



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Submission to Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

The Department of Social Services

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Introduction

The Department of Social Services' mission is to improve the wellbeing of individuals and families in Australia. The Department was active in immediate and ongoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) for areas including social security, families and communities, and people with disability.

Financial support for individuals

In 2020 and 2021, a number of temporary payments were introduced to provide additional financial assistance as part of the economic response. These included the Coronavirus Supplement (initially \$550 a fortnight, later adjusted to \$250 and \$150 a fortnight) which, from 27 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, provided over \$20 billion to over 3 million Australians affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19. Four additional Economic Support Payments of up to \$750 and \$250 were made to eligible recipients. In March 2020, National Health Emergency Crisis Payments (a supplementary payment equivalent to one week's income support) were made to people on income support who were required to isolate, including because they contracted or were caring for someone who contracted COVID-19.

A number of temporary adjustments to eligibility criteria for working age payments were made during the pandemic. These were given effect through temporary changes to primary legislation which allowed the Minister for Families and Social Services to change, through disallowable legislative instruments, the eligibility criteria and payment rates of income support payments. This process enabled rapid changes to income support settings in response to the pandemic. Changes included pausing the assets tests, adjusting a number of waiting periods for income support payments, relaxing the partner income test, and ensuring portability extensions were available for pensioners and other income support recipients overseas and unable to return home.

Mutual obligation requirements for all job seekers nationally, including Disability Employment Services (DES) participants, were suspended at key periods in line with National Cabinet's agreed COVID-19 National Roadmap.

The frequency of reporting on numbers of income support recipients was increased which provided real-time information to Government to inform policy decisions about income support and monitor the effect of the measures.

Changes to evidentiary requirements for claiming income support payments supported individuals to be connected with payment faster but also removed some integrity checks which contributed to a decline in the accuracy of payments made. While understood as a risk at the time COVID-19 response measures were implemented, this highlights the importance of considering a range of priorities and risks when adjusting or designing social security payment settings in an emergency.

The existence of new payments such as the COVID-19 Disaster Payment, Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment and JobKeeper created some confusion around payment eligibility and reporting requirements for claimants and recipients. This demonstrates the need for very clear communication with the community when payments are created or changed rapidly and without normal consultation processes.

A timeline of major changes to Australian income support settings during the COVID-19 pandemic is provided at Attachment A.

Community supports

Between March 2020 and January 2022, the Community Grants Hub delivered 8,950 COVID-19 related grants and grant variations. These grants had a total value of \$1.33 billion. Of this, over \$210 million in grants was administered by the Department.

Flexible grant management arrangements were introduced to address the impact of COVID-19 on delivering activities. These included flexibility in milestone reporting and debt recovery, acceptance of electronic signatures, and extensions to deliver activities.

The rapid implementation of initiatives meant support was provided promptly, but many of the grant agreements were not established with standard reporting requirements which later led to issues with monitoring performance and needed to be rectified through variations to agreements. Additionally, many funded providers have an expectation of continued funding of initiatives that were implemented during this time.

The sector-led National Coordination Group (NCG) was established in April 2020 to monitor the impact of the pandemic and provide advice to Government on where additional Community Support Package (CSP) funding is most needed. During the peak of the pandemic, the NCG met on a fortnightly basis. Currently the NCG meets on a monthly basis and is in place until 30 June 2024.

In March 2020, an additional \$200 million was announced under the CSP to support charities and other community organisations which provide emergency, food relief and financial counselling services to respond to demand as a result of COVID-19. Details are provided in Attachment 2.

In 2020, \$130 million was provided by the Commonwealth to the states and territories under the National Partnership on COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence Responses to invest in services to support women and children who were experiencing or at risk of violence during the pandemic.

The National Redress Scheme temporarily waived the requirement to have statutory declarations signed and witnessed, and also adopted alternative ways to establish identity, including over the phone rather than in person.

Support for industry and businesses

In April 2020, DES providers were offered an advance payment equivalent to six weeks of service fees, providing fiscal security in the immediate term. DES participants were able to have unlimited employment breaks instead of the usual 4 weeks in a 13 week period to ensure DES providers had an incentive to continue supporting participants in an employment placement. The minimum 8 hour requirement for DES participants to access ongoing support was removed, allowing flexibility for participants who could not work their normal hours due to COVID-19.

\$24.5 million was made available to Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) to help organisations transition to new opportunities to create jobs for people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities. More than \$3 million was used to extend the Supported Wage System (SWS) supplementation to 37 ADEs who used the SWS.

The Sector Readiness Fund (SRF) trial, aimed at growing the social enterprise sector, changed design to include SRF Resilience Grants of up to \$30,000 to eligible social enterprises experiencing financial stress due to the pandemic.

