

Vision Australia Submission

Response to the National Disability Agreement Review

Submission to: **Productivity Commission**

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By email.

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Introduction

Vision Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a response to the Productivity Commission on the National Disability Agreement Review.

All people who are blind or low vision, of all ages, have the right to access services and technology and to live independently, inclusively and with dignity in the community. Our position is informed by our status as the nation's leading provider of services and supports to people who are blind or have low vision. We are active in international, national, state and regional initiatives and conversations that relate to blindness and low vision. We celebrate our 150th year of existence in 2017, and have a deep and longstanding connection with the community of people who are blind or have low vision, in advocating for access to services and opportunities within the community.

We have been actively engaged with successive Australian Governments since 2011 and the precursor bodies and groups and departmental officials who designed the initial National Disability Insurance Scheme. We are a registered provider of services in multiple jurisdictions, including since launch in ACT, Victoria, NSW, WA and Queensland.

As an addendum to this submission, we provide our submission to the Senate Inquiry: Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities, conducted in 2017. Many of the themes remain current, and applicable to this current inquiry – the goals of an accessible and inclusive community under the National Disability Strategy align with the NDA, and can be reinforced by the NDA.

Vision Australia recommendations

We strongly recommend you take into consideration the following recommendations so that NDA facilitates the best possible system for supporting Australians with a disability.

- That the NDA remains and is strengthened to provide a control and governance mechanism for the ongoing coordination of Commonwealth and State disability supports.
- That the NDA must ensure access to services for people outside the NDIS and under 65, and equitable disability supports for those over 65 and outside the NDIS.
- That the NDA provides more definition and governance of the interface between the disability focus of NDIS and State/Territory based systems and that of universal service systems to provide continuity of support for clients transitioning to the NDIS and to ensure that people don't fall through the cracks.
- Accelerate the improvement of ILC (Tier 2) supports and ensure they are improved and deliver the required supports across the sector.

- That the NDA is used to outline the risk and support required for clients transitioning to the NDIS, and that measures are put in place to ensure that there is not gap in the continuity of support as client's transition from block funding to the NDIS. The cost of these services is currently being borne by providers.
- That the NDA is expanded to ensure the Commonwealth (NDIA) and state based systems engage and partner with providers who are specialists in respective fields in the design of services and education of planners.
- That the NDA is positioned to encourage the development of specialist funded solutions within the NDIS framework for people who are blind and have low vision especially in the approval of mainstream and specialist technological solutions.
- That the NDA is positioned to develop an independent governance mechanism to enhance the consumer review, complaint and escalation process during the implementation of the NDIS.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference asks the review to consider the following areas in relation to the act:

1. Relevance of the objectives, outcomes and outputs of the NDA
 2. Roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments
 3. Progress against the performance framework of the NDA (Improved outcomes for people with a disability, their families and carers)
 4. Does the NDA needs updating in light of the current sector changes
1. In this response, in line with the terms of reference, special regard has been given to the NDIS rollout and its influence and impact. Explicit in the terms of reference is the ability to raise any other issues or ideas relevant to the review. **the relevance of its objectives, outcomes and outputs in the current policy context**

The objective and outcomes of the NDA, while broad, still maintain relevance in the sector as an independent, high level guidance for the cohesive delivery of integrated disability services across Commonwealth and State governments.

The NDA must address the rights and needs of those with disability who are ineligible for the NDIS and under 65, and equitable supports for those with a disability over 65 and not on the NDIS. The NDA is intended as a holistic agreement for all people with disability: the transition of disability supports to the NDIS is placing this at risk. Additionally, the NDA can play a role in refocusing the national approach to disability from a nearly sole focus on the NDIS, to recognising the broader needs for a welcoming and inclusive community for all.

Equally, the National Disability Strategy (NDS) does not provide adequate assurances that the NDS outcomes will be measured or delivered. The NDA has a role in holding Commonwealth and State governments to account and in strengthening reporting against the six policy areas. As has been noted elsewhere, progress reports against the NDS are significantly delayed (often by more than a year), and limited progress has been achieved. Any change to the NDA should include stronger oversight of the NDS implementation and link to outcomes for people with disability.

