

Deaf Services Response to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme Assistive Technology Inquiry



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Background

Joint Standing Committee on NDIS: Assistive Technology

The committee will inquire into and report on the provision of assistive technology with particular reference to:

- a. the transition to the NDIS and how this has impacted on speed of equipment provision;
- b. whether the estimated demand for equipment to be sourced through the assistive technology process in each roll out area was accurate;
- c. whether market based issues impact the timeliness of provision of equipment;
- d. the role of the NDIA in approving equipment requests;
- e. the role of current state and territory programs in the assistive technology process; and
- f. **any other related matters.*

*Deaf Services will only be addressing **f. any other related matters** specifically access to funding of customised tablets and data for Deaf participants.

Deaf Services

Deaf Services is a not for profit organisation working with the community to enhance services and programs that benefit Deaf or hard-of-hearing adults and children. Deaf Services is the prominent end-to-end service provider, advocate and leader for Deaf or hard-of-hearing community members across all ages with a vision of our cohort of participants being empowered, connecting and achieving their goals. Supports and services cover the entire lifespan:

- Early intervention
- Lifestyle support service (in people's homes and communities)
- Community Engagement and Development
- Education service - accredited as an RTO provider and unaccredited community courses
- Language services including Auslan interpreting (online and onsite), CALD interpreting and Translating, and
- Ageing well service.

Auslan Virtual Services Hub

Deaf Services has innovated virtual service delivery to respond to the needs of the Deaf community across the state. The purpose of the Auslan Virtual Services Hub is to provide face-to-face service delivery via visual and virtual technology across multiple service delivery interventions. This has

Individuals and community empowered, connected and achieving



included staff and sector training programs relating to the Deaf and hard of hearing community. A virtual service was developed in response to the need for accessible, first language (Auslan) services for Deaf people. Further it was also acknowledged the need to develop workforce capacity and skill to respond to workforce shortages emerging from the NDIS space for Deaf people who use Auslan as their first communication.

Due to lack of appropriately skilled on the ground staff across all service interventions, service has been developed and delivered virtually in Telepractice, Auslan teaching at home, Auslan Kiosk, Information and Referral and Support Coordination and Video Remote Interpreting (VRI).

Terminology

Deaf Australia operates a terminology policy that was adopted by members in 2010¹. For the purposes of this paper Deaf Services adopts these definitions also:

- **deaf:** all Deaf and hard of hearing groups at once
- **Deaf:** culturally Deaf people who use Auslan and identify with the Deaf community
- **hard of hearing:** people whose primary communication mode is speech

Auslan is Australian Sign Language which is the language of the Deaf community in Australia¹.

Customised Tablet and Data Access for Deaf Participants

It has been a resounding NO from the NDIA with regards to funding customised tablets and data for participants. Some participants have been funded for tables via comprehensive and expensive therapy reports or through low risk assistive technology in their plans. Customised tablets have been previously funded under Commonwealth schemes such as Better Start and Helping Children with Autism.

Customised tablets have impact beyond being a device to assist with skills development but for Deaf people also as access to programs and tools that can assist in their life skills development, such as language acquisition through Auslan at home, increased participation in the community (interpreting) and overcoming development delays (therapy intervention through ECEI approach). This form of access for a Deaf person can be seen as akin to funding wheel chairs for someone who cannot walk.

As the market matures and the delivery of disability services increases under the NDIS, the NDIA desires services to provide and or develop innovative service solutions. In doing so there has been an expectation of service providers to innovate and change ways in delivery that provide optimal outcome and reach. Deaf Services has responded to this in key planned executed strategies such as the development of our Auslan Hub which provides some loans of ipads for Telepractice, Auslan at home and interpreting as well as walk-in Kiosks in key regional centres. Whilst the loan scheme

¹ Deaf Australia Inc. (2016). Terminology. Accessed from: <http://www.deafau.org.au/info/terminology.php>



promotes an innovative practice it is reliant on consumers to cooperate on booking and collecting the loan ipad to access the desired service. Further, most towns do not have this option for access. To truly reach a point of self-determination and controlling all aspect of life goals, participants should be afforded the opportunity to purchase this assistive device under their NDIS plan thereby allowing choice and control to allocate and access supports when and where they are needed.

