

Building Agency and Trust in Employment Services

A pilot study to unlock person-centred case management

Prepared June 2026



About System 2

We are an applied research not-for-profit, created in 2022 by [BIT](#) (Behavioural Insights Team) and UK innovation charity [Nesta](#).

We bring together behavioural science, systems thinking, and insights from deep collaboration with those with lived experience, to co-design, test, and scale practical solutions.



Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgment of Country

System 2 acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise their ongoing connection to this land, waters, and community, and honour their rich cultural heritage.

Further information and supporting documents

For further information about this project and to download all the materials and supporting documents mentioned in this report, go to: www.system2.org.au/buildingagencytrust

Document designed by Dave Wells at [Ramen Studio](#).

Key terms

Agency: A person's ability to make choices, influence decisions affecting them, and take action towards goals that matter to them.

ASPIRE Framework: The behavioural engagement framework developed and tested within this pilot. It consists of six observable behaviours designed to operationalise person-centred case management.

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR): The Australian Government department responsible for employment, workplace relations, skills, training and workforce participation policies. DEWR oversees Workforce Australia and manages the contracts, policy settings and performance frameworks that govern employment services delivery.

Employment consultant: A professional who is employed by a Workforce Australia Services provider who assists individuals in preparing for, finding and maintaining sustainable employment. These professionals are sometimes referred to as 'employment coaches' or 'case managers', depending on the preferred terminology of the provider.

Employment services provider ('provider'): An organisation contracted by the government to deliver employment services. This includes providing information and support to job seekers, and monitoring and reporting on job seeker compliance.

Intrinsic motivation: The motivation to engage in an activity out of interest and enjoyment without external pressure or punishment.

Job seeker: An individual who participates in an employment services program (e.g. Workforce Australia Services), typically while receiving income support payments from the government (e.g. JobSeeker Payment).

Long-term unemployment: Long-term unemployment (i.e. where duration of job search is 52 weeks or more) is of particular social concern due to the consequences of being out of work for long periods, such as financial hardship and the loss of relevant skills.¹

Mutual obligation requirements: Tasks and activities that must be agreed to and performed by a job seeker to help them find a job to receive certain government income support payments.

Non-vocational barriers: Personal circumstances that may impede a person's ability to obtain and maintain employment or engage in education in a wide range of areas such as health or caring responsibilities.

Person-centred case management: An approach to employment services in which the employment consultant tailors their support to the job seeker's strengths, needs, and preferences. This approach involves building trusting inter-personal relationships that enable employment consultants and job seekers to co-produce a plan and implement flexible, strengths-based supports. The goal of this approach is to foster sustainable, holistic progress to employment. In the wider literature, this approach is also referred to as 'relational practice', 'person-centred support', or 'relational support'.

Psychological needs satisfaction: The degree to which a person experiences three inherent needs being met: autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to the [Self-Determination Theory \(SDT\)](#), satisfying these [psychological needs](#) promotes intrinsic motivation and wellbeing, and when thwarted leads to diminished motivation and wellbeing.²

Psychosocial barriers: Social, emotional, psychological and environmental factors that may affect a person's ability to participate in employment, education or training.

Self-endorsed employment goals: Objectives that a job seeker has chosen for themselves to progress in their journey towards employment. These can be non-vocational and vocational.

Trust: The confidence and belief that another person or organisation will act with honesty, respect and good intentions.

Wellbeing: An individual's condition that allows them to develop and thrive. It can be defined as the combination of feeling good and functioning well.³
Workforce Australia (WFA): The Australian Government's employment services system that supports people to find and keep jobs, change careers and develop skills through training and education, that includes an online service and network of providers to help job seekers prepare for work and find and keep a job.⁴

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, February 15). Labour statistics: Concepts, sources and methods 2021 – Unemployment. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/detailed-methodology-information/concepts-sources-methods/labour-statistics-concepts-sources-and-methods/2021/concepts-and-sources/unemployment

² Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>.

³ Huppert F A. (2009). Psychological well-being: evidence regarding its causes and consequences. *Appl Psychol Health Well Being*, 1(2):137–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01008.x>.

⁴ Australian Government, Workforce Australia. (2024). About employment and support services. www.workforceaustralia.gov.au/individuals/obligations/learn/get-started/employment-support-services

Executive summary

Context

Despite broad agreement that tailored, person-centred case management is a key component of employment outcomes, there remains limited evidence about how it can be consistently delivered within Australia's employment services system.

The Building Agency and Trust (BAT) project sought to address this gap by implementing and testing an evidence-informed approach to person-centred case management within current Workforce Australia (WFA) employment services. The project translated broad principles of person-centred practice into practical, observable behaviours that were applied by employment consultants in real-world settings.

Conducted prior to the recent Australian Government service reform announcements, the pilot aligns strongly with the policy shift toward more tailored, responsive and person-centred services.⁵ As reform now progresses, understanding how person-centred practice can move from policy aspiration to practical service delivery has become increasingly important.

This report provides timely implementation guidance for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), employment service providers and wider stakeholders. Alongside existing work, it contributes to the design of a more consistent, adaptive and effective employment services system by identifying the conditions required to unlock person-centred practice for job seekers.⁵

The challenge

WFA has historically balanced competing priorities. On the one hand, employment services are expected to move job seekers into employment quickly and ensure participation requirements are met. On the other hand, they are expected to provide tailored support that addresses individual needs and promotes sustainable employment outcomes.⁶ This tension has constrained frontline staff's ability to provide flexible, tailored support and increasingly eroded trust among job seekers. Although person-centred support is frequently cited in policy and guidance, evidence on how to operationalise it consistently and effectively within existing services is lacking.

The intervention

The pilot tested a scalable, person-centred case management approach in WFA services. It used evidence-informed, operationalised behaviours (the 'ASPIRE' Framework) to improve the quality of interpersonal engagement between employment consultants and job seekers.

In addition to the Framework, the intervention included training for employment consultants, a practical toolkit for holistic goal setting, and modest environmental changes to reflect the approach. The intervention drew on decades of existing evidence on behaviour change and quality engagement across a range of settings. It was co-developed and refined with subject matter experts, 20 job seekers and 21 employment consultants through a series of collaborative activities. In total, it is estimated that 100 stakeholders were consulted throughout the process, including guidance from an expert Steering Committee.

The evaluation

To evaluate our intervention, we ran a pilot with the following characteristics:

- **Impact and process evaluation:** We assessed how the intervention was implemented in practice, and explored its potential impact on job seekers' psychological needs, wellbeing and employment progress, as well as employment consultants' confidence in delivering person-centred support and job satisfaction.
- **Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial (cluster RCT):** We partnered with two WFA providers, each supplying two well-matched job centres in Greater Sydney. One job centre within each provider was randomly assigned to receive the intervention, while the other was randomly assigned to a control condition.
- **Mixed-methods:** We collected data via a mixture of surveys, interviews and focus groups with job seekers, employment consultants, job centre senior managers, and administrative caseload data.
- **Panel study with rolling recruitment:** We collected data across six months from November 2025 to April 2026. The same cohort of job seekers and employment consultants had the opportunity to complete measures at multiple time points. The final sample sizes and demographics for all research activities and cohorts are provided in the [Appendix](#).

⁵ Ministers of the Employment and Workplace Relations Portfolio. (2026). Minister's Media Centre, Ending one-size-fits-all employment services. <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/rishworth/ending-one-size-fits-all-employment-services>

⁶ Whelan, N., Murphy, M. P., & McGann, M. (2021). The enabling role of employment guidance in contemporary public employment services: A work-first to life-first typology. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 49(2), 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.187937>

Summary of findings

Overall, the findings suggest that the intervention successfully operationalised person-centred practice (Finding 1) and emphasised the importance of relational mechanisms for engagement (Finding 2). There were some promising effects on early indicators of change (Finding 3), including job seekers' psychological needs satisfaction, and employment consultants' confidence in delivering person-centred practice.

However, the uneven implementation of person-centred practice within existing service settings (Finding 4) and the need to complement person-centred case management with practical employment and holistic support (Finding 5) highlight the limits of practice change alone.

1. Person-centred practice can be operationalised through clear, observable behaviours

2. Relationships are a critical mechanism for engagement

3. The intervention improved early leading indicators

4. System settings create a restrictive operating environment that constrains the consistent delivery of person-centred services

5. Strong relationships must be matched with practical employment support and holistic support

6. Creating a more adaptive employment services system will require stronger support for innovation and learning

Overall, the findings point to a disconnect between the policy aspiration of person-centred practice and its consistent implementation within Workforce Australia's operating environment. To align policy intent with frontline practice for upcoming reform implementation, we recommend that the government consider enabling experimentation for effective system settings, defining quality practice, workforce development and system design around consistent trusting relationships. Recommendations include:

Recommendation 1:

Enable experimentation to unlock effective system settings

How? Create a permanent 'test and learn' infrastructure within DEWR to enable iterative, evidence-informed testing of changes, ensuring reforms are validated in practice before system-wide rollout.

Recommendation 2:

Define and invest in workforce development to unlock effective practice

How? Develop national practice standards for person-centred case management and define and invest in workforce capability through an embedded national capability framework to strengthen vocational, relational and holistic support.

Recommendation 3:

Consider continuity of trusted relationships to unlock quality engagement

How? Design service structures, transitions, and performance settings to preserve stable relationships between job seekers and employment consultants, recognising continuity as a core driver of engagement and effective support.



