



nesa 2026 NATIONAL CONFERENCE

AUSTRALIA AT WORK: THE NEXT CHAPTER

NESA 2026 OPENING CONFERENCE SPEECH

Kathryn Mandla, NESA CEO

TUESDAY 25 AUGUST 2026

W Brisbane

Opening address

Kathryn Mandla, NESA CEO | 9.30am, Tuesday 25 August 2026

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the 2026 NESA conference.

I acknowledge the Turrbal people, the traditional owners of this land, and pay my respects to elders past and present. I also welcome our much-valued members from remote Australia who have travelled as far as the Torres Strait and remote WA to be here with us today and our friends from Canada, the US and UK.

My NESA Ltd Board Directors, sponsors and partners.

We're delighted to have the very honourable Simon Duggan, Secretary of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations with us. Welcome Simon.

Simon is regarded as an 'A-Team Secretary', and I've had the pleasure of witnessing that as a member of the Minister's Advisory Committee. You have an enormous reform task, Simon, and I remain confident you will do all you can to achieve a successful reform for our sector.

No pressure...

This is a landmark conference as the Australian Government embarks on what it describes as transformational changes to employment services.

There have been way too many phantom 'transformations' done to our sector over the decades which, like The Phantom, are yet to be seen. This transformation has potential -

but potential is only fantasy, until it becomes reality

and policy is only as good as its implementation.

The wisdom and insights of the speakers we have over the next two days can help guide the shape of this reform, our sector readiness, and our advocacy moving forward.

Make no mistake, this is a hard transformation for Government in the wake of a damning Select Committee report - a report which requires the department to say:

'We got it wrong. We must take responsibility and fix it.'

It also requires the department to say:

'Sometimes our best ideas, are not our own.'

True transformation requires courage, fuelled by the desire to leave a legacy that survives well beyond our time in a portfolio, job, or career.

It requires asking, not what is good for government, but 'what is good for the public and those who support them?' as you do.

Australia has been tumbling down the 'world class' ladder for public employment services design for over a decade now. Our overseas colleagues have noticed.

We have noticed.

And NESA, for one, and for all our members, does not want to be on that losing team.

I don't want to hear future case studies of the pregnant teenage participant, homeless, with suicidal ideation and other mental health challenges who can't be serviced by an allied health service that can see her immediately, because the program rules say, 'no'.

Of a provider being told, 'Why don't you call headspace instead', so she can sit on a 4 month wait list? Or 'We can transfer her to another provider, then you can service her with your allied health service' – a transfer which takes 2-3 weeks'. A vulnerable young woman at immediate risk of harm and program rules say, 'no'.

It fails the pub test.

The frontpage newspaper test.

Mostly importantly, it fails the humanity test.

Yet for too long – way too long - our sector has been silenced from speaking up for fear of losing their contracts in future rounds in a market engineered and controlled by the Government and characterised by levels of control, inflexibility, administrative burden, and transactionalism that are in a 'world class' of their own.

And it is an absolute testament to the resilience of our sector, that despite this, despite all the implementation failures thrown at us, our sector still achieves incredible outcomes for the many millions of people we have served since public employment services were outsourced in the late 1990s.

And the question we ask of Government, of all the stakeholders that feed into this reform, including NESA, is:

Have we acted with integrity?

Because you cannot build a system with integrity if you don't act with personal integrity in its design and implementation.

Integrity asks Government and all of us seeking to shape this reform–

What do we value?

What will our legacy be?

Do we have the courage to address the flaws of previous systems?

Under the current system, introduced in 2022, process, regulation and punishment became outcomes - not the best interests of participants, and certainly not the best interests of our workforce.

Where is the integrity in leaving as a legacy, an employment services system that history records as:

'rigid, dehumanising, and transactional

A tender that led to thousands of people losing their jobs, companies collapse, and that caused significant trauma to Australia's most disadvantaged.

Who - who among us, wants that as their legacy?

Years from now, when this reform is no longer a reform – there will be only one question that really matters:

'What did we leave behind?'

That's why this reform must create a system built on integrity.

One that gives hope - to participants, providers, employers and public servants – at every level.

That accepts public servants do not hold all the answers and it's ok – it's ok to seek advice. Advice from many in the room who have lived and walked the frontline of employment services:

- who have held traumatised jobseekers collapsing at reception
- who have found safe haven for victims of domestic violence and
- hope for refugees who have faced war and persecution.

Because they all walk through the doors of our sector with hope.

And the reform should give hope.

Tonight, at our awards, we will celebrate those who have made a significant difference in the life of too many people to count. Your impact demonstrates what transformation looks like in the real world.

And in this sector, you are the true 'public' servants.

And before I talk about what NESA is asking for in this reform, I want to put some elephants on the table. No transformation can occur unless we are honest and transparent about our vested interests.

Unions want to represent workers and grow their membership. Fair enough. If I was running a union, I'd be thinking about that too.

Peak bodies, including NESA, want to protect their sectors and keep them viable and thriving - enabled by Government to focus primarily on getting participants into jobs without all the unnecessary costs of regulatory burden.

Academics want a model reflecting the best research, even when the purity of the model reaches the messy reality of implementation and Budget constraints.

