



## **Australian Government**

### **Department of Health**

#### **Update from the Office of Hearing Services**

#### **The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and interactions with the Hearing Services Program (the program).**

As part of the communication strategy for transitioning to the NDIS, the Office is committed to keeping the sector informed and up to date. This article is the first in an ongoing series which provides audiologists with the latest information available on the roll-out of the NDIS and its impact on hearing services delivered under the program.

#### ***What is the NDIS?***

The NDIS was introduced into legislation in 2013 and is administered through the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). The NDIS enables people to access disability supports using an individualised and life-long approach through the development of a plan package. The support provided varies depending on individual circumstances, and supports are agreed between the participant and their NDIA planner for what is reasonable and necessary to achieve their health, wellbeing or independent living needs.

For eligible NDIS clients with hearing needs, this approach means that support provided is not based on a set number of services or types of devices available, but rather that funding is provided for the participant to access services and devices that are considered reasonable and necessary for their individual circumstances, based on the evidence available. This can include identifying links to existing services, such as hearing services under the program.

For the first three years, the NDIS is being introduced in stages at selected trial site locations to ensure operations and services are ready to be delivered effectively and sustainably.

The NDIS started in:

- Tasmania; South Australia; the Barwon area of Victoria; and the Hunter area in New South Wales on 1 July 2013 on 1 July 2014
- Australian Capital Territory; the Barkly region of Northern Territory; the Perth Hills area of Western Australia on 1 July 2014; and
- Nepean Blue Mountains area in New South Wales on 1 July 2015.

On 25 September 2015, it was announced that Townsville, Charters Towers and Palm Island would be early transition sites for the NDIS which would enable up to 1600 eligible participants to have approved plans in place by 1 April 2016. This early transition will target eligible children and young people under 18 years of age in Townsville and Charters Towers, and all eligible participants on Palm Island.

Further roll out of the scheme in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory will begin progressively from July 2016. Full-scheme roll out will occur by 2019-20.

***What does the NDIS mean for the program?***

The program is one of 16 Commonwealth programs to be transitioned either in-part or in-full to the NDIS by 2019-20. Not all clients of the program will transition to the NDIS so the program is considered an in-part transition.

As a matter of general principle, when fully transitioned, all NDIS services are expected to be provided in a fully contestable market. A contestable market will enable greater choice and flexibility in service and support for the client. However, the NDIA will take into consideration stakeholder feedback and other factors (such as market readiness) before deciding which delivery models for hearing services best serve the interests of NDIS participants with hearing loss.

***Which program clients will transition to the NDIS?***

Eligibility for the NDIS is not means tested. The majority of people who receive services under the voucher component of the program are over 65 years of age and are therefore ineligible to transition to the NDIS. These clients will continue to receive services through the program in the usual way, now and into the future.

Clients are eligible to become an NDIS participant if they are under 65 years of age and have a permanent disability which substantially reduces their ability to participate effectively in daily activities, or perform tasks or actions without some type of support or assistance. The NDIA is developing further guidance on thresholds for hearing loss which will guide NDIA planners in assessing whether an applicant meets the criteria to participate in the NDIS. Program clients are encouraged to apply for the NDIS when available in their location, noting that some trial site locations are phasing in participants based on their age. The progressive inclusion of program clients in the NDIS will support a smooth transition and also provides valuable information on the numbers of clients who are likely to transition by 2019-20.

If an NDIS participant is identified by their NDIA planner as requiring hearing services available under the program, they will be entitled to the same range of services as other program clients. Program legislation was changed in 2104 to enable this arrangement. Some 29 NDIS participants living in trial areas (who are only eligible for the voucher component of the program because they are NDIS participants) are currently receiving hearing services through the program now.

An NDIA planner may determine that additional hearing services or devices are reasonable and necessary that are **not** supplied by the program (for example a voucher client cannot generally receive both a hearing aid and an assistive listening device). The NDIA planner will assist the participant to find an NDIS registered provider for those additional services or supports (which will be included in the participant's funded plan).

Once a person is accepted as a participant in the NDIS they can choose to remain in that scheme once they reach 65 years of age.

***How is the Office planning for the transition of hearing services to the NDIS?***

The Office, together with the Department of Social Services and the NDIA (as key partners), commenced planning for the transition of hearing services to the NDIS in 2015.