Introduction

The Government recently announced a ‘once-in-a-generation reform’ to the employment services system, Workforce Australia (WFA), reflecting longstanding concerns about its effectiveness and design.^{7 8}

In Australia, the profile of individuals engaged in WFA employment services has fundamentally shifted. The system is no longer primarily serving those in short-term transition. Instead, it is managing a growing cohort at risk of long-term or permanent detachment from the labour market. Currently, as of August 2025, 40% of participants in WFA or adjacent programs have been in the system for more than 2 years, and 21% for more than 5 years.^{9 10 11}

For many of these individuals, pathways to employment are constrained by complex and interlocking barriers, including non-vocational barriers such as physical and mental health issues, caring responsibilities, intergenerational disadvantage and broader structural disadvantage.¹²

Despite this changing landscape, the current employment services system, as highlighted by the *Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*, has struggled to adapt effectively. The system is widely characterised as fragmented, inefficient and focused on compliance rather than human potential.¹³ As Committee Chair Julian Hill MP noted:

“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.”

7 Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (2025, May 27). Employment services reform. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services>

8 Gerards, R., & Welters, R. (2021). Does eliminating benefit eligibility requirements improve unemployed job search and labour market outcomes? *Applied Economics Letters*, 29(10), 955–958. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2021.1927960>

9 As of August 2025, the national total WFA caseload was 692,240 and the total caseload of ‘Time in Employment Services –60+ Months’ was 145,415.

10 As of August 2025, the national total WFA caseload was 692,240 and the total caseload of ‘Time in Employment Services’ over 23 months was 280,455.

11 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (August 2025). Workforce Australia Caseload by Selected Cohorts. www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-data/resources/workforce-australia-caseload-selected-cohorts-31-august-2025

12 Australian Government (2023). Working Future. The Australian Government’s White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities. <https://treasury.gov.au/employment-whitepaper/final-report>

13 Commonwealth of Australia. (2023). Rebuilding employment services: Final report on Workforce Australia employment services. *Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*.

This compliance-heavy environment often undermines the foundation of effective case management: the relationship between the employment consultant and the job seeker. While person-centred support is a contractual requirement within the WFA Services Deed, it remains a concept that is limited in practice due to a lack of practical tools, training and system constraints.¹⁴ Even though there are good intentions from people working in the system, there is substantial ongoing harm to the most vulnerable people that use it.¹⁵ A new model is required that unlocks more person-centred support.

The WFA system is underpinned by the assumption that job seekers lack intrinsic motivation, therefore must be compelled through obligations and sanctions (often referred to as the ‘carrot and stick approach’).¹⁶ This ‘work first’ approach conditions benefit payments on compliance and prioritises rapid job placement over relationship-building and long-term engagement. The approach may generate short-term activity but fails to support job seekers with complex needs, such as those facing psychosocial vulnerabilities, multiple disadvantages, or long-term unemployment.¹⁷ It can erode trust, diminish motivation, and may not lead to sustainable outcomes.

International and Australian evidence demonstrates that when employment services prioritise trust, respect, and holistic support, job seekers experience stronger engagement, greater satisfaction and improved employment outcomes.^{18 19 20 21} Employment is increasingly understood as a broader pathway to economic participation, wellbeing and social inclusion.²²

14 The Deed defines the services that will be delivered to unemployed people in Australia by its contracted employment services providers - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (2025). Workforce Australia services deed of standing offer 2022–2028. Australian Government. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/workforce-australia/resources/workforce-australia-services-deed-standing-offer-2022-2028>

15 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (2025). Workforce Australia services deed of standing offer 2022–2028. Australian Government. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/workforce-australia/resources/workforce-australia-services-deed-standing-offer-2022-2028>

16 Sykes, C. (2022). Thinking beyond sticks in Australian employment services: A self-determination theory perspective [Doctoral dissertation, Curtin University]. Curtin University Institutional Repository.

17 Sykes, C. (2023). How Australia’s employment services system fails jobseekers: Insights from self-determination theory. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 26(1), 84–113.

18 Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (2022). Transition to Work evaluation. Australian Government. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-evaluations/transition-work-evaluation>

19 Cottam, H. (2019). Radical help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state. Virago.

20 Damm, C., Green, A., Pearson, S., Sanderson, E., Wells, P., & Wilson, I. (2020). Talent Match Evaluation: A Final Assessment. <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/26573/1/tm-eval-final-assessment-final-2020.pdf>

21 Ravn, J., & Bredgaard, T. (2020). Working alliance in welfare-to-work programmes: a new approach to activating citizens. *Journal of Social Policy*, 49(2), 297–316.

22 Pearson, P., Włodarczyk, N., & Stewart, D. (2023). The role of relational welfare in building capabilities: A qualitative exploration in Scotland. *Social Policy and Administration*, 57(5), 794–810; Sen, A. (1993). Capability and Well-Being. In M. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds.), *The Quality of Life*. Oxford University Press.

Over the past decade, BIT has built a substantial evidence base showing that scalable, small changes in how employment consultants communicate, build relationships and structure goal setting with job seekers can lead to meaningful improvements in employment outcomes.²³ This work highlights that the quality of frontline interactions is a critical mechanism through which outcomes are achieved. By helping more people move into employment and better utilise their skills and capabilities, person-centred approaches have the potential to generate benefits not only for job seekers, but for employers, communities and the broader Australian economy in line with national priorities of lifting productivity and workforce participation.²⁴

The Building Agency and Trust (BAT) pilot focused on implementing person-centred practice within existing system settings in WFA services. While the original 2024 proposal also sought to test system changes to mutual obligation requirements and provider funding models, these reforms could not be incorporated. This limitation reflects the absence of a structured pathway for experimentation that this report goes on to recommend addressing. These constraints sharpened the central question guiding this pilot:

Can person-centred practice be effectively operationalised within the current system? If not, what are the barriers limiting its implementation and impact?

23 Sanders, M., Briscese, G., Gallagher, R., Gyani, A., Hanes, S., Kirkman, E., & Service, O. (2019). Behavioural insight and the labour market: Evidence from a pilot study and a large stepped-wedge controlled trial. *Journal of Public Policy*, 41(1), 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X19000242>

24 Commonwealth of Australia. (2026). Budget 2026–27: Productivity. <https://budget.gov.au/content/03-productivity.htm>

The intervention

The intervention is composed of four interlocking components:

1. The ASPIRE Framework

The ASPIRE Framework outlines six core behaviours that employment consultants can use to improve engagement with their job seeker participants within appointments. These behaviours can be applied together or separately at different times.

A

Align with what matters to the job seeker

Support is connected to the job seeker's goals, interests, and needs. Holistic needs are acknowledged beyond job searching and steps are relevant and meaningful.

"Be interested in where I've been and where I want to go"
- Job seeker in a workshop

S

Structured guidance and feedback

Clear, mutual expectations and timely feedback are provided. Guidance is practical and confidence building and feedback is linked directly to job seeker's self-identified goals.

"Check in with my goals every 3-6 months so I know I'm on track"
- Job seeker in a workshop

P

Provide real choices

Genuine, simple options that let job seekers decide are offered. Job seekers are encouraged to express their preferences and choices are meaningful enough for ownership.

"Appointments should work with my life, not just be forced on me"
- Job seeker in a workshop

I

Invite participation

Collaborative language is used rather than directive language, and requests are phrased so they are easy for job seekers to understand. Willingness to co-create a job seeker's employment journey is clearly shown.

"Ask me for feedback on how the service is working for me"
- Job seeker in a workshop

R

Relay the 'why'

The purpose behind requests or activities are explained, linked to reasonable explanations that make sense to the job seeker and connect to their values or future goals.

"I want to know the personal benefit of doing this task"
- Job seeker in a workshop

E

Express understanding

Space is provided for job seekers to share openly. Job seekers' feelings and experiences are validated and empathy is shown before moving onto practical next steps.

"Say you understand without being fake"
- Job seeker in a workshop

2. Staff training for employment consultants to learn the 'ASPIRE' Framework in action and how to use the ASPIRE Coaching Toolkit (*see below*).

Training took place in-person with frontline staff (no senior management were included in training), delivered by two facilitators – an external independent consultant with 25 years of experience in employment services and extensive experience in training frontline staff, and a Senior Advisor from BIT with expertise in behaviour change. Facilitators had presentation slides and scripts as guidance. Learning outcomes for employment consultants were to:

- Understand why motivating style is important for person-centred case management
- Understand the difference between high quality and low quality motivation and how it impacts wellbeing, effort and progress to employment
- Use the six ASPIRE engagement behaviours with confidence.
- Support job seekers to identify and work toward self-endorsed goals that align with their personal interests and needs (including vocational and non-vocational)
- Create a personalised action/intention plan for using the ASPIRE behaviours in daily practice including how to overcome barriers
- Reflect on motivating style and consider ways to strengthen engagement using ongoing peer learning.

Initial training took place in November 2025 over a day (7 hours), with a focus on peer learning and working through real-life examples. Activities included an introduction to the evidence and theory underpinning the intervention, interactive learning on the ASPIRE behaviours, small-group discussions, scenario-based exercises, reflection activities, and practical planning for embedding ASPIRE into day-to-day practice. Follow-up training took place in January 2026 and was delivered either in person or virtually depending on provider preference. The two-hour session focused on refreshing ASPIRE concepts, reflecting on implementation experiences, discussing case examples, facilitating peer learning, and identifying commitments for ongoing practice.

