



Disability Employment Reforms

23 May 2024 Event

2024-25 Budget Disability Employment Reforms

Post-budget briefing – 23 May 2024

This is full transcript of event held 23 May 2024.

The Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Amanda Rishworth MP, has also published a copy of the [keynote speech](#).

A copy of the transcript of the Department's presentation is also available, using the same headings as the presentation – both of which can be found on [DSS Engage](#).

Welcome

FACILATATOR:

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome.

My name is Sara and I will be helping to facilitate today's event.

Just a brief audio description of me — I am a lady in my 40s. I have long dark hair. I'm wearing a long sleeve black shirt with grey trousers and I'm also wearing glasses.

I'm really excited to have you here joining us all here today.

I'd like to welcome the Honourable Amanda Rishworth, Minister for Social Services. The Minister is joining us today to launch the new specialist disability employment program, one of a series of important changes to disability employment.

I'd also like to introduce both Robyn Shannon and Kellie Spence, from the Department of Social Services. Robyn and Kellie will be providing us with details on the new specialist disability employment program and what it will mean for participants, employers and providers. They will also be outlining some of the other Budget initiatives that have come out for Disability Employment Reforms through the 2024-25 Budget.

Before we do begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, whose lands we meet on here today in Sydney, and acknowledge their ongoing connection to land, culture, water and community. I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the many lands around Australia which our attendees are joining us from today. I pay my respects to all Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all people from First Nations joining us here today.

Before we do get started today, I would just like to run through some key information to ensure that this event is as accessible and inclusive as possible. So today we have interested people joining us both here in person in Sydney, but also online from all around Australia.

For those of you in the room with us today, we will have tea and coffee, water and refreshments and they will be served in the foyer area just outside the main room for afternoon tea. The bathrooms are just outside the main entry door and head to your right, including accessible bathrooms as well.

In the event of an emergency or an evacuation, we will hear an audible alarm. Don't panic. It will start with a "beep beep" sound as a warning first and then instructions will follow from the venue which we will all be able to respond to. If we should need to evacuate, anybody who does require assistance will be supported to leave the venue should that need arise.

But today we are all here to talk about the Disability Employment Reforms announced in this year's Budget.

During today's event, there will be an opportunity to post your questions and feedback as we go along, so to do this, we ask you to please use the QR code which is on the screen now and click on the pop-up link or you can go to Slido.com — that's S-L-I-D-O.com — in your browser and enter the event code "#DES Reforms". Once you are logged in, you can then select the relevant Q&A topic from the drop-down menu at the top of your screen and you can then start to enter your questions anonymously. You will be able to view questions that are already entered and already submitted, and you can upvote on any of these using the thumbs up button and this will let us know which of those questions are most important to you.

Later on this afternoon, we will be having a question and answer session with both Robyn and Kellie following their presentation, which will give us the opportunity to pose some of your questions that have come through online. Please note that all feedback and questions following this event will be collated and will inform our further development and communication with stakeholders.

The option for you to provide your online feedback will remain open until 5pm this coming Monday, 27 May, so that will give you plenty of time to consider the information that you do hear today and to continue to send through those questions from all the presentations today.

There will also be further opportunities as the Department progresses through the consultation process for the new model and these will be posted on to the DSS Engage website, which you can find at www.engage.dss.gov.au.

It is also really important today that we do engage in respectful conversations with each other. We know that you will have a lot of questions and we know that there is a lot of change being discussed at the moment with the disability community right now and it is really important that we do keep respectful dialogue open.

Today we do have Auslan interpreters joining us. We'd like to welcome Belinda, Kirk and Bettina, so thank you for joining us today. For those of you who are watching online, you will be able to see them spotlighted on your screen. For those joining us online as well, you can also access automatically generated live captions. Just select more options at the top of the screen and then click turn on the live captions option.

For those of us here attending in person, if you do require a low sensory space at any time during this afternoon's event, please feel free to use the foyer just outside the main room, but you can also head up to level 3, where there's a beautiful museum area, should you need to find that space and utilise that at any stage during the day. We do also have water stations stationed at the back of this room, at the side of the room, and also in the foyer should you need them as well.

So now, thank you, I would like to welcome Minister for Social Services, Amanda Rishworth, to join me here on stage where she will share her vision for the new program and insights on how Budget delivers for people with disability. Thank you. Welcome.

(Applause)

Minister's keynote speech

THE HON. AMANDA RISHWORTH MP:

Well, thank you very much and good afternoon. It's great to be with you all today.

I'll give you a visual description of myself. I am wearing a pink or magenta suit. I have dark curly hair, glasses, blue eyes and I checked the website, I'm average build and average height, so I was pleased to know that.

But look, thank you for being here and online in person.

We are here in person meeting on the lands of the Gadigal people and I pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging and extend that recognition to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Look, today I hope to start setting the scene and take you through the detail of our Government's redesigned Disability Employment Services and some associated initiatives.

In the Budget our Government committed an additional \$227.6 million to the new Disability Employment Services system, bringing the total amount committed over the next 4 years to \$5.5 billion to help more people with disability prepare and find suitable employment.

The Budget helps to advance our Government's commitment to a more inclusive Australia, where people with disability have equal opportunity to gain employment.

We believe that everyone should be able to enjoy the dignity of meaningful work in secure employment, including enjoying the economic, social and psychological benefits that work brings.

As a Government, we have an important role to facilitate that.

Which is why I've made sure that breaking down barriers to employment for those excluded from the labour market was a key pillar of the Jobs and Skills Summit in September 2022, where both good and bad experiences of people with disability engaging with employment services, seeking employment and being discriminated against in workplaces was highlighted. And through the Employment White Paper, our Government articulated a clear vision to create a dynamic and inclusive labour market where everybody has the opportunity to secure fairly paid work.

Now, from day one in my role as Minister for Social Services, increasing the employment rate for people with disability has been a key priority of mine, but equally ensuring that these are jobs that meet the aspirations of people with disability. In fact, one of the first meetings I held with the Department upon me becoming Minister 2 years ago was a briefing on Disability Employment Services, where I indicated my intention to reform the program.

With a significant Government investment in disability employment services, coupled with an unemployment rate for people with disability more than double that of working age people without disability that has not shifted in decades, it is clear to me that we can and should do better.

On the ground, feedback, national consultation processes, reference groups, inquiries and significant reports like the Disability Royal Commission have highlighted the need for a system of employment support that is more inclusive, effective and better meets the needs of people with disability. This includes the need to reduce barriers to participate in employment services. I've consistently heard about the need to lift the quality and culture of services and for them to deliver more targeted supports, supports that put the needs of participants at the centre of their service delivery model, not the other way around.

Now, putting the needs of people at the centre means encouraging adaptive service delivery that meets the needs of each and every individual. Personally, people with disability and their families and carers have told me about their experience of Disability Employment Services and some stories are great — life changing, in fact — where services provide wrap around and tailored supports so that people with disability can thrive in employment, but not all stories have been good stories and I no longer want that to be the case. We want all people with disability who interact with the Disability Employment Services to experience high quality services and the new specialised Disability Employment Service Program will incentivise this.

It should be no surprise to anyone in this room that I've been very clear since becoming Minister, I don't expect Disability Employment Service providers to only do the bare minimum for people using their service. All providers should be striving for excellence, providing quality services, adopting best practice approaches and focused on continuous improvement.

Now, as many of you would know, coming upon this role I was really shocked to learn that Disability Employment Service providers were not measured against quality, even though it is a key performance indicator in contracts.

As an immediate action, I initiated work to develop a new quality framework for Disability Employment Services, which was introduced in July last year.

The new quality framework places DES participants at the centre of defining what a quality service means to them and ensuring providers are listening and responding to those needs. Through clear quality service expectations for providers, it will ensure that the DES sector improves as a whole to provide better outcomes for people living with disability.

Quality assessments against the framework are currently under way and provider results will be published outlining whether their service is exceeding expectations, meeting expectations, or require further improvement. The public release of provider ratings, which will occur in the second half of this year, promotes transparency and will ensure people with disability have the confidence in their providers. This focus on quality will continue to be a key priority under the new program.

Now, as everyone here knows, a key element of successful employment outcomes is encouraging employers to create inclusive workplaces and hire more people with disability and that is why outside of the DES program, while working on the reforms of this program, we've also been trialling new approaches to increase employer confidence and equip employers to hire people with disability.

Our Government has established pilots to build employer confidence to hire more people with disability and create career pathways and development opportunities for these employees.

We've funded Australia's Disability Network for the Career Pathways Pilot in partnership with the Business Council of Australia to boost meaningful employment and career opportunities for people with disability working with large employers.

The Disability Employment Tourism Local Navigators are successfully connecting employers in the tourism industry with people with disability looking for work. These pilots are aimed at building employer confidence and breaking down silos within organisations and across service systems and industries.

In the new specialist disability employment program, we will be encouraging every provider to play a role in building employer confidence as well.

As a national network of organisations, employment service providers are in a unique position to build relationships with employers and support them to employ people with disability and it's my expectation that under the new specialised disability employment program, providers will be focused on addressing employer needs as well as their clients. We will incentivise this through the performance framework to help achieve the best outcomes.

We also continue to support employers through our JobAccess service, which provides advice and information for employers as well as workforce modifications.

And through our National Disability Insurance Scheme and the Disability Employment Services Pathway Pilot and other programs and projects announced in April, we are looking to break down silos between open employment and supported employment because it is important that people with disability, including those with complex needs, have diverse pathways to employment. These pilots and projects will be a key source of information on what works to increase employment and careers for people with disability, including those with a work capacity of 8 hours or under, who will now become eligible for the program under the Government's reforms.

Now, it's no surprise to those of us in this room that people with disability can and often do face sometimes overlapping barriers to employment.

