

# Improving the NDIS Participant and Provider Experience

26 February 2018

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# Executive Summary

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS/the Scheme) pathways describe how participants, their families and carers and providers interact with the Scheme and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA/the Agency).

The NDIS introduces a significant shift from a welfare-based system of support for people with disability to an insurance approach that works with people with disability and invests to improve their long-term outcomes. The NDIS is part of a broader ecosystem, where families, community and other government services support people with disability to be included socially and economically while working to improve their lifetime outcomes, helping them live an ordinary life.

The NDIS Pathway Review (the Review) was implemented to address feedback from participants, families, carers and providers that, for many, their experience had fallen short of their expectations of the Scheme. More specifically, it was a response to stakeholder concerns that the use of telephone planning did not promote the development of an informed relationship about a person's needs and requirements against their desired outcomes.

Announced in April 2017, the Review focused on engaging with participants, providers and significant disability organisations through workshops, and one-on-one interviews with state and territory officials and frontline staff to:

- understand the current experience;
- work with participants, providers and other stakeholders to generate ideas for improvement; and
- redesign and validate the new participant and provider pathways.

Throughout the Review, the Agency heard from more than 300 participants, providers and other stakeholders, including more than 70 in-depth stories from individual participants, family members and carers. The Independent Advisory Council was also a contributor to the Agency's learning and understanding of the participant and provider pathways experience.

Overall, participants wanted more transparency and to feel more engaged, understood and supported throughout their engagement. Participants also emphasised the need for easy-to-understand, clear and accessible communications.

Further work is underway to tailor the participant pathway to meet the additional needs of people with disability in specific population groups such as young children, people with more complex needs, people with psychosocial disability, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living in remote and very remote communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Tailored pathways recognise that some participants may need help to navigate the pathway; especially-skilled or knowledgeable planners to work with them; or information that is culturally sensitive and/or accessible.

Central to the new participant pathway is the commitment to face-to-face engagement for all NDIS plan development, provided this is the participant's preference. Other key features of the participant and provider pathways are:

- *A consistent point of contact*, who plays a key role in empowering participants to achieve their identified outcomes. Participants will maintain a relationship with their Local Area Coordinator (LAC) throughout the participant pathway, if that is their choice;
- *A stronger focus on the broader system of supports for people with disability*, including improved interactions with other government services such as health, education and transport, to promote greater inclusion and a sense of community for people with disability;
- *Communication which emphasises the objectives of the NDIS*, with a clear focus on outcomes and goals during planning discussions;
- *Information that is clear, consistent and available in accessible formats*, such as Easy English, braille, and languages other than English; and
- *An improved NDIS portal and tools*, combined with more straightforward processes that will reduce administrative cost for providers.

The first pilot of the new approach to planning commenced in December 2017. The Agency will continue to listen carefully to participants, providers and other stakeholders, and to provide regular updates on the progress that is made.

Provider pathway improvements in the areas of learning about the Scheme and operating in the Scheme are underway as a result of this Review.

In the main, providers wanted clearer and more consistent information and policy guidance, "to be able to resolve issues more easily", as well as improvements to the portal and payment processes.

An improved, web-based, interactive and easy-to-navigate Provider Toolkit was launched on 10 November 2017. The Toolkit is the primary resource to assist businesses that are considering entering the scheme, with the new platform including e-learning modules and self-assessment checklists.

Market information products are being progressively developed and released to assist in making business decisions about how to meet the growth in the market and benefit from the opportunities the NDIS presents.

In this report, 'stakeholders' refers to people with disability, their families and carers, providers, frontline staff (including LACs partners, National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) staff and Regional Managers), state officials, peak bodies, members of the NDIS Independent Advisory Council and advocacy groups that have provided input into the Review.

Also in this report, the term 'pathways' refers to both the participant pathway and provider pathway experience with the NDIS.

# 1. Introduction: The participant and provider pathways

In this section: This Report of the Pathway Review ('the Review') brings together the various work undertaken by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA, 'the Agency'), which commenced in April 2017, to develop the new pathways.

It presents an overview of the Review process, the emerging themes and outlines the new participant and provider pathways that reflect extensive engagement with stakeholders.

The Report also presents a set of next steps for testing and implementing these new pathways.

## 1.1 Background to this report

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS/the Scheme) pathways represent the way that participants and providers engage with the Scheme, from their first interaction through to ongoing engagement, and reflect their experience with the Scheme.

This report of the Pathway Review (the Review) brings together work undertaken by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA/the Agency) with participants and other stakeholders to fully review the pathway experience. The report is a result of all of that work up to February 2018.

While work started earlier, the NDIA Board officially announced the Review in April 2017 in response to significant issues reported by participants and providers with the direction of the Scheme's implementation. At that time, the NDIA Board acknowledged that the participant experience had not always been consistent with the NDIA's aspirations; plans had not always been outcomes driven; interaction with the NDIA had not always been easy; planning experiences (especially by telephone) had not always met participant expectations; and the portal had not been easy for everyone to navigate.

The goal of the NDIA has been to understand the experience of participants and providers, given the ambitious speed of the rollout of the NDIS, and to identify the challenges and opportunities that have emerged.

The NDIS began with trials in multiple regions across Australia in 2013. The trial was completed on 30 June 2016, by which point there were approximately 36,000 participants in the Scheme.

On 1 July 2016, the process of transition to full Scheme began. At that point, significant changes were made to the way in which participants and providers engaged with the NDIS. Problems almost immediately emerged, first visibly manifesting themselves in difficulty with the provider portal.

At the same time the number of participants started exponentially to increase. Indeed, by the end of December 2016, the number of participants in the Scheme had reached 61,215. Over the six months to June 2017 that number had grown to 96,772 (including children referred through the NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention [ECEI] approach). And by December 2017, the equivalent was over 142,000. The pace of entry will continue to intensify so that by 2020, once the rollout is complete, the NDIS is expected to provide funded supports to an estimated 460,000 participants.

Despite the desire of the NDIA Board and management to ensure that the experience of participants for their first and all subsequent plans and interactions with the Scheme is consistent, of high quality, and promotes the best possible outcomes, by early 2017 the Board identified that this was not occurring. As a consequence, the Board initiated the Review.

During the initial stages of the Review, stakeholders identified more than 200 “pain points” – that is, specific issues that concerned them. Working with the Agency, stakeholders then generated 400 ideas to improve the pathways. Ideas for improvement have been incorporated into each pathway, and tested and refined through further engagement to ensure that they address 200 specific issues. The Agency has continued to work through those issues and to group them into eight ‘themes’, which are further explored in section 3 of this report.

The newly-designed NDIS pathways described in this report are the result of this series of engagements with stakeholders. The design aims to deliver a pathway experience that is outcomes-focused, reliable and trusted, vibrant and connected, consistent and straightforward.

New participant and provider pathways will be progressively piloted and tested over the coming months before a national rollout. The Agency will continue to engage with stakeholders around testing and implementation.

This report also outlines the work underway to tailor the participant pathway to meet the needs of specific population groups. Consistent with the new participant pathway, tailored pathways will also be progressively piloted and evaluated for the impact on participant satisfaction, understanding and the quality of plan outcomes.

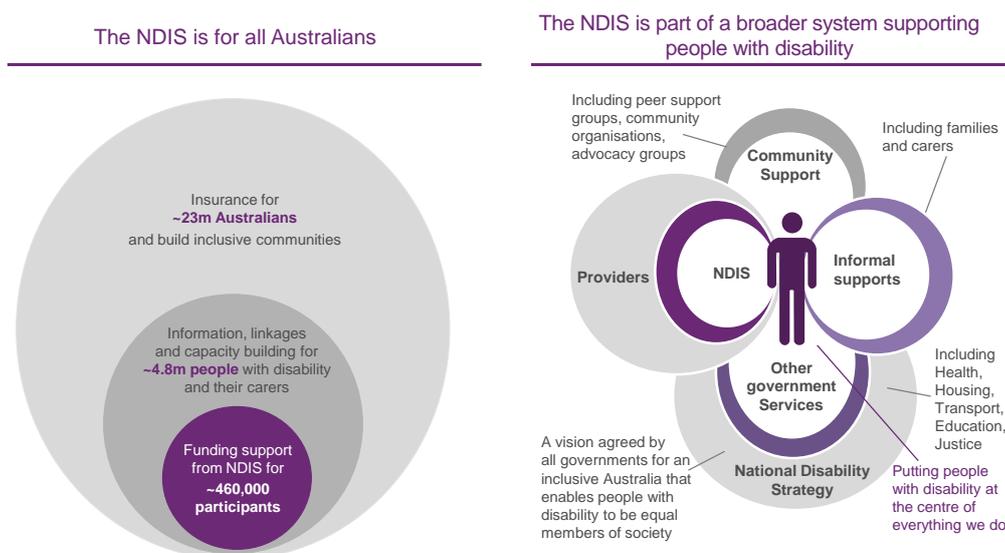
## **1.2 What is the NDIS and what are the participant and provider pathways?**

The NDIS represents a fundamental shift in the way disability supports are provided to, and funded for, Australians who have a permanent disability that has a significant impact on their functional capacity. It represents a once-in-a-generation social and economic reform, and will better the lives of hundreds of thousands of participants, their families and carers through a focus on improved outcomes.

