

National Disability Insurance Agency Submission

Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS
Inquiry into Planning

Terms of Reference (ToR)

As part of the committee's role to inquire into the implementation, performance and governance of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the committee will inquire into and report on NDIS Planning, with particular reference to:

- a. the experience, expertise and qualifications of planners;
- b. the ability of planners to understand and address complex needs;
- c. the ongoing training and professional development of planners;
- d. the overall number of planners relative to the demand for plans;
- e. participant involvement in planning processes and the efficacy of introducing draft plans;
- f. the incidence, severity and impact of plan gaps;
- g. the reassessment process, including the incidence and impact of funding changes;
- h. the review process and means to streamline it;
- i. the incidence of appeals to the AAT and possible measures to reduce the number;
- j. the circumstances in which plans could be automatically rolled-over;
- k. the circumstances in which longer plans could be introduced;
- l. the adequacy of the planning process for rural and regional participants; and
- m. any other related matters.

National Disability Insurance Agency Submission

Introduction

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is a visionary social reform that for the first time puts choice and control squarely in the hands of people with disability. Based on insurance, not welfare principles, its purpose is to improve economic and social outcomes for all Australians with a significant and permanent disability and to provide them with reasonable and necessary supports.

There is much to celebrate in what has been achieved so far.

As at 30 June 2019, 298,816 people with disability, including 5,312 children in the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) approach, had joined the NDIS. Post 30 June 2019, the 300,000 mark was passed. An additional 27,853 participants received an approved plan, representing an 8 per cent increase over the prior quarter. Almost 110,000 people have received supports for the first time.

Participant satisfaction was 90 per cent for the quarter, with strong results in relation to:

- The planning meeting went well: 95 per cent
- The planner listened to me: 94 per cent
- I had enough time to tell my story and say what support I needed: 94 per cent

But even more important than input driven statistics is the difference that is being realised in participants' lives as a result of the Scheme's roll out. Analysis of participant outcomes over two years demonstrate the positive long-term impact of the NDIS. For example, 94 per cent of parents and carers for children aged 0 to before starting school thought the NDIS had helped improve their child's development, compared to 91 per cent in their first year. Seventy four per cent of participants aged 25 and over considered the NDIS had helped them have more choice and more control over their lives in their second year of participation in the NDIS, compared to 66 per cent in their first year.

While much has been achieved, we know more needs to be done to make dealing with the Scheme easier for participants and families, and to ensure we are getting it right for participants, each time, every time.

Central to this is delivering quality plans that produce high quality outcomes. This is why we undertook the 'pathways' work, engaging with more than 1200 participants and disability organisations to design improvements to the delivery of the Scheme.

Pathways work

Since 2017, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) has been undertaking a series of improvements to the participant pathway experience.

Key improvements include:

- Three specific pathways: the NDIS Participant Pathway, Complex Support Needs Pathway, and Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) Pathway.
- Two service streams for psychosocial disability and hearing, to deliver targeted support to provide participants with an experience more suited to their specific disability needs.

- Service enhancements to meet the communication and engagement needs of people from different backgrounds or areas, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse people, remote and very remote communities, and people who identify as LGBTIQ+.

By June 2019, the NDIA baseline service improvements to the NDIS Participant Pathway were rolled-out nationally. These improvements included:

- during pre-planning, a stronger focus on community, other government, informal and employment supports to assist the participant and their families/carers;
- a consistent point of contact for participants;
- enhanced planning communication products in a variety of formats;
- face-to-face pre-planning and plan implementation meetings at the discretion of the participant; and
- improved linkages between NDIA planners and the Local Area Coordinators (LACs); and improved training for NDIA planners and LACs.

NDIS Act Review and the Participant Service Guarantee

The *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* (NDIS Act) Review being undertaken by Mr David Tune AO PSM, will assess the operation of the NDIS Act, with a focus on streamlining the NDIS processes and removing red tape for participants and providers.

Following the review, the Participant Service Guarantee (PSG) will take effect from 1 July 2020. The PSG will set new standards and timelines for NDIS processes, including access decisions, having an NDIS plan approved and having a plan reviewed. This will complement the work being implemented to improve participant pathways.

a) The experience, expertise and qualifications of planners

The NDIA strives to recruit NDIA planners that have an understanding of or lived experience in disability and relevant qualifications in human services, allied health and disability. Planners at the NDIA are expected to understand how disability impacts on daily living, assess support needs where necessary, and identify when the individual would benefit from early intervention.