The new specialised disability employment program to come into effect on 1 July next year is built on the 8 key principles of the Government's Employment White Paper released last year and this includes the principles that services should unlock individual potential and address employer needs because employment services play such a critical role in creating pathways to decent jobs and delivering outcomes to ensure that individuals are not left behind.

Now, my vision for the new program is one that puts the needs of people with disability at the centre of the Disability Employment Services and sees employers as key partners.

The new program will seek to shift the culture in employment services for people with disability and set an expectation of high quality services that develops and amplifies their client's strengths and meets their unique needs to ensure that they are successfully matched with their employers and this includes more active engagement with employers.

I do want to see a focus on innovation and continuous improvement. In fact, we all should expect it. And importantly, I want to see results that people with disability are achieving better employment outcomes, including meaningful jobs and career progression, as a result of the reforms we put in place.

Now, the new program has been designed to help shift the narrative around disability employment. It isn't just about getting people with disability into any job and forgetting them. It is about working closely with each individual, building trusted relationships, and supporting them regardless of where they are in their employment journey.

We know that people with disability have a wide range of needs and some people may require more support than others. We also recognise that there are different pathways to employment and a one size fits all approach is not going to work. That is why my Disability Employment Reform priorities are to:

1. improve the quality of services;
2. increase flexibility and individualise supports while reducing complexity and administration; and,
3. offer a diverse network of high-quality specialist providers.

Now, a critical element of the new program will be a doubling down on improving quality of the types of services that employment providers deliver. We can't keep doing the same thing and expect to shift the dial on improving employment opportunities for people with disability.

Under our new specialist disability employment program, providers will be expected to engage participants and employers to design their service and to listen and incorporate their feedback to make improvements.

Providers will be expected to have staff and leadership with a variety of skills and experience that is representative of the communities they are working with. We need providers to be leaders in employing people with disability, as consultants, administrative staff and leaders, so they can bring this expertise to the table when they engage with other employers.

At the same time, we want to ensure that employers have the right skills and supports to hire and support people with disability. We have known for a long time that many businesses want to hire more people with disability, but are not always sure how to do so or have the confidence.

With a strengthened focus on quality servicing, providers will need to work in partnership with employers.

Evidence based strategies, teamed with more generous and consistent wage subsidies of up to \$10,000, will support employers to build inclusive workplaces where a job seeker with a disability can thrive and be a highly valued team member.

Providers will not just support their clients through the recruitment process, but will be expected to continue to provide support that the client and the employer may need once they are in the workplace.

Now, our changes to the Disability Employment Service Program focuses on providing tailored, yet flexible, supports to suit each person's circumstance through the introduction of a flexible and intensive service offer.

We have consistently heard that the rigid nature of the program and the application of mutual obligation frameworks limit the provider's ability to really focus on supporting the individual. The application of the new service offer will cater to individual circumstances by adopting a similar approach to engagement and meeting mutual obligations with the ability to step up to more formalised requirements if participants aren't engaging.

The flexible service offer will focus on maintaining connections between participants and providers to meet mutual obligation requirements, while accounting for their life circumstances that make it hard to intensively participate. For example, people may be engaging in education and training, have suddenly taken on caring responsibilities, or had a decline in their ability to participate due to the nature of their disability or other barriers they are experiencing, but we'll remain connected so providers can adjust their approach to support them when circumstances change.

The intensive service offer will be for those in a position to more actively and intensively seek employment as well as those who are motivated to find employment.

Providers will be expected to customise supports and services to individuals to meet their employment goals and mutual obligation requirements will be tailored to the individual and based on engagement in activities to reach their employment goals, and with the increased flexibility being offered to providers to take a person centred approach, administrative burden will be reduced because we want providers to spend more time supporting people with disability rather than undertaking endless administration. We want you all to be doing what you do best.

Now, the changes to the service offer are key enablers of driving a cultural shift within the program and providers will be key players in enabling this.

With the program changes that increase flexibility, it will be up to providers to apply this in a way that shifts relationships between providers and participants from administrative and compliance base to one that's built on mutual respect and trust.

The new program recognises that people with disability may be at different stages of their employment journey and that a one size fits all approach doesn't work. It doesn't matter whether someone wants to build their skills and confidence before they start looking for work, if they need help in completing a resume or a job application, or are ready to connect with prospective employers and start working, the new program will support these goals.

It will support people with disability to enter employment that highlights their skills and experience with the aim of building meaningful careers and, importantly, the program will be expanded to include around 15,000 people who were not eligible for support previously, such as volunteers, who may have been excluded because of their personal savings, family or partner income. As well as volunteers, people with disability with a work capacity of less than 8 hours a week can also receive support.

It removes the service time limit, meaning more people will be able to access support as long as they need it. This has been a key piece of feedback received through consultation and is a recommendation of the Disability Royal Commission because if we're going to have a high performing system, why should people be excluded from accessing it? Now, our Government believes that if a person with disability needs help to find employment, support should be available.

Now, I've also heard clearly that people with disability want more options to access specialised providers who have historical experience and deep expertise working with specific groups of people.

Since the introduction of the current program in 2018, we've seen a drift to a more homogenised service that lacks differentiation from mainstream programs and significant provider consolidation which limits participant choice in some regions.

More active market stewardship will be introduced under the new program, but participant choice will always take precedence.

Improved information on performance will support competition and choice for participants, but there will be greater controls around provider entry and market share that are designed to support the viability of smaller and more specialised providers, while ensuring there is still diversity of providers for participants to choose from.

Now, as I said at the beginning, the expectation is not to do the bare minimum. It is about driving best practice, adopting innovation, and that is exactly what the new Disability Employment Centre of Excellence will do.

The Centre of Excellence will be a partner for our new Disability Employment Service providers. The Centre of Excellence involves an investment of \$23.3 million over 4 years and will play a critical role in driving improved quality employment service delivery in the Government's reforms of disability employment.

It will do this by establishing an evidence informed best practice hub that will provide resources, tools and training to help providers deliver quality employment services and supports to both participants with disability and employers. The evidence base for disability employment will include building the capacity of supported employment services so they can better assist employees to develop their skills and move into open employment.

Most importantly, the Centre of Excellence will contribute to improving the quality of service offered by providers in the new specialist disability employment program, Workforce Australia and the Community Development Program and the National Disability Insurance Scheme. We will also build on the skills and capacity of providers to support employment, including in Australia's Disability Enterprises.

This will build on our existing \$52 million investment in supported employment, which is focused on increasing the range of employment opportunities and pathways for people with disability with high support needs.

Our investment in supported employment has included the establishment of a new Structural Adjustment Fund, which is providing grants to enable supported employment services and social enterprises to evolve their business models and create genuine employment opportunities and pathways for people with disability. Learning what works from these grants will form part of the evidence base in the Centre of Excellence to be shared across providers.

So just in conclusion, more than 1 in 6 people in Australia live with disability and we need to see that reflected in our workforce.

Now is the time to make real change. Our Government understands that people want to and have the right to participate in dignified work.

We pledged at the election we would tackle job insecurity, increase wages and support people gain skills. With record levels of unemployment, why shouldn't people with disability get a real opportunity not just for any old job, but meaningful, secure work that they are well trained for?

Meaningful employment can be a positive part of life and that doesn't change if you live with disability.

Our new specialist disability employment program will put people with disability and their experiences at the centre of achieving the shared goal of people with disability and our Government to increase employment opportunities.

The new program is about striving for excellence and delivering for people with disability. It is also about encouraging providers to work in partnership with employers.

We want providers to have the right skills, the ability to innovate, adopt best practice, and embed continuous improvement within their organisations to ensure that they're providing a high quality service that meets the needs of participants and employers.

Now, in the later parts of this forum, my Department will take you through the new model in further detail and we will continue to work with you to further refine the implementation of our new program design. We will also be going outside of this room and directly seeking the views of people with disability, as always they should be at the heart of this reform.

Thank you again for the contributions you've already made to the important discussions we've had so far and I will encourage you to continue to engage.

But I really do think that this is an exciting time for disability employment.

These reforms I think are long overdue, but they have the potential to achieve impact right across this country and, importantly, improve the lives of Australians living with disability now, but those living with disability for generations to come.

So thank you and I look forward to continuing this conversation with you.

(Applause)

FACILATATOR:

Thank you and thank you to Minister Rishworth for your valuable insights and we really do appreciate your time with us all here today. No doubt over the course of today you will continue to think of questions as you have the opportunity to process and reflect on the information from our guest speakers today.

So as a reminder, remember we are taking your questions using the QR code on the Slido online platform to ensure that everybody has the opportunity, both attending today as well as online, to have their say. So we ask all of our audience please continue to send these questions through. As we mentioned earlier, this platform will be available through till 5pm on Monday to give you the opportunity to get those questions in.

So lots of information that we have heard so far today, but we will take this opportunity to break after this presentation before we introduce our next presenters up on stage today. So a 30-minute break. For those of you who are in the room today, please feel free, refreshments and afternoon tea are available outside for you in the foyer, and for those of you online, we will break for 30 minutes, and we'll see you back at 2.45pm. Thank you.

(Short break)

A new specialist disability program presentation

FACILATATOR:

Okay, I wonder if this — are we working? We are. Fantastic.

Hello and welcome back, everyone. I hope you all had the opportunity for a refreshing break and for those in the room, that you managed to take advantage of the wonderful refreshments that were provided to you today as well.

Before we do dive right back in and introduce our next guest speakers for the next presentation, it is just a quick reminder for those of us joining online today to please rejoin our conversation. It is very important. All of your insights and contributions are very crucial for our ongoing discussions. So we do want to give everybody online the opportunity to jump back in, to join us, to get everyone back on board so that we can continue this important work together. So thank you.

I would like now to introduce and to welcome Robyn Shannon and Kellie Spence, from the Department of Social Services. They will now take us through in much more detail what these changes mean and how they will be implemented. Welcome.

