



National Disability Award winner
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Department of Social Services National Panel of Assessors Program RFT Exposure Draft Webinar

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TAMARA WEAVER: Good afternoon and welcome to the public briefing for the National Panel of Assessors program. My name is Tamara Weaver and for those who might need a visual description of myself, I'm a woman in my 40s, I am wearing clear-rimmed glasses, I'm wearing a black jacket, black top and black pants.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of all the lands that we're meeting on today and pay my respects to Elders past and present. I'd also like to extend that respect to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Before we delve in too far, I just need to read you a probity statement to get us started today: The Department of Social Services is committed to conducting a fair, honest, and transparent process for the design and implementation of the National Panel of Assessors program and related services. For today's event, what does that mean? The presentation will be publicly made available after this event and any views expressed or information provided by you attending at this event, including any of the live chat questions that we'll have later, will be recorded and considered along with any views expressed, information provided by other stakeholders as well.

I am really pleased to be here this afternoon with you all to host the public briefing for the National Panel of Assessors. Now, we might refer to it during the course of it as NPA as well and this program will commence on 1 July 2025.

I am not alone today. I have joining me Jacinda Still, who's the Branch Manager for the Disability Employment and Implementation section, and Carolyn Graham, who's the Director of our Supported Employment Policy area here at the Department of Social Services. Carolyn is going to provide you all today with an overview of the NPA program policy and Jacinda will provide information around the tendering aspects of this process.

At the end of the presentation, we will have time for questions and answers as well. So we've got information to share with you, but it's also your opportunity to have a two-way conversation with us today, so please make sure - there's a QR code that will remain on your screen throughout the entire presentation today, so at any time you can click on the QR code and pop your questions in so the panel may be able to answer those at the end of the session. I'll now hand over to Carolyn.

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CAROLYN GRAHAM: Thank you, Tamara, and good afternoon, everybody. So I'm Carolyn Graham, as Tamara said. I'm the Director of Supported Employment Policy section. To start, I'll just provide a visual description of myself. I'm also a woman in her 40s, with shoulder-length dark hair and I'm wearing a grey dress and a white blazer today.

So, firstly, I'll provide an overview of the key topics which we'll be covering today. So these are, number 1, approach to market; number 2, indicative timeline; number 3, overview of the National Panel of Assessors, or NPA, program; number 4, key changes from the current program; then we'll have Request for Tender, or RFT process; and, finally, consultation and feedback.

So first up, approach to market. The approach to market will be a two-stage process, the first stage being public consultation through the Exposure Draft and the second stage being the Request for Tender. The Exposure Draft stage provides an opportunity for stakeholders and interested parties to ask questions and provide feedback to the department on key policy areas and tender arrangements. The Exposure Draft describes the services the Government wants to buy and the processes through which the department is planning to select providers of those services.

The Exposure Draft consultation is for all stakeholders, including people with disability, disability representative organisations, employers, providers, and other interested parties. It is an opportunity to test the details and confirm whether the services and processes proposed support the policy intent. The broad policy is set and this consultation process helps us understand if we are taking into account all the details, if we have missed anything, and if we are being clear in our communication. We welcome views from all users and stakeholder perspectives. Questions, feedback and requests for clarification can be forwarded to the department.

Please keep in mind that as the Exposure Draft has been released to facilitate consultation, tender responses must not be lodged in response to the Exposure Draft. We will use the feedback to refine our detailed program design and communications for the NPA program. The Request for Tender stage will then provide the formal opportunity for potential providers to submit tenders to deliver services under the NPA program.

Before we get into the detail of the presentation, I'll talk you through the indicative timeline that we are working to shown on the slide here. Just to briefly recap, the Government's 2024 Budget announcement outlined that the

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NPA program would continue from 1 July 2025 in line with the new specialist disability employment program. The Government has agreed to undertake an approach to market to select providers for the new program and this timeline sets out the indicative dates for this approach to market. The closing date for comments on the Exposure Draft is 27 September 2024 at 5pm Canberra time.

The Request for Tender is expected to be released in October or November and the request for tender public briefing will take place around this time also. The closing date and time for submitting tender responses to the Request for Tender is expected to be in November or December this year. The notification of tender outcomes is expected to be in March 2025. Commencement of the transition period to the new NPA program will be in April 2025, and the new program will commence on 1 July 2025.