By keeping an outcomes focus, the Scheme aims to provide participants with funding for reasonable and necessary supports to live a better life, while recognising the potential to enhance employment opportunities and to operate productively in the community. Funding for supports is determined through consideration of the participant’s individual needs, their family and informal supports, community and other government services, and their goals and aspirations.

The NDIS fits within a broader ecosystem supporting people with disability, including informal supports, community supports and other government services as shown in Figure 1 below.

**FIGURE 1: THE NDIS FITS WITHIN A BROADER SUPPORTS AND SERVICES SYSTEM**



The NDIS introduces a significant shift from a welfare-based system of support to an insurance approach that invests in participants to improve long-term outcomes. As an insurance scheme, the NDIS takes a lifetime approach, investing early in people with disability to improve their outcomes later in life. It is recognised that the NDIS is not for all people with disability. It is part of a broader ecosystem of supports that must remain strong and vibrant.

A participant experiences the NDIS through the ‘participant pathway’. The pathway is the journey that a person with disability will take from learning about the NDIS and understanding whether it is right for them and whether they are eligible, to building a plan that supports them to progress their goals and using that plan to achieve outcomes.

The NDIS recognises that every person is unique, so each person will experience the NDIS differently. However, the pathway has a set of common stages which most participants will experience. Of course, the typical participant pathway will not suit all participants and the Agency is working to tailor pathways to meet the needs of specific groups such as children (birth to six years), people with complex needs, people with psychosocial disability, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living in remote or very remote communities, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

There is also a pathway for providers. Providers may include not-for-profit disability support organisations; for-profit businesses newly entering the disability market; for-profit companies using commercial business models to produce social outcomes; and individuals, such as therapists, who provide services to NDIS participants.

The provider pathway includes finding out about the NDIS, registering as an NDIS provider, joining the market, connecting with participants, supporting participants to achieve outcomes, and completing transactions through the NDIS portal. Providers vary significantly in the services they offer, and their scale and length of time in the market. All providers are an essential part of the NDIS. Over time, the current market will grow stronger and improve as participant feedback about how they are achieving their goals and outcomes drives business innovation and responsiveness.

## 2. The Pathway Review

In this section: The Review of the NDIS pathways for participants and providers was initiated to improve the experience that stakeholders told us they were having with the Scheme and the Agency.

An improved participant and provider experience will be grounded in the NDIS's aspiration to facilitate improved economic and social outcomes for participants.

### 2.1 Importance of the Pathway Review

As an insurance-based scheme, the NDIS provides Australians with permanent and significant disability, under 65 years, with the opportunity to have reasonable and necessary supports to lead an ordinary life and be integrated as much as possible into the community, both socially and economically.

The NDIS is already enabling a meaningful improvement in the lives of more than 142,000 participants (as at 31 December 2017), who are able to exercise choice and control in pursuit of their aspirations, goals and needs.

From the commencement of transition in July 2016 and as the number of participants entering the Scheme ramped up, it became obvious that the NDIA's processes and systems had not always resulted in a participant and provider experience of a consistently high standard.

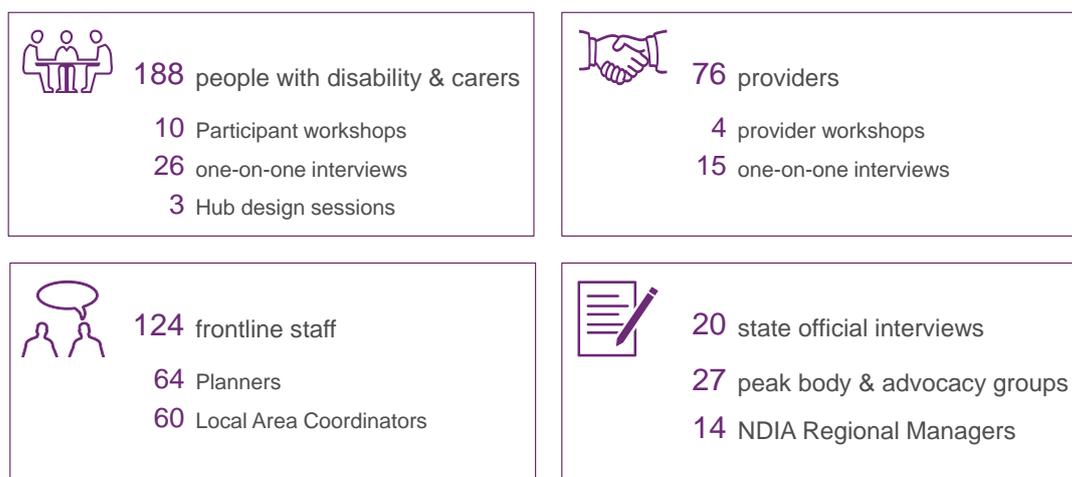
Systems and processes migrated to at transition posed Information and Communication Technology (ICT) challenges. This combined with the use of telephone contact to develop participant plans and the very pace of participants entering the Scheme collectively caused many participants and providers to report poor plan experiences.

For providers, this resulted in very long wait times when telephoning for assistance, difficulty relating the support being requested with the participant's funding, challenges making service bookings via the ICT system and problems requesting and receiving payments for supports provided.

The NDIA recognises the importance of learning from these early experiences and improving and adapting processes as quickly as possible, and in collaboration with stakeholders. The Board, management and staff of the NDIA are unequivocally committed to delivering a much better experience for participants and providers, as quickly as possible, while recognising the need for high quality information.

Since early April 2017, the NDIA has been working with individuals and in workshops with more than 300 stakeholders from all states and territories to identify what needs to improve and how that might occur. From that process, 400 specific improvement ideas and 200 solution opportunities were identified. The Pathway Review also considered Productivity Commission submissions outlining improvement opportunities, feedback from the Independent Advisory Council and views expressed at the Joint Standing Committee.

**FIGURE 2: THE NDIA WORKED WITH MORE THAN 300 PARTICIPANTS, PROVIDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE**



Participants who were included in the Review represented a broad variety of disability, age, geographic and personal circumstances. They were engaged via one-on-one interviews, focus groups, workshops and prototype testing. Where possible, participants were included in multiple engagements, allowing them the opportunity to provide input into the design for the pathways at different stages of the process.

Providers contributed to the designs of both the participant and provider pathways, since many provider issues stem from participants' experience of the participant pathway. Over 70 providers, representing a broad variety of services, enterprise size, geographic locations and length of operation contributed to the Review process. They also were engaged in a variety of formats, including one-on-one interviews, focus groups and large workshops.

## 2.2 NDIA commitment to continuously improve

The NDIA's corporate plan articulates the four key aspirations that will guide all its actions and processes. The four key goals are:

1. Better participant outcomes – continuously building and refining systems and processes to support a nationally consistent, high-quality Scheme;
2. A growing market – engaging with and providing information, including market signals to providers;
3. A financially sustainable Scheme – delivering the NDIS within the agreed funding; and
4. A high-performing NDIA – ensuring an empathetic, outcomes-driven and high-performing service delivery organisation.

### *Understanding the current experience*

The first set of workshops focused on listening to stakeholders in order to identify areas of improvement. Approximately 70 participants, family members and carers shared in-depth stories of their experiences through interviews and workshops. Participants shared a variety of perspectives.

Overall, participants wanted to feel more understood and supported when engaging with the NDIS. They emphasised the importance of easy-to-understand, clear, and accessible communications and a preference overall for face-to-face contact with an NDIS representative (Local Area Coordinator (LAC) or planner). Participants said they wanted to build a relationship with the NDIS. Most significantly, participants wanted greater transparency in how the NDIA used the information they provided to the NDIA to develop their plans and how they were to be supported to implement their plan.

Providers were particularly focused on ensuring they receive consistent information on policies and guidelines for operations. They wanted to be able to contact the Agency to resolve issues more easily, as they arose. They also communicated that improvements to the portal to facilitate payments would have a significantly positive impact on both providers and the participants they support.

### *Opportunities to improve the experience*

More than 200 “pain points” were identified across participants and providers.