3. ASPIRE Coaching Toolkit provided to employment consultants to use to support ongoing delivery of the ASPIRE behaviours. The Toolkit included the ASPIRE Framework with examples. It was developed through a collaborative process involving job seekers and employment consultants to ensure it reflected real-world experiences and needs. The Toolkit was provided in printed format on request, alongside a digital version.

The Toolkit included:

- An overview of the six ASPIRE behaviours and how to apply them in practice
- An explanation of the evidence behind ASPIRE and why the behaviours matter
- A holistic framework to help consultants discuss a wider range of job seeker needs beyond employment, identified by job seekers
- Real-life examples and scenarios developed with job seekers
- A resource to help consultants plan how they will use ASPIRE behaviours in appointments
- A self-reflection tool with practical examples of the behaviours in action
- Activities and discussion prompts to support ongoing learning and coaching between colleagues.

4. Modest environmental adjustments to job centres (with a budget of \$3,800 per job centre) to reinforce ASPIRE behaviours selected by job seekers during collaboration. Changes included:

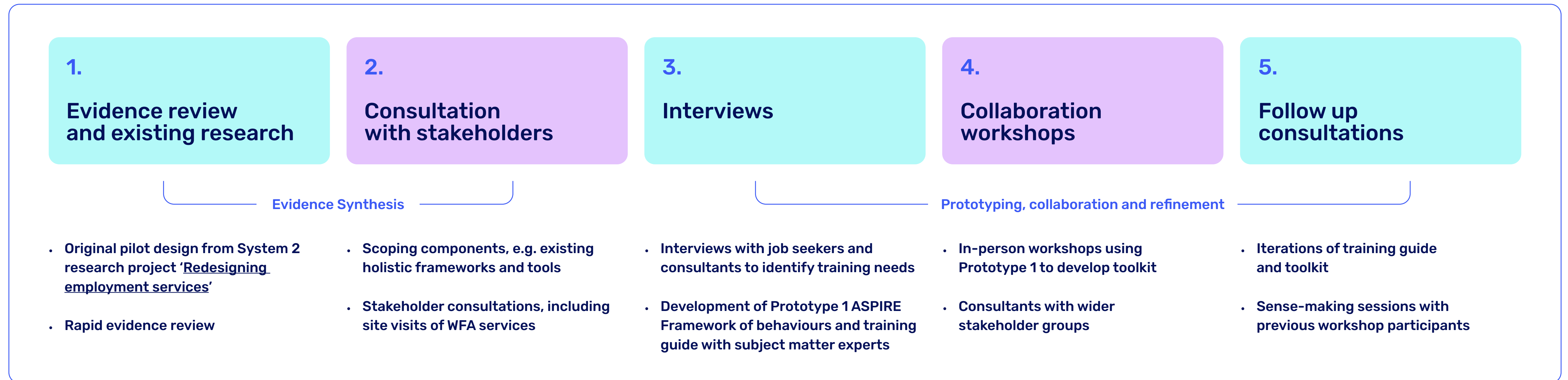
- Privacy screen dividers if the space allowed
- Snacks cart with snacks and fidget toys (ongoing top-ups)
- Colourful wall art and decorations
- Plants
- Comfortable furniture in the waiting area
- ASPIRE posters to outline what behaviours job seekers can expect.

All materials can be downloaded on the System 2 website:
system2.org.au/buildingagencytrust



Development methodology

The intervention was developed over 12 months using an iterative design loop (see Summary diagram below), bridging the gap between academic evidence, job seeker preferences and the practical realities of frontline employment services to be field-ready.



Summary diagram of intervention development

Development methodology

1-2 Evidence review and consultations

This pilot builds on years of evidence-based research and collaboration, including a previous linked research project – *Reimagining Employment Services*, which developed the original trial design. The pilot was based on the findings that services provide inadequate relational support and there is a lack of job seeker involvement in service design.²⁵ The overall idea of the intervention was based on a decade of research by BIT that demonstrated that making small changes to the way employment consultants interacted with job seekers using different behaviours has shown promising effects on reducing unemployment.²⁶ The intervention components are grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which provides a well-evidenced framework for understanding intrinsic motivation. Research shows that when employment consultants' case management style supports these three needs, it can lead to higher quality job-search behaviour, improved wellbeing and greater chances of re-employment.²⁷ In contrast, controlling environments that frustrate these needs leads to disengagement and wellbeing suffers.^{28 29} This theory highlights three basic psychological needs under which intrinsic motivation thrives:³⁰

Autonomy: The sense of control and ownership over one's actions.

Competence: The feeling of mastery and effectiveness in one's environment.

Relatedness: The feeling of being understood and connected to others.^{31 32}

Drawing on international research and collaboration with subject matter experts, evidence-based instructional behaviours from education settings were adapted into the 'ASPIRE' Framework.³³ These clearly defined behaviours are designed to unlock 'high-quality' motivation in job seekers by building

25 System 2, & Behavioural Insights Team. (2023). Reimagining the employment services system of Australia: Explore research report. <https://system2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Copy-of-System-2-Reimagining-the-Employment-Services-System-Explore-research-report-min.pdf>

26 Sanders, M., Briscese, G., Gallagher, R., Gyani, A., Hanes, S., Kirkman, E., & Service, O. (2019). Behavioural insight and the labour market: Evidence from a pilot study and a large stepped-wedge controlled trial. *Journal of Public Policy*, 41(1), 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X19000242>

27 Koen, J., van Vianen, A., van Hooff, E. A. J., & Klehe, U.-C. (2016). How experienced autonomy can improve job seekers' motivation, job search, and chance of reemployment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 95–96, 31–44.

28 Sykes C. How Australia's employment services system fails jobseekers: Insights from self-determination theory. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*. 2023;26(1):84–113.

29 Sykes C. Thinking beyond 'sticks' in Australian employment services: A self-determination theory perspective [Doctoral dissertation]; Curtin University; 2022.

30 Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>

31 Trépanier, S.-G., Fernet, C., & Austin, S. (2013). Workplace bullying and psychological health at work: The mediating role of satisfaction of needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 18(3), 264–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030914>

32 Baard, P. P., Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2004). Intrinsic need satisfaction: A motivational basis of performance and well-being in two work settings. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34(10), 2045–2068. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02690.x>

33 Reeve, J., & Jang, H. (2006). What teachers say and do to support students' autonomy during a learning activity. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(1), 209–218. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.98.1.209>

agency and trust. The underlying behavioural mechanisms drawn on have strong evidence in other settings, but were adapted to employment services, which is less evidenced. The ASPIRE Coaching Toolkit was developed as a support for providers to deliver behaviours and holistic support with operationalised examples, also utilising intention and action plans and peer learning.^{34 35 36 37} The environmental adjustments were established to reinforce the idea of agency and trust for job seekers, informed by evidence that modifying pre-service environments can reduce client stress and anxiety.³⁸ The ASPIRE Framework and holistic tool used within this pilot are similar to many other well-established frameworks, including the Brotherhood of St Laurence's *Better Futures Advantaged Thinking Framework* and Outcomes Star's *The Work Star*.^{39 40} The Theory of Change can be found in the [Appendix](#) for further details.

Alongside the development of the intervention based on a review of existing evidence, the research team conducted multiple site visits to WFA sites to observe how the behaviours could be implemented effectively. This also included informal discussions with frontline staff on their perceptions of person-centred practice and different tools they use in their practice.

The intervention was built with and refined through an iterative process involving job seekers, employment consultants, managers, subject matter experts, advocacy organisations, industry bodies, social enterprises, government representatives and researchers to ensure the content and implementation was applicable and built on a wealth of existing knowledge.⁴¹ It is estimated that around 100 stakeholders were consulted throughout the development.

34 Thistlethwaite, J. E., Davies, D., Ekeocha, S., Kidd, J. M., MacDougall, C., Matthews, P., Purkis, J., & Clay, D. (2012). The effectiveness of case-based learning in health professional education. A BEME systematic review: BEME Guide No. 23. *Medical Teacher*, 34(6), e421–e444. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.680939>

35 Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P. (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 69–119. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38002-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1)

36 Kwasnicka, D., Presseau, J., White, M., & Sniehotta, F. F. (2013). Does planning how to cope with anticipated barriers facilitate health-related behaviour change? A systematic review. *Health Psychology Review*, 7(2), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2013.766832>

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39 Howie, J. with Carr, L. & Cull, E. (2024). Better Futures Advantaged Thinking Practice Framework: Revised 2024. Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.

40 Outcomes Star, Work Star. <https://outcomesstar.org/work-star/>

41 The approach to collaborating with job seekers was intentionally designed around the power dynamics inherent within employment services. As a result, participation pathways prioritised voluntary engagement, confidentiality, accessibility and independence from providers. This approach aimed to reduce perceived coercion and support more open and honest participation from job seekers. All job seekers who participated in consultations and workshops were provided with vouchers to compensate them for their time.

3 Interviews

We conducted consultations with six job seekers (WFA participants) and eight WFA employment consultants from different providers across Australia to understand experiences of employment services, perceptions of person-centred practice, and the factors that support agency, trust and motivation. These consultations informed the development of the ASPIRE behaviours and highlighted practical considerations for implementation within frontline services.

4 Workshop and focus groups

We conducted an in-person workshop in Western Sydney with seven job seekers. The workshop was used to: refine the ASPIRE behaviours, develop the holistic framework as part of the Toolkit, including writing the conversation guidance, write real life examples for the training materials, and identify and prioritise the site environmental changes. We also conducted focus groups with employment consultants (n=12) and managers across Sydney to test the accessibility of the ASPIRE behaviours, the training format and activities, and the requirements for using the Toolkit and implementing environmental changes.