Now, just a reminder before I move forward that the QR code is available there on your screen and you can use that to submit questions or feedback throughout the webinar. Questions and feedback submitted as part of the discussion will be recorded by the department, as Tamara outlined earlier.

So next I'll give a brief overview of the National Panel of Assessors program. The Government is committed to ensuring that from 1 July 2025 there continues to be NPA providers to deliver high-quality, fair and independent assessment services for people with disability. NPA providers will provide three types of assessment services: Supported Wage System, or SWS, assessments; Ongoing Support Assessments, or OSAs; and workplace modification services, or WMS, assessments. I will provide more detail on each of these assessment types a little later on.

The Government wants to ensure that a diverse range of suitably qualified and experienced respondents have the opportunity to become NPA providers. Respondents will be able to bid to deliver either all three assessment types, SWS and OSA assessments only, or WMS assessments only.

To become a provider, respondents will be required to have an understanding of employment support requirements, including workplace barriers for people with disability, including people with high support needs. Respondents will also be required to have qualified and experienced assessors who meet the mandatory qualifications that I will outline soon. It is important that all assessors have strong communication skills to ensure high-quality assessments for the person with disability.

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The deed term for the NPA program will be from 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2028. This is in line with the New Specialist Disability Employment Program. And from 1 April, arrangements will be in place to support transition to the new NPA program.

So mandatory qualifications and skills - as I mentioned earlier, assessors are required to have particular skills, which are high-level communication skills, with the ability to consult and provide advice in a sensitive and appropriate manner; ability to complete assessments to a high standard; ability to produce detailed written reports on completion of assessment; ability to assess barriers and negotiate appropriate solutions to meet the needs of people with disability; and technical skills related to the relevant process of assessment.

Each assessor will be required to have a minimum of two years' practical experience in disability employment, workplace productivity assessments, or related sectors. Each assessor will be required to have knowledge of duty of care and professional ethics; employment assistance options available to people with disability who are seeking employment; and relevant work health and safety, industrial relations and antidiscrimination legislation.

Assessors who want to deliver OSA or SWS assessments should also have a minimum of a diploma or higher-level qualification in one of the following fields: psychology, rehabilitation counsellor, or vocational training. If a potential assessor has another diploma or higher-level qualification which the provider considers is relevant to providing the required assessments, they will need to contact the department for approval.

WMS assessors are required to have a full up-to-date qualification that is registered, accredited or recognised with the relevant association, being occupational therapy, which would need to be registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, also known as AHPRA; physiotherapy, also registered with AHPRA; nurse, registered with AHPRA; medical practitioner, also registered with AHPRA; exercise physiologist accredited with Exercise & Sports Science Australia; or rehabilitation counsellor, recognised with the Australian Society of Rehabilitation Counsellors or Rehabilitation Counselling Association of Australasia. I will just reiterate that if there are individuals who wish to be assessors who do not hold these qualifications, approval must be sought from the department in writing. Assessors will be provided with links to a training module for Ongoing Support Assessments and Supported Wage System assessments that must be completed before they begin undertaking assessment work.

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So performing assessment services - as mentioned, the three assessment services will be undertaken by approved assessors. Under the new NPA program, it will be the responsibility of the NPA provider to approve their individual assessors. Assessors should only be approved if they have the mandatory qualifications and/or the skills outlined by the department. This change has been implemented to reduce red tape on NPA providers. If an NPA provider wishes to approve an assessor who does not have the listed mandatory qualifications, the provider will need to write to the department, as I noted earlier. The department will reserve the right to request documentary evidence of relevant qualifications and skills for each assessor at any time.

NPA providers will also be subject to program assurance activities. Program assurance activities will include checks that assessors are not undertaking assessments where there may be conflicts of interest. What this means is that assessors should not be undertaking assessments for any organisations who are considered a related entity.

As an example, let's take an assessor who works for two different providers, provider A and provider B, and provider B is also a DES provider. If provider A gets allocated an assessment of a participant of the DES provider, being provider B, then the assessor should not undertake this assessment on behalf of provider A as they would have a relationship with provider B, which would be considered a conflict of interest.

Assessment services will be allocated to providers using the department's IT system on a fair and equitable basis. This means that assessments will be automatically allocated to the provider with the lowest number of assessments in their local area.

