



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance
Scheme (NDIS) report:

Inquiry into Provision of assistive technology under the NDIS

March 2019

Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (the Committee's) report to the Inquiry into *Provision of Assistive Technology under the NDIS* (the Report).

The Report contains eight recommendations to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and the Department of Social Services (the Department). The recommendations cover a number of issues relating to Assistive Technology (AT), including:

- Consistency of information on all aspects of the AT process;
- Funding for the cost associated with trialing AT;
- The length and complexity of the AT application process;
- Outcomes based funding for AT;
- The adoption of a credentialing model for prescribing AT;
- Utilisation of state and territory government capabilities in the AT landscape;
- The NDIA AT delivery model.

The Australian Government recognises the transformative power of appropriate AT and has been working to ensure participants have access to individualised AT solutions that enhance their economic and community participation. The NDIA also recognises the importance of listening and understanding participant circumstances, preferences and goals in the planning and provision of AT under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The size and scale of the NDIS means that it will not be without challenges and the NDIA is committed to identifying and improving processes as the Scheme continues to roll out across Australia.

The Australian Government supports, partially supports, or supports in principle all of the eight recommendations made in the Committee's report.

Inquiry into the Provision of assistive technology under the NDIS

Recommendations made by the Committee

1. The committee recommends that the Agency revise the AT information on its website to improve clarity around all aspects of the AT process, and ensure training and guidance is provided to NDIA staff to improve consistency in the information provided to participants, providers and AT assessors.

Response: Supported

The Government notes that a range of improvements have been made to AT processes.

In October 2018 the NDIA began implementing a new participant pathway which delivers an enhanced experience to all participants, including those who require AT supports. Participants will have face-to-face planning meetings that are easier to understand and result in more accessible plans, and will be supported through the planning process by a consistent, single point of contact.

The NDIA has implemented a number of initiatives to better deliver AT, including:

- Reducing the need for quotes across AT
- Eliminating the need for quotes for low cost AT
- Streamlining approval for outstanding AT plans by the NDIA dedicating resources.

The NDIA has a number of initiatives planned in coming months that will further improve the clarity and consistency of AT. Initiatives include:

- Improving consistency of funding decisions relating to repairs and maintenance
- Piloting a new process to improve the assessments and timeframes for more complex and non-standard AT
- Engaging with State and Territory AT programs to identify opportunities to work together to deliver improved AT outcomes for participants
- Simplifying AT planning resources and training materials.

These initiatives will be implemented acknowledging the importance of listening to and understanding unique participant circumstances and preferences as a driver of innovative and fit-for-purpose AT.

The NDIA is also upgrading its NDIS website to make sure it is meeting the needs of participants, providers and the community. A number of new AT guidance documents are currently under development that will provide more comprehensive and more consistent information about AT on the NDIS website. Some of these improved communications have already been published, such as a new animated video for participants about AT under the NDIS which was published in September 2018.

2. The committee recommends that a line item for trial costs of AT equipment be created and included in the plans of all relevant participants.

Response: Supported.

The Government agrees with the objective of this recommendation, that funding should be provided in a participant's plan for the cost associated with trialing and fitting new AT for NDIS participants. This funding is particularly important for participants who reside in regional or rural areas. Without the additional funding, they may face additional difficulties in having

trial of AT supplied to them or face delays in receiving trial AT, for example therapists incur higher costs to travel to participants in regional and rural areas.

The NDIA is considering whether an additional planning line item that specifically and separately acknowledges the appropriate funding associated with trial and evaluation of different and more complex AT solutions, coupled with improved guidance, would result in more consistent funding of trialing and evaluation costs.

To improve consistency of the line item for trialing AT, the NDIA will continue to improve planning guidance to ensure reasonable and necessary supports for the fitting and trialing of AT is included consistently in participant plans.

3. The committee recommends that the NDIA prescribe Key Performance Indicators for the length of time that staff must consider and process AT applications.

Response: Supported.

The Government supports measures to minimise delays in AT planning processes.

The NDIA established a National Assistive Technology and Home Modification Remediation team to investigate and remediate individual delays in AT planning and plan implementation. The team has worked to ensure AT applications are being received through dedicated accessible channels and handled consistently across the NDIA network. This includes the introduction of service standards that apply to enquiries received through these dedicated channels - for example, that participants receive an acknowledgement email within 24 hours of their enquiry, and further details of the next steps in resolving their issue within 48 hours where the request is urgent.

The NDIA is also reviewing system capacity to monitor the progress of AT requests throughout the process, and provide robust data on the time taken for each step. This data will inform continuous improvement to AT processes, and assist in identifying elements of the process that adversely impact the timeliness of AT decisions. These actions will allow for Key Performance Indicators for AT assessment to be monitored by the NDIA.