5 Follow-up consultations and refinement

Following the workshops, further consultation and feasibility testing of the intervention components was undertaken with a job seeker from the workshop, employment consultants and subject matter experts. Following the pilot, we conducted a sense-making workshop in Western Sydney with seven job seekers. This workshop aimed to reflect on findings, translate into accessible language and identify opportunities to improve future engagement and research participation.

Evaluation approach

To test our intervention, we ran an exploratory pilot with the following characteristics:

Impact and process evaluation: Nine employment consultants were in our intervention cohort. We assessed intervention implementation (process evaluation) and explored the intervention's potential to strengthen person-centred case management (preliminary impact evaluation). Our evaluation is focused on the implementation (process) to understand how the approach can be rolled out in real life. Our impact evaluation explores descriptive trends to identify signals of potential and check for any backfire risks.

Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial (cluster RCT): We partnered with two service providers who each supplied two job centres. One job centre within each provider was randomly assigned to treatment, where they received our intervention, while the other was randomly assigned to control, where they continued with business-as-usual.

Mixed-methods: We collected data via a mixture of job seeker and employment consultant surveys (for subjective impact outcomes), interviews with job seekers, employment consultants, and job centre managers (for process outcomes), administrative caseload data (for objective impact outcomes), and field observations of appointments between job seekers and employment consultants (for process outcomes). Surveys were administered at three time points (baseline, midline, endline) and administrative data was reported at weekly intervals for the trial duration.

Panel study with rolling recruitment: We collected both qualitative and quantitative data across 22 weeks from mid-November 2025 to mid-April 2026. The same cohort of job seekers and employment consultants had the opportunity to complete measures at multiple time points. Some job seekers joined or left the cohort during the trial as they entered or exited the job centre caseload. In the treatment group, 12 job seekers and 8 employment consultants completed at least one survey and 3 job seekers and 1 employment consultant completed all three surveys. In the control group, 34 job seekers and 7 employment consultants completed at least one survey and

18 job seekers and 3 employment consultants completed all three surveys. Approximately 2,200 job seekers (split roughly 50/50 across the treatment and control group) were represented in our administrative caseload data analysis. We conducted interviews/focus groups with 3 senior managers, 8 job seekers (5 from the treatment group), and 8 employment consultants (all from the treatment group). The final sample sizes and demographics for all research activities and cohorts are provided in the [Appendix](#).

The Bellberry Human Research Ethics committee (HREC) reviewed and approved our pilot in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2025).

Research questions (RQs)

Our process evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do employment consultants find our intervention helpful, and which specific components are seen as most and least helpful?
2. To what extent do employment consultants deliver ASPIRE behaviours consistently across job seekers and time?
3. To what extent do job seekers, employment consultants, and job centre managers perceive ASPIRE to be an appropriate operationalisation of person-centred support? Which ASPIRE behaviours do job seekers and employment consultants perceive as most impactful on job seeker outcomes?
4. What do employment consultants and job centre managers perceive as the barriers and enablers to effective delivery of ASPIRE behaviours?
5. What do job seekers, employment consultants, and job centre managers perceive as the barriers and enablers to delivering innovation and research within employment services?

Our preliminary impact evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

6. Does the intervention show positive signals of improved **job seeker**...
 - a. ...psychological needs satisfaction?
 - b. ...progress towards self-endorsed goals?
 - c. ...wellbeing?
7. Does the intervention show positive signals of improved **employment consultants'** ...
 - a. ...understanding of person-centred case-management?
 - b. ...confidence to deliver ASPIRE behaviours?
 - c. ...job satisfaction?

Evaluation approach

Design

We ran a small cluster RCT with two service providers (Provider A and Provider B) who each supplied two job centres. One job centre within each provider was randomly assigned to treatment, while the other was randomly assigned to control.

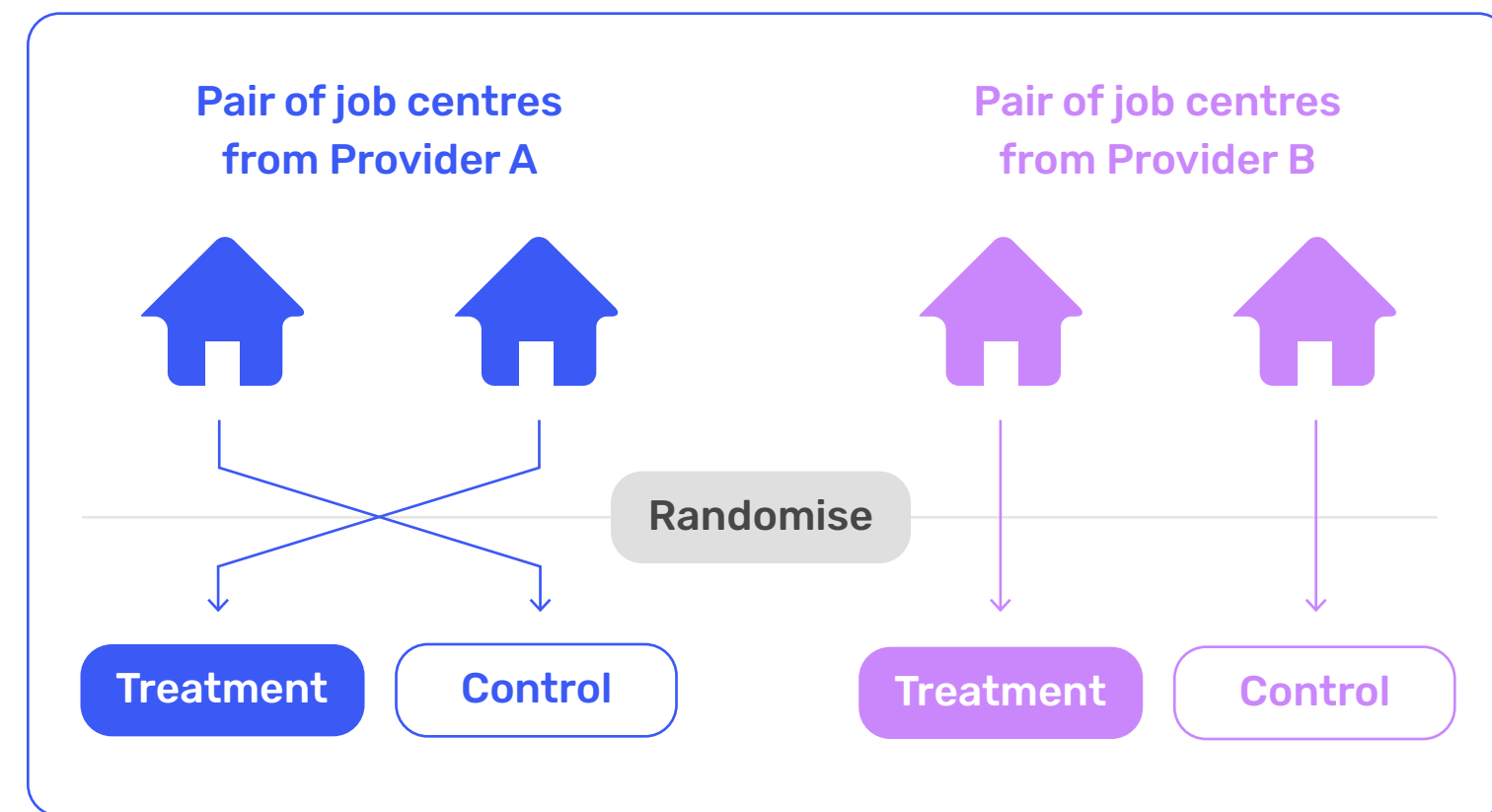


Figure: Study design

Job centres in the treatment group received our intervention. Specifically, the nine employment consultants at these centres who work with job seekers in Workforce Australia Services received our training and toolkit in late November 2025, followed by refresher training in late January 2026. We also made environmental adjustments to the job centres themselves in the same week we delivered the initial training session.

Job centres in the control group did not receive our intervention. The 10 employment consultants at these centres who work with job seekers in Workforce Australia Services continued with business-as-usual and completed the same survey measures as the treatment group, providing a comparison point for the preliminary impact evaluation.

Sample

For partner providers, we ran an expression of interest process via an online public form shared through relevant stakeholder contacts and System 2's social media across one month, to advertise the opportunity for providers to participate in the pilot.⁴² Providers were asked to nominate a pair that was well-matched in terms of caseload size, number of full-time equivalent employment consultants, and job seeker outcomes. Two providers (Provider A and Provider B) were selected in August 2025.

There was a tiered process for recruiting job seekers and employment consultant participants for observations, surveys and interviews: starting with employment consultants within the matched sites and finally job seekers on the current caseload within the selected sites. All employment consultants aged 18 and over working with Workforce Australia Services job seekers across the four participating job centres were eligible to participate in surveys, observations and interviews. All job seekers aged 18 and over enrolled in Workforce Australia Services across the four participating job centres were eligible to participate in the pilot. They were informed about the pilot and opportunity to take part in research activities through emails sent from the provider. The final sample sizes and demographics for all research activities and cohorts are provided in the [Appendix](#).



⁴² To be eligible to participate, providers had to nominate a minimum of two of their Workforce Australia job centres within Sydney, with a preference for Greater Western Sydney, knowing that treatment allocation within the pair of nominated sites would be determined randomly.