The NDIA's recruitment process is a merit based process in line with the *Public Service Act 1999* and associated regulations and directions, and is designed to attract suitably qualified staff with experience and expertise across a diverse range of health, disability and related sectors.

The majority of NDIA planners working with complex participants have a minimum of five years' experience in high-level case coordination, and a relevant professional qualification in disability, mental health, allied health, social work, education, justice or health/human services.

In addition, the NDIA has invested heavily in training recently as the Pathway reforms have been rolling out. NDIA planners and partners undertake a range of training programs prior to supporting participants. Further information about the NDIA's training program is in Section C.

b) The ability of planners to understand and address complex needs

As part of the pathways work, the NDIA established a Complex Support Needs Branch to oversee the implementation of a new complex support needs pathway. The complex support needs pathway provides specialised support for people with disability who require additional support to access and engage with the NDIS. The pathway acknowledges the range of primary and secondary situational and personal factors that contribute to the impact of complex support needs of a participant. This may include voluntary or involuntary involvement in other government service systems and transitional supports for returning to community, for example, exiting incarceration or an acute rehabilitation environment.

The complex support needs pathway incorporates stronger connections with other services, for example existing providers and other government services, through dedicated liaison roles. It also includes dedicated, specialised NDIA planners with strong experience in high level case coordination and allied health experience; access to a specialised complex support needs Practice Lead who can provide professional clinical advice and support to develop plans; skilled support coordinators; and a stronger focus on implementation, monitoring and review of participant plans.

Having a stronger connection between the planner, support coordinator and participant on a regular basis will ensure that the plan continues to be fit-for-purpose with regular evaluation to avoid the risk of service breakdowns.

The Complex Support Needs team will also have national responsibility for the following specific participants groups:

- Young People in Residential Aged Care (YPIRAC)
- Children with supports at risk
- State and Commonwealth client transitioning to the NDIS that have been determined as high risk referrals.

There are currently over 8,400 participants in the complex support needs pathway across the Complex, Voluntary Out Of Home Care and YPIRAC streams. Around one third of participants with a primary psychosocial disability will receive support through this pathway.

The complex support needs pathway was first rolled out in selected local government areas in Victoria and New South Wales in November 2018, and from 4 March 2019, it is being progressively rolled out across all states and territories. This is expected to be completed by 30 December 2019. Recruitment to support this roll out is underway.

Exceptionally Complex Support Needs Panel

An approach is currently being finalised to support people with urgent needs under the Exceptionally Complex Support Needs (ECSN) Panel. The Panel is intended to:

- Build provider capability and capacity for complex situations (proactive program of outreach and support);
- Provide subject matter expertise;
- Provide a referral service to ensure timely integrated planning for critical supports across different service systems;

- Provide an after-hours referral service for participants experiencing a disability-related crisis; and
- Establish a network of specialist providers who will assist the NDIA to support the development of robust support coordination services for participants with exceptionally complex support needs.

The ECSN Panel went to market on 5 April 2019 and an announcement is due to be made soon.

c) The ongoing training and professional development of planners

NDIA has a thorough onboarding and training program for both its internal staff and those employed through our contracted Partners.

The NDIA has invested heavily in training recently as the pathway reforms have been rolling out. NDIA planners and partners undertake a range of training programs prior to supporting participants.

The current training includes a comprehensive new starter induction program, mandatory learning modules, and disability specific and targeted service delivery training programs that support the new Pathway service improvements. Additionally, ongoing training is provided to maintain and build specialised skillset of planners and partners. Key aspects of this program include:

- The national rollout of Service Improvement and Psychosocial Awareness training for the NDIA and Partner planning workforce (completed in June 2019);
- Delivery of specialist training for ECEI partners and Hearing stream planners and providers;
- Development of joint planning training material to support a national deployment.

The NDIA is also progressively rolling out training programs focused on disability and cultural awareness to improve the service experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTIQ+, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people.

