

Shaping the future of employment services

Centre for Policy Development Submission

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Summary of recommendations

- 1) Implement a whole-of-system transformation that cuts across all three proposed service streams.
- 2) Grow the capabilities and mindsets for better commissioning, particularly through formal relational contracting:
 - a) Give contract managers more decision-making power and more balanced contract ratios.
 - b) Create a capability framework that outlines the skills, knowledge and principles necessary for Formal Relational Contracting. Embed the framework into the Department of Workplace and Employment Relations by aligning position descriptions, recruitment processes and promotion processes to the framework; creating a central resource hub; and forming internal communities of practice based on the framework.
 - c) Foster a better understanding of the realities of service provision through government service delivery, regular site visits, local immersion events, hiring commissioning staff with service delivery experience and more regular communication with peak bodies.
- 3) Prioritise providers who are community-controlled with strong local connections in procurement processes:
 - a) Assess tender applications based on the provider's connections to the local community and the degree to which they are led by the community.
 - b) Include community members and people with lived experience on assessment panels and co-design assessment criteria with them as part of the tender process.
 - c) Provide administrative support and capability-building to community-led organisations that show high potential for service quality but do not meet criteria around organisational administration.
 - d) Dedicate a portion of funding to community engagement, especially for larger mainstream providers.
 - e) Provide probity support that promotes innovation while meeting legal requirements as commissioning staff shift towards a more community-led procurement process.
- 4) Design long-term funding models and success metrics that promote flexibility, continuous improvement and jobseeker agency:
 - a) Design funding models that focus on upfront payments adjusted for local context and that include a portion of flexible funding.
 - b) Maintain long term contracts, begin recommissioning early and clearly communicate contract decisions early.
 - c) Co-design flexible performance indicators with providers that encourage organisations to gradually address jobseekers' underlying barriers to employment in line with their Employment Goal Plans.
- 5) Permanently embed the Lived Experience Panel and Employment Services Reform Advisory Group into the Employment Services learning system:
 - a) Permanently maintain the Lived Experience Panel and Employment Service Reform Advisory group and create ongoing feedback mechanisms in the form of quarterly meetings, participation in communities of practice and ongoing consultation.

- b) Support the Lived Experience Panel to provide ongoing feedback by employing a dedicated coordinator, compensating panel members for their time and providing additional flexible support as required.
- 6) Create an Employment Services learning system that continuously embeds new and existing learnings:
 - a) Use relational contracting and communities of practice to continuously embed learnings into the employment services system.
 - b) Draw on existing learnings by recruiting and consulting staff involved in existing people-centred and place-based programs.
 - c) Use a combination of developmental and impact evaluation methods to understand the effectiveness of the reforms as appropriate for the maturity of each new system element.
- 7) Create place-based governance structures and local practitioner networks to enable integrated, community-led service delivery:
 - a) Enhance the Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces to be more community-led and better focus on action, learning, employer engagement and service integration.
 - b) Broadly align the boundaries of the enhanced Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces with local labour markets, how communities organise themselves and local government areas.
- c) Create local practitioner networks focused on building shared understanding, trusting relationships and coordinated service delivery.
- d) Build connections between enhanced Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces and local practitioner networks for the purpose of shared understanding and information exchange.
- 8) Enable person-centred and jobseeker-led employment support across a jobseeker's employment journey:
 - a) Design service models that integrate digital service delivery with in-person, place-based support, including as part of stream 3.
 - b) Provide case workers with appropriate authority, guidance and training to co-design Employment Goal Plans in ways that flexibly meet the goals of the jobseeker.
 - c) Ensure assessment and triaging decisions are made by an experienced, neutral practitioner based on their professional experience, relationships with the jobseeker and service provider, and jobseeker preferences.