Participants told the NDIA that they did not feel engaged in the process of developing their plans, experiences were inconsistent and they had to retell their stories to different people. Participants wanted more of a relationship of trust built through face-to-face interaction; they wanted the NDIA staff and LACs to understand their individual needs; they needed clear communication in a format that suited their individual needs; they required greater consideration of other government and community supports in their plans; and they looked for systems that were user friendly.

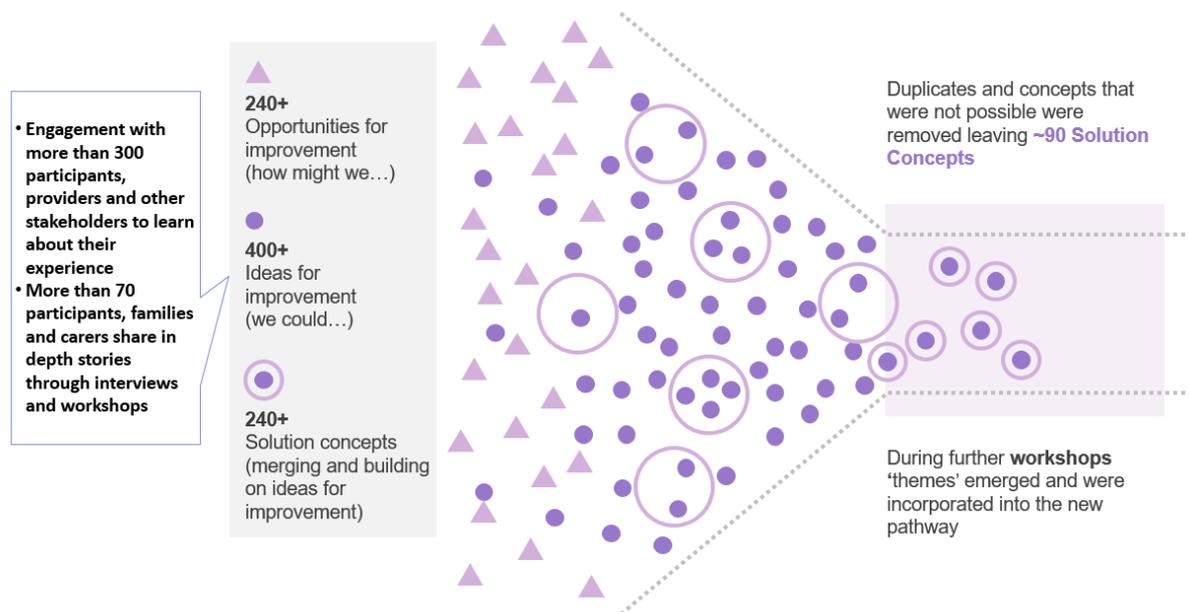
Providers wanted policies to be clear and consistent; to be able to claim payments more easily through a portal that reduced their administrative burden; to be able to register to provide services and connect to participants more easily; and they wanted to know when important changes occurred.

Once a clear picture of current experiences was established, including the “pain points” of the current experience, the Review focused on shaping and testing ideas to address the issues raised. These ideas included reinforcing activities and experiences that were working well and addressing areas that needed to be improved or replaced.

Stakeholders generated more than 400 specific improvement ideas and 200 solutions concepts. This was eventually consolidated to 90 solutions concepts, once duplicates were removed. This process is described in the following figure.

**FIGURE 3: THE INITIAL SET OF 200 SOLUTION CONCEPTS WAS CONSOLIDATED DOWN TO 90 NEW CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER IN THE NEW PATHWAY DESIGN.**

The process of prioritisation resulted in 90 solution concepts to test



### *Designing and validating the new pathways*

The pathways were redesigned to incorporate opportunities that stakeholders identified.

Opportunities were first tested in workshops with participants and providers to understand whether they would improve experiences, deliver the greatest improvements and be practically implemented. The themes that emerged through this process and how they would improve the participant and provider experience are further explored in the next sections of this report.

The NDIA undertook further testing to validate the new designs for the pathways. Participants, providers and other stakeholders contributed through workshops to all elements of design and validation. This was a dynamic process, and each workshop provided an opportunity to further refine pathways design. This is described in the following figure.

**FIGURE 4: PARTICIPANTS, PROVIDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS CONTRIBUTED AT EACH STEP OF THE PATHWAYS REVIEW**



The NDIA Board endorsed the design with the overall concept for the new pathways being announced in October 2017. The participant pathway is now in the process of being tested and refined further through pilots, before being rolled out nationally. This is essential given the implementation challenges in relation to the scale of the roll out, and the requirement for changes in ICT systems, other processes and the skills of partners and staff. Features of the provider pathway are progressively being implemented.

## 3. The new participant pathway

In this section: Participants and other stakeholders provided valuable insight of their experience with the Scheme and Agency.

Themes emerged which provided a sound base from which to develop opportunities to improve. The themes are described in this section, along with the new NDIS participant pathway in detail.

This section also introduces the early thinking about how the NDIS participant pathway might be tailored to meet the needs of participants with specific needs.

Tailoring the participant pathway for children (birth to six years), people with complex needs, people with psychosocial disability, people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people within remote and very remote communities and people within Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities recognises that participants are unique and some participants may need help to navigate the pathway; especially skilled or knowledgeable planners to work with; or information that is culturally sensitive and/or accessible.

### 3.1 Participant feedback and how it has been addressed in the new pathway

Stories from those already involved in the Scheme offer valuable insight on how to ensure that the NDIS experience is as good as possible for those yet to join, as well as ensuring that the review process for the increasing number of existing participants is a superior experience.

Each story was unique but there were common themes. In general, participants were supportive of the NDIS and had a great deal of goodwill and a desire to see the NDIS succeed. Participant issues with their current experiences of the NDIS related to better understanding how the Scheme works with other supports in their community, how the Agency communicates, how the planning process is conducted, and the interactions participants have with NDIS representatives and systems. For each of these areas, feedback from participants and others provided a number of opportunities to improve the NDIS.

Opportunities for improvement were clustered into eight main themes. These are summarised below, broadly in order of the frequency with which they were raised.

#### **Feedback theme: Engage participants in developing their plans, and make sure they reflect individual needs**

*Participant: "I didn't know I needed goals until they asked me for them in my planning meeting."*

Participants wanted a more transparent planning process, and to be included in the decisions which impact them. They wanted to better understand how the information they provide is used to generate their plan, and for their individual needs and goals to be directly reflected in their plans.

In the initial pathway developed for transition, participants felt they were not given enough information about how plans were developed. In fact, some participants did not realise that

they were having a planning conversation until later, when their plan arrived in the post. They also considered the plan document was difficult to understand.

In the pathway implemented at transition, information about the participant was collected by the LAC and the planner had often not met the participant before developing their plan. This meant the planner risked missing critical information, including the participant's broader life context, thereby compromising the quality of the resulting plan.

Once a plan was approved, the participant would receive a copy in the mail. In some cases, the plan received did not reflect a participant's needs, or voice. For example, there were cases where the participant's goals listed in the plan had not been accurately recorded. Additionally, the plan did not make it easy to understand how much funding for supports was approved due to the way funds were grouped and described. Funding for supports may have been left out of the plan unintentionally or because the Agency planner assessed that specific supports did not satisfy the 'reasonable and necessary' criteria in the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013*. Plan approval letters were long and explanations were difficult to understand.

Feedback around issues related to the planning process and the plan document will be addressed in the new pathway in several ways, for example:

- Plan development will be conducted in face-to-face meetings between the participant, their designated LAC and Agency planner;
- Participants will discuss their plan as it is being developed and have the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback during the planning meeting, to allow for any queries to be addressed before the plan is finalised; and
- The plan document will be revamped to be clearer and more directly reflect a participant's individual needs. The revamped plan document will be tested and refined as part of the initial pilot.

### **Feedback theme: Make experiences consistent and limit handoffs**

*Participant: "I have to keep repeating my story to different people, over and over again."*

Many participants have had excellent experiences with the NDIS. Several shared stories about how the NDIS has significantly improved aspects of their lives, and the strong relationships they have developed with their NDIS representatives, including their LAC. However, other participants felt that they were not able to form positive relationships with NDIS representatives.

The participant pathway implemented at transition required most participants to interact with several different NDIS representatives along the pathway, including the National Access Team, LACs, planners and contact centre representatives. For many participants this meant interacting with one person to access the Scheme, another to gather information to inform a plan, another to start using the plan, and a call centre for questions which come up along the way, which could also lead to participants receiving conflicting information from different sources.

For many participants, talking about their situation and their goals required sharing highly personal information and it was frustrating, and often emotionally draining, to retell the story multiple times. In some cases information that participants shared was not accurately passed on as they experienced being 'handed off' from one representative to the next, and the participant had to resupply information. Also, some participants felt they did not have an

opportunity to develop a relationship with a representative. Participants wanted a consistent point of contact who understood them and could answer their questions.