Evaluation approach

Measures and analysis

We used four sources of evidence to address our above research questions: interviews and focus groups, surveys, administrative caseload data, and field observations. We analysed each source on its own, then looked across all four to identify the patterns. Full details can be found in the [Appendix](#).

1. **Interviews / focus groups** were used to understand how the intervention was delivered and experienced (process evaluation RQs 1-5). We ran semi-structured sessions with job seekers, employment consultants, and senior managers. We analysed interview/focus group data through thematic analysis⁴³ using the framework method.⁴⁴ The interview guides can be found in the [Appendix](#).
2. **Surveys** examined the intervention's effects on job seekers (impact RQ 6) and employment consultants (impact RQ 7). We surveyed both groups before the intervention and twice afterwards.
 - To estimate the effect of the intervention, we compared scores in treatment centres to scores in control centres. The comparison adjusted for each person's pre-intervention score and their personal characteristics.
 - With only four job centres taking part, the pilot was too small to reliably detect an effect of the intervention even if one was there (see [Appendix](#) on study limitations). As expected, no outcome was statistically significant. We therefore treat the results as early signs of the intervention's effects rather than conclusions about whether it works.
 - The modelling approach, results, and the checks we ran can be found in the [Appendix](#) with the survey questions.

3. **Administrative caseload data** provided objective measures of how centres were performing week to week, as a supplementary check on the impact research questions. Providers supplied weekly data on appointment attendance, placements into work, and the proportion of people who left services because they had found a job. We did not expect these numbers to shift much during a short pilot.
 - We analysed these in the same general way as the surveys, with a simpler model that suited the smaller dataset. No outcome was statistically significant.
 - Charts showing the weekly trends for each metric can be found in the [Appendix](#).
4. **Field observations** are not reported. We were not able to sit in on enough appointments, because of provider availability and privacy concerns, to draw reliable conclusions.



⁴³ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

⁴⁴ Gale, N. K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S., & Redwood, S. (2013). Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 13(1), Article 117. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>

Key findings

We have categorised our findings into the following themes:

1. **Person-centred practice can be operationalised through clear, observable behaviours**
2. **Relationships are a critical mechanism for engagement**
3. **The intervention improved early leading indicators**
4. **System settings create a restrictive operating environment that constrains the consistent delivery of person-centred services**
5. **Strong relationships must be matched with practical employment support and holistic support**
6. **Creating a more adaptive employment services system will require stronger support for innovation and learning**

1. Person-centred practice can be operationalised through clear, observable behaviours

1.1 ASPIRE translated person-centred support into observable practice

The ASPIRE Framework provided employment consultants with a practical way to translate person-centred principles into everyday interactions with job seekers. While many consultants and managers described the underlying principles as familiar, the Framework helped make person-centred practice more tangible by identifying specific behaviours that could be consistently applied in service delivery. In particular, employment consultants reflected that the Framework encouraged them to pay closer attention to how they communicated, explained processes, invited participation, and responded to job seekers' experiences in ways that could strengthen engagement.

Job seekers described the ASPIRE behaviours as consistent with what they wanted from support from their employment consultant and linked to a good relationship (see Finding 2). They particularly valued consultants explaining the rationale behind their requests (**R**elay the 'why'), demonstrating an understanding of their circumstances (**E**xpress understanding/**A**lign with interests) and collaboratively involving them in decision-making rather than using a directive approach (**I**nvoke participation).

1.2 Training was highly valued as an opportunity for reflection, peer learning, and professional development

Training emerged as a key implementation mechanism, with employment consultants and managers identifying the ASPIRE training as one of the most valued components. In particular, they valued the opportunity for reflection, peer learning, and shared problem-solving, which were described as rare within a service system dominated by frontline demands and performance requirements. Managers similarly noted that existing performance frameworks left little time for innovation, reflection, or peer learning. These system limitations are discussed in Finding 4.

Employment consultants particularly valued face-to-face and interactive learning environments, which created opportunities for discussion, real-time questioning, and sharing different approaches to practice. Managers also saw these collaborative environments as important for professional development, organisational change, and more consistent implementation across teams.

The Toolkit provided during training was perceived as useful, especially the behaviour summary page and practical guidance on discussing holistic areas with job seekers. However, it appeared to have limited use in routine practice after training. This may have reflected time constraints, existing administrative demands, and limited reinforcement from senior managers. This could be linked to system limitations discussed in Finding 4.

For future implementation, employment consultants highlighted the importance of adapting implementation more to local contexts. While the principles of person-centred support were viewed as broadly applicable, employment consultants suggested that service environments, examples, resources, and engagement approaches should better reflect the communities they serve. Some recommended incorporating more culturally reflective materials and visuals so job seekers feel more comfortable. This reinforces the idea that person-centred support is shaped not only by interpersonal interactions, but also by the physical and cultural environment in which support is delivered (see Finding 1.3). Managers also emphasised the important role of leadership in shaping service culture and reinforcing expectations around person-centred practice. They described the need in the future for senior managers to be more actively involved in training and roll out to model, support, and embed these behaviours so that it filters into the performance culture.

Key findings

Interviews and focus groups with managers and employment consultants suggested that translating person-centred principles into consistent day-to-day practice requires more than initial training alone. Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing capability development, opportunities for reflection and reinforcement, and organisational support to sustain practice change over time. Employment consultants noted that while the framework provided a useful guide for practice, developing and maintaining person-centred behaviours requires repetition, feedback, and opportunities to learn from peers. Participants suggested that capability development should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-off training activity (see Finding 5).

“Face-to-face is always better than online... the best thing was there was constant interaction.”

Employment consultant during focus group

“I think the contract and performance framework don’t allow time to innovate... there’s no time for reflection or peer learning.”

Provider manager during an interview

1.3 Environmental adjustments were a complementary addition

Environmental adjustments, such as privacy dividers to support more confidential conversations, snacks and refreshments in waiting areas, and visual materials reinforcing key messages from the intervention, were generally perceived as positive. However, they were perceived as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, changes in interpersonal practice. Privacy dividers were described by job seekers and employment consultants as helping some job seekers feel more comfortable discussing personal issues, creating a greater sense of privacy, and encouraging more open conversations during appointments. Job seekers and employment consultants also reflected that the environment became a ‘conversation opener’, helping to reduce tension and make appointments feel less formal or intimidating. Snacks were also frequently mentioned as a valued addition, particularly given the financial hardship experienced by many job seekers, with some noting that they have many “hungry clients who have no money”.

Overall, the findings suggest that person-centred practice can be translated into observable behaviours, but sustaining these behaviours requires ongoing organisational support and capability development, linked to the implementation challenges discussed in Finding 5.

2. Relationships are a critical mechanism for engagement

Across job seekers, employment consultants and managers, a positive working relationship, including trust, empathy, feeling understood and being treated as an individual, emerged as the most consistently valued aspect of support. Strong relationships were described as creating meaningful engagement and increased disclosure of barriers.

Job seekers in both treatment and control groups often described positive experiences in relational terms, emphasising feeling listened to, respected and genuinely cared for - “[my employment consultant] actually cared about me”. It was often linked to a turning point in their willingness to engage. The length of time was noted as an enabler of developing good relationships with employment consultants. Employment consultants similarly reported that trust enabled more honest conversations, ongoing engagement and helped people disclose hidden barriers such as homelessness, substance use, or mental health challenges. Managers reinforced this view, describing respectful and positive relationships as essential to achieving good employment outcomes. These interactions contrasted with experiences of perceived poor relationships with employment consultants, that felt more compliance-focused, and job seekers felt processed through the system rather than understood as individuals (see Finding 4 for further details).

The findings suggest that relationships are a key mechanism through which person-centred practice influences engagement. The behaviours described in Finding 1 were perceived as valuable because they helped build trust and facilitated disclosure of barriers, participation in services, and ongoing engagement. However, while relationships were consistently described as necessary for effective support, later findings suggest they are not sufficient on their own to improve employment outcomes without accompanying vocational assistance and broader support pathways (Finding 5).

“It felt really nice to know that [my employment consultant] actually cared about me more than ticking boxes.”

Job seeker during an interview

“It’s not about you. It’s about the person who sits in the chair across from you.”

Employment consultant during an interview

“I feel like I convinced her that I was capable and then she was from there like, okay... you know what you’re doing and you are going to get a job... I definitely felt like our relationship and her specifically treatment of me improved as she got to know me.”

Job seeker during an interview

“We spent a lot of time talking about what was going on in their life and mine, and we connected... that did help me build the confidence to open up about my homelessness.”

Job seeker during an interview

Key findings

3. The intervention improved early leading indicators

3.1 The intervention showed early signs of improving job seekers' psychological needs satisfaction and employment consultants' confidence in delivering person-centred practice

Consistent with the importance of relationships and person-centred interactions, the intervention demonstrated promising effects on some early indicators associated with engagement and motivation.

Survey responses from job seekers in the treatment group showed increased levels of psychological needs satisfaction over time following the intervention. This pattern signals that the intervention may have supported job seekers' intrinsic motivation as intended.

Employment consultants in the treatment group reported increased confidence in delivering person-centred case management (the ASPIRE behaviours) and job satisfaction. Consistent with this, job seekers in the treatment group also reported increases in person-centred practice (ASPIRE behaviours) from their consultant. The most differences were observed between Surveys 2 and 3 for this measure, implying that changes in practice after the intervention may take time to emerge.