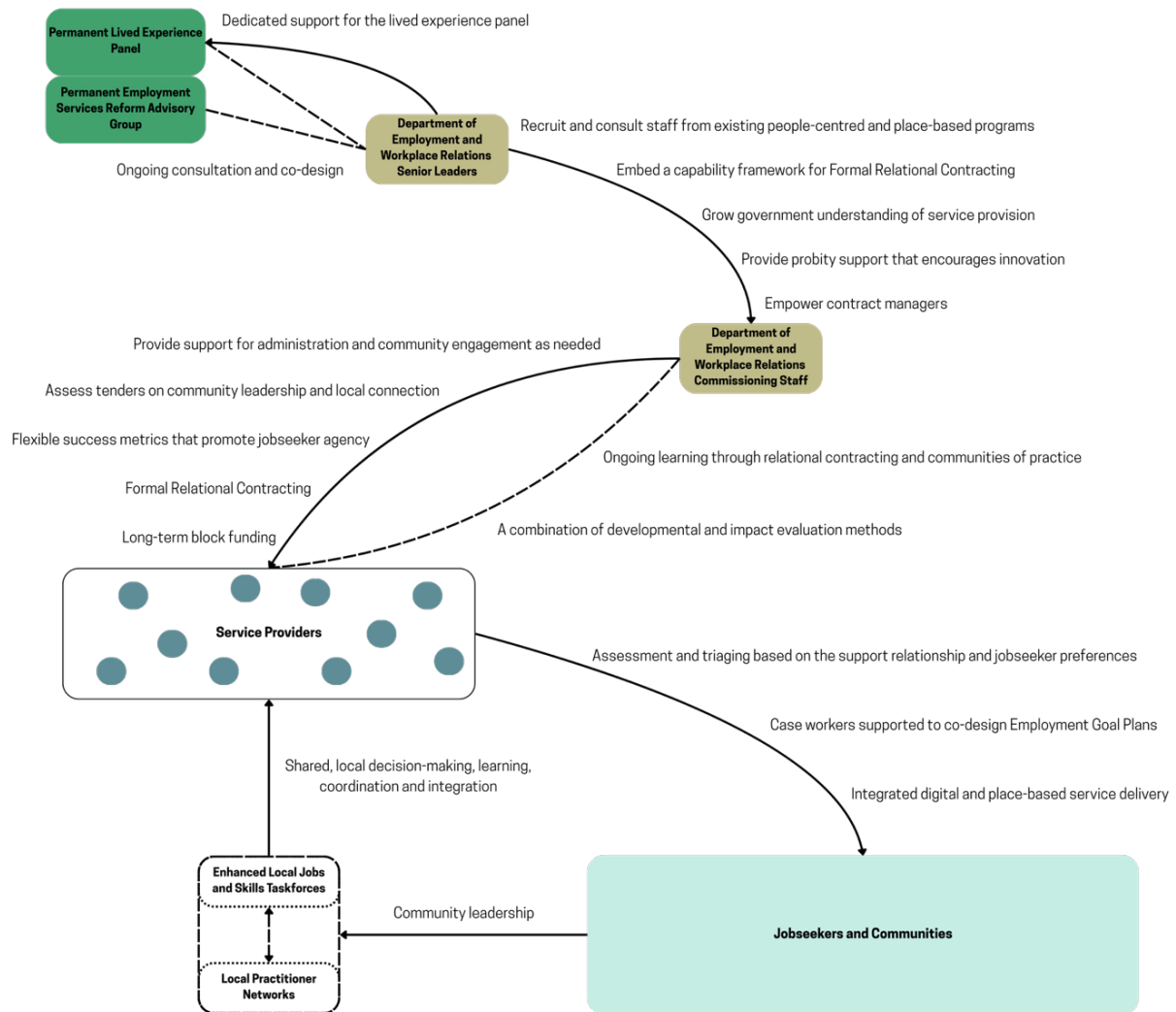


Figure 1: Visualisation of CPD recommendations

Introduction

An opportunity to provide better value for money, restore trust in government, and help people into secure and meaningful employment

For over a decade, the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) has advocated for an employment services system that helps people into secure, meaningful work through person-centred and place-based support. CPD's work in this space includes the [Grand Alibis](#) report on public sector capability, [Blueprint for Regional and Community Jobs Deals](#) on place-based employment support and [joint submission](#) to the 2023 Workforce Australia Inquiry.

Employment services in Australia have long been in need of reform. In 2023, a [government inquiry](#) found that "Australia no longer has an effective coherent national employment services system; we have an inefficient outsourced fragmented social security compliance management system that sometimes gets someone a job against all odds".¹ CPD strongly supports the proposed shift towards a more person-centred and place-based employment services system. If designed and implemented effectively, this shift could improve the system's efficiency, restore trust in government and, most importantly, ensure secure, meaningful employment for millions of people.

These reforms have the potential to increase the efficiency of the system and provide better value for public money. The current system focuses on getting jobseekers off welfare payments as quickly as possible, regardless of that job's quality, fit to the jobseeker's goals and skills, and broader labour shortages. The Parliamentary Budget Office [estimated](#) that government expenditure on all employment services in 2022-23 was \$4.3 billion, a substantial portion of which is spent on monitoring jobseeker compliance with mutual obligations. However, research by Gerards and Welters found that jobseekers

experiencing mutual obligations take longer to find employment and tend to enter jobs that are lower paid and offer fewer working hours when compared with a matched cohort not experiencing mutual obligations.² A reformed system should direct resources away from overbearing compliance and towards support that suits the goals of jobseekers and the wider Australian economy.

These reforms can improve trust in government and social cohesion. State, territory and federal governments are among the least trusted public institutions,³ and trust is especially low for people experiencing disadvantage.⁴ How the public interacts with public services is a significant determinant of this trust. When services are ineffective or inaccessible, questions about the government's ability to look after people and communities emerge.⁵ A reformed system that puts the goals of the community first and lifts service quality would help restore trust in the government's ability to support its citizens.

Most importantly, these reforms represent a chance to offer genuine support to people who want to work. The [2023 Employment White Paper](#) found that:

- ⇒ 0.5 million people are unemployed
- ⇒ 1.3 million people want to work but have not been actively looking or are not immediately available to work
- ⇒ 1 million workers are in jobs and would like to work more hours, but cannot get access to them

The paper notes that these 2.8 million people are disproportionately experiencing entrenched disadvantage, First Nations peoples, people with disabilities, young people and women. There are also specific places, often rural and remote, that face additional employment barriers. A reformed system should be more responsive to the needs of these diverse groups to ensure everyone in Australia has access to decent and secure work.