In addition, the NDIA has collaborated with the Disability Advocacy Network of Australia (DANA) to raise disability awareness amongst staff and help improve the participant experience. Through DANA, the NDIA worked with groups such as Australian Autism Alliance, Prader-Willi Syndrome Australia and Down Syndrome Australia to build knowledge and real life stories. As a result of this project, the Agency has produced 12 videos and snapshots on specific disabilities, and an eLearning module for staff.

d) The overall number of planners relative to the demand for plans

The NDIA manages planner workforce requirements through a service delivery operating model (SDOM). The SDOM incorporates a range of factors including participant numbers and bilateral forecasts, plan complexity, and the time required to meet with participants and develop plans. The model estimates demand for plans down to local government area level to inform workforce requirements by area. The model is regularly updated and is used to inform average staffing level requirements. The number of staff dedicated to planning is continually monitored and necessary steps are implemented to recruit, upskill and retain staff to manage workloads.

e) Participant involvement in planning processes and the efficacy of introducing draft plans

Draft plans

The NDIA understand the importance for participants to have meaningful input during the planning process and to understand their approved plans. This reflects consistent feedback from the pathway review.

In recognition that it is important for participants, their families and carers to understand their NDIS plan before it is approved, the NDIA is working on further improvements to the planning process.

During the initial trial period of the NDIS, participants were provided with draft plans for review before they were approved by the NDIA. While some participants found this approach beneficial in understanding their plan, in some cases there were challenges that emerged, including the final approved plan not always reflecting the supports in the draft plan after the planner had made their reasonable and necessary assessments as per the NDIS Act and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Supports for Participants) Rules 2013.

Joint Planning

The joint planning meeting is key example of how the NDIA is working towards a collaborative and transparent planning experience for participants.

Since 6 May 2019, the NDIA has been conducting a 'soft launch' of joint planning meetings in Southern Adelaide. The joint planning soft launch began with four LACs and four NDIA planners at the NDIA St Marys and partner Mission Australia's Clovelly Park sites.

In the joint planning meeting, a participant engages with their LAC and assigned NDIA planner delegate to discuss their NDIS plan before it is finalised. This occurs following the pre-planning meeting and prior to plan implementation.

This meeting gives the participant an opportunity to ask questions to better understand their NDIS plan and includes supports before the plan is approved. In most cases, the participant will leave the joint planning meeting with an approved plan and will be able to access their supports immediately.

This work builds on previous joint planning trials, which took place during the 2018 Pilot 1 (new plans) and Pilot 2 (plan reviews) as part of service improvements for the new participant pathway. This work also builds on the roll out of service improvements to the new participant pathway, particularly the delivery of plan alignment and plan implementation meetings, and stronger connections between LACs and planners.

The NDIA will roll out joint planning more broadly, following a detailed evaluation of the 'soft launch'. The rollout of the joint planning process will be supported by the introduction of an Appointment Booking Tool that will electronically capture and schedule the required meetings between the participant, their LAC and NDIA planner delegate.

f) The incidence, severity and impact of plan gaps

The NDIA's Business System original system design did not cater for situations where a new plan was not approved prior to the review date of the existing plan. This resulted in "plan gaps" where there was risk to participant supports being discontinued as the NDIA's Business System did not allow providers to claim for supports delivered in the "plan gap" period until the new plan was approved.

A business system enhancement was implemented on 1 August 2019 to automatically apply 28 days of funding when the new plan has not been approved at the plan review date in certain circumstances. This enables the participant and NDIA additional time to undertake a plan review and minimises the incidence of plan gaps. Plans that had expired prior to 3 July 2019 were not included in the auto-extension as generally these participants were unable to be contacted to undertake a plan review. As the ability to provide funding for supports during the gap period remained, the NDIA initiated a process to make contact with the participant to undertake a plan review, rather than automatically increasing their funding to mitigate the risks to the NDIA.

On the 31 August 2019, a further enhancement was implemented to remove the exception cases so all participants and providers will now be able to claim for all supports delivered in accordance with their plan while waiting for their plan review.

With the Business System enhancements described above, plan gaps should no longer be an ongoing issue for participants and providers.

g) The reassessment process, including the incidence and impact of funding changes

The plan review process includes a review of the participant's goals and reasonable and necessary NDIS support needs. This may result in a change (increase or decrease) to the participant's funded supports and funding amounts.

The NDIA considers a range of evidence when making a decision about the participant's support needs. This evidence may include information about improvements the participant has made in their capacity to undertake daily living skills, or an increase support need as the participant transitions from one life stage to another, for example leaving school and commencing employment.

Also, funding which is not required on a yearly basis, such as home modifications or assistive technology (e.g. wheelchairs), will impact the amount of funding provided to a participant.