These challenges will be addressed in the new pathway in a number of ways, for example:

- Participants will be matched to a LAC during the access process and this person will become their consistent point of contact throughout the process, including during and after planning;
- Plan development will happen side by side with the participant, rather than at a distance from them; and
- Revamped training for all NDIS representatives will ensure consistency in approach.

### **Feedback theme: Build trust-based relationships and limit phone interactions**

Participants expressed a great deal of trust in the intention of the NDIS and its representatives, and reported interactions where they had built strong relationships with the representatives of the NDIS. Some also expressed an understanding of the challenge that rolling out the NDIS nationwide represents.

However, many participants reported feeling rushed in their interactions with the NDIS, and that their interactions felt transactional—focused on getting specific pieces of information—rather than being designed to understand their unique situation. Some participants reported that they felt pressured to take calls or meetings at short notice or at inconvenient times as they were not offered other options.

Concern over the use of phone-based interactions, especially for planning, was a major issue. While some participants prefer to interact on the phone, phone-based interactions were considered impersonal by many. In some cases, the quality of information gathered over the phone was less insightful than information gathered during face-to-face meetings.

Conversations about disability can be personal and very emotional. As a result, failing to invest in building a relationship between participants, their families and carers and the NDIS can create a general feeling of mistrust which may spill over into subsequent interactions with the Scheme, such as annual plan review meetings.

These challenges will be addressed in the new pathway in a number of ways, for example:

- Major interactions, including preparation for access and plan development, will be conducted face-to-face by default, with phone or other channels only being used because of the participant's preference. This has already been implemented;
- Improved systems and tools for planning, will support NDIS representatives in building relationships with participants and having natural conversations; and
- More personalised and customised interactions, including reflecting the participant's individual circumstances in the questions asked, will occur during planning.

### **Feedback theme: Ensure staff are prepared for participants' unique situations and disabilities**

Although there were many positive stories, some of the participants felt that the NDIS representatives with whom they interacted did not have essential knowledge about their disability. Issues raised included a representative not knowing about the types of supports a person with a given disability might need, asking questions inappropriate for a specific disability, or not listening and communicating empathetically about the challenges associated with their disability. This left participants frustrated and worried that their plans would not reflect their needs.

Some of these issues related to the tools NDIS representatives used for planning, and how staff are trained to use them. For example, some questions required for functional assessments, or by the planning questionnaire, do not apply to all participants' circumstances. Using the same planning questions for all participants, regardless of disability or personal circumstances, led to a perception that the planning process was a 'one size fits all', rather than sufficiently flexible to reflect the uniqueness of each individual.

These challenges will be addressed in the new pathway in several ways, for example:

- Changes to the planning approach to better focus on the needs of the participant, with a focus on empathetic listening;
- Improved tools for access, functional assessment and planning, specific to individuals' disabilities. This includes greater customisation of questions asked during planning; and
- Improved training for all staff to support development of more specialised understanding of disability types, and better matching of planners and LACs to participants.

### **Feedback theme: Communicate clearly and tailor messaging to participants**

Although participants expressed support for the messaging they received about the NDIS, there were many suggestions around how it could be improved, and how to make sure that messages were tailored and customised to the individual.

Participants noted that they found some NDIS communications confusing and complex, and too reliant on bureaucratic jargon in long documents, rather than simple checklists, factsheets and practical advice on what is required. Communications from the NDIS were not always presented in accessible formats, or in braille, Easy English, or languages other than English.

Although participants may have been asked their preferred methods of communication during the access or pre-planning process, these preferences were not always observed in subsequent communications. A clear example is when hard copy letters have been sent to participants with vision impairment who use screen readers and require an electronic format.

The feedback around clear communication and tailored messaging will be addressed in the new pathway in a number of ways, for example:

- Increased availability of communications materials, including the plan document and letter, in accessible formats;
- Communications preferences will be captured early in the pathway and used in subsequent interactions;
- More use of checklists and factsheets in place of long narratives; and
- A revamped website with separate messaging targeted at participants and providers.

### **Feedback theme: Increase focus on supports from the community and other government supports**

*Participant: "I would have liked to join a peer support group but did not know where to find one."*

Participants want to better understand the role the NDIS plays in the broader disability system. Some participants indicated that they did not know what to expect from community and other government supports for disability and how that relates to their NDIS plan.

Participants were not always aware of supports available through other government services (including schools and health services), or of community groups that might support them to meet their needs, or how to go about accessing them. Many participants were interested in accessing peer support networks, but often did not know where to find them.

The new participant pathway will address the need for a more complete picture of supports available in a number of ways, for example:

- An explicit focus in NDIS communications about the role of the NDIS in the disability system, in supporting people with significant and permanent disability whose needs cannot be met by community and other government supports;
- Increased connections to community and other government supports at multiple points in the process, including before access and at plan development; and
- Improved connections to forms of peer support, including through disability organisations.

### **Feedback theme: Engage participants about the Scheme objectives and roles from the outset**

Participants want more information about the purpose of the NDIS, how the planning process works and the roles of the various NDIS representatives with whom they interact.

Many participants were not aware of how the NDIS, as an insurance scheme, was different from the disability support programs that they had previously relied on. Many participants had high hopes for the new scheme, knew what they wanted to achieve and were excited about the opportunity to exercise more choice and control. However, many participants were nervous, did not know what to expect, or how best to prepare. Clearer communications

around how the new approach differs, and what to expect at each step of the process would help to avoid confusion and surprises.

Participants were also confused about the role of the NDIS and its key representatives, including the Agency and LACs. There was also confusion about the role of the support coordinator.

The new pathway will address this feedback in several ways, for example:

- Increased communication about the role of the NDIS as an insurance scheme;
- Greater focus on outcomes and setting goals as part of early engagement, and in preparation for plan development;
- Clearly defined roles for LACs and Agency planners, including making it clear that under the NDIS Act all plan decisions had to be made by a NDIA staff member; and
- Improved information about the role and function of the support coordinator, if one was required.

### **Feedback theme: Make systems and interactions smooth and simple**

Many participants shared issues they had experienced with NDIS technology. The portal, which is used to review plan expenditure and, for those who are self-managing, to pay providers, has been challenging for many participants. Participants have found the systems to be unreliable and confusing. As a result, some participants avoided using the systems altogether, and relied instead on a professional support coordinator, family member, or other trusted person to handle the portal on their behalf.

Additionally, technology issues impacted NDIS representatives, including LACs, planners, and contact centre staff. For example, without reliable and flexible systems internally, NDIS staff found it difficult to answer participants' questions, find required information, or use the system in other ways to address a participant's needs.

It is the intent of the new pathway to address these issues through:

- An improved, more user-friendly portal for participants which contains the features they need to understand and manage their plans;
- Improved resources to help participants use NDIS systems; and
- Improved tools for NDIS representatives, so that they are better able to assist participants with their challenges.

## 3.2 Designing the new participant experience

The new participant pathway aims to deliver an experience that addresses the concerns raised by participants, their families and carers and ensures the delivery of Scheme objectives. These can be summarised as key principles for the design of the new participant experience:

1. Outcomes-focused
  - Recognising the important role that other government services (such as health and transport), community supports (such as disability organisations), family and informal supports and reasonable and necessary funded supports will play in supporting participants to achieve their goals and outcomes.
2. Reliable and trusted
  - Each participant will build their plan with a skilled and experienced planner who understands their situation, with support from their trusted LAC; and
  - Face-to-face engagement will be the standard for plan development, unless the participant chooses an alternative mode of contact.
3. Vibrant and connected
  - Each participant will have a skilled contact and/or specialised person, who assists them to connect to an inclusive and aware community and uses their supports in a way that works for them to achieve outcomes. Family members will have the option to work with the same contact person.
4. Consistent and straight-forward
  - Participants will receive consistent, easy-to-navigate information in their preferred format.
  - The plan will be accessible and easy to understand. The LAC will explain each support, and the portal will be easy to use, and will support participants to find the right providers to help them achieve their goals.

## 3.3 The new participant pathway in detail: Three phases, ten stages

While each participant will experience the NDIS differently, most journeys will follow three phases:

1. Engaging with the NDIS
2. Creating and submitting a plan
3. Implementing the plan to achieve outcomes.

Within these three phases, the participant pathway has ten stages. Across these stages, most participants are supported by a LAC and an Agency planner. LACs and Agency planners have clearly defined roles.

The LAC acts as a consistent point of contact across the pathway, informing participants about how the NDIS works, and how it applies to their personal circumstances. They help participants prepare for the planning process, and once the plan is approved, they support the participant to implement it to achieve their desired goals and outcomes.

