



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance
Scheme final report

Inquiry into the provision of hearing services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme.
June 2018

Introduction

Final report

The Australian Government welcomes the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (the Committee's) report to the Inquiry into the Provision of Hearing Services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) September 2017 (final report).

As part of the Committee's inquiry into the implementation, performance and governance of the NDIS, the committee examined how hearing services are transitioned to, and delivered throughout, the NDIS.

In September 2017, the Committee released an interim report (the report) containing six recommendations relating to; issues about the availability of services for people who are not eligible for the NDIS, eligibility criteria for determining access to the NDIS, referral pathways for access to early intervention services, and the adequacy and approach of early intervention reference packages for people aged 0 to 25 years of age. The Government responded to this report in March 2018 by supporting or partially supporting all recommendations made in the interim report.

The final report was released on 21 June 2018 and focusses on the objectives and guiding principles of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* and what is the best approach for providing hearing services, particularly for children. This includes how participants access the NDIS; how they are provided with information to inform their decision making about the types of support required, who is best placed to provide those supports, and how these supports are accessed.

The final report's recommendations relate to the contracting arrangements for the national Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) partners, quoting arrangements for specialist service providers, and the need for a child-first approach in the delivery of services for children with hearing loss.

The Government remains firmly committed to supporting people with hearing impairment, including through the NDIS where it is appropriate. This includes a commitment to ensuring people with hearing impairment, particularly young children, continue to be provided with high quality and timely supports.

The Government partially supports all recommendations made in the final report, noting that Government is continuing to work with key stakeholders, including Australian Hearing, to improve the way people with hearing impairment are supported by the NDIS.

Inquiry into the provision of hearing services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Recommendations made by the Committee

1. The committee recommends that the NDIA contract Australian Hearing as the national ECEI Partner for early intervention hearing services for families of deaf and hard of hearing children.

Partially supported

Response:

This recommendation is only partly supported. The approach taken by Government balances the alignment between the NDIS principles of participant choice and control and recognition of Australian Hearing's key role as an entry point for children with hearing impairment in Australia, and in providing consistent and specialist information to parents to help them make informed choices about their children's needs.

On 21 June 2018, the Commonwealth Government announced that Australian Hearing's current in-kind support to the NDIS would continue to 30 June 2020.

This announcement recognises Australian Hearing's key role as an entry point for children with hearing impairment, and in providing specialist information to parents to help them make informed choices about their children's needs.

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) will implement a dedicated hearing stream within the participant pathway for children 0-6 years with hearing impairment in the second half of 2018. The hearing stream will strengthen the collaboration between Australian Hearing and the NDIA, consistent with the above recommendation.

The NDIA is now working closely with Australian Hearing to refine its role within the revised hearing stream for participants with hearing impairment.

Australian Hearing has indicated a strong desire to work in partnership with the NDIA by providing recommendations for access and evidence of the level of severity of the child's hearing impairment. This information will be used to provide the child with an initial hearing plan to cover their hearing support needs.

Under the new arrangements, Australian Hearing will:

- Provide the NDIA with evidence of disability, including severity level, to enable rapid access to the Scheme and creation of an initial hearing plan
- Provide parents with outcomes focused information on the choices they have for hearing supports

After participants receive an initial hearing plan, an Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) partner will follow up with the family (where appropriate) to identify and engage broader support needs beyond hearing.

The NDIA will continue to work with the hearing sector including Australian Hearing to ensure the new arrangements provide families of deaf and hard of hearing children with rapid access to early intervention services.

Australian Hearing will continue to provide early access to hearing services such as the fitting of hearing aids as part of the new arrangements.

2. The committee recommends that the NDIA reintroduce transdisciplinary package quotes from specialist service providers for children who are deaf and hard of hearing and require access to early intervention services.

Partially supported

Response:

In consultation with hearing providers, the NDIA is currently considering how to set funding and pricing arrangements to support families to choose the type of hearing supports that meet their children's needs. This includes ensuring there are no barriers for families who wish to choose bundled early intervention hearing support. Bundled supports refers to funding in a child's NDIS plan that is linked to a particular goal or outcome. These supports mirror the intent of this recommendation, allowing families to have greater flexibility in the way they organize their child's early intervention supports.

A family can still choose a transdisciplinary model that incorporates their reasonable and necessary funded NDIS supports, mainstream supports and/or privately funded supports. As stated previously, they can implement this model themselves or through a service provider.

The NDIA has conducted detailed consultation and analysis to understand the impact of the current funding and pricing arrangements on specialist service providers offering bundled supports to children with hearing impairment.

The revised hearing stream will alleviate some of the issues raised by the committee in relation to funding and pricing arrangements. This includes:

- Providing improved support and training for planners and ECEI partners, including baseline reference packages, to reduce plan variance
- Increasing guidance for participants, including through Australian Hearing, to support plan implementation and reduce unintended under utilisation of funds

The nature of transdisciplinary support provision can mean that in some cases the cost of each component of service delivery is less transparent for participants and their families as they choose the supports that are right for them. In response to this, the NDIA is exploring pricing mechanisms which support the delivery of services in a way which does not compromise best practice outcomes but still enables clarity and transparency of the price of supports.

3. The committee recommends that the Australian Government put in place an arrangement similar to ‘Jordan’s Principle’ in Canada to ensure that a child-first approach is taken in the delivery of services for children with hearing loss.

Noted

Response:

The work underway through the NDIA and Australian Hearing establishes a clear pathway where children can get rapid access to hearing services consistent with the *NDIS Act* and the *Principles to determine the responsibilities of the NDIS and other service systems*, which sets the funding and delivery responsibilities of the NDIS and other service systems, agreed by all Governments.

The NDIS through the early intervention for Hearing Loss approach has strengthened the ability of all children, adolescents and young adults who meet the access criteria, to have timely access to reasonable and necessary supports. This should ensure that the issues of jurisdictional disputes and payments for services to children with hearing loss at first request, which gave rise to Jordan’s principle in Canada, do not occur in the NDIS in Australia.

The Australian Government Department of Health also has a range of activities that target the disproportionate burden of ear and hearing health in first nation’s children in Australia. These include funds totaling over \$136 million (2012-13 to 2021-22) which are being provided for a range of activities. This includes the May 2018 announcement of \$30 million (2018-19 to 2021-22) for a new targeted outreach program which will provide an annual hearing assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children prior to the commencement of school, with a focus on children in rural and remote communities.

The Government also makes a significant investment in multidisciplinary clinical outreach services in regional, rural and remote areas through the Healthy Ears - Better Hearing Better Listening program providing access to surgical support and capacity building activities such as provision of training and equipment to Indigenous primary health services.

The independent examination of Australian Government Indigenous ear and hearing health initiatives concluded that the Australian Government’s investment is conceptually sound in its elements and has facilitated and improved access to multidisciplinary ear health care for Indigenous children and young people.

Since commencement of the Healthy Ears – Better Hearing Better Listening program in 2013-14, the number of patients accessing care has increased significantly each year. In 2016-17, over 47,000 patients received services in 304 locations, with a focus on regional, rural and remote regions.

Under the Australian Hearing Specialist Program for Indigenous Australians, the Australian Government provides hearing services in more than 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia each year to help overcome access, distance, culture and language barriers.

These initiatives are evidence of the Government’s existing commitments to a child-first approach to the delivery of services to children with hearing loss.