Supported Wage System assessments are up next. So the Supported Wage System, or SWS, is an industrial relations mechanism that has been in place since 1994. The Supported Wage System enables employers to pay a productivity-based wage to people whose work productivity is reduced because of their disability. For example, someone with an assessed work capacity of 70% would therefore be entitled to 70% of the relevant pay rate in their award or registered agreement. This assessment can only be undertaken by a qualified independent NPA assessor. Further detail on SWS assessments will be provided in guidelines.

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Ongoing Support Assessments - from 1 July 2025, ongoing support assistance will be available to participants of the New Specialist Disability Employment Program who meet specific criteria. Ongoing support will be available to participants in another category, referred to as Ongoing Support Work Assist. Ongoing Support Work Assist will provide support to an employee and their employer if they are not currently receiving assistance from a new program provider. The assessment process for an Ongoing Support Work Assist provider will be the same process as a regular Ongoing Support Assessment.

An NPA assessor will undertake the assessment to determine the level of support the participant requires. The levels are: none - in other words, the Ongoing Support Assessment recommends the participant does not require ongoing support; flexible ongoing support; moderate ongoing support; or high ongoing support. The NPA assessor will also make a recommendation on the duration of support and timing for the next Ongoing Support Assessment review. The review interval will be either one, two or five years based on the participant's circumstance and needs.

The Ongoing Support Assessment will normally consist of an interview with the new program provider and the new program participant; a file assessment of the support provided in the period since job placement or since the last Ongoing Support Assessment; and a workplace assessment which should include an interview with the participant's employer. Further detailed information on Ongoing Support Assessments will be provided in guidelines.

Workplace Modifications Assessments - NPA assessors will conduct Workplace Modification Assessments for people with disability to identify barriers in accessing or performing their work. Workplace Modification Assessments will recommend equipment, modifications and other support funded through the Employment Assistance Fund to remove these identified barriers.

Respondents can also bid to deliver specialist Workplace Modification Assessments. Specialist assessments can be undertaken by an assessor who has specialist skills in a particular disability. For example, an assessor may be suitably qualified to deliver specialist Workplace Modification Assessments for individuals with vision impairment. Further detailed information on Ongoing Support Assessments will be provided in guidelines.

So the NPA program will provide services across 110 Employment Services Areas, also known as ESAs, as well as potentially on Norfolk Island. This will be confirmed in the final RFT. The department will implement a change from

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the current program and introduce caps on the number of providers who deliver services in each ESA. Currently there are no caps on how many providers are in each ESA and the department has heard that there are issues of oversaturation in many ESAs. The department has also heard that many providers would like to take on more assessment services.

In response to this feedback, the department will cap the number of NPA providers based on the historical number of assessment services in each ESA. We are very interested in your feedback on this change and welcome any feedback today or via email at DESConsultations@dss.gov.au. Respondents can bid to deliver services in an entire ESA or to only provide partial coverage. Respondents must be able to deliver face-to-face assessment services in each ESA that they tender for.

Performance management - the department is committed to ensuring NPA providers deliver high-quality assessment services for people with disability. NPA providers will be required to adhere to an NPA performance framework as well as comply with the Disability Services and Inclusion Code of Conduct Rules; key performance indicators, as outlined in the RFT document; and the National Standards for Disability Services.

As per the current arrangements, NPA providers will be required to obtain a certificate of compliance with the NSDS. This will include having an audit undertaken by an accredited certification body. The department will provide more information about these processes in guidelines.

Fees - so the assessment fees will be paid via a fee for service model when the assessment is complete. Fees for providers will be indexed annually on 1 July, with the first indexation point on 1 July 2026. All fee amounts I mention will be inclusive of GST.

The fee for an Ongoing Support Assessment will be \$475.36. The fee for a Supported Wage System assessment will be \$679.10, with additional fees available for long assessments or assessments in remote areas. And the fee for a Workplace Modifications Assessment will be \$135.82 per hour up to a maximum of five hours, with additional fees available for long assessments or assessments requiring travel.

Before I hand over to Jacinda, I just wanted to reiterate the key changes from the current program to the new program - firstly, that NPA providers will be responsible for approving individual assessors who work for them, including

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subcontractors. It will be the responsibility of the provider to ensure all their assessors are appropriately qualified. The department will undertake program assurance activities to ensure that NPA providers are appropriately qualified.

Secondly, that the department will introduce caps on the number of NPA providers in each ESA. This is in line with feedback from current stakeholders. The department welcomes feedback on these changes as well as any other information in the Exposure Draft.