In this environment of encouraging service innovation there is reluctance by the NDIA to fund a participant in being able to access innovative service delivery via customised tablets and data, despite these strategies reducing expenses to the NDIA over the short and long term.

Access to customised tablets allows Deaf participants to seek other services such as securing Auslan interpreters remotely, particularly in regional and remote areas where no physical Auslan interpreter is available and some telepractice therapy and Auslan at home thereby meeting their goals that link to participation, inclusion and skills development. This access increasing efficiencies and decreasing the impact of travel distances.

Statistics

It is our understanding the decision by the NDIA to not fund customised tablets or data relates to the 2016 census that identified 86% of households have access to the internet and 66% of households connect to the internet via a customised tablet². Data relating to internet access whilst away from the home is not readily available (as would be needed for example for a Deaf person to access Video Remote Interpreting, such as at a Dr's appointment).

It is our estimate that this data is not representative of the Deaf community which was predicted to be 3% of NDIS participants with Deafness as their primary disability, although this is currently sitting at 7%³. Regardless, Deaf people have unique needs under the NDIS that should be considered in the TSP (Typical Support Package) data.

What areas of service delivery under the NDIS are impacted?

There are several areas of impact in regards to customised tablet/data use under the NDIS. Delivering services to Deaf participants is a highly specialised area and it is difficult for participants and/or families to access the appropriately skilled staff due to significant workforce shortages and the expenses associated with travel. Under ECEI (Early Childhood Early Intervention) and IFP (Individual Funding Program) pathways of the NDIS there are several funded line items that are impacted:

- Auslan at home skills development (teaching Auslan to a participant and/or carer)
- Interpreting (through video remote interpreting which is cheaper, more responsive and accessible)
- Support Coordination and plan management (there are not many proficient Auslan communicating support coordinators or plan managers – that we are aware of in Queensland)

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs%40.nsf/mf/8146.0>

³ <https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/dcdss/disability/ndis/qlddatatrends.pdf>



- Speech therapy and Occupational therapy

Why does a Deaf person need a customised tablet and data funded by NDIS?

Although there are some significant issues with regards to eligibility for Deaf people, the NDIS allows access to the community and services to Deaf people in ways that have never occurred before. This increase in access has of course led to an increase in demand. Customised tablet and data access provides access to services that cannot be delivered by anyone other than someone proficient in Auslan or with access to an interpreter. There is no access in many towns and communities to an interpreter other than through video remote interpreting. Further in major regional and rural towns, the critical issue of shortage of supply of interpreters means innovative solutions such as video remote interpreting though virtual delivery provide an ideal solution for deaf people to continue to get interpreting services due to the business model of virtual delivery where traditional supply of face to face is unavailable. A deaf person may need a customised tablet and data funded by the NDIS for the following reasons:

- Some regional and remote areas in Australia do not have Auslan interpreters residing in them or an appropriately skilled person who communicates in Auslan to deliver other services as noted
- Sometimes the nearest interpreter is 12 hours or 1000km away
- NDIS does not fund travel costs to interpreters or an appropriately skilled person who communicates in Auslan
- Interpreters will not travel long distances if the travel cost is not covered
- The demand for interpreters is so high that they will obviously take the closest job
- Most Auslan interpreting providers that are registered as Service Providers under the NDIS and traditionally charge a two hour minimum for an interpreter booking.
- VRI (Video Remote Interpreting) can be booked for 30 minute increments, allowing funded supports to last longer and cover more bookings.
- Due to limited numbers and specialised skill set Auslan interpreters may not be able to meet the needs of all Deaf participants
- VRI reduces the travel component and frees up more interpreters to meet the needs of other Deaf Participants
- The existing Customised tablet loan programs usually require significant travel from the Deaf person to collect and return them or they are loaned for extended periods (e.g. 8 week therapy block) which reduces the loan pool
- Currently some Auslan interpreting registers are struggling to meet the demand of Deaf participants, requesting Participants book interpreters three weeks in advance

Recommendations

1. Provision of Data and customised tablets with 4G capacity provided by the NDIS to Deaf Participants. In doing so participants living across Australia will be able to execute their plans in relation to:
 - a. Accessing interpreters in efficient and cost effective ways
 - b. skill and language acquisition through access to Auslan at home and therapy
 - c. using one's native language (Auslan) for basic services such as support coordination, plan management information and referral services