After an NDIS plan is approved, the NDIA staff or partner will have a conversation with the participant to discuss the supports funded and how they can implement them to work towards achieving their goals.

Since the start of the NDIS up to 30 June 2019:

- 27 per cent of plans that have been reviewed have been within 10 per cent of their previous value;
- 27 per cent have gone down by more than 10 per cent; and
- 46 per cent have gone up by more than 10 per cent.

In the month of June 2019:

- 22 per cent of plans that were reviewed were within 10 per cent of their previous value;
- 22 per cent have gone down by more than 10 per cent; and
- 56 per cent have gone up by more than 10 per cent.

h) The review process and means to streamline it

There are two types of NDIS plan reviews:

- a scheduled plan review in line with the NDIS plan period; and
- an unscheduled review under section 48 of the NDIS Act, initiated either by participant request, or by the NDIA if a participant's circumstances change.

A participant can also request an internal review of a reviewable decision under section 100 of the NDIS Act. Such a review occurs when a person disagrees with a decision and makes a request to have the decision reviewed. An internal review must be requested within three months of receiving written notice of a reviewable decision.

Scheduled Plan Reviews:

Based on lessons learned during the first participant pathway pilot, focussed on the planning stage, key service improvements have been progressively implemented from late 2018 through to early 2019.

For example, ninety days before a participant's plan end date, the NDIA attempts to contact a participant or their nominee or child representative, to begin the scheduled plan review process.

- The NDIA will attempt to contact a participant at least three times over a minimum of three business days, at different times of the day, over a week, using the participant's preferred contact method. Additional attempts over a subsequent week are then made using any other contact methods available, including contact with authorised representatives or third parties.
- If a participant cannot be contacted to complete the plan review, the NDIA is able to extend a plan by three months, if appropriate in the circumstances, to ensure the participant is able to continue to access supports. If it is not appropriate to automatically extend a plan (such as where the participant already had one plan extension and is still not contactable), the plan will become inactive until a plan review meeting can be arranged.

Additional improvements include developing a consistent point of contact; improved training for staff; improved communications and planning support materials for participants; face-to-face planning and plan implementation support.

The NDIA has also introduced three participant booklets covering "understanding the NDIS", "Planning" and "Using your NDIS Plan" to support current and future NDIS participants, their families and carers to understand each phase of the NDIS pathway.

NDIA has enhanced its 'My Portal', giving participants clearer visibility of plan start date and scheduled review date, a graphical display of funds with visibility of funding spent, allocated and available.

In addition, the NDIA introduced a simplification measure in mid-2018 to allow the plan review process to be completed more efficiently in the NDIA's Business System. A 'light touch plan review' is a form of unscheduled plan review and has the same legal effect as a plan review under section 48 of the NDIS Act. The difference is that if a light touch plan review is being completed, there are several steps in the Business System that are prefilled with the same information as the previous plan, so this makes the overall process faster to complete in the system. A light touch plan review is

only undertaken when information included at these prefilled steps, such as the participant's goals and living arrangements, does not require updating.

Unscheduled Plan Reviews:

The NDIA acknowledges that unscheduled plan review requests have not always been actioned in a timely manner. In 2018, the Commonwealth Ombudsman conducted an investigation into unscheduled or internal reviews and provided 26 recommendations and sub-recommendations. The NDIA accepted the Commonwealth Ombudsman's recommendations on the administration of reviews, and has implemented 23 of the 26 recommendations and sub-recommendations, and is close to implementation of the remaining three. These recommendations included system enhancements and the establishment of a National Review Team to capture and manage all unscheduled plan review requests. This new team commenced full operation on 4 March 2019.

The NDIA has also established a dedicated Internal Review Team (IRT) who are responsible for actioning all section 100 Internal Review requests which have been triaged by the National Review Team (NRT) and received by the NDIA from 15 April 2019.

Centralised Approach to Unscheduled Reviews - National Review Team (NRT)

The NRT, which was established in March 2019, uses a centralised model to coordinate all incoming plan review requests and streamlines allocation to the correct team in a timely manner.

The NRT currently has responsibility to:

- Undertake assessment, categorisation and early resolution of all participant initiated requests for review;
- Make all decisions within scope of section 48 decisions of the NDIS Act and create new plans for participants requiring a simple change to the plan on the system that doesn't require a plan build (referred to as a light touch plan reviews);
- Respond to and action section 100 internal reviews within the purview of section 48 of the NDIS Act;
- Manage internal quality assurance activities, training and process development;
- Respond to escalations associated with requests for review from a variety of stakeholders;
- Provide subject matter expertise on review policy and processes across the NDIA; and
- Implement the Ombudsman recommendations.