ROBYN SHANNON:

Good afternoon, everyone. I might just start with a visual description. It's always a dilemma how you do this, as I think the Minister indicated. So I would describe myself as a tall woman of middle years with a volume of long brown, curly hair. Today I'm wearing a dark patterned dress, actually with a bit of a love heart motif because I'm in a celebratory mood, and a dark Jacket.

Look, I really do thank everybody for participating in today's information session and I'd also like to thank everyone who has participated in the reform process to date. The Department has undertaken extensive consultation in seeking to improve the overall performance of the current DES program and to inform the new program, which is something that we're going to seek to reflect on during this presentation.

The Department is committed to conducting a fair, honest and transparent process for the design and implementation of the new specialist disability employment program and related services.

For today's event, this means that this presentation will be made publicly available on the Department's website and any views expressed or information provided by attendees to this event will be considered along with the views expressed and information provided by other stakeholders.

For those of you who know me, you know that I might have a tendency to go off script at times. That's unlikely to happen today. Okay.

So I might just start by sharing an outline of what we want to cover today.

The agenda for this part of the discussion is around 60 minutes, so Kellie and I will talk in some detail. We might edit a little bit on the fly because the Minister has spoken to some elements, if we're running a little over, and then there will be 30 minutes for questions because we really do want to keep that time for questions.

So firstly, we'll outline the new program, simplified program design and key improvements, including expanded access for people with disability, which the Minister has touched on; increased flexibility so that providers can focus on serving participants and employers; and how we're going to work to seek to shift culture away from compliance and towards goal setting and meaningful engagement between providers and participants.

We'll also cover details on key improvements and areas for change for participants and then highlight how the new program will better support employers, including details of a higher value wage subsidy.

The next few sections will then give some indicative details on the new payment model, planned procurement and aspects of the new program that encompass performance, data, quality and assurance.

Last but not least, we'll provide details on how you can find out more, be involved and share your ideas moving forward.

So as the Minister reflected, the new program will be a single disability employment program combining the current Disability Management Service, or DMS, and Employment Support Service, or ESS, programs.

This simpler approach focuses on participant need within the program rather than differentiating programs.

The change does not mean the new model is one size fits all. Providers will be expected to design services to meet the needs of their participants and will have the flexibility to do so.

The need for Ongoing Support will be assessed once in employment, rather than upfront, and better reflect an individual's need at a point in time.

This simplification aims to reduce program complexity and contract administration and make it easier for job seekers and consultants and everyone involved in service delivery to understand.

So why did we make these changes?

We heard from stakeholders that there is a lack of transparency in understanding how the assessment process determines access to each of the current programs. The Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia also included feedback on the high levels of fragmentation across the employment services system.

In addition, and as you'll see there, program data demonstrates the employment outcomes for participants in the 2 current program streams, DMS and ESS, are very similar across weeks regardless of the payment incentives and structures that exist under each of these programs, and so, you know, I think if the results are not markedly different, that sort of presents a case for simplification.

It can also be difficult to determine the need for Ongoing Support in the workplace at an initial assessment as there are many variables, such as the preemployment supports that providers deliver, the actual job found and the job match and relationship with the employer. So, again, that's one of the reasons why we've made a change to the Ongoing Support assessment opportunity.

So a final benefit of this change is that it will mean less contract administration and simpler referral processes into the program and it reduces fragmentation within the employment services system.

Just to talk a little bit about the new program and the expansion of eligibility, the aim is to help more people with disability, injury and/or health conditions to prepare and find sustainable employment.

Changes to eligibility will mean that the program will be open to anyone whose disability is the primary barrier to employment who has an assessed capacity of up to 30 hours per week due to their disability, injury and/or health condition.

People with an assessed future work capacity of less than 8 hours per week will be able to volunteer. People will not need to be in receipt of income support payments to be eligible as long as they meet the other general eligibility criteria, and this expansion of eligibility responds to the recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission as well as stakeholder feedback through consultation on DES Reforms that more people with disability who need or want employment should have access to the program.

All participants currently eligible for DES will continue to receive services under the new program. This includes eligibility rules for special category participants, such as eligible school leavers, pre released prisoners and special class clients. This won't change.

Job seekers with a partial capacity to work of 30 hours or more will continue to be referred to Workforce Australia, which also provides employment support for people with disability.

Critically, there will also no longer be a break in support for those who are looking for work. The 2--year service limit is being removed, so participants will be able to stay in the program for as long as they need that support.

So I might just talk a little bit about servicing for people with a work capacity of less than 8 hours. As flagged, previous consultations have indicated there's a great deal of support for expanding eligibility to include those with an assessed capacity of less than 8 hours. The Department acknowledges, however, that in recent consultations undertaken on DES Reforms, stakeholders have provided advice about how the new program would need to be adapted in order to be able to best support those with low assessed work capacity.

A lot of this feedback has been taken on board within the new program design and we're also considering this feedback as we work to operationalise that policy. We recognise that it won't be without challenges. We'll work through the feedback we've received through various the consultation mechanisms, but it will be really critical for new providers to step up and there will be a review point for this change to eligibility in mid 2028.

Participants not on income support who want to work will now have equal opportunity to be supported in their employment journey. Decoupling eligibility from income support will allow entry for people who, for a variety of reasons, may choose not to seek unemployment benefits or be ineligible for income support, such as young people who might be precluded as a result of their parents' income.

One concern expressed in recent consultations was really about how to maintain the engagement of people volunteering into the program and so to manage this risk, it is proposed that this cohort of participants will receive active support and their participation will be monitored and volunteering participants who aren't engaged for a defined period of time will be temporarily suspended from the program until they reengage or are exited. So I think the key is these are people who are volunteering in and if they're not engaging with the provider, then there's a decision to be made about whether or not their servicing is paused and if they want to reengage, they can volunteer back in, but we need to kind of put some parameters around that.

As mentioned, expanded eligibility arrangements for those with a work capacity of less than 8 hours or who are not receiving income support payment will initially be in place for 3 years. There will be an evaluation to assess if the Disability Employment Program is working effectively for these cohorts, responding to their needs and achieving employment outcomes.

It will be important that providers, the Department and the new Centre of Excellence, which the Minister has touched on and we'll come back to a bit, all work closely together to identify and share good practice to make these services a success for people with a disability and support the directions of the Disability Royal Commission and, indeed, Australia's Disability Employment Strategy.

A point about assessment and referral — so eligibility for the program will continue to be assessed by an Employment Service Assessment, or ESAt, for most job seekers or a Job Capacity Assessment, or JCA, for those applying for a Disability Support Pension.

The ESAt will recommend the most appropriate employment service based on the job seekers' circumstances and be focused on work capacity.

Feedback during consultations often highlighted concerns over the timeliness of ESAt assessments, in addition to transparency on program decisions. Arrangements in the new program will make ESAt simpler and reduce the need for reassessments, with the secondary benefit of reduced wait times for participants to be assessed.

First steps have been taken by the Department working with Services Australia in this regard with the removal of the 78-week ESAt review under the current program arrangements which consultations identified as adding little value. The new program goes further.

The initial ESAt will no longer determine need for Ongoing Support and an ESAt will no longer be required every 2 years with the removal of the 2-year time limit in service.

The Department's analysis shows that upon reaching the current 2-year time limit, around 65% of participants actually return to DES within the next 12 months and we think this indicates that a significant majority of people continue to require help from a Disability Employment Service provider. Reducing reassessments also responds to frustrations that participants have with the current process, with many people feeling like they are asked to prove their disability repeatedly.

When it comes to the referral process, a participant's right to choose their provider from a diverse network of specialist services remains a key objective in the new program. Participants can choose the provider that best suits their needs based on speciality, performance and location.

Participant research and user testing over the last 12 months has informed planned improvements in the system for better information to participants and assessors to inform that choice.

Participants can also change from their current provider to a new provider at any time and for any reason, so that maintains the current program flexibility on that aspect.

As I mentioned earlier, special eligibility for targeted cohorts remains in place, which can allow for direct registration through a provider. In this regard, improving the pathway for NDIS job seekers to the new program will be a key focus area.

I might just now turn to the role of the National Panel of Assessors in the new program.

So the National Panel of Assessors, or the NPA, is a standing panel of independent assessment service providers who support the needs of people with disability in the workplace. NPA providers serve an important function in undertaking independent assessment services for Ongoing Support, Workplace Modification Services, and the Supported Wage System.

The role of the NPA continues under the new model. However, as mentioned, NPA providers will now determine whether Ongoing Support is required for any participant in the new program. They will also continue to deliver Supported Wage System assessments and Workplace Modification Scheme assessments to support the needs of people with disability in the workplace.

A new NPA panel will be established for 1 July 2025.

I'm just going to hand over now to Kellie and she's going to talk through some of the features of the new program as it relates to the service that participants and employers will receive.

KELLIE SPENCE:

Thank you, Robyn. So just to describe myself quickly, I am also of middle years, and I have today straight salt and pepper hair and a black and white jacket.

So a key objective is to achieve a culture of high quality service, ensuring participants are treated with respect and dignity and are receiving individualised support. This culture of service applies equally to employers.

The new program has used the participant research on quality service to describe the user experience sought for participants, including support that is tailored to each participant's circumstances; support that best meets a participant's strengths, goals and aspirations; support that builds a participant's skills and capacity; having a meaningful relationship between participants and their provider.

The program design supports these goals.

Through key changes, there will be a simplified program design with less focus on administration and compliance; a simpler approach to engagement and meeting mutual obligations, with the ability to step up to more formalised arrangements; a flexible service, where it meets the needs of an individual's circumstances; an expectation for providers to demonstrate leadership as an employer of people with a disability.

At its core, we are expecting a shift in the overall program and provider culture. That's a culture informed by a diverse network of providers who place participants and employers at the centre of their service design.

The new program design seeks to ensure that people with the highest need for specialist disability employment services can access the program without barriers.

