Summary findings from community consultation on assessment tools, processes, and flexible funding

The Government is stabilising and strengthening the consistency, transparency, fairness, and sustainability of disability support services.

This document summarises the findings from a nationwide consultation, in February-March 2025, on the needs assessment and allocation processes for people accessing DSS-funded supports, and on flexible funding.

Approximately 1,800 people took part in the consultation, including disabled people, tāngata whaikaha Māori and Pacific families, whānau, carers, and people who work in the sector.

We heard DSS is not always delivering the support eligible disabled people and their families and carers want and need.

Needs assessment and allocations should be easier, more consistent and streamlined

Disabled people and families should have an easier experience in assessment.

The assessment process (including reassessment) is hard to understand, difficult to navigate, and can be a negative and stressful experience.

Disabled people, their families, whānau, and carers often found it did not identify the supports and services they may be eligible to access (including from other agencies or organisations).

Guidance should be available to disabled people and families from a person who understands the assessment process. This could be provided by community organisations, whānau, or friends.

Help should be available in preparing for an assessment

People said they did not know what to expect or how to prepare for the assessment or understand what information they need to supply.

There was support for a separate pre-assessment phase, to better understand what the assessment is about and the services and funding a disabled person could be eligible for. This information should be available in plain language and accessible formats.

Assessment process should better reflect a disabled person's whole life, and be more tailored to an individual's situation

Assessors should engage with those involved in the disabled person's life, especially their families, whānau, and carers, to get a more complete view of their circumstances.

The assessment process should be tailored to how disabled people want to participate in assessments. This should involve the disabled person, their family, whānau, and carers choosing who should be at the assessment, how it is conducted, and when and where it happens.

Māori and Pasifika communities had particular views on how the assessment process should work, including the different cultural contexts of their communities. For example, the unique whānau and home contexts, and different expectations on supports for the family.

Assessors should better support disabled people through the assessment process

Assessors should be upskilled to support disabled people and to ensure they are aware of all the supports available to them.

More information should be provided on the outcome of the assessment to disabled people, their families, whānau, and carers

Information on the outcome of the assessment should be clearly communicated to disabled people, their families, whānau, and carers, so they better understand:

- what happens next
- the services and funding they can access
- how to get support after the assessment.

It should be easy for people to review their assessment and give feedback before it is formally submitted.

Purpose and approach of the reassessment process is unclear

People said the purpose of, and approach, to the reassessment process is unclear and difficult to understand.

They said the reassessment process and frequency should be more flexible and responsive to the disabled person's situation, significant changes, age, and stage of life, rather than being a fixed schedule.

There are a wide range of challenges faced by families, whānau, and carers looking after a disabled person that assessments do not acknowledge

Assessments do not sufficiently recognise, acknowledge, or factor in the impact that looking after a disabled person, has on families, whānau, and carers. For example, the lack of support due to the pressure on the wider household of looking after the disabled person.

Many people were supportive of developing a specific assessment for families, whānau, and carers

There was support for the needs of families, whānau, and carers to be recognised as part of the disabled person's needs assessment to reflect the connection between them and the disabled person.

It was felt that better supporting families and whānau in their caring role, where appropriate, would improve the disabled person's wellbeing and quality of life.

Needs assessment for families, whānau, and carers should be flexible to accommodate the diverse range of caring situations

People felt it is important for assessments to consider the wider dimensions of the family situation. For example, a disabled person's impairment can impact the whole household (especially siblings).

In addition to the primary carer, care for the disabled person can be shared across family members, friends, and community members.

A one-size-fits-all approach for family and carers does not work. There should be flexibility and balance to better suit the disabled person and their family and carers.

The needs of family and carers also change, particularly in respect to having to also care for their aging parents or siblings and their own ageing.

There were differing views on whether an assessment for family, whānau, and carers should be done jointly or separately to the disabled person

People asked for sensitivity around how assessments are done. As there may be situations where a disabled person does not wish to involve their family, whānau, and carers or where a different approach may be needed to keep everyone safe.

Assessments should be undertaken on the basis of what is appropriate for the disabled person and their individual circumstances.

Sometimes it is preferable for an assessment to be done with the disabled person and their family and carers together, particularly where there are cultural considerations. For example, many Māori and Pasifika disabled people are cared for within a family and whānau setting, so the disabled family member's needs should not be treated separately.

Flexible funding

People want a flexible funding system where they are trusted to use their flexible funding in a way that best meets their needs

People are anxious about engaging with DSS on how flexible funding is used. People commented on the negative impact of the changes to the flexible funding guidelines in March 2024, saying it felt like they were not trusted to use their flexible funding appropriately.

People are also concerned about the amount of work using flexible funding involves for the disabled person, their family, and carers. They want simple, user-friendly guidelines that clarify how funds can be used.

There is a perception that the real-life impacts of flexible funding policy decisions on the lives of disabled people and families are not fully understood.

There was significant support for using a plan for flexible funding that reflects the disabled person's needs

Feedback emphasised that plans should:

- be tailored to individual needs
- provide flexibility in responding to changing circumstances
- enable the disabled person to reach their life outcomes and goals.

The need for accountability in using public funds was acknowledged. Most agreed oversight should relate to the level of funding and risk, with similar compliance to other government-funded support.

People expressed concern that prescribed lists are too restrictive and inflexible

There was concern lists could limit the disabled person's independence to decide how to use flexible funding.

Lists may not cover the diversity of disabled people's needs. For example, a disabled person may want to go to the gym to improve their physical health, but list restrictions mean flexible funding cannot be used for recreational activities.

There are benefits to having prescribed lists, especially for those who are less familiar with flexible funding

Feedback suggested lists:

- are simple to follow
- provide certainty on what supports can be accessed
- make it easier to navigate the system.

People thought alternative options that are not on the list should also be considered. This could benefit people who are less familiar with flexible funding and find it uncomfortable navigating DSS.

Some supported having lists to provide guidelines on how to use flexible funding. For example, a list that provides examples on what supports are available could make it easier for people with an intellectual disability to make choices.

Another example is a list showing the approximate costs for how people with the same impairment use their flexible funding.

There was support for combining a plan reflecting the disabled person's needs with a list

People were supportive of combining a plan centred on the disabled person with a list providing guidance and examples for how flexible funding can be used.

This would create more certainty around what flexible funding can be used for, particularly for whānau and carers.

There is little guidance on how to access flexible funding

There was concern that disabled people are not accessing the supports and services they need, due to a lack of guidance on flexible funding. The flexible funding guidelines changes made in March 2024 are hard to understand and navigate.

People were strongly opposed to introducing criteria for receiving flexible funding but some thought it could bring clarity and consistency

People were concerned about introducing criteria for receiving flexible funding as it could be too restrictive, inflexible, create more barriers (particularly for Māori and Pasifika communities), and add complexity.

Others felt introducing set criteria could have some benefits and provide greater clarity and consistency.

Set criteria could help allocate resources fairly and transparently and could prioritise the needs of the disabled person. It could also create accountability when using flexible funding.

There was support for having criteria to provide options for disabled people, or those acting on their behalf, to manage flexible funding

People supported having options for disabled people to not be involved with the responsibilities that may arise with flexible funding, such as managing employment disputes.

It was felt that people with learning difficulties, language barriers, migrant groups, older people, and those on the autism spectrum could benefit from such an arrangement.

What's next?

The findings from this community consultation have informed advice to Government on changes to the disability support system.

Disability Support Services will continue to involve the disability community in discussions about how disability support services are delivered.

More information

Read the full report from Community Consultation on the DSS website.