And just before I hand over to Jacinda, another reminder of the QR code that's available there if you'd like to submit any questions or feedback. So Jacinda, over to you. Thank you.

JACINDA STILL: Thanks, Carolyn. Hi, everybody. It's lovely to be here today. I'm Jacinda Still. I'm a woman in my mid-40s. I have blonde, curly hair, I'm wearing blue glasses, and I have a blue and white striped jacket.

I'll now be going through the key aspects of the Request for Tender process. The next few slides are very important for those organisations that are considering whether or not to prepare a response to the Request for Tender. For other stakeholders, the subject of criteria is also an area that we're interested in receiving feedback on. This is to ensure that we're identifying what's important for assessing responses.

I'll go through these in some detail and it's important that you read the relevant parts of the Exposure Draft and then the Request for Tender when it's released. They are pretty technical as a result, so you'll have to bear with me.

Throughout the next few slides, I'll refer to a respondent. What I mean by this is the organisation or body that prepares a tender bid or response and then submits it. Lodging a response to the Request for Tender will constitute an offer by the respondent to provide the services on the terms and conditions set out in the response and the draft deed. It's the document that the department will use for the evaluation.

When lodging a response, there are a few aspects that you need to be aware of. The Request for Tender document will include conditions for participation and minimum content and format requirements. Respondents must satisfy these elements in order for their response to be considered against the evaluation criteria. In other words, these are the threshold requirements for a response to move forward into technical evaluation.

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The conditions for participation are set out in section 3.1 of the Exposure Draft. Respondents must meet a number of conditions in order for their response to be included in the evaluation process. There are also minimum content and format requirements, which are set out in section 3.2 of the Exposure Draft.

The Request for Tender will also include information about Employment Service Areas and coverage. For this process, ESA boundaries, or Employment Service Areas, will remain the same and maps of each region are available in appendix C of the Exposure Draft. The department is looking to publish data on data.gov.au relating to the historical number of assessment services in each ESA and a link to the information will be uploaded onto DSS Engage once it's been published.

Evaluation of responses - responses will be evaluated through a staged approach as outlined on the slide. In stage 1, responses will be downloaded and undergo checks, including checking that all information was provided and received by the closing time and date. In stage 2, responses will be assessed, noting that the department will use all information available, including the responses to criteria and any available data and referee reports.

In stage 3, the Right Fit For Risk preliminary assessment, the department, with the assistance of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, will consider the status of a respondent's Right Fit For Risk accreditation or readiness to achieve that accreditation under the External Systems Assurance Framework. In stage 4, the department will determine the financial viability of respondents, again using all information available to it, including information provided by respondents.

In stage 5, the department will conduct an overall value for money assessment to inform recommendations for offering a deed. And finally, in stage 6, the department may enter into negotiations with one or more respondents, including detailed discussions with respondents, with the goal of achieving the best value for money.

The Group Manager for Disability Employment is the delegate for this process and will make the final decisions. Any decisions of the delegate in relation to the outcome of the Request for Tender is final and not subject to review or appeal.

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So how will tenders be assessed? There are three proposed selection criteria. The first criterion is organisational capability and this will apply to all respondents. The second criterion is quality and this will also apply to all respondents. The third criterion is capability and specialist knowledge to be able to deliver specialist WMS assessments. This criterion will only apply to respondents who wish to bid for specialist WMS services and they should only complete this selection criteria in their response, and I'll go through each of these shortly.

Respondents should include evidence such as case studies, examples or relevant data to support their responses. Responses to each criterion will be scored, subject to weighting, and the scores will inform the value for money evaluation and allocation of business. In responding to the selection criteria, respondents should refer to the statement of requirements in the Request for Tender.

The first selection criterion is about organisational capability. It's proposed that this criterion asks the respondent to demonstrate against each of the subcriteria their organisation's capability to deliver Ongoing Support Assessment or Supported Wage System assessments and/or WMS assessment services.

The second selection criteria is about quality. It's proposed that this criterion asks the respondent to describe how their organisation will provide and maintain quality assessment services, including any assessment services provided by subcontractors. And the third criterion is for specialist WMS providers only and respondents who wish to deliver these services must complete this criterion. Respondents who do not wish to deliver the specialist WMS services should enter "not applicable" in the tender form. It's proposed that this criterion asks respondents to describe their organisation's capability and specialist knowledge to be able to deliver specialist WMS services in line with the subcriteria.