During the rollout of the NDIS we have seen a lack of cohesion between the NDIS and traditional state based disability support systems. The NDA is clear in its intention to ensure there is broad coverage for all people with a disability and that no one should fall through the cracks, even if they are not eligible for the NDIS. Recent submissions to the NSW Parliament have highlighted the impact of the premature reduction of state based services and its impact on clients during the NDIS transition. Some states and territories are seeing the introduction of the NDIS as a driver to drastically reduce expenditure on disability services.

The NDA has a role to play in providing a guidance and accountability for states and territories to ensure they work with the NDIS to provide services and support for clients both eligible and not eligible for the NDIS. This is especially relevant where we are seeing clients entrance into the NDIS delayed or protracted, especially due to plan reviews (no services are delivered during reviews) where the client does not consider the NDIS supports adequate, and the state has already removed services as the client has engaged with the NDIS.

2. Roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments

Interface issues have been identified by the Productivity Commission, and repeatedly raised by Vision Australia to ensure that people don't fall through the cracks – including in relation to state based systems, Commonwealth systems, and mainstream arrangements identified by COAG.

Health – The aged care sector is not adequately geared or supported to support an older person with disability. Older Australians with disability are faced with an aged care system that is orientated towards frailty needs, a network of assessors who lack the tools and support to know what to do to meet their needs, and a patchwork of 11 state based aids and equipment schemes with different arrangements and levels of support which are gradually being withdrawn.

Education – the interface between the NDIS and the education system has created a blurring between education/schooling and community involvement and family support. The NDIS says it provides support for 'participants to attend school education' while the education system is said to have responsibility for 'assisting students with their educational attainment'. This interface is not always clear and not always appropriate as it prevents families and communities from obtaining a holistic approach to a child's needs while they are of school age.

Transport – Transport has been an issues for clients since the introduction of the NDIS. To date schemes such as the Mobility Allowance and taxi subsidy schemes are currently in question and the interface between the NDIS and transport schemes is unclear. Outcomes focused on employment and social inclusion will only be realised if adequate transport supports are provided to people with disability.

3. Progress against the performance framework of the NDA (Improved outcomes for people with a disability, their families and carers)

At a high level, we have seen improvements in outcomes for people with disability through the past 5 years, particularly as the NDIS has begun rollout. However, emerging issues around NDIS quality and accuracy of support inclusions in plans, the Aged Care Reforms lack of focus for disability, and other emerging challenges place these improved outcomes at risk.

There is an urgent need to reduce red tape issues such as MyPlace operation, registration, reporting and payment arrangements. While there have been enhancements to the MyPlace portal, these have had minimal impact on the time and effort required from providers and clients to easily access information. This inability to easily monitor and manage client budgets is a key driver in the poor plan utilization (64%) as highlighted in the COAG Disability Reform Council, Quarterly Report, Q4 2018. While a low utilization rate is a positive for the financial performance of the NDIS, they indicate that supports in client plans are potentially not suitable, or difficult to access and substantial impede the realisation of outcomes for people with disability. The NDA performance framework should incorporate measures linked to the NDIS outcome framework.

One of the emerging operational issues for providers under the NDIS is the support required by clients as they transition into the NDIS scheme. It is broadly acknowledged that the NDIS represents significant cultural change to the sector and providers. What has been underestimated is the cultural change for clients transitioning into the system, and the fear this has created. Under the NDIS structure there is no pre-planning or preparation support provided and providers are filling this gap. This transition pre-work is essential for clients to achieve outcomes in line with the NDA, currently this time spent is unfunded and non-billable against the NDIS as funds cannot be drawn on until the plan is approved. Vision Australia engages in this work as it results in real outcomes for clients. An example of feedback from our clients is outlined below:

"I just wanted to give you some feedback on my NDIA planning meeting I had this morning.

At first, the interview started with no explanation of the NDIS or what path the interview was going to take. When the questions started, it was a bit vague at first and I had to ask a couple of times, "what do you mean". By this time, I was saying to myself "what is going on here". After a couple of awkward silences, I handed the document you prepared for me yesterday which was an absolute lifesaver.

Once the planner had your Vision Australia (VA) documents, plus my goals and equipment paperwork, the planner was then able to read, understand, and copy that information directly into her computer.

However, after that bit of a slow start, we ended the interview and I feel that the planner understood my level of disability and what was in our documentation

I am so grateful for our preplanning meeting yesterday as without this meeting and the documentation you provided, I would have been "up a creek without a paddle."