And there may be people in government thinking "how do I protect my resources, my team and its relevance in the face of endless productivity dividends?"

We are all human. We all bring interests to the table.

The question isn't whether we have them, it's what we do with them.

Unless we approach this reform with integrity, how can we ever build a system with integrity?

A few weeks ago, I explained to a colleague why I don't participate in judging the NESA Awards and don't know who has won until envelopes are opened on the night.

He said, "Ah yes. Your reputation." I didn't correct him at the time.

But it's not about reputation.

It's about integrity.

Reputation is what other people think of us. Integrity is what remains when nobody else is looking. It's the decision you make when there is no applause for making it.

It's what keeps you awake at night when you've compromised it.

And it's what lets you sleep when you haven't.

The most important question we should ask throughout this reform is:

'Can we look at the decisions we made and say, with integrity:

'We put the people this system exists to serve ahead of ourselves.'

Ahead of institutional interests.

Ideology.

Membership numbers.

Careers.

Reputation.

Because if we need a North Star for this reform, it is not Government. Not NESA, Not providers, academics or unions.

It's the participant.

The jobseeker.

The person who walks through the door needing us to see them not as a caseload, a Stream, a payment, an outcome, or a piece of policy –

but as a human being whose life can change for the better because we got this right.

Integrity demands that they come first.

So, with that North Star, NESAs are asking the Government to:

- Get the assessment right.
- Trust and rapport are built over time. The assessment process must recognise this through a two-stage model for participant assessments – a Services Australia triage, then an in-stream, face-to-face assessment by providers.
- In the real world, there's not many people who will tell a stranger a life's worth of trauma and hardship in the first sitting.
- If we get the assessment wrong, we get the whole system wrong.
- Protect service continuity and engagement
- Mutual obligations should not leave participants to waste away unserved and make services financially unviable. They should be based on positive engagement by participants with compliance as a backstop.
- Replace automated payment suspensions with early funded re-engagement, and switch funding automatically to service fees, whenever mutual obligations are paused, to enable providers to engage participants during the pause.
- Integrate Streams 2 and 3 – for those with moderate and complex needs. Moving from complex to moderate need, shouldn't retraumatise vulnerable people by moving them to another provider to retell their story.
- Most parts of rural and regional Australia cannot accommodate separate providers for Streams 2 and 3 – the markets, caseloads, and local capability are too thin and site establishment, and ongoing operating costs, are disproportionately too high.
- Also separating providers for Streams 2 and 3 and growing government's digital Stream 1, could more than halve caseloads across the sector leading to market collapse – this is the biggest risk for any reform, as caseload size is a key determinant of financial viability.
- Enable the frontline to do its job.
- Competitive neutrality should apply in the reform regardless of what type of organisation our frontline works for. Legal entity status is not a consideration for participants in choosing a provider.

Frankly, they don't give a toss, and neither should we.

- Provide fairer funding. Annual indexation of payments against real cost movements and reintroduction of an ongoing service fee as a stable funding base, with a reduction in the outcome payment share ratio.
- Enable people on the frontline to be paid a fair wage, that is reflected in the funding model and doesn't expect providers to self-fund the gap. The Award for our sector, where we have 72% of workers women, many with lived experience, is disgracefully low.
- Providers pay around 20% above Award to attract and keep their staff, while Government trials pay public servants doing comparable frontline work around 25% more again.
- Keep the employment fund and make it flexible enough to accommodate individual participant needs.

- Reduce the level of administrative burden. 50% of frontline workers' time spent on government administritivia is a blatant waste of taxpayers' money and is killing service productivity. It's killing our sector.
- Don't be shy about Ai –Government can reduce administrative burden almost immediately by allowing workers to use tools that reduce time spent on low-risk administrative tasks.
- And after nearly a year of waiting, I hear provider applications to use Ai are finally getting decisions – it's not a deluge, but they are finally trickling in.

As the peak body for the employment services sector – NESA will continue to fight hard for our sector and the many disadvantaged people you support.

Our sector knows, too well, that, 'nothing worth doing was ever easy'.

NESA is up for that challenge.

Returning to the young woman I spoke about at the beginning.

What does reform integrity look like for her?

- It needs to feel culturally safe – from her perspective, not ours
- She needs an immediate response to her suicidal ideation, emergency housing, and access to pre-natal care and longer-term mental health care
- an employment consultant who can provide quality case management because their caseloads are reasonable and funding adequate
- a system that enables her to build her confidence to participate in pre-employment education and training and
- a system that respects her human dignity enough to say, 'we believe you worthy of employment and we have been fully enabled by the Government to get you there.'

And most importantly, a reform that says to the providers it has commissioned to deliver these services, 'we will enable you to get on with the job and get people jobs'.

That's a reform with integrity.

It's a reform that 'puts the public back in public service.'

NESA will continue to fight for the public and the exceptional people in our sector who serve them.

We will fight for a reform worthy of the people whose lives depend on us getting this right.

Because our North Star is not an abstraction.

She is that young Indigenous woman I spoke about today.

And there are hundreds of thousands of people like her walking through the front doors of our services every year.

If we keep the reform focussed on them, we will know which way is North.

And that - that is a transformation worthy of the Australian public.