The Agency planner works with the participant to understand their goals and identify strategies to achieve these goals. The Agency planner will develop the plan with the participant, explaining how the reasonable and necessary provisions of the Scheme work and explaining each part of the plan. The planner has to be a staff member of the NDIA because this is required under the enabling NDIS legislation.

Of course, the typical participant pathway will not suit all cases, and the Agency is working to tailor the pathway to meet the specific needs of a variety of participants. For example, the ECEI pathway focuses on early intervention for children aged 0-6. Participants and their families on this pathway are supported by specialist ECEI partners, rather than by LACs. Work to tailor the pathway to the needs of specific groups in the community is ongoing and described in greater detail in a later section of this chapter.

The three phases and the ten stages of the new participant pathway are described in detail in the following section, and summarised in Figure 5.

**FIGURE 5: THE NEW PARTICIPANT PATHWAY HAS TEN STAGES ACROSS THREE PHASES**



### Phase 1: Engaging with the NDIS

In Phase 1, participants first encounter the NDIS and find out how the Scheme might be relevant to their circumstances. If appropriate, they apply for and receive access to funded supports from the Scheme.

#### *Stage 1: Learn about the NDIS and how it fits in the broader system of supports*

In Stage 1, a person with disability hears about the NDIS. Initial communication focuses on clearly explaining the NDIS role within the broader systems of supports and services available to people with disability.

Feedback from NDIS participants and other stakeholders has led to specific changes at this stage of the participant pathway: making information about the NDIS clear and simple; emphasising the Scheme’s objectives, its focus on outcomes and its role within the wider system of services and supports; and ensuring that communications take participants’ preferences and accessibility needs into account.

*Stage 2: Decide to proceed to access*

In Stage 2, a person with disability is informed about the support options available, and about eligibility requirements. The focus is on supporting people with disability to access supports that are appropriate for their circumstances, and for their desired outcomes. This includes applying for access to NDIS-funded supports.

Taking feedback from NDIS participants and other stakeholders on board, there will be increased clarity around eligibility requirements and alternative forms of support. During the transition, participants transitioning into the NDIS from defined state and territory programs will continue to access the NDIS through a more streamlined access process.

*Stage 3: Receive access decision*

In Stage 3, the focus is on ensuring that the access process is clear and efficient, that every access request receives a timely decision, and that people who meet the access criteria are able to quickly move to developing a plan. The LAC at this stage will remain a consistent point of contact. People will be able to attend group information sessions in their local area and seek specific support from LACs. Once the access decision has been made, it will be clearly communicated to the individual by their LAC. The person may choose to request a review of the access decision.

The changes that are underway are summarised in Table 1, below.

**TABLE 1: PHASE 1 OF THE PATHWAY IS ABOUT LEARNING ABOUT THE NDIS AND ACCESS**

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Learn about the NDIS’s objectives and how they fit within the disability community	Decide to proceed to access	Access determination
<b>Description</b>	<p>People learn about the NDIS through multiple sources</p> <p>They hear consistent messages about NDIS, and to whom it provides access</p>	<p>People make an informed decision to request access</p> <p>LACs connect people to government services and community activities</p> <p>Alternatives to the NDIS are clear</p>	<p>Potential participants attend group information or access meeting</p> <p>LAC checks request, submits to National Access Team (NAT)</p> <p>NDIA delegate makes access decision; LAC communicates decision, becomes point of contact</p>

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Learn about the NDIS's objectives and how they fit within the disability community	Decide to proceed to access	Access determination
<b>Issues with current approach</b>	Participants are not engaged about Scheme objectives and roles  Communications are unclear, not tailored	Insufficient focus on support from broader disability community  Systems and interactions are clunky and frustrating	A trust-based relationship is not developed; it is too transactional and phone-based  Experience is inconsistent, with too many handoffs making people tell their story multiple times
<b>Changes to address these issues</b>	Information emphasises the role of the NDIS and of wider services and supports  Communications account for preferences and accessibility	Improved local knowledge of wider disability supports  Enhanced guidance on access and evidence	LAC communicates access decision to participants directly and informs them of their right to review  LAC remains a consistent point of contact and offers an access request completion meeting

## Phase 2: Planning to achieve goals and outcomes

In Phase 2, participants work with their LAC and planner to develop a set of goals and outcomes and a plan that will help them to achieve those outcomes.

### *Stage 4: Understand current supports and prepare for planning*

In Stage 4, participants will meet their LAC (typically face-to-face) to prepare for planning. They will learn what to expect from the planning process and provide information about their current circumstances and the outcomes they want to achieve. The planning meeting will be scheduled in advance with the participant. Planners will be briefed ahead of the meeting to avoid participants having to retell their story, and wherever possible participants will be matched with a planner who has a specific understanding of their circumstances and disability.

### *Stage 5: Create a plan to achieve goals and outcomes*

In Stage 5, the participant, their LAC and an Agency planner meet face-to-face, if this is the preference of the participant, to work on a plan that will achieve the outcomes the participant is seeking. The presence of the LAC maintains the continuity of contact as the Agency planner develops the plan with the participant. Face-to-face meetings offer a less transactional experience and creating the plan during the meeting, with the participant present, provides greater transparency around what is included and why. Participants are able to ask questions and clarify information as part of the process. To facilitate greater social and economic participation, there will be an increased focus on first considering government, informal and community supports.

### Stage 6: Receive approved plan

In this stage, participants receive and understand their approved plan containing reasonable and necessary funded supports.

Following feedback from participants and other stakeholders, dependent on the participant's preference, the participant will receive their approved plan during the meeting and in their preferred format. The format of participant plans is being redesigned to make it easier to understand. The LAC will explain what the plan includes, and answer any questions that the participants or their families and carers have. The LAC will support the participant to activate the plan immediately or at a follow up meeting, if preferred.

The changes that are underway are summarised in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: PHASE 2 OF THE PATHWAY IS ABOUT BUILDING A PLAN TO ADDRESS GOALS AND OUTCOMES**

	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
	Understand current supports and prepare for planning	Create a plan to achieve goals and outcomes	Receive approved plan
<b>Description</b>	<p>Participants meet their LAC face-to-face to prepare for planning</p> <p>Participants are matched to a planner who understands their circumstances</p> <p>Planning meeting scheduled</p>	<p>LACs and planners share information before planning</p> <p>LAC and planner finalise goals and plan management with the participant</p> <p>The planner determines funded supports, answering questions as they go</p>	<p>Plan is usually approved on the spot; participant receives a copy</p> <p>Planner explains each support and its flexibility</p> <p>LAC supports participant to activate plan immediately, or at a follow-up meeting</p>
<b>Issues with current approach</b>	<p>Experience is inconsistent, with too many handoffs making people tell their story multiple times</p> <p>Staff are unprepared for participants' unique situations and disabilities</p>	<p>Relationship is too transactional, key conversations happen over phone</p> <p>Insufficient focus on supports from broader disability community</p>	<p>Plan development is not clear, plans are impersonal and confusing — driving many unscheduled reviews</p>
<b>Changes to address these issues</b>	<p>LAC briefs planner before planning conversation so they are prepared</p> <p>Planning meeting scheduled with LAC and appropriately-skilled NDIA planner</p>	<p>Planning meeting held face-to-face with LAC and planner</p> <p>Planning looks at informal, community, government supports first</p>	<p>Funded supports are determined with the participant.</p> <p>Planner is able to approve on the spot, in most cases</p>

### **Phase 3: Achieving goals and outcomes**

In Phase 3, participants connect to providers and other supports and make use of their plan. Support is provided as necessary, and plans are reviewed periodically.

#### *Stage 7: Implement and activate plan*

In Stage 7, the plan is activated and participants are connected to providers or supports. LACs (or support coordinators, for participants with complex needs) help participants learn to use the portal and participants make initial service bookings.

Following feedback from participants and other stakeholders, there is an increased focus on ensuring next steps are clear, with follow up within three weeks to ensure plans are being used and any issues are addressed. The *Provider Finder*, an on-line resource to help participants connect with providers and learn about their services, will be enhanced. This will help participants identify providers appropriate to their needs and enable greater self-direction and self-management.

#### *Stage 8: Use plan to achieve outcomes*

This Stage focuses on ensuring that participants are able to exercise choice and control as they use their plans to achieve their agreed outcomes and to monitor any issues. This includes ensuring that participants can track their spending easily, via an easier-to-use portal, rather than relying on clunky and difficult systems and interactions. There will also be an opportunity for participants to meet with their LACs in three to six months to review progress and resolve any issues.