The Office recently conducted NDIS transition planning workshops in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth, to consult with key stakeholders groups and share information regarding the transition, as well as seeking input as to what the key questions and areas of concern there may be regarding the introduction of the NDIS. This input is being used to inform the Transition Plan which will support the smooth transition of clients. A further planning workshop will be held in Adelaide on 23 October 2015.

There is considerable work progressing on the details to support the transition, including changes to the existing legislative framework that supports the program.

***What quality safeguards will the NDIS provide for its participants receiving hearing services?***

An important consideration identified for transition is Quality and Safeguards. As this is considered a priority work package, together with eligibility for the NDIS and the newborn pathway from screening to services, the Office has already commenced some preliminary work.

A national NDIS Quality and Safeguards Framework (the framework) is being developed to provide NDIS participants consistent standards and safeguards of quality service delivery wherever they live in Australia. However, it will operate at a relatively high level given that it will apply to all disability services. While it is not expected to include any hearing sector specific requirements, the framework may adopt by reference sector specific quality frameworks which are in place and supported by that sector. For that reason and also to better define the role of the Office, consultation commenced earlier this year on a potential Service Delivery Framework for hearing services.

A proposed set of underpinning principles which could apply at the service provider level was released by the Office for consultation in June 2015. In anticipating the need to align hearing care practice with these principles, the hearing sector, including practitioner professional bodies and industry organisations, has been working collaboratively on developing a set of National Practice Standards for hearing care practitioners. These Standards will ensure clients receiving hearing services have access to high quality services delivered by appropriately qualified hearing practitioners, regardless of whether they are NDIS, program eligible or private clients. It is expected that the draft Standards will be released for consultation and finalised by mid-2016.

***How are regional and remote services being managed in the transition to NDIS?***

The delivery of hearing services to regional and remote areas of Australia will continue to be a priority from a Health policy perspective under the NDIS and the program. The NDIA is monitoring market performance nationally, including in rural and remote areas. Close surveillance of possible market failure and service gaps will help to ensure that risks to service delivery are addressed. As part of the transition, the Office is also considering opportunities to leverage delivery of hearing services using existing providers, regardless of the funding source.

The NDIA is currently developing a service delivery strategy for rural and remote areas, which includes the opportunity to drive service delivery improvements and strategies to link with current and existing providers to support improved coordination of services where thin markets are identified.

***What will the transition to NDIS mean for Australian Hearing?***

The majority of younger children currently receiving services from Australian Hearing through the Community Service Obligations (CSO) program are expected to transition to the NDIS. Current program arrangements mean that these clients will continue to receive CSO services from Australian Hearing until legislative changes occur.

The Government has made no decision regarding the future ownership of Australian Hearing. It is important to recognise that the transition of eligible program clients to the NDIS will occur regardless of the ownership arrangements for Australian Hearing.

***How do audiologists best support clients who apply for the NDIS?***

NDIA planners expect that many people entering the scheme with hearing loss will have had previous assessments (including an audiogram), and will use this information where possible to make decisions about eligibility. In some cases the planner may seek additional information to support the planning process, including diagnostic information and/or demonstrating reduced functional capacity – for example that the person is unable to, or requires assistance to, communicate. The planner may also approach a provider to provide assessment and formal opinion regarding recommended supports, in order to inform planning. The Speech Pathology Australia website [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) provides further useful information for speech pathologists which is broadly applicable to audiologists.

***How can I keep up to date on what's happening with the transition of hearing services to the NDIS?***

The Office is mindful of the need to ensure that hearing impaired Australians, particularly the most vulnerable, continue to have access to high quality, Government-funded hearing services. This remains an important consideration as we continue to update stakeholders and other interested parties with respect to the transition of services to the NDIS and how this will influence and shape the delivery of hearing services in Australia.

Further information on transition of hearing services to the NDIS, including a write up of the transition planning workshops, is available on the program website at [www.hearingservices.gov.au](http://www.hearingservices.gov.au). You can also subscribe to the RSS feed which is routinely updated with information on program changes.

The NDIS website also includes further information on access to services, including eligibility, at [www.ndis.gov.au](http://www.ndis.gov.au)