The department may also perform security, probity and financial investigations as is necessary in relation to any respondent, its employees, officers, partners, associates, subcontractors or related entities. Respondents must satisfy the department of their financial viability to meet the requirements of the Request for Tender. Respondents must also provide information to allow the department to undertake a credentials check on the organisation. The department reserves the right to make any inquiries it considers appropriate to the evaluation of an organisation.

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In chapter 8 of the Exposure Draft, it offers comprehensive information on conditions and requirements for organisations that do intend to submit a response. It's the respondent's responsibility to ensure that it has met these requirements when lodging the Request for Tender. For example, you will need to read the entire request for tender; make your own inquiries regarding the risks, contingencies, and other circumstances that may impact on your decision to submit a response; satisfy yourselves as to the terms and conditions of the draft deed and ability to comply with it; make your own assessment and investigations; take note of the closing date and time; satisfy yourself that your organisation's response is complete, accurate and provides the necessary information to be assessed. Please also keep a copy of the submitted response and attachments.

Respondents should note that the Indigenous Procurement Policy applies to this procurement. Further information on the Indigenous Procurement Policy is at www.niaa.gov.au. Essentially what this means is that the department may apply the principles of the Indigenous Procurement Policy in selecting providers for each of the ESAs, or Employment Services Areas.

Mandatory set-aside requirements may apply to this RFT, or Request for Tender, for ESAs that intersect with a remote area as identified in the Remote Indigenous Procurement Policy. This map is available on the National Indigenous Australians Agency website. What this means is that in those ESAs the department will first determine whether an Indigenous small or medium enterprise could deliver the required goods or services on a value-for-money basis. If any resultant deed is a high-value contract, at least \$7.5 million, the mandatory minimum requirements for Indigenous participation will apply. This means the provider must meet certain Indigenous employment and business participation targets. Respondents must also ensure compliance with all relevant laws and government policy in preparing and lodging tenders and taking part in the RFT process.

The department is committed to conducting a fair, honest and transparent process for the procurement of services for the NPA program. The department has appointed Ashurst Law as its external probity adviser. The role of the probity adviser is to advise the delegate on the probity and integrity of the procurement process.

But we want to hear from you and our stakeholders. Feedback, comments and questions on this Exposure Draft can be submitted through to

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DESConsultations@dss.gov.au. The department has issued a companion document to suggest questions that stakeholders and potential respondents may wish to provide feedback on, although any and all other feedback is also welcome. Easy Read versions of the NPA Exposure Draft and companion guide will be available shortly and submissions need to be made before 5pm Canberra time on 27 September 2024 to ensure they will be considered in preparing the formal and final Request for Tender. Tamara, I'll hand back to you.

TAMARA: Thank you very much and thank you to Carolyn and to you, Jacinda, as well for that comprehensive overview.

We've now got about 20 minutes for questions and answers, so thank you very much for popping your questions through. If you haven't already, the QR code on your screen, you will be able to pop your questions through that as well. And just a reminder that any information that's coming through to us today, we will take that, we'll record that as feedback and any other information provided by stakeholders through this process.

I know you just finished speaking, Jacinda, but I'm going to throw back to you already, if that's okay. Will the NPA draft deed be released?

JACINDA: Yes, it will. We're currently working on the draft deed for the NPA and we are hoping to release that shortly for feedback as well.

TAMARA: Fantastic. Thank you very much. Carolyn, I'm going to pop over to you.

CAROLYN: Sure.

TAMARA: Will DES providers be able to hold both an NPA and DES contract?

CAROLYN: Yes, they will be able to hold both. It will be important that they manage their conflict of interest, as I spoke to earlier, but yes, they will be able to have both, as they currently can.

TAMARA: Fantastic. Thank you so much for that. I'm going to stick with you for a moment. Why have the fees not increased for the NPA?

CAROLYN: Yes, great question. So the department has considered feedback from current NPA providers that many of them had quite a small number of

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assessments because of that oversaturation in particular Employment Service Areas. We are really thinking about financial viability of NPA providers and that's why we're introducing the caps in particular Employment Service Areas. This will mean that the providers in those areas will have more assessment work, thus being more financially viable.