#### *Stage 9: Get support using plan*

This Stage is about ensuring that participants can get help with their plans when they need such assistance. This includes finding information about the plan, understanding how it can be used and resolving issues quickly, with streamlined systems and processes. A key change that will be introduced, following feedback, is the ability to make minor plan changes more readily.

#### *Stage 10: Review outcomes and progress*

Stage 10 is the periodic review of participant plans. Reviews will measure progress towards outcomes, set goals for the next plan or, in some circumstances, exit the Scheme. Plan review meetings will be conducted face-to-face by default, with the participant, the LAC and the Agency planner all present. Similar to the initial planning meeting, the plan review meeting will focus on outcomes achieved and those desired for the next plan, with an increased focus on government, community, and informal supports.

The changes that are underway are summarised in Table 3.

**TABLE 3: PHASE 3 OF THE PATHWAY IS ABOUT USING A PLAN TO ACHIEVE GOALS AND OUTCOMES**

	Stage 7	Stage 8	Stage 9	Stage 10
	Implement and activate plan	Use plan to achieve outcomes	Get help using plan	Review outcomes and progress
<b>Description</b>	<p>LACs help participants learn to access and use the portal</p> <p>Participants create initial service bookings</p> <p>LACs follow up within three weeks to ensure plan use</p>	<p>Participants can track spending and pay via the portal</p> <p>Participants meet LACs in 3-6 months to discuss issues</p>	<p>People helping participants can make changes in portal</p> <p>Participants can easily request minor plan changes</p> <p>LACs check-in on participants' progress against goals</p>	<p>LACs review and monitor use of plan</p> <p>Participants prepare for review with LAC help</p> <p>Develop new plan or help to transition out of the NDIS</p>
<b>Issues with current approach</b>		<p>Systems and interactions are clunky and frustrating</p>		<p>Relationship is too transactional and phone-based</p> <p>Insufficient focus on supports from broader disability community</p>
<b>Changes to address these issues</b>	<p>Planning meeting transitions into implementation if possible, follow-up meeting scheduled with LAC if not, providing clear next steps</p>	<p>Easy-to-use portal with ability to provide access to intermediaries; improved provider finder tool augmented with business intelligence</p>	<p>Assistance from LAC to ensure plan activation and use, including 3-6 month follow up meeting</p> <p>LAC is notified by system if spending is unusual</p>	<p>Review conducted face-to-face with both LAC and NDIA planner present</p> <p>Plan review focuses on outcomes achieved</p>

Consistent with the Agency’s commitment to continuous improvement, over the coming months the new participant pathway is being progressively piloted and evaluated for the impact on participant satisfaction, understanding and the quality of plan outcomes. This is informing what elements are useful and cost effective for a national rollout. Some elements, such as face-to-face engagement with a LAC, have already largely been implemented.

### 3.4 Early thinking on tailoring the pathway for specific groups

The NDIS recognises that every participant is unique, and that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. The Agency is working to tailor the participant pathway to meet the needs of specific population groups. Tailored pathways are being designed in close collaboration with participants and other stakeholders. The six tailored pathways to be designed or enhanced are for:

- Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI)
- People with complex needs
- People with psychosocial disability
- People within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- People within remote and very remote communities
- People within culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Once the design of the tailored pathways is completed, they will be piloted and rolled out nationally. The Agency will continue to engage closely with participants and other stakeholders as they are piloted and through implementation.

More detail on each of these tailored pathways is provided below.

#### **Early Childhood Early Intervention**

The ECEI approach provides early intervention support to children under the age of seven with developmental delay or disability, through a specialised ECEI partner with early-childhood expertise. This includes an expert assessment of the child's needs and linkages to appropriate support. This approach aims to optimise children's outcomes and ensure Scheme sustainability. The ECEI tailored pathway is still under development, but features will include:

- Timely access to best-practice early intervention with a focus on family-centred capacity building to improve long-term outcomes;
- A flexible, individualised support model (including the option for short-term Initial Supports delivered by ECEI partner) with clear exit opportunities to address the wide variation of needs in children, and the uncertainty of the long-term functional impact of a developmental delay or disability in young children; and
- Reinforcement of evidence-based assessment of needs by specialist ECEI partners to inform access.

## **People with complex needs**

The participant pathway is being tailored for participants with complex needs: that is, for participants who are expected to require a higher level of assistance to navigate the pathway. Reasons for needing additional support may include:

- Involvement in other government service systems, in particular health, child protection, mental health and justice;
- Interaction with multiple government services or multiple community supports;
- Multiple diagnosis/clinical complexity;
- Insufficient support to assist with decision making, due to factors such as minimal or no informal supports, or a parent or carer with disability;
- Complex behavioural support needs; and
- An immediate unmet need for support or a crisis situation.

Initial engagement suggests that the pathway will have a number of key features to meet these needs, such as:

- Warm transfers from states and territories or existing service providers, and their involvement, led by regional delegates, in preparing for access;
- Planning conversations with participants and other stakeholders, led by Agency planners with specialist skills, focused on ensuring a deep understanding of participant context and circumstances;
- Individualised implementation support, with a focus on maintaining critical supports, via a plan-funded support coordinator, with responsibilities including the development of service plans and agreements, mitigating risks of service failure and coordination with mainstream support systems;
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of plan usage and outcomes, with the ability to make minor adjustments to supports and approaches to improve effectiveness; and
- Support through the process by someone the participant trusts.

## **People with psychosocial disability**

Tailoring of the participant pathway for people with psychosocial disability is being developed with input from stakeholders including participants, their families and carers, providers, peak bodies and internal and external experts. The tailored pathway is likely to meet the needs of people with psychosocial disability by:

- Ensuring that planners with specialist knowledge of psychosocial disability are available;
- Strengthening the referral pathways between the Scheme and community programs, and staff training to ensure effective initial engagement with people with psychosocial disabilities;

- Ensuring participants have access to skilled coordination of supports and connections to other services, potentially through their LAC (or their support coordinator, where the participant has complex needs);
- Better describing the flexibility in support use, in anticipation of episodic need; and
- Increasing the focus on outcomes appropriate for people with psychosocial disability, supported by common tools and measurement approach.

At full Scheme, it is anticipated that around 13 per cent of NDIS participants will have a primary disability that is psychosocial, noting that this is also a secondary disability for many others. Trial sites, where participants were inclusive of all ages, provide evidence to reflect that the proportion of participants entering the Scheme with a primary diagnosis of psychosocial disability was consistent with the original estimates.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

The Agency recognises the importance of ensuring that the Scheme works for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The work to tailor the participant pathway builds on the existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement Strategy. Engagement is ongoing to develop a collaborative planning and working model to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability, their carers, families, and communities. Initial engagement has determined four needs and priorities:

- Flexible local solutions are required to implement the NDIS effectively and with cultural competence in different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia;
- Engagement and communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the 'proper way', with respectful and culturally-appropriate methods and materials including the Three 'I' model (Introduction, Initiation, Invitation) used during the NDIS Trial in the Northern Territory;
- Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's employment, training, and economic participation to be maximised, including identifying opportunities for Indigenous organisations to provide services under the NDIS; and
- The need to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability to participate in their communities, because being part of community and connected to country is fundamental to a sense of wellbeing and overall health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

There are approximately 650,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, almost 3 per cent of the population, and disability is 1.7 times more likely to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than other Australians.

## **Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities**

Participants from CALD communities may have different and additional needs compared to other participants, and the participant pathway is being tailored to meet these needs. For example:

- Ability to access information, engage and communicate in their preferred language;
- Acknowledgement and understanding of cultural sensitivities, particularly with respect to selecting appropriate service providers; and
- Explanation of key NDIS terms and concepts in a culturally relevant context.

Participants from CALD communities span all disability types and make up approximately a fifth of all participants. They are officially defined as participants whose country of birth is not Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada or South Africa, or whose primary language spoken at home is not English. In practice, access to the pathway tailored for CALD communities may also be appropriate for participants who are born in Australia and speak English as a primary language, but who strongly identify with a diverse cultural background.

## **Remote and very remote communities**

Approximately 2.5 per cent of all Australians and 21 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in remote or very remote areas<sup>1</sup>. The prevalence of disability is higher in remote and very remote areas than in urban areas. The Agency's vision is that people with disability in rural and remote Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, are supported to participate in social and economic life to the extent of their ability, to contribute as valued members of their community, and to achieve good life outcomes.

In supporting people in remote areas, the Agency faces challenges due to the unique needs of these participants, as well as the challenges of service delivery in remote areas.

Participants in remote and very remote areas are currently understood to need support with:

- Limited service choice and availability;
- Issues relating to service/support quality;
- The need for travel and transportation;
- Difficulties with recruiting, training, and retaining professionals; and
- Lack of alternative accommodation options.