The current model is high investment for high intensity support and in line with that, eligibility was limited to those who were considered to have the most capacity to benefit from that, which excluded those with lower work capacity and time in the service was limited to 2 years, and many stakeholders told us that this doesn't work for all people. Many people don't need or aren't able to engage in a high intensity service at all times.

One way that the new program increases flexibility and customisation is by having 2 new service offers, an intensive service and a flexible service.

Providers will work with participants to determine whether they would benefit from the intensive or flexible service considering the individual's personal circumstances. Participants may transition between the services as their circumstances change.

The intensive service is the core service, targeting all participants who are able, with the right help, to engage intensively in services and activities that will help them prepare for, find and keep a job. As a general rule, participants will start in the intensive service and be expected to participate in this service unless guidelines indicate that the flexible service is more suitable.

The flexible service is for participants who are unable or don't need to participate more intensively at a point in time. This includes participants who are engaged in activities that substantially meet their requirements and/or have complex and/or multiple barriers to employment that limit their capacity to engage.

Examples of people who would be assisted through the flexible service could include people who are employed part time or currently studying, caring or volunteering or a mixture of these activities. The flexible service will also benefit people who need to undertake non vocational activities that address significant personal issues, so they are better placed to participate in the intensive service in the future.

Participants who have a temporary suspension may also volunteer to participate in the flexible servicing to remain connected while the temporary exemption runs its course.

The provider will consult with the participant before making a decision about whether the flexible service is the right one for them. Some participants who may be eligible for the flexible service will instead choose to remain in the intensive service if that is what they want to do.

The service arrangements for employment assistance, or the pre-employment supports, will be described as 2 new phases in the new program, Job Search and Work Preparation. These phases will help identify where the job seeker is at on their employment journey.

We've often heard providers describe their services along these lines. This change considers feedback we received in previous consultations on the DES Reforms, including feedback received while developing the DES Quality Framework, that the service needed to consider the job readiness of a participant.

The services offered in these 2 phases are not black and white. Participants in both the Job Search and Work Preparation phases will be offered a broad range of supports and services to meet their needs. Both will focus on the end goal of helping participants to find sustainable employment.

However, the new design gives stronger emphasis on investment and intensity in building skills and capacity for those who need it whilst supporting job seekers to apply for jobs that fit their goals and skills.

The 2 phases also set clearer expectation for participants on the type and level of supports that they will receive.

During the commencement period, the provider will draw upon assessment information from the ESAt, job capacity assessment or other provider assessments, as well as their discussions with the participant to understand their strengths, goals and aspirations in order to determine the most appropriate service phase.

In the Job Search phase, participants who are closer to gaining employment will be supported to look for work, including activities such as helping them with applications, interviews, and industry and employer connections. This can be in combination with activities that continue to build their skills and work readiness. Where appropriate, providers will ensure that participants are connected with other relevant programs, such as Self Employment Assistance and Supported Employment.

The Work Preparation phase recognises that some participants will need more time and a greater investment in wrap around services to address their barriers to employment, which could include vocational and non-vocational barriers. In this phase, providers will give participants more intensive supports to help build their work readiness through targeted programs of support. This may be referral to community services, health services or other services that address whole of life issues that can affect employment prospects. It also might include volunteering or participating in social enterprises or other activities that build social and economic connections. Participants would also be engaging in relevant job search activities while they receive more intensive support to increase their capability to succeed in finding work.

The flexible service recognises that the intensive service may not be appropriate for all participants at all points in time. The flexible service, therefore, will focus on maintaining connections to the program.

Some participants that may benefit from the flexible service are those in work, study, volunteering or caring responsibilities, or a mix of those.

For example, looking at the DES caseload currently, we know that there are around 12,000 people who are receiving employment assistance and have some earnings. Some of these participants may be better serviced in the flexible program, recognising that they may be near their capacity, they can keep in touch, get support with continuing activities and/or new job opportunities.

On the other hand, there are participants who are further away from the labour market and experiencing more significant barriers that mean they cannot fully participate in the intensive program. This group may be engaging in non-vocational activities or have a range of personal circumstances that limit their capacity to engage. Over time, and as they're able to participate more fully in the program, they would step up to the intensive service.

Activities in the flexible service could be 2 appointments a quarter if the participant's circumstances meant that for a time they can't do more than that, recognising that they are likely to be participating in other activities, supports and services.

As their capacity increases, providers will help participants to move back into the intensive service and connect with activities tailored to their needs and employment goals. Alternatively, the participant may secure a job and more directly move into post placement support.

So I'll take you through a few scenario examples to give a flavour of that.

Sam is 28 and is assessed as having a partial work capacity of 23 to 29 hours a week, although the episodic nature of his condition means that this varies. In the intensive service, Sam undertakes a variety of activities and training improving his work readiness.

Sam's health deteriorates and he makes an appointment with his specialist, but it's going to be next month. Sam is concerned and is struggling to engage with the program, the intensive service. He's considering getting a review of his capacity or seeking a temporary exemption from his mutual obligation requirements.

Sam discusses possible options with his provider and the provider and Sam agree that while waiting for his specialist appointment, Sam will undertake flexible servicing. Following the appointment, Sam is granted a temporary exemption from his mutual obligation requirements, but Sam decides to volunteer for the flexible service while suspended so he can keep in touch and keep connected.

Sam's health is improving over the next few months and during an appointment, the provider makes Sam aware of a job expo that's being held locally. Sam is interested in attending and is really feeling supported by his employer, so he connects with some employers at the expo, so he's stepping up to return to the intensive service.

In a separate example, Nora is 58 and has a partial work capacity of 15 hours per week. She has had long term employment of 10 hours per week. She does volunteering and undertakes caring duties for her grandchildren. She's been regularly attending her appointments, but is not actively participating in any other activities with her provider as she has very limited additional work capacity.

Nora has moved into the flexible service to maintain connection to her provider, with the goal that if she or her provider identify an opportunity for 15 hours per week of paid work, she'd like assistance to apply for that role. Nora checks in with her provider twice a quarter to discuss her current employment goals, any challenges she has in maintaining her work, jobs she's applied for or any new opportunities to increase her hours.

So, the new program will focus on meaningful engagement of participants to help both providers and participants build positive relationships and take a partnership-based approach to goal setting and participation in activities.

This new approach is expected to contribute to the new service culture, where providers are able to work more flexibly and collaboratively with participants. It is also expected to improve engagement in the program, with participants able to be more involved and in control of their program of supports. We expect that providers will be able to spend less time on monitoring compliance, which will free them up to focus more on the relationship building and supporting participants to find and keep a quality job.

So why have we made these changes?

The Government is taking steps to strengthen the integrity of employment services and better recognise people's individual circumstances. As part of the 2024-25 Budget, there are some changes to the operation of the mutual obligations framework that provide stronger safeguards for clients while it undertakes consultation on broader reforms to the employment services system in response to the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia.

The Select Committee found that the current approach to mutual obligation was ineffective and distracted the effort being made to improve employment prospects. Providers are tied up in red tape and unable to apply discretion in a way that builds trust with their participants.

Similarly, provider feedback in the DES Reform consultation identified that the current approach makes it difficult to achieve the desired engagement and relationship with participants.

The proposed approach for the new program is within the existing legislative framework and seeks to strike a better balance between flexibility and making sure that participants can meet their mandatory obligations under social security law.

It adopts practices from the Transition to Work program for disadvantaged youth, where encouraging and supporting engagement is the primary focus, but there is a step up to detailed requirements if a participant is not engaging with the services offered by their provider.

So what does meaningful engagement look like in practice, how will it actually work?

A participant's Job Plan will continue to be the primary agreement for mutual obligation requirements.

Providers will work with participants to develop a partnership-based arrangement.

A collaborative and flexible approach to participant engagement and Job Plan development will help participants to be invested in their employment goals.

On commencement in the program, the mandatory requirement will be participating meaningfully in the program by engaging with the provider to prepare for, seek or maintain employment; working with the participant, providers will make sure that the participants are carefully consulted before adding activities into the Job Plan; having a Job Plan developed that is participant led and will include the provider discussing the supports and services that might be right for them and ensuring their views are heard and respected. These activities will be considered voluntary.

A provider will decide if a participant is meeting the requirement to meaningfully engage by considering their overall participation and willingness to work towards achieving their employment goals.

Providers will work constructively with the participant to encourage and support engagement, rather than monitoring individual engagements and activities and managing the associated compliance processes. These new arrangements will be closely monitored to understand if they're having a positive impact on engagement and on the relationships between providers and participants.

So participants who aren't engaging meaningfully with the program will have their obligations to participate managed more traditionally. Job Plans will then include mandatory items for all the key activities, such as appointments, job search and other activities.

The Targeted Compliance Framework will apply, with demerits for not meeting requirements. So — as per the current arrangements — after 3 demerits, a provider will conduct a capability interview to understand if there are any personal or other issues impacting the participant's engagement with the program and to review the mandatory activities if required.

If a participant continues to be non-compliant, then they would be subject to compliance action.

So I'll take you through another kind of example scenario.

Jordan is a 25 year old living with a mental health condition. Overall, Jordan is keen to participate in the program. They take part in their activities, attend provider appointments, and show a willingness to work with their provider on the agreed voluntary activities in their Job Plan.

Jordan misses a provider appointment and then doesn't attend a training course that was scheduled on the same day. Jordan is really reluctant to explain why this has occurred. Under the current arrangements, the provider would mark these as participation failures in the system and talk to Jordan about the consequences of these and any subsequent failures to comply with mandatory requirements, including action that could be taken under the targeted compliance framework.

In the new program, the provider considers Jordan's overall engagement and decides they are still engaging meaningfully. The failed attendances haven't continued and Jordan is back participating in their activities, so the provider is able to build greater trust with Jordan to encourage disclosure of issues and the provider can help Jordan to keep working towards their goal of getting a job to save for a new car.

The new program continues to offer support for participants once in employment.