Since its inception the NRT has received more than 30,000 requests for an unscheduled plan review, an average of 1,326 requests per week, and has actioned around 90 per cent of all requests. Work is underway to progress the remaining 10 per cent in the pipeline for completion within legislative timeframes.

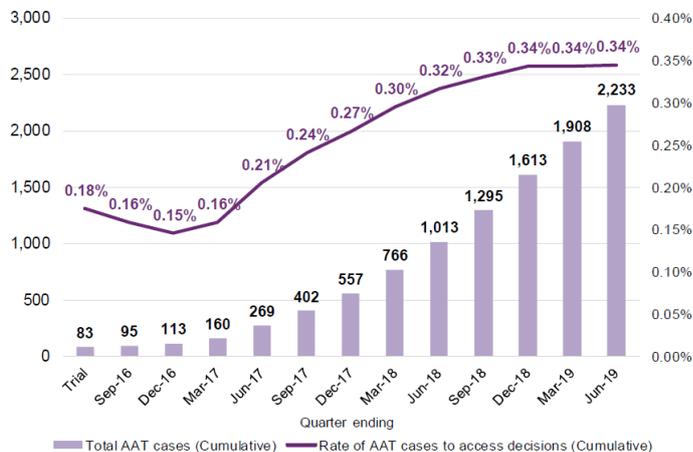
i) The incidence of appeals to the AAT and possible measures to reduce the number

As at 30 June 2019, the number of matters lodged with the AAT as a percentage of the number of participants, or specifically the number of access decisions being made by the Agency is 0.34 per cent. This is a relatively small percentage compared to other Commonwealth government departments and agencies, and is largely as a result of the roll-out of the Scheme nationally and the significant increase in the number of participants brought into the Scheme.

Number of AAT applications:

- 186 in 2016-17
- 745 in 2017-18
- 1,220 in 2018-19

Number and proportion of AAT cases over time (cumulatively)



In response to the increase in the number of matters going to the AAT for external review, the Agency established a dedicated team, AAT Applications and Decisions Division (AATADD), to implement an early resolution model for matters in the AAT. The aim of the early resolution model is to attempt to resolve matters as early in the AAT process as possible, or if resolution is not possible, to have matters well prepared and managed if they do proceed to a hearing.

Since 3 December 2018, all new applications from the AAT have been considered in line with the early resolution case management model. Early resolution case managers work closely with Applicants and their representatives to attempt to resolve the matter in advance of the first AAT case conference. Even if the matter cannot be resolved at that point, the approach to early resolution will continue throughout the process. Where a matter cannot be resolved and proceeds to a substantive AAT hearing, the AATADD ensures that the matter is well prepared, with all required evidence obtained, and a prospects advice and litigation strategy developed in line with the Agency’s model litigant obligations.

A strong early resolution focus continues to see over 92 per cent of matters resolved without the need for a substantive hearing. The average number of days to achieve resolution is now 58 days as opposed to 195 days for matters received prior to 3 December 2018.

j) The circumstances in which plans could be automatically rolled-over

The NDIS plan durations are determined based on individual participant circumstances. Plan durations are generally 12 to 24 months. However they can be shorter if there is a likelihood of changes to the participant’s function or circumstances.

The NDIS Act does not allow a participant plan to be “rolled over”. At plan review, a new plan must be approved. This ensures the participant has the correct supports to enable them to meet their goals and aspirations.

The removal of plan gaps enables funding to be available until such time as a plan review has been undertaken.

Another key improvement is the move to providing participants with longer plans. By the end of 2019 the NDIA will introduce options for 2 to 3 year plans or longer for participants who have more stable arrangements.

k) The circumstances in which longer plans could be introduced

The NDIA heard from participants and providers that participants who have stable lives and disabilities would like plans greater than 12 months in length. Nationally, the proportion of plans greater than 15 months in length has increased from 3.5 per cent in January 2019 to 7.7 per cent in July 2019.

The NDIA has undertaken initiatives to encourage LACs and planners to discuss and approve plans with longer plan durations, where appropriate.

