

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Parliamentary Committee Inquiry Hearing
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

Inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout

Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000089

Senator Rachel Siewert asked on 27 February 2019 on proof Hansard page 60.

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Participation in ParentsNext Focus Groups

CHAIR: There was no measure, or no assessment, of the quality of employment that was gained by those that did gain employment through the program or the level of people's parenting—whether people felt that their parenting had been impacted by participation in the program. Can anybody address those issues now?

Ms Shannon : I can certainly talk to some of those issues. I can give you information about the number of people who participated in focus groups and the sample size of surveys. I can also explain why eight out of 10 locations were involved. Whenever you do an evaluation, there are resource constraints and judgements that you have to make about how you can get sufficient coverage of all of the issues. In terms of the site selection, what we were trying to do was identify locations where, cost effectively, we could get sufficient coverage of different participant groups and where we could get robust sample sizes. There were a whole range of factors that went to the selection of the locations and trying to balance the resources that we have with the sorts of insights to try and get a saturation of all of the key issues that we would expect to be raised in those kinds of fieldwork exercises. If you like, I can give you information about the number of people who were involved in those processes.

CHAIR: Could you take that on notice? I think that would be most effective in terms of time.

Ms Shannon : Certainly.

Answer

Employment Measures

The ParentsNext Evaluation assessed the early impact of ParentsNext 2016–2018 as it operated in 10 Local Government Areas. The evaluation, and the updated impact analysis provided in Table 1 on page 10 of the department's submission to the ParentsNext Senate Inquiry, use a number of indicators to assess participants' progress towards their education and employment goals. Measures against these indicators rely on data collected for the purposes of administering the ParentsNext program, as well as available income support and child care-related data collected by the Department of Human Services (DHS). A measure of the quality of employment or the impact of employment on parenting was not available from these data.

The evaluation included a survey of ParentsNext participants (see below). A comparison group of similar parents who did not participate in the program was also included in the survey. When asked about their attitudes to workforce participation, 90 per cent of surveyed ParentsNext participants agreed that having a job was good for the well-being of their family (compared with 82 per cent of comparison parents). Participants were also more likely to agree that working sets a good example to their children (91 per cent of participants, compared with 82 per cent of comparison parents).

Evaluation fieldwork and surveys

The ParentsNext Evaluation presents the findings of qualitative research by specialised researchers from Social Research Centre (SRC) undertaken on behalf of the department in November 2016. This research was conducted in eight of the 10 ParentsNext 2016-2018 locations and included 11 focus groups with 57 ParentsNext participants, 13 in-depth interviews with providers and five interviews with DHS operational staff.

Fieldwork locations were selected to ensure a balanced coverage of metropolitan and regional ParentsNext locations. Participant focus groups were constructed to include the three main priority groups of early school leavers, parents with a youngest child aged 5 and parents with significant labour market disadvantage based on an assessment using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument. In addition, the focus group participants included ParentsNext volunteers, Indigenous parents, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and fathers. Research participants were advised that their responses would be anonymised for reporting purposes, participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Two quantitative surveys were conducted to inform the evaluation.

(i) The departmental evaluation team undertook a census of ParentsNext providers in April and May 2017. This involved staff at all 52 full-time ParentsNext project sites completing an online survey. Provider staff were advised that the survey was for research and evaluation purposes only and that no individual or organisation would be identified in any reporting.

(ii) The SRC managed a survey of parents in July 2017 on behalf of the department. The SRC survey included two groups: a ParentsNext participant group (with 640 completed responses) and a non-participant comparison group (with 400 completed responses). The non-participant comparison group were parents receiving Parenting Payment without participation requirements matched by their characteristics to the three main ParentsNext priority groups. Survey responses were completed online or through computer assisted telephone interviews. All survey participants were advised responses were anonymous and that participation was voluntary.

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Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000180

Senator Rachel Siewert provided in writing:

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Privacy

1. How many participants have signed privacy waivers?
2. How many reports/complaints from participants has the Department received over breaches of privacy?

Answer

The Department of Jobs and Small Business (the department) does not collect the signed ParentsNext Privacy Notification and Consent Form. These forms are kept by the participant's provider.

Between 1 July 2018 and 31 January 2019, the department received:

- two complaints through the National Customer Service Line where ParentsNext participants raised provider servicing issues, including confidentiality and privacy; and
- three alleged breaches of privacy through other sources. Of these three, two are under investigation and one has been finalised as not being a breach of privacy.