3.2 Wellbeing, employment progress, knowledge of person-centred case management and administrative employment outcomes did not shift during the pilot period

Despite these promising early signals, there was no evidence of improvements in wellbeing, employment progress, or administrative employment outcomes during the pilot period. There were no changes between the treatment and control groups in job seekers' progress toward self-endorsed employment goals or wellbeing, measured through satisfaction with life. Administrative caseload data also showed highly variable appointment attendance, commenced placements in employment, and exits from the service due to employment across the trial period.

There was no evidence that the intervention increased employment consultants' understanding of person-centred case management (ASPIRE-like behaviours). Self-reported comprehension levels were already

high at baseline, and apparent increases in the treatment group following the intervention were similarly observed in the control group. This suggests a ceiling effect, whereby employment consultants already reported a strong understanding of person-centred case management prior to the intervention, leaving limited scope for measurable improvement. This pattern suggests that the intervention's value may lie less in sharpening employment consultants' conceptual understanding of person-centred case management, and more in helping them translate the concept into tangible behaviours with confidence in a complex system.

There was no discernible systematic impact of the intervention on these outcomes. Importantly, there was no evidence that the intervention caused harm or adverse effects for job seekers. These outcomes may require longer time periods to shift, making effects difficult to detect within the short post-intervention follow-up period.

3.3 Early positive signals are consistent with the intervention's theory of change, but downstream effects were not observed

These findings are generally consistent with the intervention's theory of change, which proposes that when job seekers' basic psychological needs are supported, it may strengthen the relational mechanisms described in Findings 1 and 2. The small positive directions observed for needs satisfaction, confidence, and job satisfaction are compatible with this pathway, though they fall short of providing confirmatory evidence. Downstream improvements in wellbeing and progress toward employment were not observed within the pilot period. This may suggest that improvements in person-centred practice alone may not be sufficient to influence downstream outcomes, particularly where implementation remains uneven (see Finding 4) and practical capabilities of employment consultants are limited (see Finding 5). Finally, small sample sizes limited the ability to detect changes in downstream outcomes with certainty, reflecting the broader difficulty of recruiting and retaining job seekers for research in this space (see Finding 6). For detailed model results and accompanying visuals see the [Appendix](#)



Key findings

4. System settings create a restrictive operating environment that constrains the consistent delivery of person-centred services

The translation of early gains into broader downstream outcomes appeared to be shaped by features of the wider employment services system. This creates a restrictive operating environment that constrains the consistent delivery of person-centred services.

4.1 ASPIRE behaviours were perceived to be applied unevenly across caseloads

Although employment consultants generally viewed ASPIRE positively and demonstrated understanding of its underlying principles (see Findings 1 and 2), implementation was uneven across caseloads. Rather than reflecting resistance to person-centred practice, variation appeared to be influenced by differing levels of capacity, time pressure, and perceived system constraints within which employment consultants operate. Some employment consultants described adapting the application of ASPIRE-aligned behaviours depending on caseload pressures and perceived job seeker readiness or engagement. This was echoed in job seeker interviews, which indicated variability in the quality and depth of support received, including within the same service relationships over time. As one job seeker reflected in the sense-making workshop: *“I was highly engaged at the start... at first they helped. In the end they didn’t,”* suggesting that support could fluctuate in response to changing circumstances and system pressures.

This variation in implementation appears to be shaped by broader structural features of the system rather than individual willingness or capability. Employment consultants operate within restrictive system settings characterised by high caseloads, significant administrative burden, compliance requirements and limited time per interaction. These conditions can constrain the extent to which person-centred practices can be applied consistently across all job seekers.

“I implemented ASPIRE with around 50% of my caseload, mainly those who were more engaged or ready for work.”

Employment consultant during an interview

“[My employment consultant] knows that I wanted to be in a role... supporting people... and encouraged me to apply for this kind of role.”

Job seeker in an interview

“...I go to the meeting...they ask me if I found something, if I’m looking for something, stretch for 5-10 minutes. Then they put the next appointment in and that’s it.”

Job seeker during an interview

4.2 Work-first incentives, structural pressures and limited capacity shape the delivery of person-centred case management

Broader structural pressures were continually raised by employment consultants and managers as limiting implementation of the person-centred practice, including high caseloads, administrative burden, compliance requirements, limited appointment time, and vague or changing contracts and guidelines for performance expectations. For example, managers noted particular contractual tensions around delivering ‘real choice’ within a system still heavily influenced by mutual obligations and compliance processes. This is also reflected in job seeker experiences, with both treatment and control groups describing previous experiences where they and/or their employment consultant were merely “ticking boxes” in a short timeframe. Rather than indicating a lack of commitment to person-centred practice, these findings suggest that practice is enacted within a constrained operating environment where competing priorities must be continually balanced.

These system constraints are closely linked to the performance framework that pressures short-term, job-placement outcomes and compliance requirements. In practice, this can shape how time and effort are distributed across caseloads, particularly where consultants are required to manage competing demands within limited capacity. Some participants

described prioritising job seekers who appeared more ready for work or more likely to achieve outcomes, most likely as a response to system pressures and time constraints. This pattern reflects longstanding concerns about “creaming” and “parking” in employment services, where provider incentives and work-first pressures can encourage greater investment in job seekers perceived as easier to place while reducing effort directed towards those facing more complex barriers.⁴⁵

These findings may help explain why the intervention’s effects appeared strongest on early psychological indicators rather than employment outcomes

(Finding 3). Although employment consultants valued ASPIRE and recognised the importance of relationships (Finding 1 and 2), structural pressures limited the extent to which person-centred behaviours could be delivered consistently across caseloads. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of person-centred practice depends not only on individual consultant capability, but also on the broader organisational and policy environment in which those behaviours are delivered and should be tested further to understand what works and for who (Finding 6).

⁴⁵ The terms ‘creaming’ (directing effort toward job seekers perceived as easier to place) and ‘parking’ (reducing effort for those perceived as harder to place) are well established in the Australian employment services literature and have been raised in successive parliamentary inquiries, including the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023) Rebuilding Employment Services. See, for example, O’Halloran, D., Farnsworth, L. & Thomacos, N. (2020) ‘Australian unemployed workers’ experiences of being parked and creamed by employment providers’, Australian Journal of Social Issues.

Key findings

5. Strong relationships must be matched with practical employment support and holistic support

Findings also suggest that an ASPIRE-like model for strengthening relationships alone is unlikely to be sufficient to improve employment outcomes.

5.1 Practical employment capabilities were often lacking

While job seekers and employment consultants consistently valued relational support (see Finding 2), many job seekers noted that practical vocational assistance to help achieve employment goals felt lacking.

Some job seekers described feeling emotionally understood and validated by their consultant, but dissatisfied and frustrated when this did not translate into employment opportunities aligned with their qualifications, skills, or professional experience. Some job seekers perceived a capability gap, with employment consultants lacking the expertise or resources required to provide tailored vocational support e.g. resume writing, interview preparation, appropriate job matching etc. One example was a qualified chef who felt their consultant lacked the skills or experience to identify suitable employment opportunities aligned with their background. More broadly, job seekers wanted support that recognised their existing capabilities, career goals, and local labour market opportunities, rather than generic job search activities. This was particularly evident among highly experienced job seekers, including those with established qualifications or career histories, who felt their consultants defaulted to entry-level recommendations that were not suited to their circumstances.

Managers suggested the challenges of not getting employment outcomes for some job seekers may partly reflect limited opportunities for training and professional development.

Job seekers also described frustration with compliance-related activities that felt transactional or procedural (see Finding 4). A common experience was being encouraged to pursue entry-level roles that overlooked their skills, experience, and career history. In these circumstances, person-centred interactions could lose their perceived value, with appointments becoming viewed as supportive but not necessarily useful in progressing employment goals.

“They validate my feelings... they express understanding, but that’s not enough, they need to find a job for someone like me.”

Job seeker in an interview

“At times, it felt more like I was catching up with a friend than receiving employment support. At every appointment, I asked for more upskilling, but there was rarely any follow-up.”

Job seeker in an interview

5.2 Job seekers require stronger support pathways beyond employment services

More broadly, interviews and focus groups highlighted the extent to which employment barriers often extend beyond employment services.

Job seekers described significant needs, including homelessness, mental health challenges, language barriers, and other complex personal circumstances. Whilst person-centred practice may encourage disclosure of issues (see Finding 2), employment consultants are not trained to act as counsellors, psychologists, housing workers, or specialist cultural support providers. Some employment consultants described reaching the limits of their own capability when supporting specific cohorts, such as those facing significant language or cultural barriers.

This points to a broader system issue that person-centred support may help surface complex needs, but disconnected or overstretched support services can limit what employment consultants are able to do.

Together these findings suggest that person-centred practice functions as an important foundation for support (Finding 1 and 2), but its effectiveness to translate into wellbeing and employment outcomes (as seen in Finding 3) may also depend on the availability of practical employment assistance and access to broader specialist support services.

Key findings

6. Creating a more adaptive employment services system will require stronger support for innovation and learning

The implementation experience highlights broader implications for employment services reform. While the pilot demonstrated that practice change is possible, it also revealed limitations in the current governance and operating environment that constrain experimentation and adaptation.