A shift to longer-term plans provides participants with the disability support certainty they have identified as important to them. To support this the NDIA:

- Delivered service improvement training nationally (completed in June 2019);
- Implemented a pilot in Toowoomba and Coffs Harbour in 2018 to test and evaluate a number of pathway features, including a move to longer plan durations as the default.

Longer plan duration approach

When determining appropriate plan durations with participants, the NDIA considers a range of factors that may affect the participant. This includes the stability of the participant's life and the functional impacts of their disability, family situational risk, key life transition points such as leaving school, and involvement with other government service systems such as health, community services, or justice.

Examples of how this can work in practice include:

1. Participants with a life transition point, complex or unstable circumstances may be considered for plans 12 months or shorter in some circumstances.
2. Participants who have stable support needs and home lives may be considered for longer plan durations.

Since September 2018, the NDIA has been delivering training on service improvements to improve the participant pathway. Part of this training focuses on raising awareness of longer plan durations with NDIA Planners and LACs.

In January 2019, additional resources to support NDIA Planners and LACs determine appropriate plan durations were released. The NDIA is also undertaking further work to support NDIA planners and LACs to match plan duration to a participant's life circumstances. Updated guidance will be issued to planners and LACs regarding 2 to 3 year plans.

The NDIA will continue to respond to unexpected changes for participants with longer plan duration if circumstances change.

The Review of the NDIS Act may identify opportunities to improve participant planning and plan review processes.

I) The adequacy of the planning process for rural and regional participants

The NDIA is working to enhance the participant and provider pathway to ensure the NDIS is accessible and effective for all eligible Australians.

Early experience from NDIS trial sites and transition areas revealed some challenges for delivering disability supports to regional and remote communities, including remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In particular, disability support providers have reported the following challenges:

- Identification of individuals, children and families that may be eligible for the NDIS;
- Assisting individuals, children and families with pre-access and access processes;
- Coordinating planning meetings in culturally secure locations;
- Connection to providers and plan implementation;
- High costs of service delivery for geographically dispersed client; and
- Difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff.

To manage challenges in remote areas and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, NDIA has commenced interim contractual arrangements with the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector. This approach will be evaluated and a careful national rollout approach will be considered over the next 6 to 12 months.

To deliver on the outsourced functions, the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector has been engaged to deliver through three contract/program areas, aiming to:

- Improve provider confidence in the NDIS, increasing the number of providers entering the Scheme;
- Consider flexible remote service delivery models that support participant choice and control and maximise value-for-money; and
- Develop skilled local workforces, delivering efficient, sustainable supports for NDIS participants in regional, rural and remote locations.

The following three contracts/programs can be used individually or as a package:

- Remote Community Connectors: to connect the Agency to remote participants through community based organisations, and to identify and assist participants by working in partnership with mainstream services and Evidence, Access and Coordination and Planning to effectively test eligibility and reduce time taken for access decision. There are 23 contracts in place delivering to 218 communities, and 29 contracts pending to 276 communities in total across Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory.
- Evidence, Access and Coordination and Planning: to fund Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) /Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) to assist participants in acquiring the medical evidence/assessments required for eligibility. These organisations support the participant throughout the pre-planning and plan implementation process in understanding and translating the NDIS plan funding into the support services needed. There are eight contracts in place delivering in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

- Early Childhood Services – to fund AMS/ACCO to deliver placed-based services to children 0 to 6 years in remote locations in the absence of a Partner in the Community arrangement. There are five contracts currently being rolled out in Western Australia, and the NDIA are in the process of contracting organisations in the Northern Territory to deliver this model.

m) Any other related matters

Delivering a new participant pathway

The new NDIS Participant Pathway was progressively introduced between September 2018 and June 2019, with NDIA staff and partners receiving training in the new service improvements. These changes are helping the NDIA to deliver:

- Face-to-face pre-planning and plan implementation meetings as the default (where this is the participant's preference);
- A stronger focus on community, other government, informal and employment supports during pre-planning;
- Plan alignment meetings and stronger connections between planners and LACs, who will become the participant's consistent point of contact;
- Improved Easy English and planning communication products (these resources are now available in 11 languages other than English); and
- Improved training for LACs and planners.

These improvements have been designed to improve the NDIS planning process, leading to higher quality plans and an improved participant experience.