The Government recognises the crucial role that post placement support and ongoing support plays in supporting people with a disability to achieve sustainable long-term employment.

Under the new program, participants will continue to receive support once they find a job to ensure they settle into employment. Some participants may require this support for a short time, whereas others will require longer term, ongoing support in their job. Both these options will be available.

However, a key change is that Work Assist, or the former Jobs in Jeopardy program, will become part of Ongoing Support. The Post Placement Support phase will include up to 52 weeks of support once a participant starts employment. Providers will keep in contact with participants over this period and offer a range of personalised supports that are designed to help them settle into their new job. Providers give this support in return for a 4-week progress fee — more on that later — 12, 26 and 52 week outcome fees where employment is sustained.

If a participant is eligible, Ongoing Support will be available from 26-weeks onwards so that providers can give extra help to employees who need it to keep their job. The program will continue to have 3 levels of Ongoing Support — flexible, moderate and high — to allow support to be tailored to the needs of each participant. The National Panel of Assessors will conduct Ongoing Support assessments for participants to recommend that level of support.

The National Panel of Assessors will also set the timing of support reviews based on the stability and permanency of participants' disability. This will help to avoid unnecessary reassessment, particularly for participants who require long term, ongoing support to keep their job.

If a participant's circumstances change over time, they'll be able to move between Ongoing Support streams. The program currently called Work Assist will be incorporated into Ongoing Support. Employees with disability, injury or a health condition who are having difficulty meeting the requirements of their job will be able to directly register into the new program to receive ongoing support immediately. The Department has heard from stakeholders about the importance of promoting the new Ongoing Support service to make sure it isn't underutilised in the new program and is giving consideration into how best to make that happen.

The new program will offer employers access to high quality specialist support, with greater investment and engagement by the providers. I think this came through very clearly and loudly from the Minister.

Providers will be expected to build strong relationships and work closely with business to get support to identify their business needs, find suitable candidates, and improve retention of employees with disability within their workforce.

Providers will also work closely with job seekers to promote employment opportunities and provide training, coaching and support so they are ready to take on those roles. As a result, improved engagement with employers will not only help to address vacancies, but also improve the alignment of skills and training gained by participants to suit business needs.

Providers will also help employers to access available supports. This may include organising workplace modifications, training or on the job coaching and supports or wage subsidies, something that I'll cover in more detail shortly.

Employers will be able to tap into expertise of providers in order to build confidence and capability to employ people with a disability within their business.

The Centre of Excellence, mentioned by the Minister, will share best practice in disability employment and help all employment service providers, including providers in the new program, to deliver disability aware, quality services to both people with disability and employers.

Providers will need to build relationships with employers to get regular feedback on their service design. Providers will also need to work closely with employers to identify job opportunities and assist employers to design jobs that are suitable for individual participants.

Other supports and training will also be offered by providers to help employers provide safe and productive workplaces for employees with disability. Targeted assistance is also available for employers who already employ a person with disability should this employee need support to maintain their job.

The support under the new program will be complemented by existing employer supports.

The Government will continue to offer a range of employer support services and resources through JobAccess and the Employment Assistance Fund.

JobAccess includes access to free, confidential and accessible workplace information to help remove barriers to employing people with a disability. JobAccess also coordinates with the National Panel of Assessors to conduct free workplace assessments, offering advice on workplace modifications and support which may be eligible for reimbursement through the Employment Assistance Fund.

This fund gives financial help to eligible people with disability and mental health conditions and employers to buy work related modifications, equipment, Auslan services and workplace assistance and support services. The fund is available to eligible people with disability who are about to start a job, are self-employed or who are currently working. Providers will be well positioned to help participants and employers access the fund.

Employers, if eligible, will be able to access wage subsidies through a new flexible wage subsidy program. It will have a higher value in order to better offset some of the initial costs of hiring a new employee and settling them into their new role.

The evidence available on wage subsidies shows that they can be effective at supporting people who may otherwise be overlooked by an employer, negotiating increased hours and increasing the sustainability of job placements.

Three wage subsidies are currently available under DES. This has resulted in complexity in administration and red tape for both providers and employers. From 1 July 2025, there will be one simplified wage subsidy. The new subsidy will have 4 different levels for participants reflective of a person's capacity to work: up to \$3,000 for a job of at least 8 hours a week, up to \$5,000 for a job of at least 15 hours a week, up to \$7,500 for a job of at least 20 hours per week, up to \$10,000 for a job of at least 30 hours per week.

The subsidy will be offered over a 26-week period with higher amounts based on a participant's capacity to work and the hours of work that the employer is offering. Importantly, the highest subsidy amount of \$10,000 is on par with what is available for Workforce Australia participants, giving employers equal incentive to employ a person through the new program.

Simplification and consistency for employers will be an ongoing priority in the implementation. Eligibility will be similar to the current arrangements, including the need for a valid ABN, that the subsidy cannot be for a family member nor commission based, self-employment or a subcontracted position. Participant eligibility will depend on how long they've been participating in employment services, with the subsidy targeted at those who've been in employment services for at least 6 months.

So I'll now shift to the payment model.

We're continuing with a blended payment model, which means we pay a mix of service fees to support investment in services and outcome fees to reward ongoing open employment. There is also a new progress fee to recognise steps towards employment goals along an individual's employment journey. The split between service, progress and outcome fees has been modelled to around a 50:6:44 split. In comparison, the current model had a higher proportion targeted towards the outcome fees. Moving some funding forward to service fees means that there is more funding available upfront to invest in services and supports for participants and employers.

Indexation will be applied, with fees adjusted on 1 July each year.

On the next few slides, we start to outline in more detail what each payment looks like for the new program. Now, the amounts that we're showing today are still indicative.

We will be seeking feedback on the balance of payments and incentives and therefore the amounts may change.

Service fees are paid to providers to work with participants and employers to prepare for, match and support sustained employment.

In terms of service fees, the intensive service fee will have 5 funding levels based on the likelihood that a participant finds a job and the level of investment required to get them into work. The flexible service will have one flat fee in line with the less intensive support needed.

To reduce complexity and recoveries of service fees when they are paid, we will move to paying them monthly, or every 4-weeks, in arrears under the new program.

To help providers adjust to service fees being paid in arrears and meet the establishment costs to operate, an advanced payment will be made available. Finer details of the terms and conditions of that payment will come at a later date.

A design feature of the new program is the introduction of a payment to recognise participants' progress towards sustainable employment. Progress payments recognise the investment providers make to help participants overcome barriers to employment and to secure employment.

Progress payments will be paid for 4-week job placements, work experience and education and training outcomes.

The introduction of progress payments for job placements acknowledges that participants require support at the early stages of employment. It also recognises that during the early stages, a participant may need to build confidence and familiarity in the work setting.

As such, a broader range of job placements will be recognised under the progress payment. For example, they may be claimed for jobs that aren't ongoing or are seasonal work or through a social enterprise.

Two progress fees of \$1,000 per instance will be claimable over a 12 month period.

Progress payments will be paid in addition to service fees.

Outcome payments will continue to be available to providers for placing participants into suitable ongoing employment.

Outcome payments are payable after 12, 26 and 52 weeks of continuous employment.

Partial outcome payments will be available for outcome placements that do not meet a participant's employment benchmark.

Some of the key changes — well, first of all, 4-week outcome payments will now be paid as a progress fee. 12-week outcomes are being introduced, replacing the 13-week outcomes. This is to better align with Services Australia reporting periods for job seekers and hopefully simplify things.

Outcome fees will continue to be paid on a participant's funding level, recognising that some participants are likely to achieve employment with less support from their providers than others.

Ongoing Support payments will continue largely the same as they are now — that is, payments will be paid on a monthly or quarterly arrangement for each of the 3 different levels of Ongoing Support.

Work Assist fees will no longer be a feature of the program and as people who would have been eligible for Work Assist under current arrangements will instead have their support funded immediately in the form of Ongoing Support.

The moderate intellectual disability payment will continue to be paid. The payment is for reaching outcome milestones for people with an IQ of less than 60 for jobs that are of at least 15 hours per week.

So there's some of the details on the payment model and I'll now hand back to Robyn. Thank you.

Okay, thank you. So I might — I'm conscious we've got about 18 minutes left before questions and I'm keen to maintain that time, so I might just skip through a few bits and try to get to the items that I think you'll be most interested in.

So just briefly, the Government's Employment White Paper and the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia both raised the importance of government stewardship and continuous improvement. So, in practice, this means the Department of Social Services will have a transparent, proactive approach to helping providers improve performance in order to ensure the delivery of a high quality service to participants and employers.

The Department will continue to build a service culture of collaboration and constant improvement. This will be across participants, employers, providers and the department to achieve a system that produces the best possible outcomes for people with disability.

We kicked off our reform in 2022 with a focus on quality outcomes for participants. As the Minister mentioned, that resulted in the release of the DES Quality Framework on 1 July 2023.

Engagement with participants and disability representative organisations ensured we were focused on the important aspects of service quality for users. Consultation on the Quality Framework informed the quality indicators, measurement and reporting. This work is progressing well and we will have our first measures available mid-year.

This was, of course, followed by work on the new Provider Performance Framework to replace the STAR ratings. We are currently consulting on a new framework, which aims to take a holistic view of provider performance, with proposed measures that incorporate the DES Quality Framework as well as effectiveness and efficiency.

As we head into the new program, the performance framework will be the base from which future performance management will evolve in line with the new policy settings. So, for example, one area where the performance framework will continue to develop is in how it incorporates participant and employer voice.

Over the next year, we'll continue to consult with the sector and gather your feedback on how the performance can be measured in the new program to achieve the program goals.

I might just turn to market strategy.

So I think as was evident from the Minister's speech, the Government is seeking to procure a diverse network of providers who offer high quality, expert services to participants and employers and that will include attracting providers with deep expertise in working with specific cohorts of participants.