4. The committee recommends that the Agency publish criteria of the circumstances which will require the Agency to conduct further assessment beyond that provided by a registered therapist.

Response: Supported in principle

The NDIA is continually improving processes, and is implementing a number of initiatives to simplify the evidence required during the planning process. The NDIA has introduced improved AT assessment templates, combined with clearer guidance on the application of the requirements of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* (NDIS Act) and Rules in considering AT requests. These steps have been taken to assist allied health professionals in providing all necessary information in AT assessment reports to support NDIA decision making.

The NDIS Act requires that each participant's plan is appropriate to their needs, and takes account of other supports the participant may be able to access. The requirement for this individualised approach limits the capacity to publish definitive rules relating to the approval of particular AT items. However, the NDIA will as required update on its website detailed criteria for scheme participants and registered therapists alike on AT assessment requirements.

5. The committee recommends that the NDIA makes funding decisions based on outcomes rather than on whether the item is considered mainstream, or could be used beyond its AT purpose.

Response: Supported in principle

When considering whether to include support in a participant's plan, the NDIS Act and associated Rules require that all supports, including AT, are reasonable and necessary against a number of criteria. The criteria includes whether a proposed support will be effective and beneficial for the participant, deliver value for money, and is most appropriately funded by the NDIS. In general, a reasonable and necessary support would substantially improve the life stage outcomes and be of long-term benefit to the participant.

In effect, the NDIA is making decisions based on outcomes that would be achieved from intervention taking into account goals that participants have set in their plan.

Decisions on whether the NDIS is the most appropriate funder of supports may be clear in some cases (e.g. personal care support in the community), while some other technologies (e.g. telecommunications systems) may be the responsibility of others. As the access needs of people with disability are increasingly addressed in mainstream technology, the decision on whether widely used technology (such as smart phones) is a reasonable and necessary support, for a participant will need to be evaluated on a case by case basis, e.g. whether AT is more cost effective than alternative supports.

The NDIS has and continues to work with participants, providers and the sector as it refines and updates guidance on the provision of mainstream or AT solutions to deliver the most effective outcomes for participants.

6. The committee recommends that the NDIA adopt the State Wide Equipment Program (SWEP) credentialing model for prescribing AT.

Response: Partially supported

The Government agrees it is important that providers have the expertise and skills to appropriately prescribe AT.

The NDIA has tested various approaches to demonstrating competence and providing oversight to AT practice with the AT sector. Elements of the Victorian SWEP credentialing standards for advanced AT assessors have been included in the design for the specialised AT assessment panel that the NDIA will pilot in 2019.

7. The committee recommends the NDIA explore entering into agreements with state schemes for the prescription, assessment, and delivery of Assistive Technology to NDIS participants.

Response: Partially supported

The NDIS seeks to build a robust and competitive market that provides innovative supports and improves on previous systems. In doing this, the NDIA has drawn on the capabilities of state and territory AT programs in two key areas:

- Establishment of procurement approaches that achieve value for money on some items, as well as repair and maintenance services;
- Quality assurance methods that improve the integrity of assessments.

Where available, the NDIA will continue to work with states and territories to learn and facilitate best practice quality assurance processes for AT assessment.

It is important to note that under the NDIS Act, the NDIA is not able to delegate its responsibility for making decisions on the inclusion of reasonable and necessary supports, including AT, in a participant's plan.

The NDIA will continue to encourage all providers of AT, including state and territory AT programs, to make their services available and accessible, including through lease/hire or purchase arrangements.

8. The committee recommends that the NDIA undertake an urgent review of all aspects of its AT delivery model, with specific focus on how it can utilise current state and territory equipment schemes, including bulk-purchasing, loan and recycling programs.

Response: Supported in principle

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring participants experience the benefits of AT through streamlined and efficient systems. The NDIA is continuously reviewing its approach to the provision of AT, and the findings of the Committee are an important part of this process.

In early 2018 the NDIA commenced work to improve the AT experience, including:

- Consulting with participants, providers, sector peak bodies and governments to identify opportunities for improvement and test proposed initiatives.
- Regularly consulting the NDIS Participant Reference Group and Industry Reference Group.
- Testing loan and recycling methods, as well as cost effective supply.
- Piloting a specialised AT assessment panel for more complex AT needs.
- Consideration of every aspect of the AT pathway, including short, medium and long term improvements.

In June 2019 the NDIA will implement improved processes in AT, which will enable better access to refurbished AT, with a priority for children who require an AT solution and whose circumstances often changes as they grow.