

National Patron:

Annette Ellis,

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Minister for Family and Community Services on Disabilities



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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Dear Secretary

We are writing to make a submission to the inquiry on the impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services.

The submission details Nican's experience of the funding process and the impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services.

The key points in our submission are that we feel the process was problematic in excluding our service type; that we experienced a lack of due process arising from the communication of funding decisions with the process and over a period of time; and that the outcome will mean the loss of a valuable high performing disability service in an area where there is significant undersupply for the NDIS. We have problems with the way we were notified and the information being provided to us and to other stakeholders.

Background

Nican provides a national information service with more than 4,000 sports, recreation, arts, travel and other opportunities in the one place. It's continuously updated. It's available in many ways – online, on Smartphones for iPhone and Android and by ringing us. A Google Adgrant means we come up quickly in search engines and our website has more than five million hits per annum. Nican provides a unique service in that we will personalise a search for an individual on request. Individuals contact Nican directly and we research their request and then provide them with specific information. Nican was funded as an information service by the Australian Government of Social Services.

Our online referral service is in demand and is experiencing rapid growth with 5,202,413 million hits in 2013 more than 15 times higher than 2010 however, and more importantly, there is an ongoing high level of enquiries for information services and last year our

personalised referral service continued to grow and we anticipate that demand for our service will continue to be high with the roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Nican exists to support people with disability to get active, to travel and to be part of community. There is compelling evidence which says that people with disability are disconnected from social and economic participation. People with disability don't volunteer, play or spectate in sport or get involved in the arts as much as others. It's a complex disconnect involving a lack of friends, incomes, confidence, transport links and information about what is available and how to access it. It means people are poorer, have fewer friends they can rely on and are disconnected in employment too.

While people's information needs have changed the information program has grown and moved with these changes.

Nican won a Google Adgrant in 2012. Google search handles over 1 billion searches per day, with 7.8 billion daily page views and there are 87.8 billion monthly worldwide searches conducted on Google sites.

Nican is highlighted if there is a Google search of 'disability tourism Australia' from anywhere in the world. Engagement with our website is expanding at an exponential rate. Unique visitors have tripled since 2010 and exceeded 140,000 unique visitors in 2013 and website views have gone from 300,000 per year in 2010 to over 4,000,000 now.

Additionally and importantly we had more than 1,300 direct enquiries in 2014. Our personalised traffic grew by more than 40% over last year with many people contacting Nican as an office of last resort having experience the service ring-around and still not landing the information they needed.

Furthermore the information service provided us with the capacity to leverage additional benefits for travelers with a disability and carers. We operate the Qantas Carer Concession Card which provides people with disabilities and carers with discounted flights to recognise the additional costs of travelling with a carer. In 2011 Nican gained an increase in the Qantas Carer Concession Card Discount from 10% to 50%.

Examples of ways the card has been used include people with terminal cancer needing to fly interstate to be with family; people with high level disability like quadriplegia who can't travel without a carer; as well as many parents of adult children with autism who can't travel unaided without significant risk to themselves and others.

Qantas operates the card through us so that the discount can be appropriately targeted by us as a disability organisation. There is no guarantee they will continue the card independently or join with another scheme - they have opted not to be part of the Companion Card Scheme run by the States and Territories.

Funding by DSS

Since 1988 Nican has received funding by the federal government through a number of grants streams including as a peak body and then as an information service provider.

For the last 4 years Nican has been offered Annual Contracts through a standalone program called the information activity for people with disability. We were consistently told over that period that the Department intended to put information activities to market. For that reason we focused on bolstering that side of the service; refreshing the website, introducing a smartphone App, actively marketing the service and continuing to build the database.

Nican has been re-contracted on this basis for 12 month contracts a total of four times since 2010. This is very poor practice and has limited our ability to plan.

In late 2013 the department requested access to our metrics over and above those already required under contract reporting obligations, for the purpose of preparing documents to go to market. We were cautious, as we believed this information would be used in the tender process whereby we would lose our competitive advantage in knowledge of the market. After an assurance by a departmental staff member that the information would not be supplied to any potential market competitors, we complied. This indication and action by the department strengthened our belief that the service would go to market and that the process of doing so was imminent.

