

Government Senators' Dissenting Report

Introduction

1.1 Coalition Senators reject the two recommendations from the Health Select Committee's 3rd Interim Report (the Report).

1.2 From the outset, Coalition Senators once again reiterate the waste of taxpayer money and lack of direction of the Health Select Committee's work as it duplicates the role of the Senate Community Affairs Committee. The issues raised in the Report clearly fall under the responsibility of the portfolios relevant to the Community Affairs Committee and no compelling reason has been provided to date as to why this separate committee is necessary.

Recommendation 1

1.3 Coalition Senators note that further consultation is underway with the hearing community about the findings of the scoping study into Australian hearing before making any decisions on future ownership.

1.4 The report itself quotes the Department of Finance's summary of the findings of the scoping study:

The concerns raised by stakeholders during the scoping study process are closely related to issues being considered as part of the introduction of the NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme]. Regardless of the future ownership of Australian Hearing, these issues will need to be addressed as part of the NDIS transition planning.¹

1.5 Given the Government has not made a decision on the ownership of Australian Hearing and the consultation is ongoing, the Committee should not pre-empt the outcome. Therefore, Coalition Senators reject Recommendation 1.

Recommendation 2

1.6 Coalition Senators note that the Government has provided ample information and clarity about the work done on the transition of the Hearing Services Program.

1.7 As part of the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), it was agreed to transition existing state and Commonwealth funded programs that provide support to people with disability to the NDIS. One of these programs is the Australian Government Hearing Services Program (the Program), which will be

1 Senate Select Committee on Health, Third Interim Report 'Australian Hearing: too important to privatise', 17 September 2015, p. 15, paragraph 2.58.

transitioned in part to the NDIS by 2019-20. Moving eligible clients to the NDIS will mean they have more choice and control over the services they need. Interim arrangements are in place to allow NDIS clients to access the Program, while existing program clients continue to receive services in the usual way.

1.8 To assist the transition, the Office of Hearing Services (the Office) in the Department of Health has:

- Provided information to existing service providers regarding the interim arrangements.
- Placed a number of fact sheets including Questions and Answers on the website www.hearingservices.gov.au.
- In partnership with the Department of Finance and Department of Social Services, held 3 information sessions in June 2015 that targeted those who had been involved in the Scoping Study process. A copy of the PowerPoint presentation and summary of the information sessions is available on the website.
- Conducted an open registration process for those interested or who may be impacted by the transition to attend a Transition Workshop. The Workshops were conducted in August and September 2015 in partnership with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and Department of Social Services.
- Visited NDIS trial sites in ACT, SA and WA to hear feedback from planners and participants.
- Met with key advocacy groups to discuss in further detail specific concerns.
- Sent letters to those clients who may be eligible for the NDIS to inform them about the transition arrangements.
- Reviewed submissions and considered feedback from the information sessions from various groups and individuals detailing their concerns and/or views about the transition which has identified important packages of work to be undertaken to support the transition.

1.9 It was clear from the information sessions and workshops that stakeholders have various concerns about changes to the existing system and what these will mean for the experience and service provided to clients, particularly for infants and young children. Concerns and issues raised by stakeholders will be considered in transition planning and can be summarised in the following key themes:

- Maintaining current speed of access to paediatric services and the quality of those services, including appropriately trained and qualified clinical staff
- Monitoring the application of the NDIS access criteria and provision for any Hearing Services Program clients who are ineligible for the NDIS
- Ensuring that NDIA planners have appropriate information about reasonable and necessary supports for hearing loss

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- Maintaining a national clinical data collection for all clients receiving government funded hearing services
 - Ensuring that any new arrangements continue to provide for the monitoring of children at risk of permanent hearing loss
 - Maintaining access to expert advice on the appropriateness of hearing equipment in schools
 - Preserving access to services for clients in rural and remote areas
 - Ensuring that there is active engagement with key stakeholders

1.10 Stakeholders involved in the consultations to date include representatives from existing contracted service providers, hearing practitioners, parents of children with hearing loss, early intervention service providers, hearing loss and early intervention services advocacy groups for both adults and children, representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy groups, representatives from rural and remote service delivery agencies, researchers, device manufacturers, and representatives from hearing resource centres.

1.11 The broad mix of stakeholders has enabled wide ranging discussion regarding service delivery considerations, including for rural and remote clients and the unique challenges faced in these areas, as well as to draw on the experience of those who have used the current hearing program and their perceptions of change with some services moving to the NDIS.

1.12 The Office will now develop a Transition Plan that details the activities and work that will be undertaken to address the key concerns raised by stakeholders. The NDIA will be a key partner in this Transition Plan. A Communications Strategy will also be developed to support the Transition Plan. These documents will be placed on the website, along with further updates and opportunities for stakeholders to be involved in the activities needed to support the transition.

Recommendation 3

1.13 Coalition Senators recommend the Government continue the methodical, transparent process of transitioning hearing services to the NDIS.

Senator Sean Edwards
Liberal Senator for South Australia

Senator Zed Seselja
Liberal Senator for Australian Capital Territory

Senator John Williams
Nationals Senator for New South Wales