Improved NDIA plan format

The NDIA released an improved version of the NDIS participant plan in November 2018. This provides participants with a plan that is easier to understand and use. Some of the main changes were a clearer layout, language that is easier to understand, stronger alignment of the broader systems of supports to each participant goal, and a primary point of contact.

Improving staff and partners disability awareness

The NDIA has released Disability Learning Resources to assist staff and partners to prepare for more meaningful and empathetic conversations with participants during the planning process.

Three learning resources were developed: an online learning module; disability navigator (online portal for staff and partners providing access to disability awareness resources including disability snapshots and participant videos); and making the difference workshop.

Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) Approach

The NDIA is focused on eliminating the backlogs for children receiving NDIS plans. Providing early intervention at the earliest possible stage is critical to helping children. The Minister for the NDIS, Stuart Robert, announced a plan in June 2019 to resolve delays and backlogs for children with disability in accessing ECEI supports through the NDIS.

One of the key initiatives is to provide a standardised, interim six-month plan for participants who have been waiting for 50 days or longer. The roll out of this initiative commenced in South Australia on 12 August 2019, and will be rolled out to other parts of the country from 19 August 2019.

Measures include:

- New participants not categorised as complex and not transferring from an existing Commonwealth, state or territory disability program will be given a six months interim plan with a package value of \$10,000.
- Children transferring from an existing Commonwealth, state or territory disability program to the NDIS will receive an interim plan and funding package that will reflect their existing support levels. If that amount is lower than \$10,000 they will also receive the \$10,000 standardised interim plan for up to six months.

In addition, from early April 2019, a new ECEI information booklet for families was released to provide greater guidance on what families and carers can expect from the ECEI approach and Early Childhood Partners.

Hearing Service Stream

The NDIA has partnered with Hearing Australia to prioritise access to the NDIS for children from birth to six years of age with a newly diagnosed hearing loss. A dedicated hearing service stream commenced implementation in August 2018.

This supports children to move quickly from diagnosis to early intervention to minimise the risk of developmental delay. Hearing Australia assists families to test their eligibility and access the NDIS at the time of their initial appointment.

Hearing Australia also assists families of children with an existing hearing loss to access the NDIS at the time of their annual appointment.

In addition, work is ongoing to transition eligible clients within the Commonwealth's Hearing Services Program to the NDIS. This began in partnership with Hearing Australia at the beginning of March 2019. All eligible clients will transition by the end of June 2020.

Psychosocial Disability Service Stream

The Psychosocial Disability Stream has been developed with specialists and the mental health sector in recognition of the unique needs of people with psychosocial disability. It includes features such as more specific pre-planning; being supported by a trusted family member or adviser; interacting with a specialist planner who genuinely understands their disability; building an ongoing, empathetic and trust-based relationship with a LAC. It also recognises the episodic nature of psychosocial disability and proactively supports a recovery ethos. At full implementation, it is expected there will be 64,000 participants with psychosocial disability in the NDIS.

In November 2018, the NDIA commenced the progressive rollout of the Psychosocial Disability service stream in South Australia and Tasmania, and from 30 April 2019, streamlined access was available to prospective participants from mental health programs in all states and territories.

The NDIA delivered foundational psychosocial disability training for all members of the workforce who started prior to 1 July 2018. Nationally, around 3,466 staff and partners received this training. All new staff complete psychosocial disability training as part of their standard induction training.

The NDIA is developing a Psychosocial Disability Capability Framework to ensure participants with psychosocial disability have better access to planners and LACs who have the necessary skills and experience to support them.

Service enhancements – Skills and competency

The NDIA continue to deliver service enhancements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living in remote and very remote communities and people who identify as LGBTIQ+.

This includes developing further training for staff and partners focussed on improving the service delivery experience for diverse groups of people with disability.

Translation and interpreting services

In May 2019, a suite of resources was released providing information on how to access and use language and interpreting services for NDIA participants and providers. The resources were developed in consultation with sector representatives, including Translating and Interpreting Service National, the National Ethnic Disability Alliance, NDIA Participant Reference Group, and Amparo Advocacy.

National Community Connectors program

The NDIA has engaged local, community-based remote community connectors across Australia to assist with connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Cultural and Linguistically Diverse communities and remote communities. Community Connectors usually speak local community languages.

They perform a cultural brokerage role, and assist in building awareness about the NDIS. There are currently 23 organisations delivering community connection services to 218 remote communities across Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The Government has committed \$20 million to expand the National Community Connector Program over the next two years.