

Appendix 2: Initial key themes from community engagement

In December 2024, the Minister for Disability Issues directed Disability Support Services (DSS) to consult widely with disabled people, families, and the wider disability sector in early 2025 on changes to the DSS system. We wanted to:

- hear about how we can make our assessment and allocation processes clearer, and propose changes to how flexible funding is used
- build public trust and confidence in the community and signal a pathway for progressing recommendations 5 and 6 from the Independent Review.

Our community consultation ran from 10 February to 24 March 2025. It built on responses we received through our survey and submissions in late 2024. More than 1,800 people contributed by attending in-person and online workshops and by providing feedback through an online survey and written submissions. We are currently preparing a detailed analysis of the consultation feedback. A summary will be published on the DSS website in July 2025. Consultation findings have informed the near-term changes to stabilise DSS proposed in this paper however, the feedback will also inform work to strengthen DSS in future.

Clearer assessment and allocation processes

The assessment process should be easier, more consistent, streamlined, and holistic

Many people said that their experience through the needs assessment process should be easier, more consistent, streamlined, and holistic.

There was significant feedback that disabled people often found the assessment and reassessment process to be a highly negative and stressful experience, with limited information on what funding supports and services they might be eligible for, or did not understand what information they should provide to demonstrate their support needs. This has led to a perception that people who had the skills, time and resources were more successful in navigating DSS and external systems to get the support they needed. This is seen as inequitable and lacking transparency.

Disabled people, family/whānau and carer(s) may need help navigating the system

Many people said that disabled people may need help navigating the assessment process and consider that better information should be provided prior to an assessment. This could help disabled people, family/whānau and carer(s) to better understand what the assessment is about, the services and funding that the disabled person could be eligible for, and how to start the assessment process. It could be beneficial for disabled people to have a person work alongside them, who understands the lived experience of disabled people and their families, and who can navigate DSS, other government systems, and other organisations. This could be through a Needs Assessment and Service Coordination (NASC) agency or through a connector-type role, separate from a NASC agency.

The assessment process should be more flexible to provide disabled people more choice and adapt to significant changes in a disabled person's needs

The assessment should be more flexible to provide disabled people, family/whānau and carer(s) more choice in the way the assessment is provided. This may involve the disabled person choosing the location and who should be present at the assessment.

Most submitters agree that family/whānau and carer(s) should be involved in the assessment process, alongside the disabled person (where it is in the best interests of the disabled person), to ensure that the best information is available about the disabled person's needs.

There was feedback that assessments should be proportional to a person's disability-related needs for support. If a disabled person is mostly independent and the level of support is expected to be minimal, there could be an option for the disabled person to do a self-assessment or a shortened assessment (which may need to be supported). Assessments should respond to the diversity of people's life situations, especially where there are significant changes in a disabled person's needs. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

Improving reviews and reassessments

Many people state there should be more time for the disabled person to review and revise their assessment/reassessment plan. The disabled person should also have more choice, post-assessment (where there are significant changes in a disabled person's needs).

The Māori and Pasifika communities had distinct and unique views on how the assessment process should be conducted

Cultural competency should be a requirement for assessors to better understand the different cultural contexts of a disabled person within the Māori and Pasifika communities.

Information about DSS needs to consider the different cultural conception of "impairment", "experience of disability" and the expectations around family and community supports.

There is a lack of awareness of DSS and how to access support across the Pasifika community. There is a need for targeted engagement with the Pasifika community.

Providers said that the assessment process needs to balance consistency and flexibility on how assessments are conducted and the need for a skilled workforce

Providers thought that the assessment process should provide more consistent information to the disabled person, but that NASCs should have flexibility on how an assessment is conducted. We heard that having prescribed assessment processes do not work, however a high-quality and responsive assessment requires a skilled workforce.

Many people are supportive of developing a specific needs assessment for family/whānau and carer(s), but opinions differ on how that should be done

There was strong support for developing a specific needs assessment for family/whānau and carer(s), as part of the disabled person's assessment and reassessment. This could include questions on the family/carers' mental health, and any difficulties around maintaining social relationships in other areas of their life and maintaining their identity as separate from their caring role (e.g. as partners or parents to other siblings).

There should be flexibility in the specific needs assessments for family/whānau and carer(s) and be proportionally relevant to the context of the disabled person and family/carers

Many people noted the significant impact supporting a disabled person can have on family/whānau and carer(s) – especially if there is an enduring caring commitment into older age. The assessment needs to consider the family/whānau and carer(s)' context. For example, an ageing carer may develop their own impairments and disability-related support needs, health conditions, or the carer(s) may be the disabled person's partner.

People also noted there will be situations where a disabled person does not wish to involve their family/whānau or carer(s), or where a different approach may be required to keep everyone safe. A balanced approach is needed to safeguard a disabled person and to respect their autonomy.

Changing how flexible funding can be used and criteria to access flexible funding

There was significant support for a plan-based approach to managing flexible funding, in a way that reflects the disabled person's needs

The disabled person-centred plan would need to be tailored to individual needs, provide flexibility in responding to changing circumstances, and enable the disabled person to reach their life outcomes and goals.

People acknowledged that there needs to be accountability for expenditure, but any oversight should be proportionate to the level of funding and risk involved, and compliance should be on par with other recipients of government-funded support.

People expressed concerns that a prescribed list could be too restrictive while others see benefits, especially for those unfamiliar with flexible funding

There was significant feedback that lists could limit the autonomy of the disabled person to decide how to use flexible funding, and that lists may not capture the diversity of needs of disabled people.

Others thought there are benefits to having prescribed lists in providing parameters and guidance on how to use flexible funding. This is particularly useful for those with learning disabilities, language barriers, older people, and autism.

Most people oppose introducing criteria to access flexible funding, but some feel it could provide greater clarity and consistency

Many participants were concerned that criteria could limit access to flexible funding, particularly for Māori and Pasifika, and could add complexity to an already complicated process for accessing support. They saw criteria as the antithesis of flexibility.

There was support for having criteria that provides options for disabled people, or those acting on the disabled person's behalf, on how to manage flexible funding

People were generally supportive of criteria that could give disabled people the option to not be involved with the responsibilities that might arise with flexible funding (e.g. managing employment disputes). Having criteria could also help to ensure that those managing flexible funding on someone else's behalf were safe to do.