

## Executive Summary

It is anticipated that approximately 16 000 to 20 000 people with hearing impairments as their primary disability will join the NDIS by 2019-2020. This will represent a small cohort within the Scheme (less than 3% of NDIS participants). However the introduction of the NDIS has undoubtedly had a disruptive effect on what is broadly recognised as international best practice in the support provided to deaf and hearing impaired. Some extremely concerning issues have emerged and need to be resolved to ensure deaf and hard of hearing people continue to receive world class services.

### *An interim report*

In March 2017, the committee delayed finalising its report pending release by the NDIA of (a) key operational guidelines for access criteria to the Scheme for deaf and hard of hearing people and (b) baseline reference packages to guide plan development for early intervention services. The NDIA had indicated to the committee that it would release the guidelines and packages by the end of April 2017. While the NDIA released guidelines for access criteria on 1 September 2017, the early intervention packages remain outstanding. Without definitive information about the early intervention packages, the committee cannot report and make considered recommendations. This is a cause of great concern for many families, the hearing sector and this committee.

The committee has therefore decided to release an interim report while it awaits the release of the packages. This interim report focuses on the access criteria to the Scheme and the issues pertaining to access and delivery of early intervention services.

### *Access criteria*

Until now, there has been a lack of clear access criteria to determine eligibility to NDIS services for deaf and hard of hearing people. This has caused great uncertainty for future access to services and supports for deaf and hard of hearing people, especially for newly diagnosed infants and children. The committee is relieved that clear guidance to determine access to the Scheme has finally been articulated and publically released by the NDIA. However, the committee is frustrated it has taken so long.

Based on the evidence received to date, the recently released access criteria for early intervention requirements for deaf and hard of hearing people aged 0-25 appear to be technically consistent with the current practices of Australian Hearing, and are therefore broadly welcomed by stakeholders. In regards to the access criteria for those 26 years or older, the committee is concerned that the requirements may leave some people not eligible to the Scheme despite their need for reasonable and necessary supports.

### *Early intervention services*

The committee is also concerned with the disruptions to early intervention services that have occurred since the introduction of the NDIS. The NDIS is failing to

streamline intervention services: from referral pathways, to access and funding of services for newly diagnosed participants.

Guided pathways to ensure families could engage as early as possible with services that meet their needs have been lost. It is a clinical fact that timely early intervention for deaf and hard of hearing children produces optimal results, yet evidence of delays to access therapies is mounting. Confusion, absence of guided advice, lack of choice and control over access to services, are regularly reported by families and carers. Inadequate and underfunded NDIS plans are commonly awarded to children, and as a result opportunities for children to be taught to communicate as well as any other child (with spoken or signed language) are being lost. The committee believes it is critical the NDIA addresses these issues as a matter of urgency. The introduction of a guided referral pathway is necessary to ensure no delay between diagnosis and commencement of therapies. Appropriately designed and funded early intervention reference packages must also be implemented.

#### *Recommendations and next steps of the inquiry*

The committee has made a number of recommendations in relation to the matters discussed in this interim report. The committee intends to release its final report once the NDIA has introduced its early intervention reference packages. In addition to discussing the appropriateness of the packages, the final report will discuss the other issues raised during the inquiry not reported in the interim report. The committee will continue to consult the hearing sector as required until the committee completes its inquiry.