6.1 Innovation and research participation are perceived as resource-intensive and risky by providers

Managers described innovation and research participation as requiring significant time, effort and organisational commitment. There was a perception that research activities could compete with existing performance expectations, service delivery demands and short-term operational priorities (see Finding 4). These concerns appeared to make it more difficult to conduct research activities and prioritise innovation longer-term, even where managers were supportive. Research participation heavily relies on good will to participate.

6.2 Governance settings limit the scope of innovation that can be tested outside government

Existing governance arrangements also limited the ability to test changes extending beyond operational delivery. As a result, the intervention was largely confined to influencing employment consultant interactions rather than testing broader system reforms that may shape person-centred practice. Changes to mutual obligation requirements (MORs), Job Plans, provider payment structures, or reporting requirements, typically require higher-level policy or ministerial approval, with no clearly defined pathway for proposing or negotiating such changes.

A more flexible and transparent governance mechanism for innovation would enable the government to better leverage collaborative partnerships with research institutions, providers, and philanthropic organisations that have both the capability and appetite to test more ambitious service reforms.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ For example, regulatory sandboxes and test-and-learn programs provide structured mechanisms for organisations to trial innovative approaches under agreed conditions and governance arrangements. These models allow temporary exemptions or modifications to existing rules to generate evidence before broader policy decisions are made.

6.3 Effective evaluation of service innovation requires integrating implementation and outcome evidence

The evaluation further demonstrated the importance of combining implementation evidence with outcome data. While quantitative findings provided useful signals, the most important insights emerged from understanding how the intervention was experienced, the conditions that supported implementation, and the barriers that constrained change.⁴⁷ There was also a need to adapt and respond to ongoing changes over time. Overall, the evaluation reinforces the importance of integrated evidence approaches that combine outcome measurement with implementation learning, particularly when testing reforms in complex service systems.

6.4 Trust, independence, and perceived safety are critical to meaningful job seeker participation in research

The pilot highlighted significant challenges in recruiting and retaining job seekers in research. Many job seekers face complex personal circumstances, psychosocial disadvantage, or disengagement from employment services, making them a difficult cohort for researchers to reach.

This was discussed with job seekers in the sense-making workshop and trust emerged as the central factor influencing participation. Job seekers placed high value on research that was clearly independent from both government and service providers, with strong assurances around confidentiality and the separation of research from service delivery or compliance processes. In contrast, communications perceived as provider-led or linked to service obligations were less likely to generate engagement. Previous experiences of consultations that did not lead to visible change also contributed to scepticism and consultation fatigue. These dynamics may result in lower participation rates overall and a sample that may over-represent more engaged or readily accessible participants.

Without trusted mechanisms for participation, there is a risk that innovation efforts fail to capture the experiences of those facing the greatest barriers.

⁴⁷ This pilot used a structured evaluation design involving comparison between participating sites. While this provides a strong foundation for assessing causal influence, the practical requirements of implementation, including provider engagement, staff training, operational alignment, and ongoing data collection, shaped the scale and pace of delivery.

Job seeker recommendations to improve research participation*

- Provide clear incentives for participation.
- Clearly explain the research in simple terms, including who is involved, what it is about, when it will take place, and why it is being conducted.
- Offer strong assurances of confidentiality, including clear separation between research activities and any service delivery, compliance, or reporting processes.
- Make participation as convenient and accessible as possible (e.g. flexible timing, minimal time burden, online options).
- Clearly state who is leading the research and whether it is independent, as trust influences willingness to participate.
- Explain how the information collected will be used.
- Clearly outline the expected outcomes and how the findings will be applied or shared.

* Collected from job seekers at a sense-making workshop in 2026.

Recommendations

This project translated person-centred principles into observable frontline behaviours and tested whether these behaviours improved engagement and experiences in real-world employment services. Our findings highlight an intention-reality gap between the ambition of person-centred employment services and the realities of frontline delivery. While early indicators suggest the BAT intervention may improve job seekers' psychological needs satisfaction and employment consultants' confidence in delivering person-centred practice, current system settings constrain consistent delivery. Our findings indicate that trusted relationships alone are not sufficient, and they must be unlocked through system changes.

The Federal Government's proposed reforms within the [Shaping the Future of Employment Services Discussion Paper](#), presents a significant opportunity to bridge this gap. The proposed shift from a one-size-fits-all model towards three distinct service streams (Online, Targeted and Intensive Services) provides an opportunity to embed clearer person-centred practice, strengthen workforce capability, and create the infrastructure needed to test, refine and scale effective approaches over time.

To ensure these reforms translate policy ambition into consistent frontline practice, we recommend that the government considers the following three interdependent recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Enable experimentation to unlock effective systems by creating a permanent 'test and learn' infrastructure within DEWR

Why we're recommending this

The pilot did not evaluate broader policy settings; however, it highlights the practical challenges of testing system reform within current governance arrangements. Existing contracting, governance, and evaluation frameworks constrain the ability to trial system-level changes in real-world conditions, limiting innovation in areas such as provider incentive and funding models, mutual obligation settings, and service design. In the absence of a structured mechanism for experimentation, there is a risk that reforms may be implemented at scale without sufficient evidence of feasibility, acceptability, or impact.

What we're recommending

DEWR should establish a formal '[Test and Learn](#)' infrastructure that enables iterative, evidence-informed policy within Workforce Australia and allows collaborative learning.

About Test and Learn

[Test and Learn](#) is an iterative evidence-driven approach to developing policy. It is especially suited to developing ambitious policy reforms to tackle 'wicked' problems that require coordination from many actors within dynamic environments. Test-and-learn involves staged cycles - developing prototypes, testing their critical assumptions (e.g., feasibility, scalability, acceptability, impact) in local contexts to validate direction, refining prototypes based on learnings, and gradually scaling up and testing proven solutions in new local contexts as confidence grows.

Traditional policymaking places large bets by deciding on a wholesale policy solution upfront and then possibly evaluating its success. Test and Learn emphasises placing smaller bets by testing earlier and more often. A Test and Learn framework may be particularly valuable in employment services, where service delivery involves multiple interacting actors, policy and labour market conditions can shift rapidly, and poorly designed reforms can impose significant costs on vulnerable populations. This would enable DEWR to continuously improve services while building a robust evidence base to support future investment, scaling and policy decisions.

How this recommendation could be implemented

1. Establish a test and learn governance model
 - Establish a dedicated DEWR Test and Learn unit
 - Create clear approval pathways for experimental policy and service prototypes
 - Enable controlled variation in service design within defined parameters e.g. reduced contractual risk and suspended performance penalties for providers to participate
 - Establish a lived experience advisory group to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of reforms.
2. Align evaluation approaches to the maturity of the innovation
 - Early-stage reforms should prioritise rapid learning cycles that test assumptions, identify implementation challenges, and refine service models in different local contexts
 - As reforms mature, evaluation should increasingly focus on outcomes for job seekers, providers and the broader employment services system
 - Once reforms are well established, more rigorous methods should be used where appropriate to assess causal impact, scalability and value for money.

Recommendations

Applying the Nesta Standards of Evidence to Employment Services Reform

The Test and Learn approach aligns with the [Nesta Standards of Evidence](#), which encourage governments to build confidence progressively through testing, learning and refinement before scaling reforms nationally.

Early-stage reforms (Nesta Levels 1-2): Focus on understanding whether the reform is being implemented as intended, whether its theory of change is credible, and what adaptations may be required. Appropriate methods include theory-based evaluation (e.g. process tracing), implementation evaluations, pre- and post-surveys, cohort studies, and analysis of existing evidence and administrative data. These approaches could be applied to test early iterations of the rollout of the Intensive Services stream, or a new initial assessment and triaging process.

Established reforms (Nesta Levels 3-4): Focus on measuring outcomes and demonstrating impact. Evaluation should assess indicators such as engagement, trust, wellbeing, employment progress, service quality and provider performance. Appropriate methods include comparison-group designs, quasi-experimental approaches, hybrid effectiveness-implementation studies, and independent external evaluations.

Mature reforms (Nesta Level 5): Focus on demonstrating causal impact, cost-effectiveness and scalability. Appropriate methods include randomised controlled trials, cost-benefit analysis, replication studies, fidelity assessments, and evaluations of long-term system outcomes. Strengthen wider system enablers of research and innovation, including:

- Enable secure data-sharing and collaboration between government, providers and researchers through shared data and learning infrastructure
- Support communities of practice for executives, managers and frontline practitioners to support peer learning and the sharing of effective practices
- Build mechanisms for continuous learning and rapid feedback into policy refinement
- Provide dedicated funding and implementation support for innovation sites
- Establish national learning loops to share findings and implementation lessons across providers
- Create structured mechanisms to translate evidence into Deed and policy updates
- Examine and remove barriers for providers to innovate and participate in research
- Build 'rapid learning' cycles into reform implementation timelines.



Recommendations

Recommendation 2: Define and invest in workforce development to unlock effective practice by: i.) establishing national practice standards for person-centred case management and ii.) defining and investing in workforce capability to strengthen vocational, relational and holistic support

Why we're recommending this

Delivering the Government's proposed reforms requires a workforce that is equipped and supported to consistently deliver high-quality person-centred support. Our findings suggest that this is not primarily a challenge of workforce commitment or intent, however the absence of a shared, operational definition of person-centred practice makes it difficult for providers to consistently translate these intentions into day-to-day service delivery.

While person-centred practice is noted throughout employment services policy and provider expectations, it is not currently defined in clear behavioural terms. This creates variation in service quality across providers, making effective practice difficult to train, measure and scale. Our findings demonstrate that person-centred support can be operationalised through clear, observable behaviours, such as those outlined in the ASPIRE Framework.