To truly improve efficiency, strengthen social cohesion and secure meaningful employment

for millions of people, the proposed employment services reform must include a shift in purpose. The system must be more than a compliance management system for social security payments. One's risk of long-term unemployment is shaped by a range of factors regardless of how motivated they are to work, including educational attainment, mental health and experiences of childhood poverty.^{6,7} The Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme found that "fraud in the welfare system was miniscule".⁸ The system must treat jobseekers not as potential fraudsters scamming the system but as a diverse group of real people seeking employment for various reasons. Work, in whatever form it takes, brings stability, purpose and community to people's lives. That is what the system should be about, collaborating with jobseekers to ensure they reap the full benefits of secure, meaningful work in ways that align with their needs and goals. As CPD put it in a [recent the Policymaker Article](#), "imagine the difference if people felt the weight of the system was behind them instead of on top of them".

While these reforms are a crucial opportunity to improve productivity, social cohesion and people's lives, the employment services system is only one part of the puzzle. Much of what causes people to be un- or under-employed, especially over the long term, sits outside of the employment services system. The Reserve Bank of Australia maintains a minimum level of unemployment via its control of interest rates, purportedly to reduce inflation.⁹ Broader economic conditions, policy changes and new technologies can cause businesses to close or lay off staff. A person's risk of unemployment is shaped by countless factors experienced across their lifespan. The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) does not directly hold the levers for many of these determinants. However, the department should work with other agencies and jurisdictions as part of these reforms to create an employment services system that provides holistic employment support as soon as it is needed.

A whole-of-government approach to developing and utilising human capability is needed in order to realise the goal of full employment.

Australia needs whole-of-system reform to its employment services

Australia's employment outcomes will not change unless there is a whole-of-system reform to the country's employment services. The discussion paper outlines three service streams, with many of the new elements of the system trialled in stream 3, the intensive services stream. While varying services based on proximity to the labour market and trialling new elements are both important parts of these reforms, it is important they do not become a barrier to whole-of-system transformation.

There is a risk that stream 2, targeted provider services, merely replicates the existing issues in the system. This is problematic because all jobseekers deserve quality support that meets their needs, and it is important that people receive the right support as soon as it is needed. Otherwise, a portion of jobseekers in stream 2 may end up in stream 3 anyway because the quality of the intervention was insufficient, creating needless costs, delays and distress for the government, providers and jobseekers. Another issue is the administrative difficulty and disruption that would come from moving jobseekers between the different streams if the boundaries between those streams are too rigid. A continuous relationship is essential to quality support, and that cannot be achieved where the various streams operate in vastly different ways. Finally, there is the risk of adding another layer of administrative complexity that increases the cost of the system, worsens fragmentation and results in confusion for jobseekers.

For this reason, CPD recommends that the proposed systems transformation occurs across all three service streams but implemented in ways that meet the purpose of each. This submission is not prescriptive about the stream in which our recommendations should be implemented but

does acknowledge that the more complex the issues or barriers being addressed, the more relational the approach will need to be.

Recommendation 1: Implement a whole-of-system transformation that cuts across all three proposed service streams.

Employ a commissioning approach that promotes local connection, collaboration and ongoing learning

Grow the capabilities and mindsets for better commissioning, particularly through formal relational contracting

Good employment services commissioning looks like the right combination of services in each community, provided by organisations with deep local knowledge. It looks like communities having a say in the support they receive and all system partners learning from each other via trusting and transparent relationships. By contrast, the 2023 Workforce Australia inquiry found that the system's commissioning approach presents barriers for community-based service provision and shared, continuous learning.¹⁰ Core to this is the lack of active market stewardship from DEWR, a hyper-competitive environment and an overly punitive performance management approach.

The Commonwealth Procurement Rules already allow for flexibility in how departments approach commissioning and contracting. This suggests that building capability and shifting mindsets is needed to embed better practice. One of these better approaches is Formal Relational Contracting (FRC), which is characterised by shared goals, guiding principles, joint governance and ongoing communication.^{11,12} It can look like flexible performance indicators, more frequent informal communication alongside formal contract meetings, and automating

simple administrative tasks to reallocate resources towards mutual collaboration.¹³ FRC is better able to respond to the inherent complexity of employment services. It also enables shared, continuous learning by reducing excessive competition and, in combination with recommendation 4, affording greater stability in the system.

CPD recommends three ways to grow the appropriate capabilities and mindsets for better commissioning and contracting. The first is to give contract managers more decision-making power and more balanced contract ratios. Contract management has become the core business of the government in employment services. Yet, contract managers are rarely empowered or resourced to undertake this core business. Contract managers should be given enough authorisation over decisions related to their contract that they can rapidly resolve issues and provide support to providers in ways suited to their context. This will also mean ensuring that the contract-to-contract manager ratio is appropriate so that staff can dedicate enough time to supporting providers. DEWR could ensure an appropriate contract ratio by consolidating multiple contracts for the same provider, making administering contracts more efficient or hiring more contract managers. Increased decision-making power combined with more appropriate time per contract would allow contract managers to learn through practice how to solve problems and enable continuous learning.

Recommendation 2a: Give contract managers more decision-making power and more balanced contract ratios.

