

Submission by Focus ACT to Public Hearing on National Disability Insurance Scheme Canberra, 27 March 2015

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for this opportunity to give evidence on the administration and implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Focus is committed to the NDIS and embraces the challenges it brings. While Focus aims to grow its shared accommodation support provision, the first priority is to assist current clients to successfully transition from block funded supports to the NDIS.

Founded in 1991, Focus ACT (Focus) is an incorporated, non-profit, non-government organisation that operates only in Canberra. Some of Focus' clients have been supported since 1991, most others for more than 10 years. The NDIS has not caused Focus to make fundamental changes to its support provision: personalised and flexible supports tailored to clients' individual needs have always formed the basis of Focus' service. A workforce of 50 staff, 80 per cent casual and 20 per cent permanent, deliver 40,000 hours of direct support per year.

Focus' direct experiences are drawn from assisting seven (7) people to transition to the NDIS in line with the schedule set by Disability ACT, families and guardians planning for transition and the shared experiences of other members of National Disability Services.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE SCHEME

Planning

People and families already receiving disability support from a provider are familiar with planning and tailoring supports and the process used to assess and describe a person's needs. However, many others say they are dismayed and confused when confronted with the new approach and the new language, such as 'clusters', 'line items', 'core', 'capacity', 'capital', 'bundling' in relation to themselves or a family member. Some individuals and families have not previously received any funded disability support and are very anxious about what the scheme will mean for them.

People and their families have been provided with NDIS updates and attended information sessions conducted by Focus, ACT NDIA and other providers. They have told us they need more assistance to understand and prepare their plan.

The format of the plan is difficult to understand and some of the 'goals' in the plan do not reflect the person's capability or choice. People with disability (particularly intellectual disability) question why they have to have so many 'goals' – they may not want to go out 3 nights a week but would prefer to stay home with support.

Building futures together



It will take time for people with disability to articulate what kind of support they need and how to make choices. One person was interested in learning how to cook. The planner coached her to include in her plan the specific goal of learning 3 recipes in 12 months when she actually wanted assistance to cook something different every night.

There are only NDIA planners in the ACT. This, together with the lack of separate Local Area Coordinators (LACs), requires Focus and other providers to spend considerable time, effort and internal resources to assist individuals and families to understand the NDIS and work through transition issues. Our network of family members is ageing and they want greater assistance in working through NDIS eligibility, planning and negotiating their funded supports than is available.

Organisational Challenges

1. Focus' source of funding for the past 24 years has been Government grants. Contracts require deliverable outputs according to the level of funding, with any year end savings being returned to Government. There has been no opportunity to retain funds to build working capital required to operate in an environment of payment in arrears as an NDIA provider.

One solution is to allow greater flexibility to use Government block grant funding during the NDIS transition period. Organisations need to increase their workforce to meet service demand, develop business systems and have reserves to meet commitments. The ACT Government's 5% grant 'carry over' amount should be increased to allow working capital to be accumulated to maintain staff costs due to the new NDIS system of payment in arrears. A financial management consultancy had recommended that Focus required 10-15% retained reserves. This could be achieved if some unspent block funding could be retained.

2. Moving into quarter 4 of the 8 quarter transition, Focus has made significant progress as a registered NDIS provider. The biggest challenge to date is managing multiple services and systems. As mentioned, our priority is to assist people and families to understand what the NDIS means to them and assist them through transition. Focus has maintained the quality of support to people who are still block grant funded, complied with service agreements and managed the growing demand for services brought on by the discontinuation of ACT Government services and new participants who have not had services in the past. Additional resources are needed to manage a complex change timeframe and service demands.

3. Governments do not want disability support providers to fail during the NDIS transition. However, providers are concerned that the ACT Government's proposed tender 'Provision of Assistance to ACT Community Providers Preparing for the NDIS' will adversely impact on the capacity or willingness of government to support organisations to implement recommendations arising from earlier, completed funded consultancies and reviews. It is not yet known if, when and what further grants will be available to organisations directly.

Since 2013, Focus has spent \$156,000 on NDIS transition projects (finance, business systems, workforce development, and information technology). Of this amount \$94,000 was from its own funds.

To meet these challenges, our Board of Directors is actively involved in implementing Focus' strategic priorities. Please refer to an excerpt from Focus' Management Action Plan (Attachment A).

External Challenges - Housing

The housing options paper prepared by the NDIA over twelve months ago has not been released. Instead disability ministers will again discuss housing at their next national meeting in April 2015. While NDIA does not fund housing, \$700million to cover cost of participants obtaining more specialist housing is expected to be available under the full scheme. However, new mechanisms for social housing are needed now. Without immediate action, the social housing situation will become increasingly unsustainable as the full rollout of the NDIS occurs.

Focus is happy to provide more detailed information on any of the issues raised in this submission.

Tina Siver
Chief Executive, Focus ACT

Focus ACT Management Action Plan –summary

Strategic priorities to meet the challenges of the NDIS

- Working closely with help families to help them through transition through regular meetings and information
- Maintaining full support services to clients while operating under two systems, doubling the workload
- Managing fundamental change in only two years instead of five
- Adopting a business model of support provision
- Addressing and monitoring through a management action plan:
 - modeling and forecasting
 - contracts and risk management
 - NDIS transition planning
 - organisational capability
 - organisational sustainability
 - governance
- Responding to increased demand for services