

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE (JSC) ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL REDRESS SCHEME INQUIRY INTO THE OPERATION OF THE SCHEME

Opening Statement of the Secretary of the Department of Social Services – 9 March 2023

- Administering the National Redress Scheme is a key responsibility of the Department of Social Services. This includes supporting survivors throughout their redress journey, facilitating institutional participation and working closely with jurisdictional counterparts under the Scheme's intergovernmental agreement.
- The Scheme is maturing and is in its fifth year of its ten-year operation.
- More than 23,300 applications have been submitted to the Scheme with over 12,200 offers made and approximately \$965 million in redress payments made as at 24 February 2023. The current average payment amount is over \$88,000 (significantly higher than the \$65,000 estimated by the Royal Commission).
- The Scheme is currently receiving an average of 777 applications per month compared to an average of 307 per month in the three years to March 2022 – so a significant and sustained increase in applications. January 2023 saw the highest number of applications received in the Scheme's history, with over 900 applications received.
- Over the life of the Scheme the average processing time for an application from the date of receipt until notifying an outcome has been 11.8 months. The average processing time when an application is actionable by the department is 7.8 months. Processing times have remained steady across 2022 despite the significant increase in applications.
- The commencement of this increase began a year ago in March 2022, following the removal of the statutory declaration requirement in the application form and streamlining the online application process through myGov.
- Despite the surge in applications since March 2022, processing times have remained steady.
- The Department has implemented strategies to mitigate potential delays with the influx of applications. For example, where applications are missing information and have been submitted online, the Scheme has amended processes to request further information online rather than phone. Applicants can respond online or via post.
- The Scheme now encompasses all Commonwealth and state and territory government institutions and over 600 non-government institutions. The Commonwealth and state and territory governments have taken responsibility for 95 unique institutions under Funder of Last Resort arrangements.
- A priority for the Department is the very important objective of improving the experience and increasing access to the Scheme **for First Nations People, and people with disability**.
 - The Department is aware that First Nations People and people with disability can face barriers in accessing redress and is committed to supporting awareness of and accessibility to the Scheme. The supports available include:
 - a wide range of Redress Support Services,
 - robust processes to support applicants being assisted by a nominee,
 - a dedicated Service Charter for applicants to the Scheme,
 - diverse participation in the Survivor Roundtable, and
 - an Indigenous Service Delivery Stream, which includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally proficient staff who provide culturally safe phone contact with First Nations peoples.
- The Scheme encourages engagement with funded **Redress Support Services** and has expanded the availability of free Redress Support Services to assist applicants through their redress journey.
 - There is extensive coverage of Redress Support Services across each state and territory, including in regional, rural and remote areas.

- Of the 45 Redress Support Services, there are 12 First Nations-specific organisations and three organisations with a focus on supporting people with disability.
- The Australian Government also funds **knowmore Legal Services** to deliver dedicated legal support and financial counselling services for redress applicants across Australia.
- Another method for supporting survivors is closely **protecting the sensitive information** they provide to the Scheme.
 - The current strict legislative protections aim to minimise unauthorised disclosure of protected information and are focused on protecting the privacy of applicants to the Scheme.
 - Beyond the purposes of assessing redress applications, currently protected information can only be disclosed in limited circumstances, primarily for law enforcement or the safety and wellbeing of children, or in circumstances when doing so is necessary to prevent or lessen a serious threat to an individual's life, health or safety.
- I welcome the insights of this Committee to inform our commitment to ensuring access to timely and trauma informed redress for survivors.
- Thank you.