The second way to grow new capabilities and mindsets is to develop a capability framework that outlines the skills, knowledge and principles necessary for better commissioning, particularly FRC. This framework could be embedded into position descriptions and recruitment and promotion processes. It could also be operationalised through a central and easily accessible resource hub (e.g., [ACT Commissioning](#)

[Resources page](#)). These resources could include templates, practice guides, case studies, a probity guide and other tools. Finally, the capability framework could be embedded across the department through communities of practice, particularly for contract managers, that spread innovation aligned with the framework. These communities of practice might include sector representatives and people with lived experience to ensure commissioning staff understand the realities of service provision. Such representation could be drawn from the Lived Experience Panel and Employment Services Reform Advisory Group, particularly if they were made permanent entities (see Recommendation 5). They could also include staff from agencies that have already begun to implement relational contracting, like the [Department of Social Services' \(DSS'\) Community Grants Hub](#) or South Australia's Department of Human Services' [Community Connections program](#) and [Child and Family Support System](#). DSS is [currently undergoing reforms](#) to embed relational contracting in the Children and Family Support (CaFS) program. DEWR should consult with the DSS staff undertaking these reforms to embed the capabilities for FRC in their own contract managers.

Recommendation 2b: Create a capability framework that outlines the skills, knowledge and principles necessary for Formal Relational Contracting. Embed the framework into the Department of Workplace and Employment Relations by aligning position descriptions, recruitment processes and promotion processes to the framework; creating a central resource hub; and forming internal communities of practice based on the framework.

Finally, commissioning and contracting is more effective when staff understand the realities of service provision. Governments cannot steward systems they do not deeply understand. FRC creates the opportunity for more flexibility, where contract managers are able to support providers in overcoming challenges inherent to the complexity of social service delivery. For contract managers

and other commissioning staff to be able to make full use of this flexibility, they need to understand what service provision feels like on the ground.

The department could foster a better understanding of service provision in several ways. Direct government service delivery, either through the proposed stream 1 or via regional hubs as the 2023 Workforce Australia inquiry recommends, would create a practical understanding of service provision that could be shared with commissioning staff. The department could give contract managers the authorisation to conduct site visits to observe service delivery in the places it occurs. DEWR could also partner with community organisations to run local immersion events that bring together commissioning staff, community members and providers in place, such as Logan Together's [Walking Together for Logan's Children](#). An effective and easy way to build an understanding of service provision is to hire commissioning staff with service delivery experience in Workforce Australia or another employment services system. Finally, the department could more frequently consult national and state peak bodies for feedback on the commissioning and contracting process.

Recommendation 2c: Foster a better understanding of the realities of service provision through government service delivery, regular site visits, local immersion events, hiring commissioning staff with service delivery experience and more regular communication with peak bodies.

Shift procurement processes to prioritise providers who are community-controlled with strong local connections

Providers that are controlled by the community or have strong local connections are better able to deliver employment support tailored to local needs. Many programs across social service systems have already made this a priority during procurement. Examples include Jobs

Victoria's Mentor Service, The Brotherhood of St Laurence's (BSL's) [Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters \(HIPPY\)](#), [Junubi Wyndham](#) and [the upcoming iteration](#) of DSS' CaFS program.

There are several criteria that DEWR could use while assessing potential providers, including:

- ⇒ The provider's participation in local communities of practice, community governance groups or other local networks
- ⇒ Letters of support from local employers, community services providers or community organisations
- ⇒ The length of the provider's physical presence within the community and the tenure of key staff
- ⇒ The proportion of the provider's workforce that are local to the communities they serve
- ⇒ The degree to which the provider's staffing reflects the demographics of the communities they are supporting
- ⇒ What proportion of their time and resources are dedicated to community engagement
- ⇒ The presence of community members with lived experience in the provider's governance structures and workforce

These criteria and examples of good practice for each criterion should be clearly communicated to providers well in advance of the tender application process to ensure applicants have the time to collect necessary evidence.

Recommendation 3a: Assess tender applications based on the provider's connections to the local community and the degree to which they are led by the community.

Preferencing providers with local connections can be enabled by including community members and people with lived experience on the panels assessing tender applications. Community members might also co-design the assessment criteria from the beginning. This already exists in BSL's [HIPPY program](#)¹⁴

and the [Cape York Partnership](#)'s assessment of Indigenous rangers.¹⁵ This would not only increase the market share of providers with strong local connections but also build community capability for self-determining appropriate services.

Recommendation 3b: Include community members and people with lived experience on assessment panels and co-design assessment criteria with them as part of the tender process.

The department should provide support to community-led organisations who show potential but are unable to meet all criteria due to a lack of resources or capabilities. Communities will already have local programs, relationships and other assets supporting employment outcomes. Employment services need to recognise and build on these strengths, even if they do not look like typical employment services models or organisations. This is particularly true for organisations lacking administrative capabilities like recordkeeping or human resources that, while important, are not directly related to the quality of service delivery.

DEWR can support promising community-led organisations by pairing them with a more mature organisation that can provide administrative support. This could be a permanent arrangement or a temporary capability-building relationship. BSL's [HIPPY program](#) supports capability-building for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) by partnering them with a larger provider, with the long-term goal being a full transition to the ACCO.¹⁶ Queensland's Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety did the same thing when procuring [Village Connect](#) to provide kinship care.¹⁷

Recommendation 3c: Provide administrative support and capability-building to community-led organisations that show high potential for service quality but do not meet criteria around organisational administration.

Larger providers will also need support to enable local connection and community engagement. Just as community-led organisations have not been adequately funded to meet the administrative requirements of government procurement processes, mainstream providers have not been resourced or incentivised to build community connections under the current system. Larger organisations that demonstrate the potential to build local connections and community leadership should still be procured. They should have a portion of their funding dedicated to community engagement in the forms described in recommendation 3a.