At the same time, employment consultants are expected to deliver increasingly complex support across vocational and non-vocational domains while balancing compliance administration, employer engagement and the growing complexity of participant needs. Expectations regarding workforce capability remain fragmented and inconsistently defined.

Our pilot suggests that employment consultants could benefit from stronger support to develop both practical vocational capabilities, such as labour market navigation and career planning, and holistic capabilities, such as identifying barriers and connecting job seekers with specialist services. Together, these findings suggest that improving service quality requires both clear practice standards and sustained investment in workforce capability.

The opportunity is not to replace existing strengths within the workforce, but to provide a clearer framework, shared expectations and practical support that enable quality person-centred practice to be delivered more consistently.

What we're recommending

DEWR should establish a National Person-Centred Practice and Capability Framework that combines clear service delivery standards with workforce capability development. The Framework should define the core behaviours, competencies and capabilities expected of employment consultants across all service tiers. This would create greater consistency in service quality while supporting employment consultants to deliver high-quality relational, vocational and holistic support. As one example, the ASPIRE Framework demonstrates how person-centred principles can be translated into practical, observable behaviours that can be trained, supported and measured in practice.

Alongside practice standards, DEWR should invest in workforce development through nationally consistent capability expectations, training pathways and ongoing professional development opportunities to uplift practical skills.

Together, these reforms would operationalise the Government's commitment to improving service quality by establishing clear expectations for practice, strengthening workforce capability, and supporting consistent delivery of person-centred employment services at scale.

How this recommendation could be implemented

- A. Establish national person-centred practice standards
 1. Define ASPIRE-aligned behaviours as explicit service delivery requirements. Provide examples of what service delivery behaviours look like (an example of this can be found in the [ASPIRE Coaching Toolkit](#)).⁴⁸

2. Adapt implementation of behaviours in and between proposed service tiers:
 - Tier 1 (digital/light-touch): embedded in digital journey
 - Tier 2 (targeted support): embedded in employment consultant practice standards as a guide
 - Tier 3 (intensive support): embedded in holistic case management requirements as a foundational guide alongside other capabilities required e.g. trauma informed case management.
 - Implementation of this could be supported by integrating into digital and operational systems, such as adding prompts and guidance into provider systems and user-facing systems (job plans, notes etc).
3. Embed behaviours into quality and assurance mechanisms. This could include behavioural observation tools, structured job seeker feedback measures aligned with the ASPIRE-like domains, and minimum service experience standards incorporated into provider performance and review processes. Behavioural indicators should be used for organisational learning and service improvement, rather than performance management of individual staff or compliance monitoring of job seekers.
4. Co-design implementation of the framework with job seekers, employment consultants and providers across each service tier to ensure it reflects the distinct needs, circumstances and goals of different cohorts. Ensure there is a clear mechanism for feedback from the Employment Services Reform Lived Experience Panel to review standards over time.⁴⁹ This would allow the model to maintain national consistency while recognising that job seekers facing complex and long-term barriers may require different approaches.

⁴⁸ Australian Government (2025). *Workforce Australia Provider Deed Guidelines and Fact Sheets*. www.dewr.gov.au/aii/download/15404/workforce-australia-provider-deed-guidelines-and-fact-sheets.

⁴⁹ Australian Government (2026). *Employment Services Reform, Employment Services Reform Lived Experience Panel*. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-reform/employment-services-reform-lived-experience-panel>.

Recommendations

B. Build workforce capability

1. Co-develop a set of nationally consistent core competencies, aligned to the proposed service tiers and informed by high-quality evidence, across three key capability domains:
 - Relational capability (e.g. ASPIRE Framework or another well-established Framework)
 - Vocational capability (e.g. labour market navigation, career planning)
 - Holistic support capability (e.g. identifying barriers, referral pathways) to ensure early access to specialist services (see system level considerations below).

Example: [A Competency Framework For Guidance Practitioners](#) developed in Ireland, is a standards framework outlining the knowledge, skills, and competencies required of employment practitioners. It identifies areas in Theory and Practice of Vocational, Educational, and Personal/Social Guidance, Labour Market Education and Training, Counselling and Information and Resource Management, Professional Practice and specialised areas.⁵⁰

2. Assess current workforce capability against the competencies in the Capability Framework:
 - Conduct national capability baseline assessment across providers
 - Identify gaps between current workforce capability and expected standards
 - Use findings to inform workforce transition planning.
3. Develop structured training and professional development pathways
 - Commission nationally consistent evidence-informed training aligned to the Capability Framework
 - Embed training (based on ASPIRE or similar operationalised behavioural models) as part of induction and ongoing development
 - Fund accredited micro-credentials for specialist capability areas.

4. Embed standardised referral protocols across the employment services system, supported by consistent assessment, planning and referral tools. These should include clear eligibility criteria, structured conversation guides and defined referral pathways to support timely and appropriate access to specialist services.⁵¹

Any changes introduced within the workforce could be rapidly tested, evaluated and refined through the 'test and learn' infrastructure proposed in Recommendation 1, to see what skills and micro credentials are most helpful for employment consultants and therefore job seekers.



⁵⁰ National Guidance Forum. (2007). *A competency framework for guidance practitioners*. National Guidance Forum. www.iccdpp.org/a-competency-framework-for-guidance-practitioners-national-guidance-forum-ireland-2007.

⁵¹ Campbell, K. A., Myrup, T., Branson, D. B., & Svedin, L. A. (2024). Collaborative practice pilot between child welfare and child health care providers: Lessons in implementation and evaluation of cross-sector interventions. *Child Abuse Negl*, 149:106694. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106694

Recommendations

System considerations for effective practice

DEWR should also address the broader system conditions that support high-quality practice, including:

- Greater focus on workforce retention strategies. Based on work in the education sector on teacher retention, interventions should focus on sustaining staff motivation and wellbeing through coordinated, multi-level strategies. These should include professional development, financial and practical support, peer and social support, workload management and leadership development.^{52 53}
- Stronger integration across service systems. Employment consultants should be equipped to identify and respond appropriately to psychosocial barriers, but not expected to operate as mental health practitioners. This reinforces the need for stronger integration and referral pathways across service systems, ensuring job seekers can access appropriate specialist services early while receiving coordinated support for both employment and broader wellbeing needs.^{54 55} However, referral pathways alone are unlikely to be sufficient.
 - Effective integration also requires investment in the system conditions that enable collaboration, including dedicated time and resources for partnership-building, shared planning and information-sharing across services, strengths-based assessment approaches, service navigation support, and incentives for providers to work together around job seeker needs.⁵⁶

There is evidence from the UK that integrating access to psychological therapies services (IAPT) into employment services has a beneficial impact on employment outcomes.^{57 58} For job seekers facing complex and long-term barriers, DEWR should consider greater role specialisation within intensive service tiers, such as dedicated vocational coaches alongside staff with mental health or social support expertise.⁵⁹

- Embedding capability development into routine practice through structured supervision, peer reflection and mentoring.⁶⁰ There is evidence of the beneficial impacts of clinical supervision in mental health professions.⁶¹
- Minimising additional administrative burden on providers as strengthening person-centred practice will require creating more space for quality frontline engagement. Changes should ensure they are not introducing additional layers of reporting, auditing or compliance that reduce the time available to support job seekers.



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Recommendations

Recommendation 3: Consider the continuity of trusted human relationships in service design to unlock quality engagement

Why we're recommending this

The pilot reinforces that trusted relationships between job seekers and employment consultants are a core mechanism underpinning engagement, disclosure and effective support. Job seekers consistently emphasised the importance of having a trusted point of contact, while employment consultants viewed relationship-building as central to understanding individual needs and providing meaningful assistance. However, the proposed reform model introduces new service streams, assessments and transition points that may unintentionally disrupt trusted relationships if continuity is not explicitly considered during implementation. This risk may increase under the proposed three stream model if participants move between service types or providers multiple times throughout their employment journey.

What we're recommending

The Government should explicitly treat continuity of trusted relationships as a core design principle and performance objective within the future employment services system.

As new service streams, Employment Goal Plans, and assessment processes are introduced, reforms should be designed to minimise unnecessary disruption to trusted relationships and ensure that transitions between services do not undermine engagement, trust, or progress toward employment goals.

How this would be implemented

1. Design service tiers to preserve continuity of relationships.
 - Minimise unnecessary movement of job seekers between employment consultants
 - Design tier transitions to preserve existing relationships where possible
 - Where transitions occur, ensure there are mandated structured handover protocols
2. Embed continuity of support into provider obligations
 - Outline 'continuity of support' as an expectation in any guidelines from Workforce Australia, with details on what this means
 - Embed continuity indicators into performance frameworks
3. Strengthen digital system supports
 - Improve digital systems to ensure all case notes, history and relationship contexts are shareable across tiers
4. Measure and monitor trust and engagement
 - Include trust and engagement indicators as part of service performance reporting.

Job seekers should also be provided clear information and expectations about continuity of service from entry into services, including clearer information on how to request a different consultant or provider.

Ultimately, building agency and trust in employment services is not only about strengthening relationships between job seekers and employment consultants. It also requires trust between government and providers, supported by policy settings and implementation approaches that enable innovation, professional judgement and shared responsibility for achieving better outcomes. Creating the conditions for person-centred practice therefore requires attention to trust and agency at every level of the system utilising these recommendations.



For more information, go to
system2.org.au/buildingagencytrust

