reporting, and assurance and performance frameworks.

NESA strongly urges government to ensure its co-design and consultation processes and findings are transparent, are not rushed, and allow sufficient time for remote stakeholders and peaks to respond and engage.

5. Government Stewardship and Accountability

There needs to be transparency as to the performance of the Australian Government in stewarding REAL. NESA strongly recommends there be service level agreements for Government departments/agencies involved in delivery of REAL and other employment services to ensure effective operation of the employment service system. These agreements should align with an overarching system performance framework and include performance indicators, measures, and service standards, as well as operational performance reviews, including at a regional level.

6. Clear principles guiding government decision-making

There should also be clear principles to guide the development and implementation of the new REAL program. NESA recommends these include principles that accord with public expectations of government and its stewardship role, including an overarching principle that the best interests of program participants should be of paramount concern. Other principles should include cultural safety; fairness and competitive neutrality; client choice; accountability and



transparency; evidence-informed decision making; value for money; merit-based selection; service quality; and avoidance of power imbalances; harm to sectors and markets; and conflicts of interest.

These principles are particularly important in determining the respective roles of government, and community stakeholders under REAL, and how this program will engage external employment service providers. As part of this, the Government should have a strong regard to the human rights and dignity of participants and support for, and understanding of, the support required by all providers to meet the program objectives.

7. Financial viability

Financial viability remains a significant concern for the employment services sector both in remote and non-remote locations, and it will be a critical condition of success for REAL providers. Across the breadth of employment services programs, providers have seen:

- Changes to program rules that significantly impact revenues with no compensation
- Significant rising costs of doing business in a cost-of-living crisis that is not matched by rising fees/payments from Government
- Sector modelling indicating administrative tasks (particularly in WFAS) take up more than 50% of a frontline workers time
- Poorly designed and poorly performing IT systems
- The additional cost of delivering services in regional and remote locations, including greater barriers to participants such as transport, or service availability or supports, and the significant costs of delivering services to homelands where participants may return to live.
- Significant challenges in recruiting, and retaining staff, given the short contracts, complex clientele, and low wages, and (particularly in regional/remote areas, the lack of available housing for staff)
- The cost of gaining and maintaining accreditation for Right Fit for Risk and other mandated quality frameworks.

It is incumbent on the Department to undertake transparent and independent financial viability modelling for delivery of the program that distinguishes between the costs required to deliver the program in metropolitan, regional and remote locations, and ensure that payment structures reflect the real costs of program delivery, particularly fairer wages for staff to deliver the programs. NESAs would welcome the opportunity to discuss what a fairer payment model could look like with the Department.

8. Enabling providers

The Discussion Paper states that a central feature of REAL will be that ACCOs and other First Nations organisations will be prioritised to deliver the program, and that providers will deliver trauma-informed, holistic services. It is suggested that this includes directly providing services and connecting participants to other services where appropriate.

Clarifying the scope of the program (item 1) will go a long way to helping organisations to identify the skills and knowledge that will be required to deliver the program.



NESA strongly recommends that the Department clarify the skills and capabilities that will be required by frontline workers to deliver the program, with grant funding also being made available to support organisations to train staff in further skills and capabilities necessary to support the cohorts that they will be servicing, given there will be training and professional development requirements beyond the scope of what the National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance may be able to deliver.

Further, while ACCOs and First Nations may be prioritised as service providers, there should also be funding available for *all* successful providers for training necessary to equip frontline workers with the necessary skills and capabilities to deliver services under the REAL program, including cultural safety programs.