Recommendation 3d: Dedicate a portion of funding to community engagement, especially for larger mainstream providers.

As part of this shift to a more community-led procurement process, DEWR will need to support its commissioning staff to navigate probity concerns. Prioritising community-led providers with local connections does not mean conflicts of interest, unfair market advantages and other probity concerns should be ignored. As the examples listed throughout this section show, it is entirely possible to meet probity requirements *and* support community organisations in procurement. Yet, there can sometimes be an assumption that these two things are incompatible, and this assumption can prevent commissioning staff from shifting their procurement practice.

The department should support commissioning staff throughout the procurement process to prevent this false assumption from hindering good practice. This support can take many forms. DEWR could use internal probity advisors that are specialised in employment services to assist commissioning staff in understanding what is an actual legal limit and what is a false assumption. External probity advisors could be used in situations where there is significant risk or where a neutral third party would be beneficial. The department could also build the capability of staff to apply

probity considerations in complex environments as part of the capability-building processes described in recommendation 2. [Primary Health Networks](#) have a history of place-based procurement from which the department could learn.

Recommendation 3e: Provide probity support that promotes innovation while meeting legal requirements as commissioning staff shift towards a more community-led procurement process.

Design long-term funding models and success metrics that promote flexibility, continuous improvement and jobseeker agency

Funding models should move away from incentivising providers to place jobseekers into work as quickly as possible and instead focus on enabling providers to invest in long-term systems change, adapt to local context, engage in ongoing learning, and tailor support to the goals and needs of each jobseeker. As noted in the discussion paper, providers working in thin labour markets or with communities that face persistent employment barriers may struggle to earn employment outcomes payments despite delivering high-quality services. This creates a negative feedback loop where quality providers miss out on funding due to factors outside of their control, which means they are less resourced to address these external factors, which means they earn even less funding, and so on. The employment outcomes payments also do not incentivise providers to place jobseekers into work that is meaningful, in line with their employment goals, or that makes the best use of their skills and knowledge, it simply incentivises job placements that last 26 or 52 weeks. Finally, some providers take advantage of these payments by ignoring the clients that need the most support and focusing on those already closest to the labour market.^{18,19}

Funding models in a reformed system should put greater focus on upfront payments that can sufficiently resource quality service delivery, organisational administration,

learning, cross-organisation collaboration and engagement with local stakeholders. These payments should be adapted to the nuances of each employment region. DEWR should consult peak bodies and existing providers to ensure the costing of the system accurately reflects the full expenses required by providers in each location. These upfront payments should also include a portion of funding that can be spent flexibly by the provider based on the needs of the community and each jobseeker. For example, [Safer Family Services'](#) annual budgets include a significant amount of brokerage funding, and many Commonwealth Department of Social Services grants allow for a portion of funding to be used flexibly on innovation with agreement from the department.

Recommendation 4a: Design funding models that focus on upfront payments adjusted for local context and that include a portion of flexible funding.

Enabling providers to invest in long-term system improvement requires stability within and across contract cycles. Short contracts reduce motivation for such investment and create additional administrative costs for the department and providers because of more frequent recommissioning. Last minute recommissioning processes that do not clearly communicate contracting decisions with enough notice have a similar effect, as providers are uncertain whether they will continue offering services in the next contract cycle. When combined with the more relational commissioning discussed in recommendation 2, stability fosters an environment of collaboration where providers see each other as learning partners rather than competitors.

The current [Workforce Australia Deed of Standing Offer](#) is in place between 2022 and 2028. A similar six-year contract length should be used for the next iteration of the system. In addition, DEWR should communicate the decision around the new set of contracts as early as feasible and at least six months in advance. The department should aim to avoid last minute contract

extensions by ensuring future recommissioning processes occur well in advance of contract end dates and are clearly communicated to providers. When paired with a strong learning system (recommendations 5 and 6), longer contracts and more stability across contracting periods give providers, especially lower performing providers, the time and security to invest in service improvements.

Recommendation 4b: Maintain long term contracts, begin recommissioning early and clearly communicate contract decisions early.

Performance indicators for providers should incentivise support that meets the goals of jobseekers and reflects the realities of service provision. Rarely are jobseekers looking to find a random job for 26 or 52 weeks and rarely is a jobseeker unemployed because they have not applied for enough jobs. Yet, the payment structure and performance indicators for providers would suggest otherwise. The proposed Employment Goal Plans start to address this issue at the level of the jobseeker. Performance indicators for providers also need to be designed such that providers are encouraged to support jobseekers in addressing the underlying barriers to unemployment in ways that meet the jobseeker's aspirations. EMPATH's [Economic Mobility Bridge](#) tool is an example of a holistic approach to measuring employment outcomes that focuses on gradual progress. Importantly, these performance indicators still need to be practical for providers to achieve and measure. This will require flexibility, with specific performance indicators refined through ongoing discussion with providers at contract meetings, as is the case in South Australia's [Child and Family Support System](#).²⁰

Recommendation 4c: Co-design flexible performance indicators with providers that encourage organisations to gradually address jobseekers' underlying barriers to employment in line with their Employment Goal Plans.

Embed shared, continuous learning into the employment services system

Permanently embed the Lived Experience Panel and Employment Services Reform Advisory Group into the Employment Services learning system

The insights of people with lived experience, the sector and independent research organisations are essential to an effective service system. The department will use a [Lived Experience Panel](#) and [Employment Services Reform Advisory Group](#) to help design the new system. To ensure the system genuinely enables good practice and adapts to the needs of service users, the department should permanently maintain these groups (or a version of them) to continue to leverage their insights once the new system is operational.