There will be an expectation of providers to demonstrate leadership in employing people with a disability. As the Minister said, you know, we want to see providers who have staff and leadership that reflects the diversity of the communities they are working with and as noted earlier, providers will be expected to have clear strategies for engaging participants and employers in the design of their services and for ongoing feedback on improvement to support the delivery of a service culture that is meeting the needs of their users.

In addition to the market strategy, there will be changes to support market viability and increase the diversity of choice for participants, which I'll cover next.

So as you know, or many people would know, DES is currently delivered across 111 Employment Service Areas, or ESAs, and these will remain the same under the new program. In retaining the current number of ESAs for the new program, we've had regard to commentary in the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia, which suggests that delivering the program, or programs, within smaller geographic areas supports better connections with the local community and employers.

For the new program, however, there will be greater market stewardship.

The number of providers delivering in each ESA will be determined by the Department and will be managed based on the reintroduction of market share distribution, noting that participant choice, as the Minister emphasised, will still take precedence over market share limits.

When analysing the changes from 2018, we have, as the Minister said, seen a consolidation of providers from 137 to 88 currently. Much of this reduction has been in smaller providers and there has been an increasing proportion of the caseload with larger providers.

Many providers have identified that there are regions with an oversaturation, while in other regions there is limited choice.

Service providers offering services to specialist cohorts will be able to cover partial, whole or multiple employment service areas in the new program. They will be able to design flexible service approaches to meet participant and employer needs that support greater accessibility to those specialist services.

Providers under the new program will be engaged via an open, competitive procurement process.

The Department intends to publicly release an Exposure Draft of the Request for Tender in mid-2024, with the approach to market plan to commence for the last quarter of 2024. I rush to say these timeframes may be subject to revision.

Release of the Exposure Draft will provide stakeholders and the wider community with an opportunity to provide further feedback.

The Department will release further information regarding the procurement process in the coming months. But I can say that the process will be finalised sufficiently ahead of 1 July 2025 to allow new and existing DES and National Panel of Assessor providers to transition to the new arrangements and, indeed, for participants to transition to new providers, if that's the outcome, ahead of the implementation of the program.

The new program will be underpinned by an uplift and modernisation of the ICT system to improve administrative processes and support a better participant and employer and indeed provider staff member experience.

A phased approach has been agreed in consultation with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), which maintains the IT platform for the current and future programs, and this takes into account learnings from the development of the Workforce Australia ICT platform.

With design and development starting from 1 July 2024, the new program will transition into the Workforce Australia Digital Platform, or ESSWeb2.0, on 1 July 2025 and have a number of improved core elements. It is critical that we do this because the DES program is one of the last remaining Australian Government programs that operates on the legacy IT system operated by DEWR and this is scheduled for approximate decommissioning in the 2026–27 financial year.

We're going to take a phased approach which will then allow for the identification of user led adjustments to the design following the initial implementation.

A critical focus for the Department will be ensuring that the user experience is at the forefront as systems enhancements and changes are made. We will be working with our DEWR colleagues to make sure there are opportunities to provide feedback and help us test the system at key points.

So as part of its stewardship role, the Department will work in partnership with providers and at this point I would just say, to be frank, we're also working to lift our own capability, with a focus on lifting program management, improving communication with participants and providers, and increasing access to reporting for stakeholders.

We are also, as the Government is, committed to strengthening the evaluation of programs to build a stronger evidence base and so, as I mentioned earlier, an evaluation will be conducted during the second year of the new program and it will look at how the new program has been implemented and whether the objectives that we have set for the program have been met and evaluation will also inform future ideas for policy changes.

So the changes that we've been discussing actually build on a number of initiatives to help empower employers to hire more people with disability. The Minister mentioned the NDIS DES Pathway Pilot and the Tourism Navigator Pilot and the pilot with the Business Council of Australia called the Career Pathways Pilot, so I won't go into further detail today, but we can certainly make sure that there's further information on those pilots available.

I did just want to take a little bit of time — I know the Minister mentioned the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence — but we think that this is actually an essential component in supporting the ambition for high quality and effective services that continuously improve to deliver better outcomes for people with disability and employers.

The Centre of Excellence will be an evidence informed, best practice hub that provides resources, tools and training to help provider and deliver quality employment services and supports to participants with a disability and employers to improve outcomes.

Specifically, the Centre will collect, translate and disseminate disability employment related research and evidence of what works into best practice resources, bringing together and using existing resources available both nationally and internationally.

The Centre will support all providers who help deliver employment outcomes for people with a disability, so this includes the new providers of the new specialist disability employment program as well as Workforce Australia, remote employment services, people helping build participant capacity for employment in the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Supported Employment Services, including Australian Disability Enterprises.

Disability employment outcomes will be improved by ensuring that providers have high levels of disability awareness to support participants more effectively, a knowledge of evidence based models and approaches, including customised employment, job coaching and career planning, and an improved understanding of employer needs and the skills and knowledge to help employers to hire and support employees with disability.

The design of the Centre was informed by input received through open consultations that the Department held between October and November last year and with discussions with stakeholders.

So we expect that the centre will commence in March of 2025 to support the introduction of the new specialist disability employment program from 1 July. A dedicated online hub will be available from September 2025.

I might — the next slide talks about the extension of funding for the National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline and Complaints Resolution and Referral Service.

In short, this funding extension will ensure continued coverage and support for people with disability with concerns or complaints while the Government considers future arrangements in the context of broader reforms.

The key is that we want to make sure that there's clear and regular communication about how to provide feedback, the use of feedback and complaints to continuously drive service improvements, more effective complaints management and resolution with a transparent dispute management.

So I'll leave that part of the presentation there and just, I guess, to close, as Minister Rishworth outlined, there's a great deal of reform work happening across the employment services sector, including Workforce Australia and in remote employment services.

Consistent with the Government's commitment to strengthen employment services as articulated through the Employment White Paper, initial improvements to the employment services system and policy settings were announced in the 2024–25 Budget. As Kellie said, these improvements will strengthen the integrity of employment services, better recognise people's individual circumstances, and invest in critical improvements to IT systems.

The Government is taking incremental steps in the 2024–25 Budget towards larger scale reform.

These initiatives are an initial response to the immediate issues identified through the Select Committee Inquiry into Workforce Australia. For example, changes to mutual obligations will mean newly registered DES participants will not face compliance action if they don't meet a requirement except where they don't agree to a Job Plan or attend an initial interview [initial appointment].

In addition, the new specialist disability employment program goes some way to addressing the findings of the Disability Royal Commission and the Government has committed to a formal response to the DRC around the middle of this year. Indeed, that commitment is with all governments.

The Government recognises that further reform will be necessary to achieve its vision for a stronger more inclusive economy and is committed to working closely with stakeholders and the broader community to improve employment services in the longer term. This means that while the core settings of the new specialist disability employment program have been established, there may be some areas that continue to evolve over time to ensure that the key employment services work cohesively as a system.

That's it largely in terms of the presentation content, but as you would appreciate, there is a level of detail that still needs to be worked through during the implementation and transition process.

Our next steps focus on ensuring that there are opportunities for consultation, so the Government has agreed a clear vision for a diverse market of providers offering high quality services to participants and employers.

We'll be seeking feedback on the balance of incentives and settings as well as the best way to implement and operationalise the policy. This is critical because we want to achieve the best outcomes for people with disability.

Today's presentation is the first in a number of planned ways that the Department will consult with you and about how the new specialist disability employment program will work. These consultations will involve people with disability, disability peak organisations, disability service providers, and employers.

Details of how to contribute to ongoing consultation processes as the new program is implemented will be made available on DSS Engage. The web address for that is engage.dss.gov.au and a link can be found on the following slide. I certainly encourage you to continually check the website for regular updates and additional information.

And you can get started by posting your questions and feedback on the new program through the app provided today, through the link.

If you have any ideas or concerns, you can also email DESConsultations@dss.gov.au. We welcome your feedback and will be keeping track of all of the comments and questions we receive to inform our further communication and the final design.

I'll just point out at this point too, when we respond, we will respond to the market and the community at large so that everybody has the same information. So as you'd appreciate, we're now in a probity environment and we need to make sure that everybody has equal access to the same information.

So I think there are actually a number of questions. I'll now sit down and I think our lovely facilitator will direct the traffic.

Questions?

FACILATATOR:

Thank you. Thank you.

Please, everyone, join me in thanking both Robyn and Kellie today.

(Applause)

Thank you. It really was a very comprehensive and a very valuable update on the model, so thank you both very much.

Yes, as you mentioned, we have been inundated with questions that have been coming through from our audience, so we'd like to extend a huge thank you to people who have contributed so far and to those of you online who have been popping those questions through.

So we do have some of the most frequently asked questions that have already come through from today, so we will look to pose these questions now to both Robyn and to Kellie. We'll give you a second just to catch your breath, though, before we do, and we would of course like to throw out yet another reminder to keep those questions coming in using both the Slido online application and the QR code that has been presented to you so far, and as we've already said on a number of occasions, this opportunity will remain open for you until 5pm on Monday to give you and everybody an opportunity to continue to ask those questions. So please do so.

Okay. So we're going to just start. We will jump right into the questions as they stand now.

So at the moment the most popular question that's come through so far from our audience, so this we'll leave to either Robyn or Kellie to answer this one, what is the expected timeframe for the release of tender following further consultations?

ROBYN SHANNON:

Thanks for that question. So I think as I indicated, we do still have a range of policy and operational details to work through and we've signalled that some of that will be done through consultation with people with disability, providers, employers, so there's further work to be done before we are in a position to release the tender.

As part of standard processes, we would expect also to release an Exposure Draft, so that provides a mechanism for feedback and I think as I indicated, we would be looking to do that towards the middle of the year. It's May, so I'm conscious that we're close to the middle of the year, but I'm not going to be more precise than that at the moment. But suffice to say we will, of course, communicate it broadly so that we reach the broadest possible audience who might be interested in participating in the tender process and the new program.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you.