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Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000184

Senator Rachel Siewert provided in writing.

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Monitoring of Activities that Providers are Requiring Participants to Undertake

Is the Department monitoring the activities that providers are requiring participants to undertake? If so how? If not why not?

Answer

The department monitors activities through ongoing data analysis. The department does not monitor parents' individual records or activities unless investigating a complaint or as part of assurance activities where data analysis has highlighted an irregularity.

As part of its ongoing analysis, the department examines the recording of activities, including how many Participation Plans have at least one activity recorded. The department has also undertaken preliminary analysis of the types of activities by category that participants are being referred to.

During the first half of 2019 the department will undertake a broad quality assurance process, which will review the appropriateness of activity placements for parents in ParentsNext.

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Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000187

Senator Murray Watt provided in writing.

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Penalties for Providers

Minister O'Dwyer told Fairfax in an article published on the 1st March, "[if] providers are not fulfilling their obligations as per our contract with them, we will build in appropriate penalties for those providers". How does the Department ascertain whether a provider is fulfilling their contract? What "penalties" has the Department put in place for those providers? What does the Department deem an "appropriate penalty" for ParentsNext providers?

Answer

The Department of Jobs and Small Business (the department) undertakes assurance activities to determine if providers are meeting their obligations under the ParentsNext 2018–2021 Deed (the deed) and associated guidelines. This includes data analytics, desktop monitoring, site visits, participant feedback, performance reviews and risk-based management of providers.

The ParentsNext performance framework provides for monitoring of the efficiency, quality and effectiveness of the services that providers deliver. The department provides formal performance reports to providers every 12 months, with interim assessments every six months. The department also works with the provider to address any issue that may arise in between performance discussions.

If a ParentsNext provider is not meeting its obligations under the deed, the department may require the provider to rectify the identified issue. This may include:

- directing the provider to conduct targeted education to its personnel on specific compliance requirements
- requiring the provider to implement or review its policies and procedures to prevent future non-compliance.

The department may also take remedial action against the provider. These remedial actions, which are specified under the ParentsNext deed, include:

- suspending referrals or payments to the provider
- reducing or not paying specific payments
- imposing additional financial or performance reporting requirements
- recovering payments already made by the department
- removing part or all of a provider's business.

The department determines the appropriate remedial action on a case-by-case basis.

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Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000192

Senator Murray Watt provided in writing.

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Children Attending Participants Activities

ParentsNext participants are required to bring their children to their activities. What insurance provisions are required to cover both the parent and the child?

Answer

It is not mandatory for ParentsNext participants to bring their children with them to ParentsNext activities. Where an activity is suitable for a participant to take their children to, parents are encouraged to take their children if they choose. Some activities, such as counselling or formal training, may not be suitable for children. In these cases, ParentsNext providers should take into account the participant's caring responsibilities. Where appropriate, ParentsNext providers can assist participants with finding childcare to assist parents to attend these activities.

The Department of Jobs and Small Business's personal accident insurance covers participants and their children while travelling to and participating in ParentsNext activities, even if the child is not participating in the activity.

ParentsNext providers have obligations under the ParentsNext 2018–2021 Deed to purchase insurance that covers participants while they are on the provider's premises to undertake employment services activities that are not covered by the department's insurance, such as attending the provider's premises to develop their participation plan or complete a work readiness assessment.

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Department of Jobs and Small Business Question No. SQ19-000193

Senator Murray Watt provided in writing.

Question

PCI - ParentsNext: Payment Suspensions - SMS Notifications

How many people have received a text to notify them that their payment has been suspended? What is the cost of those text messages?

Answer

From 1 July 2018 to 31 January 2019, 23,507 ParentsNext participants were sent 89,588 SMS messages advising their payment had been suspended.

The messages sent to participants are tailored so the participant will be fully informed about the reason for their payment suspension. All messages include advice that, to have payment restored, the participant should contact their provider. Provider contact details are included in the message.

Participants whose payment remains suspended after the initial SMS was sent, will receive reminder SMS messages to contact their provider, two and four days after their original suspension date.

From 1 July 2018 to 31 January 2019, a total of 98.5 per cent of ParentsNext participants had re-engaged with their provider once suspended. The remaining participants had not re-engaged with their provider and, as a result, their income support payment was cancelled.

The total cost of SMS messages from 1 July 2018 to 31 January 2019 is \$7923.17.