Our annual contract for funding expired in June 2014. In anticipation of tendering in the open market we started making enquiries about the process in early 2014 only to be told mid-March the department would inform us of the future of the Information Activity in the 'near future'. In early May 2014 we were advised that we would be required to apply for funding through the 'A New Way of Working' Grants process. At this time, we also received an email stating that funding to the majority of current grant recipients for 6 months would occur and that we would receive a letter from the department in coming weeks detailing the specific arrangements that applied to our grant agreement. That letter never arrived, and our organisation did not appear on any of the lists available on the website. After inquiry with our departmental contact we were advised that we were on the list and this would be followed up and we would receive the contract extension shortly. Again this did not arrive and only after following up once more was it received. Upon returning the contract it then 'disappeared'. We were then asked if we had returned it and was asked to re-sign another contract and resend which we did, only to be advised the original had 'turned' up as it had been sitting in someone's inbox.

At no time during these exchanges were we advised that information services would not be funded under "A New Way of Working" DSS grants. We only learnt this after a very convoluted and exhaustive quest for answers about the grants program.

A staff member from Nican called the DSS grants hotline centre when the process opened and was told that our stream of grants were "on hold due to the appropriation bills being stalled in the Senate and more grants which cover Nican would be rolling out soon". We have subsequently learned that this was not the case and this was incorrect information.

We then made repeated attempts to clarify the situation, including further phone messages, emails and contacts with Departmental staff which did not give any indication that there would be no grants for information services. Nican was only able to establish this after a direct call to Minister Fifield's office on 30 June after the Grants had been opened some weeks. This limited our capacity to form consortiums and be competitive in the Grants process.

Until we made contact and prompted a phone call from Mitchell Cole, Branch Manager, Autism and Early Intervention Branch on 1 July 2014 Nican never received any indication that the Australian Government no longer saw a need for an information service for people with disability.

Until we were advised of being defunded via a phone call to a member of staff and an anonymous email sent in July 2014 we were never given any indication that the Government was no longer interested in information services and that we should make urgent changes to ensure our viability.

We believe this raises serious procedural concerns about the way the decision was made by the Australian Government and that these amount to prejudicial and commercially unfair treatment of Nican as an organisation.

We also believe that Nican also did not receive timely advice surrounding the Grants process and we were actively misled during the process.

The program guidelines released in early 2014 for DSS Grants under Disability and Carer Support indicated under section 2.1 that the Government would be continuing to retain the capacity to fund Organisations for services, including, but not limited to, those covered under the Disability Services Act 1986.

Information services are covered under the DSA meaning that we had a reasonable expectation that grants might be offered for these. Indeed for a number of years we had been repeatedly informed by the Department that the Government intended to put information services out to tender.

This has resulted in us continuing to build and bolster the information services side of our organisation in order to ensure that they were competitive in any open tender.

Incorrect reasons for defunding

The advice we have received from the DSS grants team acknowledges that the Information Activity has over the years of operation enabled greater access to information for people with disability.

However, it claims the objectives of the program – to provide an information service on recreation, tourism, sport and the arts – in its current form, are largely being met by other

organisations, businesses and government departments, through a multitude of specialist and mainstream websites.

This is not correct and arises from key misunderstandings about the type of services currently provided through information services, the demand for these services and the nature of the market.

Specialised, accurate, national information about sport, recreation, arts, equipment, accommodation and services for people with disability is NOT available in the mainstream.

The need and demand is higher than ever before and is clearly not being met by mainstream organisations. Our service demand has grown tenfold since 2010. The number of web hits has grown from under 300,000 in 2010 to 5,202,413 million searches for information last year. Our personalised contact in service delivery has grown 40%.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is creating *more* demand for information about transport, accommodation and recreation options for people with disability. We are now getting calls from NDIA Personal Planners and Support Coordinators.

The need is not being largely met by other organisations. Instead there is a mess of incomplete, unfunded, out of date sites and services and an ongoing need for a stable *national* service that is actually maintained. There are small information services managed by volunteers or by State organisations but none of them have the reach or durability of Nican's database.

We are not just a website and this is an important distinction between us and other information services. Our information service has been designed to also meet the needs of people who are elderly or have barriers to the Internet. The information service is more than a website. We provide personalised telephone help to people who can't use the Internet easily or organise information easily – the elderly, people with cognitive disability and intellectual disability are key users of Nican.

State and Territory based services are patchy and they do not meet the needs of people with disability planning travel across jurisdictions.