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<sup>1</sup> According to most recently available ABS data 3238.0.55.001 - *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*

Tailoring the participant pathway for remote and very remote communities aims to address these challenges. Features of the tailored pathway are still being developed, but are likely to include:

- Provision for the use of innovative delivery options, such as video-conferencing, where travel for face-to-face meetings is not feasible for participants;
- Collaboration between the Agency and existing local support services, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations and other government services; and
- Specific reference material relating to how the NDIS works for people in remote and very remote areas.

## 4. The new provider pathway

In this section: Providers told us through the pathways review that they were supportive of the NDIS but there were issues and challenges for them in their interactions with the Agency. This section looks at that feedback from providers, designing the new provider experience based on the themes and describes the key features of the provider pathway.

### 4.1 Provider feedback and how it has been addressed in the new provider pathway

Providers are supportive of the NDIS and achieving outcomes for participants in the Scheme. Many advocated for the establishment of the NDIS and demonstrated goodwill throughout trial and transition.

Growth in the number of registered providers with the NDIS has been strong. However, providers involved in the Review revealed issues and challenges associated with understanding key NDIS policies, becoming registered, and operating within the Scheme. The new pathway is designed to alleviate those causes.

Many of the sources of provider issues related to aspects of the participant pathway, including the quality of plans; the inability to make minor corrections or changes to a plan without triggering a lengthy review process; and the limited help participants receive to interpret and implement their plans. Providers told us that these issues add to the time they spend helping participants resolve issues, and increases the administrative burden of operating in the NDIS. This feedback has been captured and addressed as part of the participant pathway, described in detail in section 3.

Providers also shared issues coming from their engagement with the NDIS across the various aspects of the pathway: from learning about the NDIS, to registration, connecting with participants (specifically the development of service bookings), management of regular payment requests, delivering services and being paid on time for their services.

Providers' feedback has been clustered into six themes which have been used to guide the development of the new provider pathway. They are listed below, broadly in order of the frequency with which they were raised:

1. Clarify policies and explain them consistently;
2. Make it easier to claim payments;
3. Reduce the administrative burden of using the provider portal;
4. Make registering as a provider easy;
5. Help providers effectively connect to participants; and
6. Notify providers when important changes occur.

## **Feedback theme: Clarify policies and explain them consistently**

*Provider: "I often receive different answers from different people about the same issue or rule."*

Providers understand that the NDIS is a world-first innovation and represents a major change from previous models of providing support for people with disability. Nonetheless, many had issues with how difficult it can be to understand key policies.

Providers indicated that it appeared that some policies were 'missing'. Other providers reported receiving inconsistent responses from Agency staff to policy questions, leaving them unsure as to how to proceed. Providers emphasised a need for a publicly available 'source of truth' on key policies (for example, policy guidance and FAQs on the website). In particular, there was seen to be a need to clarify the policies regarding specialist disability accommodation (noting that it was very new at the time of the Review); improve processes in relation to assistive technology; and clarify the role of intermediaries. Providers also sought to receive better integrated information from Department of Social Services, states and territories around about the implications for them of the transition to the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission from July 2018.

This situation was compounded by the fact that many NDIS policies have been changed since trial and the start of transition. This meant that what appeared to providers to be inconsistent responses was in fact a change of policy. The issue of the currency of policies and interpretations caused providers to have to repeatedly make contact with the Agency to ensure they were acting consistently with the most up-to-date policy. Call centre wait times to obtain advice added to this challenge.

This feedback is being addressed in the new provider pathway in several ways, for example:

- Finalisation and implementation of policies on key areas, including specialist disability accommodation, assistive technology and information on the role of intermediaries;
- Better access to clear, consistent and useful guidance on rules and policies, including responses on common provider questions;
- Easy self-service for providers through an intuitive and up-to-date website, with relevant, regularly updated and accessible information; and
- Relevant and granular sub-market information to be made available.

## **Feedback theme: Make it easy to claim payments**

Rates of successful payment requests have significantly improved since the start of transition, with the vast majority of providers (over 91 per cent) now successfully claiming payments through the NDIS business system. However, some providers continue to experience difficulties in claiming for services that have been delivered.

Ongoing issues with payment processes include rejected payments, administrative difficulties claiming for services delivered, and the length of time it takes to submit requests for payment or to follow up on unsuccessful requests. Existing systems and processes make it difficult to know why a request has been rejected, or to manage bulk requests.

This feedback will be addressed in the new pathway in a number of ways, for example:

- Improved and more efficient administrative approach to bulk payment requests;
- More informative error codes and clearer processes for resolving payment errors; and
- Ability to generate more useful business reporting from the portal.

### **Feedback theme: Reduce the administrative burden of using the provider portal**

*Provider: "I have to spend my Sunday afternoon sorting through the admin."*

Although providers acknowledged significant improvements in the provider portal since the commencement of transition in July 2016, they saw room for further improvements. Providers reported spending significantly more time than expected navigating the portal and the service booking process, which increased the administrative cost of operating under the NDIS. This made it more difficult to operate efficiently within NDIS price caps and had the potential to reduce the time they dedicated to supporting participants.

Examples of issues with the portal included slow processing times, automatically logging providers out, persistent unexplained errors in requesting payment and the lack of functionality to edit service bookings, particularly in bulk.

Providers reported that the portal was difficult to use, and that resolving problems with the portal was difficult as error codes and notifications are unclear and unhelpful. Many reported that seeking support to use the portal is challenging, as contact centre and regional staff are unable to see the portal from the provider view, and therefore find it difficult to understand the specific problem or provide useful advice.

This feedback will be addressed in the new pathway in several ways, for example:

- Making it easier for providers to create accurate service bookings by providing participants with the option of sharing parts of their plan with providers via the portal;
- Reducing administrative burden by improving error messages;
- Notifications to providers when service bookings are changed; and
- Ability of contact centre staff to see the provider portal.

## **Feedback theme: Make registering as a provider easy**

*Provider: "I operate in three states, so I had to register three times for each service."*

Growth in the provider market has been strong since the transition to full scheme commenced in July 2016. At that time there were 3,519 registered NDIS providers, in excess of 12,000 providers had registered.

Despite the substantial growth, some providers expressed dissatisfaction with the processes and time it takes to register as a provider under the NDIS. Providers must follow state and territory processes to verify that they meet the required standards. These processes vary and many providers must demonstrate they meet similar standards multiple times. Several providers were confused as to how the different standards and safeguards applied when they operated cross-border businesses, and how these may change with the introduction of the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission and the implementation of the *National Quality and Safeguards Framework*.

Registering as a new NDIS provider is difficult in some jurisdictions because of the need to demonstrate previous experience in providing disability supports. Consequently, some potential new providers report having chosen not to register at all, or have delayed registering until the national process is in place. This has the potential to limit the diversity and capacity of the provider market, which in turn, may restrict the supports available to participants.

While not all of these issues are within the purview of the NDIA, this feedback will be addressed in the new pathway in several ways, for example:

- Clear communication on the process for transition to the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission as the new registrar for providers; and
- Support for providers moving from registration with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission to operating within the Scheme.

## **Feedback theme: Help providers effectively connect to participants**

*Provider: "I don't know how people in my area can find out about my services."*

Operating in the marketplace under the NDIS requires engaging participants directly and establishing new referral networks. This is often a change for providers who may be familiar with operating in a state-based system, with waiting lists. Providers have had difficulty making themselves known to people with disability in their service areas. In addition, participants found it difficult to use the portal-based Provider Finder tool to select and connect with appropriate providers in their local area.

Providers were also concerned that, even if they are able to make themselves known to people with disability who could benefit from their services, they would struggle to differentiate themselves from other providers based on their quality or specialisation. This risks discouraging business innovation and competition on quality, and may create a risk to the long-term health and growth of the provider market.

This feedback will be addressed in the new pathway in a number of ways, for example:

- Release of an improved *Provider Finder* tool, augmented with business intelligence, with more detailed information on providers; and
- Creation of an online marketplace for providers and participants to transact in.

## **Feedback theme: Notify providers when important changes occur**

*Provider: "I don't have enough time or opportunity to adapt when NDIS processes change."*

Providers felt that they were not given sufficient notice of changes to NDIS policies or processes and that changes are implemented too quickly. In many cases providers told us that they were not aware when a policy had changed. This meant that providers often acted on outdated information, causing confusion, rework and denied payments.

Providers also expressed concern that the Agency does not sufficiently test policies with providers before implementing them. This limits opportunities for provider feedback, and for the Agency to ensure that policies will be effective.