There are several successful examples of this approach from which DEWR could draw insights. South Australia's [Lived Experience Network](#) shapes the state's Child and Family Support System by advising government executives at quarterly meetings, providing feedback on practitioner resources, providing feedback on data collection tools, and contributing material for training videos and staff inductions.²¹ South Australia's whole-of-government [Not for Profit Advisory Group](#) enables partnership with the sector through regular meetings and [system reviews](#). Many non-government organisations have lived experience-based governance structures that make strategic decisions and offer feedback, including Accountable Futures Collective's [Impact Board](#) and PLACE Australia's [Community Council](#). DEWR should implement similar mechanisms to ensure service users and the sector can provide ongoing influence on the employment services system for the purpose of continuous improvement.

Recommendation 5a: Permanently maintain the Lived Experience Panel and Employment Service Reform Advisory group and create ongoing feedback mechanisms in the form of quarterly meetings, participation in communities of practice and ongoing consultation.

Ensuring the success of these groups requires placing the appropriate supporting infrastructure. South Australia's [Lived Experience Network](#) works because it has a full-time coordinator to provide logistic and wellbeing support for lived experience advisors, reimbursement for participating in the network, and more flexible support such as a creche and reimbursing transport costs.²² The Lived Experience Leadership and Advocacy Network's [Toolkit to Authentically Embed Lived Experience Governance](#) is a useful resource here, as is Accountable Futures Collective's [Defining Accountability](#) report.

Recommendation 5b: Support the Lived Experience Panel to provide ongoing feedback by employing a dedicated coordinator, compensating panel members for their time and providing additional flexible support as required.

Create an Employment Services learning system that continuously embeds new and existing learnings

The primary means for improving service quality should be through multiple ongoing learning mechanisms. The discussion paper notes the importance of these continuous improvement processes but still emphasises outcomes payments and contract and licence cessation as mechanisms for shaping service quality. The evidence shows that this approach has not ensured service quality in the current system and sometimes creates harmful unintended consequences, like incentivising creaming and parking.^{23,24} The department should instead invest in ongoing learning mechanisms that focus on iteration and quick feedback loops.

CPD recommends that DEWR use relational contracting and communities of practice to

continuously embed learnings into the employment services system. As discussed earlier, relational contracting emphasises trust, shared goals and ongoing communication. This environment makes it easier for the department and provider to continuously share mutual feedback during contract meetings, including lifting provider performance. It might also involve embedding a commitment to shared, continuous learning into contracts with providers.

Communities of practice allow staff to directly share best practice with one another and work through any collective challenges. This might involve different communities of practice for staff at different organisational levels, like executives, managers and frontline support workers. Communities of practice might also be organised around region-type, such as metropolitan providers, remote and regional providers, or providers in growth areas. It might also involve larger events for all practitioners. CPD's case study of [South Australia's Child and Family Support System](#) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence's [evaluation of Tasmania's Regional Jobs Hubs](#) provide guidance on what these mechanisms can look like in practice.

Recommendation 6a: Use relational contracting and communities of practice to continuously embed learnings into the employment services system.

There is ample good practice for people- and place-centred practice within the Commonwealth and other governments. The reformed employment services system must draw on lessons from these existing examples rather than attempting to start from scratch. This is particularly essential for those elements that DEWR is going to trial, such as the Employment Goal Plans, assessment process and place-based intensive services stream. While learning what works at trial sites before a national roll out is wise, these trials should themselves be based on prior best practice to ensure success.

DEWR already has experience with place-based approaches through its [Local Jobs](#)

[program](#), [Broome Employment Services](#) and [Parent Pathways](#). Other governments have successfully implemented similar place-based employment programs, including [Tasmania's Regional Jobs Hubs](#) and [Opportunity Wyndham](#). Several other service systems have ample experience in this space, such as the Department of Social Services' [Communities for Children Facilitating Partner](#) and [Stronger Places, Stronger People](#) programs; the National Indigenous Australians Agency's [Stronger Communities for Children](#) and [Empowered Communities](#) programs; South Australia's [Community Connections](#) program and [Child and Family Safety Networks](#); and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing's [Primary Health Networks](#). Many of these examples have evaluations DEWR could use to inform service design in the reformed employment services system.^{25,26,27} The Commonwealth has also released several resources for working in place that the department could use to inform their service design, including an [Australian Public Service Guide to Working in Place](#), [Australian Public Service Shared Decision-Making Guide](#), and [Australian Public Service Place-based Evaluation Guide](#).

There are several ways DEWR could learn from these existing initiatives. The department could recruit staff who worked on these programs to shape the design and implementation of the reformed employment services system, including through secondments where appropriate. DEWR could also regularly consult those involved in these existing programs as they implement their trials in employment services. Finally, DEWR might invite staff who worked on these programs to participate in the other learning mechanisms discussed in this section, such as the communities of practice.

Recommendation 6b: Draw on existing learnings by recruiting and consulting staff involved in existing people-centred and place-based programs.