Our next question coming through now: will there be an increase in the total size of the participant pool?

ROBYN SHANNON:

[Kellie] You can answer that one, if you like.

KELLIE SPENCE:

Yes. So there will be an additional 15,000 people participating within the program, estimated, each year through the new expansion of eligibility.

FACILATATOR:

Great.

ROBYN SHANNON:

I'll just emphasise that participation in the program remains demand driven, so if there are changes in the economy or an increase in unemployment, then obviously the number of people in the program is not capped, but as Kellie said, it's a consequence of the changes to eligibility relating to people who have an assessed work capacity of less than 8 hours or volunteers who are not on income support, so that's where you see that projected growth.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you both.

The next question coming through now: could we hear more about the upcoming Disability Employment Centre of Excellence and how it will be connected to the various parts of the DES system?

ROBYN SHANNON:

I will throw that one to Kellie because she's been working on the detail.

KELLIE SPENCE:

So the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence will aim to connect in a variety of ways and it's really aimed not just at the disability employment service providers, it's aimed at all provider services who engage with people with disability and helping to achieve employment outcomes, so that will include people in supported employment and the providers who assist them through to the new program, through to more mainstream programs, such as Workforce Australia, and it's really looking to bring that evidence base together.

I think we've heard from many providers, we do pilots, we do all this great work, but the learnings aren't necessarily brought together and shared equally, so this is where the Centre of Excellence will really step up in terms of having a spot for all of this evidence to be gathered and disseminated so that we can all be learning together to really deliver the best we can for people with disability. So it really is across the spectrum.

We have started — in terms of the design of it, our focus primarily is at the start about supporting providers within that instance and how they gain the knowledge to do the best for participants and employers. So that's our starting point.

When we did our consultation, there was like a lot of things that people were really wanting the centre to do, but that was a common theme in terms of really trying to make a difference in sharing best practice in that sort of service provision side. So that's really where we're starting and that connection.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you, Kellie.

The next question to come through now: so how do you envisage that the new DES program will link with the NDIS to support NDIS participants?

KELLIE SPENCE:

Do you want me —

ROBYN SHANNON:

Yes, if you like.

KELLIE SPENCE:

So there's a number of key changes within the program that is really aimed at better supporting integration between the NDIS system and the employment services support system.

The first is obviously the expanded eligibility and opening that up in terms of a pathway, but the second is around the flexibility in the service offer and sort of recognising the progress fee and different types of supports, such as social enterprise as a progress pathway. So it's trying to really open up how the different services might be designed and used.

The Centre of Excellence is another in terms of trying to share that evidence about what pathways work, and also the pilot that we've been doing on the NDIS and DES, we'll be taking the learnings about what's getting in the way now and how do we make the processes support the objective — not just the eligibility and the structure, but how do the processes really work and how can we learn that and bring that into the design of the actual systems, for example, to make those connections work much better. So they're just a couple of the key areas to make that work in the new program.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you.

So now what is the future of specialist providers under the new DES system?

ROBYN SHANNON:

Look, I might start with that. So I think as we outlined, one of the things that we're really keen to do is firstly encourage specialisation in the way that providers design their service, so in the way that they engage with the users of their service, that the provider organisations who deliver specialist services have sort of deep and meaningful connections with the cohorts of people that they are working with.

I guess I would reflect on some of my experience in other programs that it can be easy to say that you can meet the needs of a particular cohort, but if it's not something that's deeply embedded in the mission and purpose of your organisation, that can sometimes fail to be translated through to the service that's provided.

The other, I guess, key levers that we're using to try to encourage more specialisation is around that additional flexibility for specialist providers because we know that the current rule where you need to operate across the whole of the ESA really does restrict specialist providers in terms of being able to offer their services outside that geographic boundary, which then creates some viability issues, so we're wanting to introduce that greater flexibility for specialists to be able to operate across ESAs or geographic boundaries.

We will come out with more detail over coming weeks on what that might look like because we're conscious that we need to balance that flexibility for the provider and making sure that they've still got an on the ground service offer for people where they live because, as we know, that's very important, the accessibility of the service really does drive a lot of choice by job seekers.

So they're some of the key things. We see a bright future for specialist providers, that's what we want to see, because as the Minister said, we have seen a bit more of a drift to a more homogenised service offer, which frankly, in many instances, does not look a lot different to the service that people are getting in the mainstream. So this is really what we want to try to drive. And I'm not suggesting that's across the board, but we want to start the new program with a really clear expectation that that's what we want, you know, widespread across the program.

KELLIE SPENCE:

And one thing I'd just add to that, we actually expect all providers within the new disability program to be specialists with people with a disability, but we do recognise that there's some providers who have a really deep expertise in a very sub cohort, a cohort specific within that again, and how are we bringing that in and ensuring viability for those really — providers with very deep expertise in a particular sub cohort.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you. And once again, please keep in mind not only the questions coming through now, but also the responses, once you've had an opportunity to reflect and digest, they may obviously generate more questions, so please keep in mind you still have that option through to Monday to continue to pose those questions as well.

So the next one up: how do we ensure a focus on people with intellectual disability and Down Syndrome within disability employment?

ROBYN SHANNON:

That's a good question. Kellie, I think you can articulate a range of features.

KELLIE SPENCE:

In terms of that connection, I guess one of the other things I would add to that in terms of that specific question is I think this is also where there's going to be an opportunity for specialists with that particular cohort to possibly come in as well. We have some, but there's further opportunity so that they can bring their expertise and help to strengthen that link between sort of the supported employment into more open employment.

ROBYN SHANNON:

But I think it sort of goes a bit to your answer earlier as well. Some of the other broader changes we think will assist here, so the changes to eligibility.

We're retaining the particular payment for people with moderate intellectual disability in the payment structure. We've got emphasis through the payment structure as well on that kind of progress payment really is trying to encourage steps towards open employment, that's really what we want, so that people actually are able to take those steps towards open employment with the support of their provider because the provider has the incentive to work with them to do that and that they get — it's specifically recognised in the payment model.

So it might be, as Kellie said, that we've seen lots of great work that's being done around the country really introducing people with disability, including people with intellectual disability, but not solely, to the concept of work through social enterprise and again, we want to sort of recognise the role of those kinds of opportunities in the way that the program is designed.

FACILATATOR:

Okay, thank you.

So we do have quite a few questions that have come through around red tape and administrative burden, so how are you going to consider this in the new program?

ROBYN SHANNON:

That's a favourite one, that one, isn't it?

KELLIE SPENCE:

I think one of the things that I would highlight in that is the thinking around the meaningful engagement. The idea is to try to take away some of that churn of activity chasing just individual, you know, activity and appointments and trying to remove that at least whilst a person is engaging meaningfully from the system. It obviously is there when it's needed, but that is one of the aims in terms of that simplification.

The other is in some of the actual design of the actual service offer. We are trying to move away from you must do X amount of appointments in this period of time and really looking to you in terms of designing the service offer to really offer different opportunities for engagement using the evidence base about what could work with different cohorts and different people so that it's sort of more tailored and less, you know, tick this one, do this many this time. So that's also part of the goal.

But as we're working through in the drafting of guidelines and other things, I'm very open to hear where you think there's opportunity for us to continue to improve, yes.

ROBYN SHANNON:

I think I'd just add if you look at each of the kind of key elements of the program, we have tried to step back and take a look to see is that necessary, can it be more flexible, do we need that going forward?

So we've kind of tried to test at each point whether it's between having the 2 current programs, does it really need to be a feature going forward? Well, the feedback told us no and the data told us no, so that's a decision we took.

On the assessments, can we simplify assessments, can we reduce the number of times people have to go through an assessment, those kinds of things. So in each element we've tried to think about ways of doing it.

Of course we will always have to balance, as good public servants, the use of Commonwealth taxpayer money with appropriate assurance and compliance arrangements and, you know, you would expect us to do that, certainly our central agency colleagues expect us to do that, so there will be — as Kellie said, you know, the deed will have requirements, we will have guidelines, but we will try to make those things as clear and straightforward and put that kind of lens of is it necessary, do we need it, can we make it simpler or flexible over the top.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you.

The next question: can you talk about the future of assessment services providers under the current or previous NPA space?

ROBYN SHANNON:

That's a little tricky. Kellie, I think — I mean, we see the role, at least for the next little while, being consistent with the current approach, but obviously we've signalled that NPA providers will actually have a change in their function, particularly around Ongoing Support, in the future program. I think are there other features that you would want to draw out.

KELLIE SPENCE:

Yes, I think that's the main one, although like it is pretty similar to where it is now.

I think one thing that has been flagged in the Select Committee Inquiry is potentially looking at the overall system and how assessment can work better. So I think there's potential for that, but that's still a very high level thinking that there could be further work in that assessment space.

I think the thing I'd highlight is we've really tried to simplify the amount of employment services assessment components within the new program, but the primary roles of the National Panel of Assessors remains the same — assess for Ongoing Support, Workplace Modifications, and the Supported Wage element.

ROBYN SHANNON:

Yes.

FACILATATOR:

Okay. Thank you both.

So next up: can you explain the interaction between disability employment and supported employment?

ROBYN SHANNON:

Well, I think the Minister touched on some of the connections between supported employment and disability employment. I mean, obviously the disability employment program still remains — the new program will remain focused on employment opportunities in the open labour market and obviously there's a reform agenda around the supported employment sector in terms of, you know, continuing that journey of modernising and better integrating employment opportunities for people who are currently participants in Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs).

Again, there are, I think, from some of the policy settings, including the opening up of the eligibility criteria and other elements of the new program, more opportunities for people in ADEs with the right support to transition to disability employment — the new open employment program and as the Minister said, we really are investing through the recent grant process to support Supported Employment providers to make the change as well.

FACILATATOR:

Thank you, Robyn.