COVID-19 response for people with disability

From March 2020, a Departmental team was in place to coordinate the portfolio response for people with disability. This expanded in August 2021, including the appointment of a dedicated Senior Executive Service Band 1 lead. In response to the Omicron wave, a Portfolio COVID-19 Taskforce was officially stood up in January 2022 to support Department of Health-led activity concerning vaccination and other COVID-19 responses for people with disability.

The Department worked closely with Health to support communication with people with disability related to COVID-safe behaviours and vaccination access. This included the secondment of communication staff to the Department to Health, assisting with the production of accessible information, activating all available portfolio communication channels, provision of COVID-19 information and support for vaccination appointments through the Disability and Carer Gateways. The Department led five text message campaigns where information on vaccination was sent directly to recipients of carer payments and the disability support pension (DSP).

At the start of the pandemic, there was no vaccination data for the disability cohort. Further, there is no complete data set that identifies all people with disability in Australia, including within the health system. The absence of specific data meant the vaccination response for people with disability was not able to be identified or measured beyond the designated cohorts of NDIS participants and DSP recipients (approximately 850,000 people aged over 18). To go some way to address this, the Department worked with other government agencies to develop a methodology to use linked, de-identified disability data to identify cohorts and areas of low vaccination, allowing for some targeted action. More complete data sets or better ways to connect data sets across government systems could go some way to ensuring people with disability are more visible in a health emergency.

The pandemic highlighted gaps in knowledge and understanding of roles and responsibilities of the states and Commonwealth in keeping people with disability safe in a health emergency. The Department established open lines of communication on disability across Commonwealth agencies, with the states and territories, and with disability service providers to clarify responsibilities, align responses and share information efficiently.

This aligned response ensured a focus on increasing the vaccination rate of people with disability. NDIS participants living in shared residential accommodation were a priority cohort in 'Phase 1a' of the vaccination rollout. However, in July 2021, only 57.7% of NDIS participants living in shared disability accommodation and residential aged care had received one dose of the vaccination. By October 2021 this had increased to 81.6%, and by March 2022 this had increased to 88.3%, with 86.2% of NDIS participants living in shared disability accommodation having received at least 2 doses.

Support measures were implemented to help keep people with disability, and those who care for them, safe from COVID-19 including support payments for eligible disability workers to assist NDIS workers and participants to be vaccinated, distribution of Rapid Antigen Testing kits to NDIS providers, and the implementation of the Disability Worker COVID-19 Leave Grant.

It was integral that people with disability were included in the development of COVID-19 responses, including communication material. The disability community is comprised of a diverse group with many varied needs and the response needed to be tailored for different parts of the disability

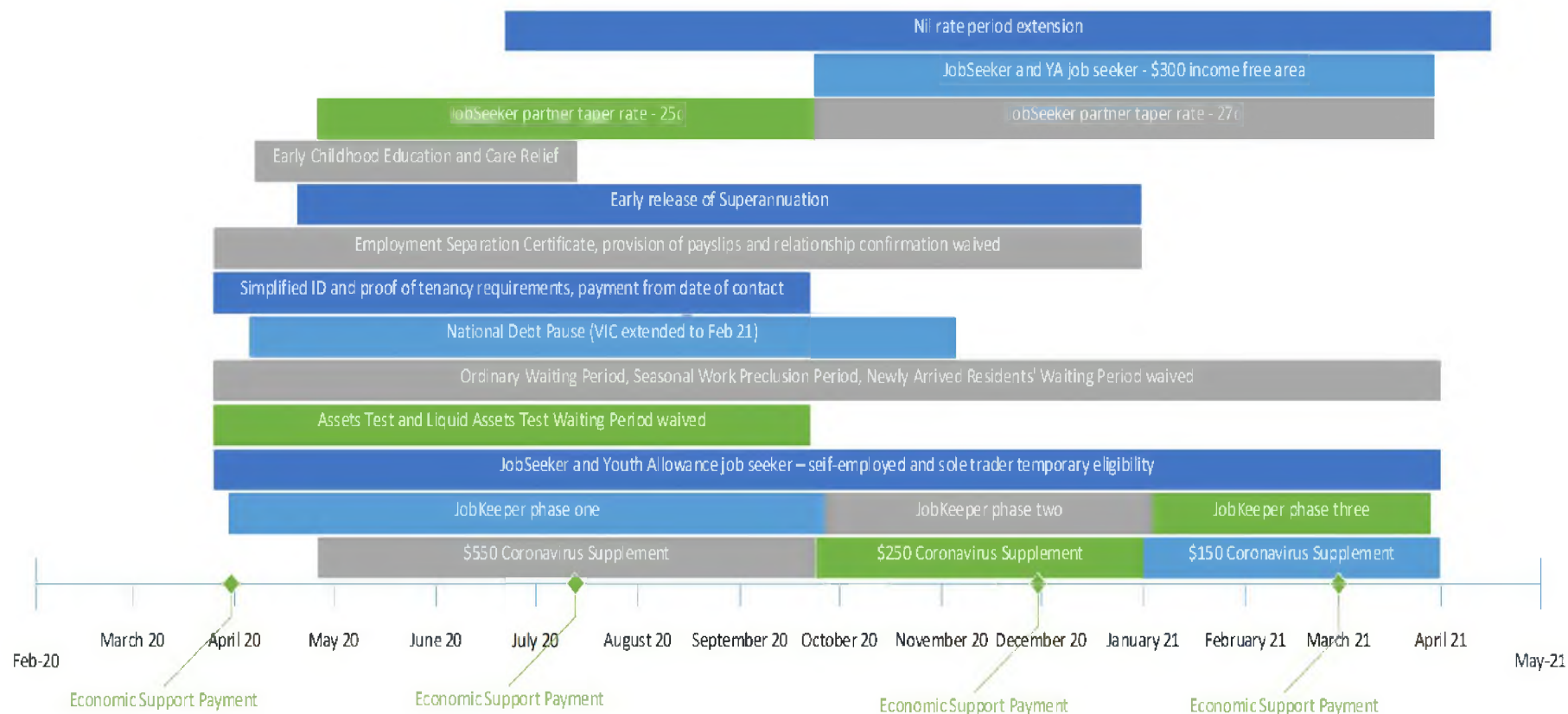
community. The Department supported Health in connecting with the disability sector, and the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Committee, set up by Health, has provided invaluable advice on where the gaps are in the targeting of effort, which groups are missing out on support, what kind of support is required, and the need for accessible communication products.