Good evaluation requires using the right combination of evaluation methods for the maturity of the program.^{28,29} DEWR should

combine various [developmental](#) and [impact](#) evaluation methods depending on the maturity of each new element of the reformed system. In the early stages of implementation, evaluation should emphasise practical learnings distributed through fast feedback loops focused on adapting to context and unexpected challenges. This might involve short surveys, practitioner interviews and community workshops. As the initiative matures, evaluation should focus on measuring what works for whom and why, while still regularly feeding these findings back into service design and delivery. This might include analysing administrative data, client surveys, linked data assets, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Once the program has become established, evaluation should shift to more definitively demonstrating impact and measuring sustainability and scalability, such as through randomised control trials and social cost benefit analysis. DEWR should seek support from the [Australian Centre for Evaluation](#) as part of this process. As noted earlier, the centre has developed a [place-based evaluation guide](#) that would assist DEWR with generating learnings on the new system.

Recommendation 6c: Use a combination of developmental and impact evaluation methods to understand the effectiveness of the reforms as appropriate for the maturity of each new system element.

Create a system that delivers community-led, integrated and person-centred employment support

Create place-based governance structures and local practitioner networks to enable integrated, community-led service delivery

Delivering integrated employment support in place, particularly as part of the proposed stream 3, means joining up local actors for

shared decision making, learning and action. This includes:

- ⇒ Employment services providers
- ⇒ Other community services providers
- ⇒ Education providers
- ⇒ Community leaders
- ⇒ People with lived experience of long-term unemployment
- ⇒ All three levels of government
- ⇒ Major employers in the region

These place-based structures are particularly important for improving employer engagement and integration with the skills and training system.

There are two components to this. The first is a governance structure that enables shared, local decision-making, planning, learning, coordination and service integration. DEWR already has a version of this in the [Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces](#), which focus on local planning and are made up of ten volunteer members and a DEWR-employed job coordinator. These taskforces should be enhanced as part of the proposed reforms to incorporate best practice for place-based governance, especially to enable the effective delivery of stream 3.

There are several models for what an enhanced place-based governance body might look like. Our Blueprint for Regional and Community Job Deals outlines a regional jobs taskforce supported by research, stakeholder engagement and administration staff to set a regional vision, build tighter relationships between the local ecosystem, communicate systemic issues back to the department, attract funding to the region, and provide data and research support.³⁰ The National Youth Employment Body's [Community Investment Committees](#) are action-focused groups that work to understand systemic employment barriers, facilitate collaboration to address those barriers, use and build evidence about what works, and co-design innovative initiatives to improve local outcomes. The Hume Jobs and Skills Taskforce is a long-standing example of how place-based governance can improve employment outcomes. Established in 2012,

the taskforce brings together representatives from all tiers of government, business and industry, community services, and secondary and higher education providers. The taskforce has served a range of functions across its time, including system mapping, obtaining additional funding, engaging local employers and shaping Hume City Council's local employment programs. The Pingelly Somerset Alliance's [Staying in Place](#) program is a strong example of achieving employment outcomes by following community needs. While the primary goal of the initiative is to provide aged care support in the community, the fact that it uses local workers has enhanced the region's local care economy.

There are several resources DEWR could use throughout the process of enhancing the Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces. BSL³¹ and Hume City Council³² have produced practice guides that outline their governance bodies. PLACE Australia's guide to shared decision-making outlines various principles, steps and case studies relevant to place-based governance.³³ ANZSOG's Co-Governance Guide outlines how to set up and implement a governance body alongside the community and the conditions that enable successful co-governance.³⁴

Characteristics of place-based governance that are common to these examples and resources are:

- ⇒ Strong trust and transparency
- ⇒ Genuine power-sharing, especially with the community
- ⇒ The translation of shared decisions into concrete actions
- ⇒ Shared, ongoing learning loops
- ⇒ Deep collaboration with local employers and across services systems

The lessons from these examples about employer engagement are particularly useful. These partnerships allowed the various employment programs in each region to work with employers in a cohesive and coordinated way, avoiding over-engagement. Bringing employers into the governance structure

meant partners could build a deeper understanding of employer needs over time, resulting in services that are genuinely tailored to local labour market conditions. Finally, including employers in these partnerships enabled a gradual mindset shift within the employers themselves that improved recruitment practices and support for jobseekers once they enter employment.³⁵

The department should use these case studies and resources to enhance its Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces to better embody these characteristics.

Recommendation 7a: Enhance the Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces to be more community-led and better focus on action, learning, employer engagement and service integration.

The enhanced Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces need to operate over appropriate geographical boundaries. Currently, the taskforces are based on DEWR's employment regions. However, these regions do not necessarily align with local labour markets, how the community organises itself or local government areas. The 2023 inquiry found that there are too few employment regions, that they are too large and that they are largely artificial administrative boundaries designed for ease of procurement rather than community outcomes.³⁶ Whether by adjusting the number and size of employment regions or decoupling taskforce boundaries from employment regions, place-based governance structures must align with local needs and self-perceptions.

Recommendation 7b: Broadly align the boundaries of the enhanced Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces with local labour markets, how communities organise themselves and local government areas.