TAMARA: Okay, thank you very much. Jacinda, coming back your way, will assessments be changed to accommodate the new DES specialisation model?

JACINDA: So the changes to the Disability Employment Services Model, or DES model, will not require changes to SWS or WMS assessment types, but there will be some changes and these will apply to Ongoing Support Assessments and this will see that the NPA assessors indicate how long until the next Ongoing Support Assessment is required and that could be either one, two or five years.

TAMARA: Okay, that's helpful to know. Coming over to you - I'm doing turn about, so it's fair at the moment - the new DES model has a more continuous model for participant engagement. Does this mean that the total number of NPA assessments are likely to increase at all?

CAROLYN: Well, given changes in eligibility for the New Specialist Disability Employment Program, there is potential that the number of assessments for NPA providers will increase. However, these assessments are demand driven, so it's difficult for us to say exactly how many assessments there will be in any area.

TAMARA: Okay. Good to know. I did say I was giving you turn about, but I'm not, I'm coming back to you while you're next to me. Will providers be forced to have specialist assessors on board?

CAROLYN: Well, generally the NPA assessors do need to meet the qualifications and the skills that I spoke about earlier. The only specialist assessors are in the Workplace Modification Assessment type. That is optional for providers. If they would like to bid to be a specialist Workplace Modification Assessment provider, they can, but there's no requirement, nobody will be forced to be a specialist --

TAMARA: Okay.

CAROLYN: -- WMS provider.

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TAMARA: Excellent. Once again --

CAROLYN: Yes.

TAMARA: -- I'm giving you a little bit of a break, Jacinda, over there, you can hold tight. Carolyn, can you please address the conflict of interest with assessors working for product suppliers?

CAROLYN: Okay. I'm not quite sure what product suppliers means, but I'll have a go at answering it. We know that the way the program works at the moment, there are assessors who work for multiple NPA providers and this does raise risks around conflicts of interest. So really it's being really clear about that and making sure that providers understand that it wouldn't be appropriate if you worked for multiple NPA providers, especially if they're a DES provider as well, to be conducting assessments for organisations who you might also have an employment contract with. So, look, there will be more advice about that to come, but yes, it's really just about making clear that there's no perceived or real conflicts of interest in the program.

TAMARA: Thank you so much for that. That was comprehensive. I am coming over to you now, Jacinda. Will the department be providing expected volume data and/or capped number of providers by ESA at the RFT stage to inform provider decisions? Now, I know we've used a couple of acronyms, so you may want to spell that out just in case.

JACINDA: Sure. So when we talk about an ESA, we mean an Employment Service Area, and when we're referring to an RFT, it's the Request for Tender, so what this document will eventually be. So it's a good question and we've had quite a lot of questions both on this particular one, but also when we release the Exposure Draft for the new specialist disability employment Request for Tender.

So when the final RFT, or Request for Tender, is released for this particular program, we will be looking to include information on the capped number of providers, including how many providers the department is seeking in each of the ESAs, in each of the Employment Service Areas. So we're hoping that that will be useful and will help potential respondents to make a decision on whether they wish to bid or not.

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What we'll also try to do is look to provide historical data as well on the number of assessments in each Employment Service Area. So between these two pieces of data, that should provide potential respondents with a good understanding of what the services will look like in each region and then make their assessment on whether they wish to bid.

TAMARA: Fantastic. And thank you all for your questions that are coming through at the moment. Again, please use the QR code if you are thinking of a question. This is not the only time. If you walk away from today and you have a question or you have feedback, please make sure you do email us at DESConsultations@dss.gov.au. Carolyn, I'm going to come back to you for the next question. How will the review period be considered?

CAROLYN: Okay, thanks, Tamara. I assume that question relates to the review period in the Ongoing Support Assessment. So further information about that will be in the guidelines for Ongoing Support Assessments.

TAMARA: Okay.

CAROLYN: Yes, not much more to say on that one.

TAMARA: All good. While I've got you, will small providers need to guarantee that they can deliver a certain number of assessments in each ESA?

CAROLYN: So this goes back to sort of what Jacinda was talking about earlier. We would expect that, when responding, respondents are thinking about their capacity to meet expected demand for assessments and you'll be able to get a feel for this once you see the historical assessment data along with the cap of the number of providers in that ESA. We would expect that, you know, for some small providers who bid, they may, if they're successful, need to think about hiring more assessors to staff up to meet demand. So these are all factors that we'd encourage respondents to think about and the data that will come will help you do that.