In 2021, the Disability Royal Commission reviewed the Commonwealth's response to COVID-19 for people with disability, and called out a number of shortfalls particularly in the vaccine rollout. This was especially the case in residential disability settings where the pandemic highlighted longstanding disparities between health services delivered within the Aged Care sector and the disability sector. The Department responded to identified shortfalls within its remit, and continues to work with Health to drive the response to further identified shortfalls.

Conclusion

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, the Department has provided financial support for individuals, support for communities, and support for industry and businesses. The Department has been instrumental in the Commonwealth's COVID-19 response for people with disability and continues to engage with key stakeholders across the Commonwealth, state and territory jurisdictions and the disability sector on vaccination acceleration activities and supports for NDIS participants, their support workers, DSP recipients and the broader disability cohort. The Department has regularly reflected upon lessons learned throughout the pandemic to consider ways in which the response to any future health emergency could be improved.

Attachment 1 - Timeline of major income support changes over the COVID-19 period



This graph shows changes to Australian income support settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, including those for which the Department of Social Services does not hold policy responsibility.

SOURCE: Ferlitsch, P. (2022). *Changes to Australian income support settings during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Crawford School of Public Policy. Australian National University.

Attachment 2 - Community Support Funding Package

An additional \$200 million under the Community Support Package (CSP) was provided to support charities and other community organisations which provide emergency relief, food relief and financial counselling services to respond to demand as a result of coronavirus. This was broken down as below:

- \$97 million for Emergency Relief (ER) nationally from 2019-20 to 2021-22 including
 - \$72.7 million for ER across Australia; and
 - \$24.3 million for the Australian Red Cross (ARC) to deliver ER and counselling support to temporary migrants.
- \$27.1 million for Food Relief providers to support ER providers from 2019-20 to 2021-22;
- \$20 million, across all Financial Counselling organisations, including the National Debt Helpline to increase the capacity of financial counselling sector, from 2019-20 to 2020-21;
- \$20 million to increase access to No Interest Loans from 2019-20 to 2020-21;
- \$10 million in 2020-21 for the Temporary Visa Holders Experiencing Violence Pilot to support women on temporary visas affected by domestic and family violence access social services, legal assistance and migration support. This package included:
 - \$6.5 million for the ARC to deliver targeted support to women on temporary visas experiencing violence who may be unable to access social services and welfare payments due to their visa status; and
 - \$3.5 million for 9 Community and Women's Legal Centres to help women access legal assistance and migration support.
- \$300,000 to deliver secretariat support for the National Coordination Group (2019-20 to 2020-21).

In November 2022, the remaining \$25.6 million from the CSP was re-profiled to be made available for allocation across 2022-23 and 2023-24 in response to major economic crises.