Okay, next up: so if a person with disability is working in an ADE, can they also start working with a DES whilst maintaining employment in the ADE?

KELLIE SPENCE:

My understanding of that question is that the answer is yes, but I will have to double check that. But I understand that that's the case, that yes, they can be engaging to work towards open employment. But I —

ROBYN SHANNON:

We will undertake to come back and publish an answer to that question.

KELLIE SPENCE:

Yes, thank you.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you. Okay, the questions keep coming through loud and fast. Okay.

How will decisions regarding moving to flexible servicing be made by the provider?

ROBYN SHANNON:

So I think we will certainly be looking to develop some guidance around this. I think it is important that we give some, you know, structure to support providers to make that decision.

I think there are really sort of 2 elements and the first one, and I think the most important one, is actually the views of the participant.

So I think as Kellie said, if somebody is already, you know, engaged, close to their assessed work capacity or they're doing a combination of work and other activities, you know, the sort of criticism that we see in the program now where people actually, you know, have to go and attend appointments and do lots of activities and things when they're actually already pretty close to meeting their obligation or they're also making a great contribution to their community then, you know, I think it's time to recognise that that is enough and we should support people to do that, but the flexible service is about making sure that there's still that connection with a provider who can assist the person if they need some advice, they want to increase their hours, their circumstances change.

And the other element there, I think, is around, you know, current providers will know people who are having difficulty participating in the program, that they might be people who are seeking repeated temporary exemptions from their requirements.

So those kinds of things might be the sorts of factors that you would consider in thinking about whether or not a participant might move to the flexible service for a while — while they try to deal with those issues, whether it's their health or other things, but we really want that connection to be maintained so that if and when they're ready to come back into a more intensive service, they're available to be engaged with the provider. That's really what we want to see. That's the intention of the flexible service.

You know, we don't know if this will happen, but it may well be if the flexible service works really effectively, we may — you know, we would hope to see fewer people actually seeking formal exemptions because what they're being asked to do is within their remit that they can do that, that the intensity of what they're being asked to do meets where they're at — at that time. So that's really sort of the broader policy objective there.

KELLIE SPENCE:

And one thing I would just add to that is providers are used to working and to work through what's the right requirements for a person based on their individual circumstances, so really this is the next step of saying given that range of circumstances, I think this person should have a lower level of mutual obligation requirements because they've got all these other things or they're already engaging. Then the service offer almost lines up and matches with that. So it's a similar logic and thinking in terms of guiding what's the right thing for this individual participant.

The other thing I would say about that just maintaining connection, you never know when the right opportunity might come up for that person that is a perfect fit that might make the world of difference and so it's really important in keeping that opportunity of being linked still in with their provider so that they're open to those things that could come along and be really suited to them. So that's also one of the big benefits in maintaining that connection to the program.

ROBYN SHANNON:

And I guess I should say too that, you know, part of the guidance that we will provide about those elements of the program will also include advice about how servicing participants in both streams will feed into the performance framework.

FACILATATOR:

Great, thank you.

So Kellie or Robyn, can you explain what improved data linkages means?

KELLIE SPENCE:

So I think I'll take that one.

We're obviously trying to look at the data that we have available and how we make that available to our stakeholders, for example, to inform their decisions and influencing what moves forward, but it also can be in an overall system.

So some people may have heard of the National Disability Data Asset and bringing integration so that it can inform both policy and programs, but it's also that how do we use those sorts of tools and resources to inform the Centre of Excellence, to inform providers so that we're all getting the benefit of bringing better data into the system, and that's also part of that IT build is making sure we've got good data to support us as a program, as providers, in doing our job well together.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you. We've still got some time for some more questions coming through now. Okay.

Are you able to tell us when the Centre of Excellence grant round opens?

ROBYN SHANNON:

I think we might need to take that on notice and come back to everybody.

As the question anticipates, yes, there will be a grant round to select the provider, so I guess that signals the Centre of Excellence will not be within Government or the Department, but as Kellie mentioned, when we did the consultation, there was also a view that, you know, maybe embedding it solely in academia wasn't the right answer either. So part of, I guess, taking an approach for a procurement is to kind of really be able to sort of test the most appropriate, for want of a better word, location of the Centre of Excellence and how it would operate.

FACILATATOR:

Okay, great. We will definitely note that one for collation with our further questions as we move forward.

So can you further explain social enterprises definition, please?

KELLIE SPENCE:

I'm not going there. That's a big debate.

We've been using it sort of broadly in terms of thinking about all the different pathways that there could be for people to create a pathway to more open employment and recognising that there's lots of different models out there. So we're starting to think particularly in that progress fee how do we recognise whether you call it work experience, whether it's in a social enterprise of one type or another, but recognising that there's lots of different ways that could help build those work like skills in employment situations, so yes.

ROBYN SHANNON:

I mean, there may well be, and this is detail that we are — we will need to work through and would be interested in stakeholder feedback, but, you know, my expectation is that people that are doing that sort of work experience or who are in a social enterprise, it would be paid and it would be in an environment where there are workers of all abilities and from different backgrounds. So they're some of the features that I think we would be looking for in terms of the social enterprises. But there's more work to be done there, including particularly, I think, with people with disability and their representative organisations to make sure that we get those settings and the guidance right.

FACILATATOR:

Great. A question has come through around provider expectation.

So will providers be expected to be out in the community building employer relationships?

ROBYN SHANNON:

Yes, yes, absolutely — not just with employers, but with other community service organisations. We really want to see more integrated kind of relationships on the ground.

FACILATATOR:

SARA: Great. Okay.

Can you explain more about how the new funding levels will be determined?

KELLIE SPENCE:

So in terms of the modelling we've done, we've looked at the range of different things that are there now and done a range of supporting and there's multiple objectives going into that kind of setting of the funding levels.

As I said, we have tried to get a reasonable balance in terms of service fees upfront to really ensure we're getting the support in the investment in the capacity of building people and that that's a really key theme and why that was important.

We've also been looking at the evidence base behind it in terms of outcomes.

But we will continue and that's part of why I did say they are set indicative because we want to get some feedback on whether the balances are right between those.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Okay, I think we have time for probably a couple more questions to come through now. Time has run fast in this section.

So lots of questions have come through around IT. Can you talk a bit more about the new IT system?

ROBYN SHANNON:

I have to say posing that question to me is quite dangerous, but look, what I would say is we know that the current system is, as we said, a legacy system.

There's a range of features about it that we really do need to address and we're working with DEWR basically to uplift to the ESSWeb2.0 platform.

We know and we've had some experience working with our DEWR colleagues that, like all large IT builds, there are lessons to be learnt in terms of the build of ESSWeb2.0 and so we're having a really open discussion with our colleagues in DEWR about how we get the benefits from that system, but also we actually think and hope and hope to work collaboratively with our colleagues to actually, through the investment in moving DES to that system, also to partner with DEWR to improve the system as a whole and I think there was an investment in the Budget in the DEWR Budget papers, if you have a look at that, to actually address some continuing service improvement in the IT there.

So there's sort of a general lifting us up to a more modern platform with similar features.

I mean, I'm just going to be very open here that it's really important that we're reusing the features of that existing service where that functionality will work across the program and really just focusing on the things that need to be more bespoke or tailored to the new DES program. That's, again, from a taxpayer perspective, it's really important that we actually look for opportunities to align the IT systems where we can, but we are conscious there are different policy settings and so that may drive a need for some particular settings in the new system, and then, as I said, there's an opportunity DEWR has got some resources to do further work on the platform and we've got the resources to do that as well.

KELLIE SPENCE:

One thing I'd add to that is we have really included strengthening the accessibility of the systems for both participants and employers and providers and lifting the whole standard in the accessibility area is one of the key things.

The other thing I'd just highlight is we are really taking a phased approach. So we learnt that sort of from the first work with Workforce Australia, so what we will get because of the timeframes will be what the essentials are to get the program up and running with the core changes, but we have got investment there to keep going, so to realise that, oh, that bit is not working very well, let's strengthen that. So we've actually planned those phases in to continue to respond and have some user designed feedback and elements within the design of it over time. So that was one of the sort of key learnings that has gone into that.

FACILATATOR:

Great. Thank you both. We are down to our final question for this afternoon.

So how will the Department engage with the sector after this event?

ROBYN SHANNON:

Kellie, did you want to take that one?

KELLIE SPENCE:

Sure.

So there will be a range of options. The DSS Engage website will be the first place to sort of keep your eye on what's being released or opportunities. We will have a range of them to get different perspectives.

But obviously, as Robyn pointed out, an Exposure Draft process will be one of those key processes where we can take feedback on the sort of details of the program. So that will be our general approach.

FACILATATOR:

Absolutely. Thank you.

And that's all that we do have time for by way of our online questions and answers today, so thank you both very, very much.

Closing slide - Thank you!

FACILATATOR:

So in closing, I want to extend a large thank you to everybody for your active participation today.

Thank you to everybody for your time and effort who were in the room today and for those who have joined us online as well. We really do appreciate and value your time in joining us today.

We want to extend a thank you, of course, to Minister Rishworth for her time in her presentation today and another thank you again to both Robyn and to Kellie for their presentation information and time with the questions and answers today as well.

I'd like to extend a thank you to our fabulous Auslan interpreters today.

(Applause).

So to Belinda, to Kirk and Bettina, thank you so much. You have been extremely valuable and we really appreciate your time for us today as well.

So as we've said, this is the beginning of our engagements. We've mentioned on numerous occasions please take advantage of the fact that our online tool is open until 5pm on Monday. Keep continuing to send those questions through and we will collate those through and, as mentioned, you can continue to keep yourselves informed.

Go to www.engage.dss.gov.au.

The recording from today's event, as well as the slides that have been available on the screens today, will be available and posted on that Engage website as well shortly, so keep your eyes peeled for those. They will be coming as well. So once again, everybody, thank you, take care, and thank you so much for joining today's event.

(Applause)

Thank you!