

# Hearing services in the NDIS

*Translated into plain language by Deafness Forum of Australia*

A Parliamentary committee held a series of public hearings in 2017 to look into Hearing services in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Between 16,000 to 20,000 people with hearing impairment that is their primary disability will join the NDIS by 2019-2020. This is a tiny fraction of people who will be part of the NDIS. It is an even smaller fraction of people in Australia who live with hearing impairment.

This new report by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme said in its introduction, "Some extremely concerning issues have emerged and need to be resolved..."

The report made six recommendations that you can read in the following pages. This report is not the finish of the committee's inquiry. The committee is waiting for the National Disability Insurance Scheme to publish its early intervention reference packages. The final report will look at the reference packages and extra issues raised by people with the committee. Under the NDIS, early intervention support will be given to some children and adults to reduce the life long impact of their hearing impairment. It will give support at the earliest possible stage. Early intervention support is also supposed to reduce the cost of a person's future needs for supports; and this will save money for the NDIS.

## **Moving services into the NDIS**

The Commonwealth, state and territory programs that provide services and supports to people who are deaf or hard of hearing and under the pension age are being moved into the NDIS.

There are four Commonwealth programs that will be affected. They are:

- The Hearing Services Program that is funded by the Department of Health. Some of its services will be moved to the NDIS. People who are in the NDIS will have them funded by their NDIS personal packages. When the NDIS reaches full national roll out by 2019–20, some Hearing Services Program clients under 65 years of age will transition to the NDIS.
- The National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service funded by the Department of Social Services. Funds for people under 65 years will be given to the NDIS so that people in the NDIS can purchase the service using their funded packages.

- Remote Hearing and Vision Services for Children. These services in regional and remote places across Australia are funded by the Department of Social Services. It is a small program for young people up to 18 years of age. It is delivered by The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children via remote service delivery methods. It is expected that most of these children will be eligible for the NDIS. The program is to be moved in full to the NDIS.
- Better Start for Children with Disability. This program is for children with developmental disabilities. Developmental disabilities cause many difficulties in certain areas of life, especially in language, mobility, learning, self-help, and independent living. Developmental disabilities can be detected early, and affect all areas of a child's development. Under the Better Start program, eligible children under the age of six can get early intervention funding up to \$12,000 over two years. There are 6,000 children in this program. A quarter of them have a primary disability of hearing impairment or deaf blindness. It is expected that most children will join the NDIS. The program is to be moved in full to the NDIS.

State and territory support programs for deaf and hard of hearing people, including early intervention programs are also moving into the NDIS. These programs were mostly delivered by the non-government sector, which used to receive block funding to provide a range of services. Block funding was an arrangement where governments gave grants to organisations to provide services to people with disability. Under the NDIS, it is now the person with disability who gets the funding and decides where to spend it. This is called individualised funding and it is supposed to give choice and control to an individual.

The committee said it was concerned that as government programs are moved into the NDIS, some people might be left with no services. It is not clear how services will be delivered to people not eligible for the NDIS. The committee wants all governments to explain to the community how they will provide services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing who are not in the NDIS.

### **Eligibility criteria**

The committee's report looked at the criteria for a deaf or hard of hearing person to be eligible to join the NDIS.

The committee found that there were two main issues. Firstly, the lack of publicly available information on the criteria that the NDIS will use to decide if a person is eligible. The second point was what would happen to the large number of deaf or hard of hearing people who would not be allowed to join the NDIS.

Most of the people and organisations that wrote submissions or spoke to the committee said that eligibility should not be based on a report by an audiologist, which measures hearing but cannot show the effect hearing loss can have on a person's life. Deafness Forum of Australia said in its submission to the inquiry,

Eligibility for the NDIS should not be based on hearing threshold levels alone. This measure does not provide any information on the impact of the hearing loss on a person's ability to undertake activities, or participate in employment or socially. An average hearing threshold level can be misleading if viewed in isolation especially if the person has other disabilities. When a person has their hearing assessed the determination of a hearing threshold level is only one component of the assessment process. Audiological assessment includes a broad range of information gathering including, a discussion of the impact of the hearing loss on the person's functioning, a discussion of the individual's needs and goals, as well as a diagnostic hearing assessment to determine the degree and type of hearing loss.

The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children told the inquiry that the Federal Government must make sure that the provision of free and universally available access to hearing services is not reduced with the full NDIS rollout. It said,

Any change to eligibility criteria will necessitate that the Government consider alternative arrangements for those young adults (under 26) with less complex hearing needs who are currently CSO clients eligible for services under the Hearing Services Program but who may be ineligible for services under the NDIS. This is an issue that requires Government policy consideration in light of its promise that no current recipients of Hearing Services would be worse off under the transition from the Hearing Services Program to the NDIS. Hearing services and funding should not go backwards, as appears to be happening under the NDIS. Australia will lose its reputation as a world leader in hearing services and research, to the detriment of our population under the current policy settings.

### **An early intervention pathway**

Margaret Dewberry is an expert adviser to Deafness Forum of Australia. She told the committee,

At the moment, Australian Hearing generally does not do the diagnosis. That is done through hospital systems, particularly for newborns, where it is certainly done in hospital systems, and perhaps

community health or something like that for older children. From there they ring Australian Hearing. It is as simple as that. You tell Australian Hearing the age of your child. If that child is under 26, they are eligible. They might ask about their residency or citizenship status because you have to be an Australian citizen or permanent resident to be eligible. That information is taken verbally, and that is the end of the story of the eligibility check.

With the NDIS there are many more steps to make sure you meet the criteria and so on. That will slow things down, and that is the concern. We want children to be diagnosed and go immediately to intervention.

The NDIS does not yet have a guided pathway to help parents, which can lead to delays that did not occur before the introduction of the NDIS. For example, before the introduction of the NDIS, there was no waiting period for early intervention in Victoria for families with children who are deaf. Under the NDIS, it has become a complicated and time-consuming approval process. Parents of newly diagnosed children often have no experience with hearing impairment. They need support to understand the options available to their child. What is needed is a central point of contact for parents of newly diagnosed children.

This has been a short interpretation of some of the important things that are in this report on the inquiry into Hearing services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. You can read and download the report from the Deafness Forum website at <http://deafnessforum.org.au/>

The six recommendations made in the report are next:

### **Recommendation 1**

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The National Disability Insurance Agency – the organisation that runs the NDIS – should work out the number and needs of deaf and hearing impaired people who are not eligible for the NDIS. The Agency should report on its findings in 12 months time.

### **Recommendation 2**

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The National Disability Insurance Agency should immediately look into the cases of people with hearing impairment who were not allowed to enter the Scheme. Some of these people might now be eligible under the updated entry guidelines for the NDIS. The Agency should test their eligibility again using these updated guidelines.

### **Recommendation 3**

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All governments should explain to the community how they will provide services for people who are deaf and hard of hearing who are not in the NDIS.

#### **Recommendation 4**

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Australian Hearing should be made the independent referral pathway for access to early intervention services under the NDIS. It should be properly funded to take on this new role.

#### **Recommendation 5**

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The National Disability Insurance Agency should make early intervention packages take into account all the needs of individuals and include:

- proper funding in a person's NDIS package that is right for a person's unique needs; and not fixed at an amount for an average person.
- funding for other services that might not be core supports but are important for them to live a quality life.
- Payments to approved service providers for the necessary and reasonable services they gave to a person between the time of diagnosis and when their NDIS plan was approved and activated.

#### **Recommendation 6**

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The National Disability Insurance Agency should urgently finalise, publish and introduce the early intervention reference packages that relate to people who are deaf or hearing impaired.

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