Place-based governance structures lead collaborative and community-led services. Interdisciplinary, local practitioner networks ensure that collaboration extends to delivery personnel. These networks can take various forms, but should focus on building shared

understanding, trusting relationships and coordinated service delivery. One model is South Australia's [Child and Family Safety Networks](#), which regularly bring together multiple agencies in a region to share information and coordinate the most ideal referral pathway for families in need of support for child safety concerns. Imagined Futures [Where is the Door?](#) initiative provides a community of practice for community services workers in the southern suburbs of Perth to understand where to refer clients needing various kinds of support in the region. WOMEDA has proposed several methods for building better connected local skill ecosystems in place, such as having education providers, employment services providers and employers collaborate on workshops, co-design curricula and hire dedicated liaison staff within participating organisations.³⁷

Recommendation 7c: Create local practitioner networks focused on building shared understanding, trusting relationships and coordinated service delivery.

The local governance structures and practitioner networks should connect with each other to build shared understanding and exchange information across all local actors. For example, Wyndham City Council's [Opportunity Wyndham](#) initiative hosts both a strategic and operational partnership group. The council shares information between the two groups to ensure decision-making is informed by practice insights and that practitioners understand the local vision to which they are working towards.

Recommendation 7d: Build connections between enhanced Local Jobs and Skills Taskforces and local practitioner networks for the purpose of shared understanding and information exchange.

Enable person-centred and jobseeker-led employment support across a jobseeker's employment journey

Facilitating meaningful and productive employment means providing support that meets the goals of jobseekers throughout

the training, job search and employment stages of their journey. Exactly what this looks like will vary for each person in each place, but will require services that place a continuous, trusting relationship between the job seeker and support practitioner at the core of their service model. This is particularly true for the proposed stream 3, but also streams 1 and 2.

There are many examples of programs in the employment space and beyond demonstrating the benefits of a person-centred approach. Smith and colleagues' Liberated Method involves case workers providing flexible support, regardless of what that support looks like, based on the goals of the service user and a simple set of rules and principles.³⁸ They found the approach provides substantial value for money as service users move away from brief engagement with many disconnected services towards deep engagement with a small number of tailored interventions. There are also various link worker programs in different disciplines that demonstrate the efficacy of relational support and provide models for a similar approach in a reformed employment services system. Examples include [Karitane's Village Connect](#) or [the Hive's Early Learning Linker](#).

Online service delivery can be a key component of person-centred support. Future Women's [Jobs Academy](#) supports women with diverse and intersecting barriers to work into meaningful employment through phone calls, online courses, interactive group activities and more to meet the women where they are at. This approach to service delivery has resulted in 71% of program participants retaining their jobs three years after program completion, demonstrating the potential for person-centred digital support.³⁹ [Global Sisters](#) combines in-person and online coaching, workshops and peer networks to support women into self-employment. Their programs have helped women increase their business revenue, improve their confidence, and reduce or eliminate their need for welfare payments.⁴⁰ This example also points to the importance of self-employment as a key

career pathway for jobseekers supported by employment services. Online employment support, especially when integrated with place-based service delivery, can enhance flexibility and increase access for certain cohorts.

Recommendation 8a: Design service models that integrate digital service delivery with in-person, place-based support, including as part of stream 3.

The proposed Employment Goal Plans represent one way to operationalise person-centred and jobseeker-led support. For it to do so, the plan must be genuinely co-designed between the practitioner and jobseeker, and it must offer flexibility in how jobseekers meet their mutual obligations. In line with the Liberated Method, these activities should not always be assumed to be a formal service. Family coaches in Anglicare WA and Ruah's Sunshine Project used vision boards and group visioning sessions to discover the goals of each family, before working with the family to turn these goals into a concrete plan.⁴¹

Implementing the Employment Goal Plans this way will require providing appropriate authority, guidance and training to case workers. System 2's pilot study in two sites found that person-centred employment support could be effectively embedded in existing Workforce Australia providers through staff training, a toolkit and changes to the physical spaces in which support is offered. Jobseekers at these sites had their psychological needs better met compared to control sites.⁴²

Recommendation 8b: Provide case workers with appropriate authority, guidance and training to co-design Employment Goal Plans in ways that flexibly meet the goals of the jobseeker.

Core to this person-centred support is an ongoing assessment and triage system based on human relationships and jobseeker agency. The department should absolutely develop new tools, as outlined in the

discussion paper, and DEWR could draw on existing resources like EMPATH's [Economic Mobility Bridge](#) in designing these tools. However, an individual's barriers to unemployment and the means to address them are inherently diverse and complex. No tool will capture all of that complexity, and using reductive tools in this context can actively create psychological harm and stigma.⁴³ As a result, assessment and reassessment decisions should be made by an experienced practitioner across many meetings using their professional experience and ongoing relationship with the jobseeker, with assessment tools providing assistance but not being the primary means of making the decision.

Given the risk of conflicts of interest, this assessment and triaging function should continue to sit outside of employment services providers and with a government entity or other neutral third party.⁴⁴ An ideal location for the assessment practitioner is the regional hubs described in recommendation 4 of the 2023 Workforce Australia inquiry.⁴⁵ However, the assessment practitioner should be in close contact with the case worker providing employment support to ensure accurate, ongoing assessment of that jobseeker's needs. Assessment and triaging decisions should also consider the goals and preferences of the jobseeker. Maintaining continuous relationships between the practitioner making assessments, case worker providing employment support and the jobseeker will be important for ensuring accurate, ongoing assessment and triaging.

Recommendation 8c: Ensure assessment and triaging decisions are made by an experienced, neutral practitioner based on their professional experience, relationships with the jobseeker and service provider, and jobseeker preferences.

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