This is indicative of the continual feedback we receive in this space, and as experts in the needs of our clients, often Vision Australia are best placed to deliver clients this guidance. The work, however, is unfunded and not claimable against the client's NDIS package - however is crucial to achieving outcomes under both the NDA and NDIS. Work of this nature should be captured in some form when measuring the NDA outcomes.

It has been identified that (COAG Disability Reform Council, Quarterly Report, Q4 2018) that ILC services (formally tier 2) have been underfunded: this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency as the ILC function is imperative in ensuring clients not eligible for the NDIS have a pathway to engage with other supports available. While it is acknowledged that this funding shortfall is being addressed, it is important for the department to engage with specialist providers such as Vision Australia to ensure quality advice and guidance is being given. To date this has not occurred. ILC will be crucial to ensure improved outcomes for people with disability and in meeting NDA performance measures.

The blind and low vision community represents a relatively small percentage of the disability client base. While this is a low incidence cohort, the highly specialised supports can result in significant improvements in quality of life. Generalist planners and assessors have a lack of understanding of blindness or low vision including the impact of vision loss and the particular equipment and supports that are required, such as assistive technology and the adaptation of mainstream technology. The specialist knowledge of the sector is not leveraged or relied upon by NDIS planners and this results in essential technology supports being denied.

4. Does the NDA needs updating in light of the current sector changes

The NDA is important as a governance and control measure across Commonwealth and State jurisdictions as the NDIS rolls-out and beyond. Ensuring the States work with, and complimentary to the NDIS scheme is imperative in ensure a cohesive and effective support network is in place for all people with a disability and their family and carers.

We recommend that the NDA is enhanced to provide clarity on the requirement to provide adequate support for clients to transition for current block funded schemes to the NDIS, and to provide adequate support for people with a disability who are:

- a) Under 65 and not eligible for the NDIS
- b) Have their plans placed in review as they believe the NDIS supports are inadequate
- c) Over 65 and not on the NDIS

One additional, significant update to the NDA that is required is the mandate for an independent governance and oversight function for the NDIA. While the NDA provides a framework the escalation point for clients with issues is within the broader Commonwealth Ombudsman and Administrative Appeals Tribunal. Also active are various state bodies and independent advocacy organizations. The escalation path for client's is confused, protracted and not clear. It must also be taken into account that clients may not be receiving services while their NDIS plans are in review.

While there are escalating pathways for clients, once an internal review has been undertaken by the NDIS the extended pathways not specific to disability.

Recently we have seen the inclusion of the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission and the NDIS Fraud Taskforce to oversee providers. There has however been little work on strengthening the escalation pathways and process for consumers. Since its inception the NDIS has received the following number of complaints:

Complaints about Service Providers: 932
Complaints about the agency: 17,676

In light of this and in line with the current provider specific oversight measures introduced we recommend that the NDA influences enhancements and improvement of the consumer issues resolution process in line with the mechanisms being introduced for providers.

Conclusion

Vision Australia is aware that the NDA provides a platform for the development and implementation of disability services. Many of the recommendations above reach beyond the current scope of the NDA, however there is the opportunity for the NDA to be developed to provide more clarity and governance in a rapidly changing sector.

Flexibility is required to ensure people with disability are not disadvantaged by the transition of many disability programs to the NDIS, especially those who are not eligible for an NDIS package, such as people with disability over the aged of 65.

Assistance for consumers in the transition is also being borne by providers as it is an essential service and one currently not funded in most instances.

Overall Vision Australia has a desire to see a disability support network for people who are blind and have low vision that enables them to live the life they choose and also enables a viable sector for specialist providers such as Vision Australia. There must be a strong commitment to ensuring that the NDA works for all people with disability, and coordinates national consistency in supports and approaches during the coming years.

Vision Australia would welcome the opportunity to provide additional information or to work in conjunction with commonwealth and state departments as required.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include:

- Registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care
- Aids and Equipment, and Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support

- Seeing Eye Dogs
- National Library Services
- Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds
- Employment services, including national Disability Employment Services provider
- Accessible information, and Alternate Format Production
- Vision Australia Radio network, and national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped
- Spectacles Program for the NSW Government
- Advocacy and Engagement, working collaboratively with Government, business and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and fully exercising rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of the Organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, with people who are blind or have low vision representing the voice and needs of clients of the Organisation to the Board and Management. Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), to strengthen the voice of the blind community.