TAMARA: Excellent. Thank you very much for that. I'm going to stick with you. I'm picking on you a little bit, Carolyn, sorry for that.

CAROLYN: That's fine.

TAMARA: Given some of the Employment Service Areas, ESAs, may be capped under the proposed new NPA contract, how will the work be distributed,

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especially out of small NPA providers where NPA is their main source of income?

CAROLYN: Yes, sure. So the allocation principles will remain the same as they are now. So the way it works is that there's an automatic process where the provider with the fewest assessments allocated to them receives the next assessment that comes through. So that method will continue. That just means that all the providers in the area get an equal share of the assessment work.

TAMARA: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. Coming over to you now, Jacinda - we'll give Carolyn a little break - will NPA providers be required to obtain a certificate of compliance with the National Standards for Disability Services and will there be reimbursement for the audits?

JACINDA: Yes, thanks, Tamara. That is another really good question. So yes, NPA providers, or providers that provide the National Panel of Assessors work, will be required to obtain a certificate of compliance with the NSDS, or the National Standards for Disability Services. And in relation to the second part of your question about reimbursement, we're currently considering options for that and what potential options for support we may be able to provide.

TAMARA: Fantastic. Thank you very much for that. It's good to see these questions coming through. Once again, if you need to put your question in now, we've approximately got just 9 minutes to go for those questions to come through.

Jacinda, I know there's a lot of information that we've given in a very compact period of time. Can you - is there any bits that you'd like to really point out again or reinforce that we've said over the course of the last sort of 45 minutes?

JACINDA: Absolutely. So the reason that we've released an Exposure Draft is to provide information to stakeholders and potential respondents about the direction that we're going with this NPA program, but if respondents are considering bidding, then it's really important that they look through the Request for Tender document in detail.

The information contained in the Exposure Draft is really just a draft, so if people are considering whether to bid, the final information will be contained in the Request for Tender document and it's really, really important that potential respondents read that in detail and respond to the criteria as it's set out.

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TAMARA: Fantastic. Thank you so much for that. Carolyn, are there current specialist WMS assessors or what examples of specialists are anticipated?

CAROLYN: Yes, so yes, there are current specialist WMS providers. So I mentioned an example earlier of vision impairments. I believe there's also a specialist provider who works with people with spinal cord injuries, so they're just a couple of examples, but yes, it's really a case of specialists who work with people with a particular type of disability who may have particular needs in the workforce that they can really assist with.

TAMARA: Fantastic. Thank you very much. And I know I just asked Jacinda as well, but obviously a lot of information you just got through and fantastic information for all those online today. What, from a policy lens, would you like to reinforce for people online?

CAROLYN: Yes, sure. I suppose I would just say I'm aware it's been a period of change for the program and that this is continuing. We really are focused on ensuring that we can provide high-quality assessments. These are really important assessments that we do to support people with disability to find and keep great jobs. So I would just say that, you know, if people do have feedback or thoughts, we really are very open to hearing that. We want to make sure this works really well on the ground. So please, if you do have any feedback that perhaps you haven't provided today, we'd love to get it at the DES Consultations mailbox.

TAMARA: Fantastic. Jacinda, why do assessment services need to be undertaken face to face?

JACINDA: So I think this is a really nice lead-on response to what Carolyn was just saying. The department has a strong focus on high-quality assessment services for people with disability, so it's really important to understand that face-to-face assessments are an important part of that quality and it's particularly important for people with disability who may have high support needs. So that's why there is a preference for face to face.

TAMARA: Thank you. So, again, if you're someone like me who processes information and you walk away and you have questions or you've got thoughts that you'd like to contribute or more information, Carolyn and Jacinda are keen to hear about that. So if you can please, like I've said before, pop that through to DESConsultations@dss.gov.au.



National Disability Award winner
Australian Human Rights Commission Award winner

Transcript

We've gone through quite a few questions today and we want to thank you very much for interacting with us. It's exceptionally useful to the team to be able to have these questions, think about the questions and make sure they're capturing that through this process. Thank you again for joining us today. Your time is very valuable to you and the fact that you've given it to us today we really appreciate as well. So on behalf of myself, Carolyn, Jacinda and the department, we thank you very much. It's been a pleasure to spend time with you today and we hope you have a fantastic afternoon. Thank you.

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