Nican is also not limited to people planning holidays or optional activities in their lives. Among the requests we get are to assist with:

- People stranded without access to emergency repairs on a wheelchair or wanting to know where to buy a custom wheelchair or an adaption for a telephone handset or communication equipment
- People wanting specialised services who don't know where to start looking
- People with disability travelling for work
- People travelling due to a family crisis or for a funeral
- Parents wanting to find an arts group in their local area which welcomes children with an intellectual disability
- Parents of children with a disability wanting to get them involved in sport

- People with a problem while travelling, such as needing to find an alternate hotel because the one they have booked has a step in the shower, despite advertising that it has an accessible room.
- People with disability and carers planning travel for essential medical reasons
- People with disability and carers planning travel to reunite with family
- Parents needing to travel with a child with a disability as the parents relocate with a new job
- People with a disability wanting to join a local social group because they are lonely and want to make friendships

People with disability and carers require a seamless path of travel, which often means providing advice and support on travel and accommodation options at both the departure and the arrival point. A national service is needed to do this.

There is a great deal of market failure in the provision of accessible information to people with disability. Hotels advertised as accessible are often not really accessible when people show up. Services like renting a car with hand-controls or an accessible van are not readily located without the right contacts.

Nican’s staff includes people with disability who know the sector, have direct experience of overcoming barriers to travel as well as having built an extensive library of resources relating to everything from where to hire an accessible beach chair to youth clubs which welcome people with disability.

Additionally, Nican’s website is AAA Accessible to Australian standards meaning that people who are blind and vision impaired and use a screen-reader program can use the site. Few mainstream sites offer this service.

Misleading information about the service provided to stakeholders:

Nican have now made a range of representations on the defunding of the service as have worried cardholders and members. These include letters to MP’s and Senators and to State and Territory Ministers to make them aware of the withdrawal of services in their jurisdictions.

A number of these representations have prompted responses which have been passed back to Nican. In reviewing these we’ve become concerned that Government is providing information to some stakeholders that misrepresents our position.

Government Statement	Facts
When NICAN was first established in 1991, there was only a small number of online information websites available for people with disability, hence the reason the Government first funded it was to fill the gap in providing these services.	Nican is <i>not</i> just an online database and wasn’t funded to be one – that’s the whole point. We support people through a 1800 number who cannot easily access the internet due to being blind, having an intellectual or cognitive

Government Statement	Facts
<p>However, with the advances in technology and changes in the way people now produce, access and use information, there has been significant growth in the online disability space. To that end, there are now a large number of websites that include information about disability-specific services and, in some cases, cover issues broader than the areas of recreation, tourism, sport and the arts targeted under the initial Information Activity programme</p> <p>Examples include (www.accesswa.com.au); : Information on Disability and Education Awareness Services Inc. - www.ideas.org.au; d-ability - www.d-ability.org; and Brainlink - www.brainlink.org.au.</p>	<p>disability or who are elderly.</p> <p>The other databases listed are purely online, regionally focussed or specific to a specific diagnostic group and they are also less comprehensive than Nican.</p> <p>For instance – IDEAS is mainly services in NSW; d-ability is a very patchy and small database which includes overseas services; and Western Australian Disability Services Site "Access WA" is good but is only available online and with coverage of one State.</p> <p>The need that people with disability have is to be able to access quality information at all stages of their journey. Nican’s website also reaches a AA accessibility rating under the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines which means it is accessible to people using screen readers and needing web access whereas many other mainstream sites are not.</p>
<p>The travel concession card was independently funded by Qantas itself and has never relied on funding from the programme directly.</p>	<p>This is wrong and disingenuous. The Qantas Carer Concession Card is <i>not</i> funded by Qantas.</p> <p>It is operated by Nican as a value added service; funded by a small user pays fee and has been operating as part of our service for more than a decade.</p> <p>Nican are able to do this because we have the information service but if the office closes then we will be unable to administer it.</p> <p>Like many community organisations we offer other services off the back of our funding and we’ve actually been encouraged to be innovative and to find ways to extend our services that aren’t Govt dependent.</p> <p>It is highly disingenuous to claim that you can defund an organisation without those kinds of services falling away.</p> <p>It’s like taking all of the NRMA’s insurance</p>

Government Statement	Facts
	<p>business away and expecting it to still offer a full roadside assistance service.</p> <p>The Scheme has been entrusted to Nican we have operated it since it's inception. We will work to ensure existing cards are honoured but there is no guarantee that Qantas will continue the scheme in house or with another organisation.</p>
<p>The decision to withdraw Government funding was first announced in July last year. The Department has been working closely with NICAN and its project Coordinator, Mr Craig Wallace in transitioning from Government support since this time.</p>	<p>The Department has <i>not</i> been working with Nican in any way since funding was withdrawn. Nican only discovered it had been defunded after repeated inquiries and then received an anonymous email informing us of the defunding decision. Nican was then urged to be part of the New Way of Working with Grants process despite this process having no funding for disability information services. The Department has not met with or even contacted Nican to support a transition.</p>

The timing and scheduling of DSS Grants

The Disability and Carer Service Improvement and Sector Support Grants, which opened following our defunding, were for “Disability Representative Organisations” and “Community Capacity Building”.

These are clearly a long way from Nican’s core information services although we attempted to find a fit.

Nican did apply for funding under the New Way of Working with Grants process. We made several applications under different pools.

We applied through the community capacity building tranche one as an information service; and two others for allied projects which of themselves are not sufficient to keep the organisation solvent. We made the linked nature of the applications clear.

Nican was advised late last year that the Department had decided not to fund the information service but to fund a smaller project.

This proposal was for a specific project, called Know Before You Go, which is designed to develop a toolkit as an online training resource, to seed our Know Before You Go approach with other organisations and build a provider community. It’s an exciting project but not a new sustainable ongoing program.

The funding in this proposal will cover the delivery costs for the project such as the redevelopment of the tools and providing seed funding to other organisations but would not be able to keep Nican's doors open until we transition to work as an information, linkages and capacity building service under the National Disability Insurance Scheme which is where we feel the services we provide now fits.

We clearly indicated in the grant proposal the project was linked to our application to provide information and referral services and contingent on our ability to keep Nican's doors open in some form. The grant proposal does not include extensive administration – it is mostly money out the door.

This decision is another example of the poor decision making within the grants process. They have provided a project grant to an organisation that they have also defunded and which therefore potentially can't deliver should alternate funding not be found.

When Nican began a campaign of representations to the Minister seeking to reverse the decision the Departments response was to offer to bring the project grant forward.

While we appreciated that offer it is not a useful one as it potentially puts us in a position of committing to deliver a project through an organisation, which potentially may close due to another decision by the same Department. We of course have diligently chosen not to place our organisation in this position.

The Department has refused to provide a funding bridge to Nican to the NDIS. This is disappointing.

This decision is a cut to services needed under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). There will be a significant shortfall of services such as ours when the NDIS Tier 2 (now known as Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) supports) is rolled out in 2016. The recently released ILC framework consultation paper highlights the need to fund services such as Nican, specifically those that link to mainstream services, provide information, assist to improve choice and control, social and community inclusion, peer support for people with a disability, families and carers. The ILC intends to reach beyond people with individual funding packages and work as a prevention tool for people on the borderline of needing funding packages.

The current decision means that in 16 months time an information service will be needed to be redeveloped from scratch with a significant start up cost. It is baffling that Government would withdraw now knowing that there is an undersupply of information for the NDIS.

This decision also alienates access to information for people who fall outside the NDIS. The need for information on inclusive opportunities does not stop when you are 65.

There has been no transition plan and it is unclear what will happen to clients as the service closes. We have asked Government to help identify who our clients will transition to, however we have not had a response. We are not aware of a comparable national service.

We would have been happy to see the service go to market but we are surprised by the decision to simply walk away from information altogether on the eve of the NDIS. The Commonwealth is withdrawing from a key disability service prematurely which is what it is criticising some States and Territories for doing.

Conclusion

The defunding of Nican and the DSS Grants process highlight a range of issues for the inquiry.

There were serious flaws in the information provided to existing organisations; the information provided to stakeholders by the assessment centre; the assessment of grant applications linked to organisational viability and the fragile nature of community organisations.

Key stakeholders including Members of Parliament have been provided with incorrect information about our service in response to constituency representations. The defunding has been carried out in a careless and disrespectful way with an anonymous note sent to a trusted partner organisation after 26 years of service. A member of staff was informed over the phone of the defunding decision rather than a formal communication with the Executive Director. We have not been supported to transition clients or provided with any places to transition them too.

The decision itself is flawed and counterproductive. It will leave a serious gap in service, which will need to be reinvented by the National Disability Insurance Agency in just a few months time. It will waste a great service, which has built up more than 26 years of experience, online, and paper holdings about disability access and travel just as the NDIS arrives and people need service information.

Thanks for considering our submission. We are happy to discuss the submission or appear before the Hearing. Please contact myself or Craig Wallace, Marketing and Projects Manager

Yours sincerely

Suzanne Bain-Donohue
Executive Director
Nican