This feedback will be addressed in the new pathway in many ways, for example:

- Including an "updates" section within the Provider Toolkit to allow providers to keep abreast of policy and process changes;
- Including a "hot topics" section within the Provider Toolkit to notify providers of current policy work and its progress;
- Regular communication from the Agency on opportunities to engage on critical changes. Changes will be tested thoroughly with providers before implementation, and implemented with advance warning, minimising disruption to day-to-day operations; and
- Using a provider forum as one means of obtaining provider feedback on policy changes.

## 4.2 Designing the new provider experience

Like the new participant pathway, the new provider pathway has been designed to deliver an improved provider experience. It aims to deliver a provider experience in line with the same four core values applied to the new participant pathway:

1. Outcomes-focused
  - Providers understand that their role is to assist participants to achieve outcomes.
2. Reliable and trusted
  - Providers are able to provide information about their services in a reliable online marketplace where participants can find them easily;
  - Simple, reliable and trusted processes allow providers to focus on helping participants to achieve outcomes; and
  - Providers know when changes are being planned and why, and that changes are tested before being rolled out.
3. Vibrant and connected
  - Marketplace tools support the growth of vibrant, localised markets of providers that respond to demand; and
  - Communication channels are available, including a dedicated point of contact for certain provider segments when experiencing significant change.
4. Consistent and straight-forward
  - There is a single, national approach to quality and safeguards regulation;
  - Providers receive consistent and relevant information about key principles and clear guidance on policies; and
  - The portal will be easy to use, providers will be able to easily manage the participants they work with and they will receive payment from claims lodged through the portal.

## 4.3 Key features of the provider pathway

The provider pathway facilitates the development of a vibrant market of supports by helping business understand and join the Scheme as providers connect and transact with participants, and focus on providing high-quality, innovative services.

Key features of the new provider pathway include:

- *Clear, coherent policies and settings that give providers the confidence to invest and innovate.* Rules and policies are defined clearly and completely, with changes occurring in predictable cycles. Unnecessary barriers to entry are systematically identified and progressively resolved, especially where they prevent providers from developing innovative service offers that enable participants to achieve their goals;

- *Seamless transactions that are simple and easy to follow—especially in the portal.* The portal will be easy-to-use, providing a positive user experience that minimises the amount of administrative time providers spend on portal-related tasks. The portal will have additional functionality to enable providers to efficiently manage their businesses. Providers will be better able to view parts of a participant’s plan to better design their service offering. They will be able to cancel payment requests, and will receive more information about changes to service bookings and plans;
- *Rapid issue resolution over the phone and online —including effortless self-service.* A high-quality self-service through a usable, accessible and easy-to-navigate website and portal will have the required functionality needed to provide effortless self-service. The 1800 phone line for providers will have low wait times and high first-call resolution, providing consistent advice and solutions to providers. This will include the ability of call centre staff to see the provider portal. Where issues are more complicated, there will be clear processes for escalating issues to the correct business area allowing them to be quickly and easily resolved. Some segments of providers where there is significant change occurring will have a dedicated point of contact;
- *Thriving, marketplaces where providers compete on outcomes.* This includes improvements to the Provider Finder in the short term, to provide more relevant and up-to-date information to participants searching for providers who can meet their needs. The updated Provider Finder will be designed with the full range of users in mind, including carers and others who support participants such as LACs, support coordinators and plan managers. Longer-term improvements will support market development, including potential online marketplaces, by providing additional online features and tools such as customer ratings that will provide greater market transparency and create opportunities for a more diverse range of providers; and
- *Changes tested before implementation and providers adequately notified.* The Agency will alert providers of current issues, develop solutions in collaboration with the providers and affected parts of the sector, and test changes before implementing them. It will bundle implementation of these changes, where possible, to ensure that the frequency of disruption to providers is minimised. The Agency will notify providers in advance of proposed changes with clear and timely communications.

## 5. Next steps

The Review was undertaken to significantly enhance the experience of participants and providers as they interact with the Scheme through the participant and provider pathways.

Consistent with the Agency's commitment to continuously improve, over the coming months, the new participant pathway will be progressively piloted and evaluated for the impact on participant satisfaction, understanding, and the quality of plan outcomes. The pilot and evaluation is informing which elements are useful and cost effective for a national rollout (see Figure 6).

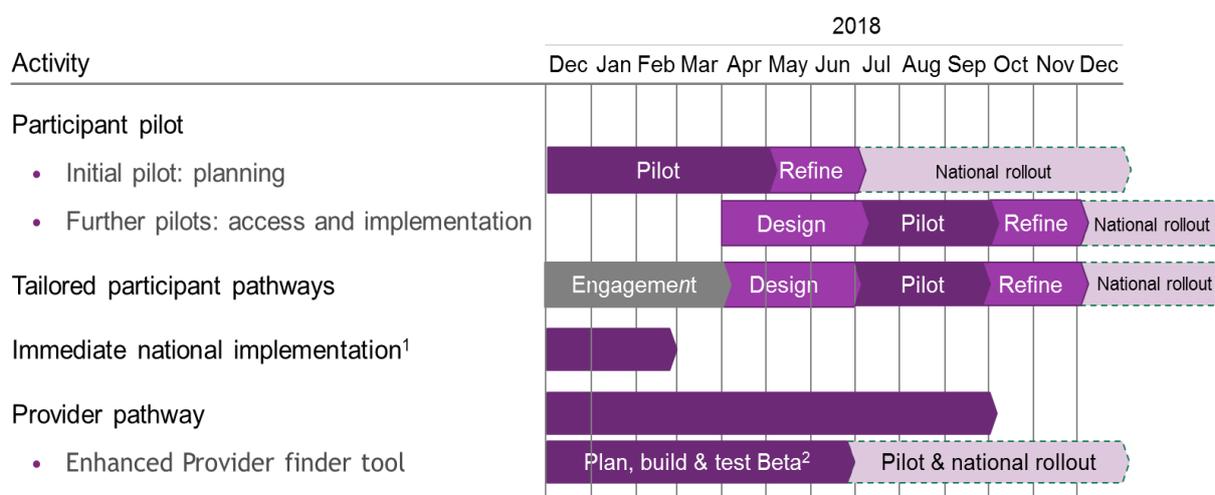
The first pilot of the new approach to planning commenced in December 2017 with the development of resources to assist pre-planning and engagement with NDIA staff and LAC partners in pilot sites. Full implementation of all stages of the new participant pathway, staff and partner learning and development, additional ICT and system enhancements may take more time. This is consistent with the need to ensure high quality implementation.

The Agency will provide regular updates on the progress of improvements on the NDIS website. Work is also underway to develop tailored pathways to ensure that the Agency has the right response for all participants including young children, people with complex needs, people with psychosocial disability, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living in remote and very remote communities and people from CALD communities.

The Agency has also commenced working with stakeholders to enhance the participant pathway experience of people with disability who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTIQ+). The Agency will continue to engage with participants, providers, and other stakeholders (including the Independent Advisory Council, Disability Support Organisations, peak bodies, and Partners in the Community) through the test and pilot period, and into the future as part of an ongoing effort to improve the participant and provider experience.

In addition, the Agency has established a Participant Pathway Reference Group. This will support continuous engagement on the development, piloting, and delivery of the new pathways.

**FIGURE 6: THE NEW PATHWAYS WILL BE PROGRESSIVELY PILOTED AND TESTED BEFORE NATIONAL ROLL**



1. For example the new NDIS provider toolkit, information about the Assistive Technology (AT) Market and changes to the NDIS myplace portal so participants can choose to share their plan with providers

2. Beta version = minimal viable product (MVP) of the enhanced provider finder tool which will be built and tested over the next 6 months. Post successful testing, a pilot will be implemented prior to national roll-out in the latter part of 2018.

In addition to the enhanced *Provider Finder* the Agency has initiated a number of activities to improve the provider experience, including:

- Improved provider engagement through a series of national provider forums throughout February and March 2018;
- A provider sentiment and satisfaction survey – piloted in South Australia in late 2017, the survey is now being refined to commence national quarterly surveys in mid-2018;
- An improved, web-based, interactive and easy-to-navigate Provider Toolkit was launched on 10 November 2017. The Toolkit is the primary resource to assist businesses considering entering the scheme and the new platform includes e-learning modules and self-assessment checklists;
- Market information products which are being progressively developed and released to assist providers to make business decisions about how to meet growth in the market and benefit from the opportunities the NDIS presents. The Assistive Technology Market Insight was released in December 2017, which is the first in a short series of new market information products; and
- The *myplace* portal has recently been updated to give participants the option of sharing parts of their plan with providers. This change enables providers to see aspects of a participant’s plan to allow better tailoring of supports to assist participants achieve their goals.

The Agency has implemented a series of immediate responses as a result of the Pathway Review. They include:

- Face-to-face planning meetings for all participants as a default;
- Updates to the NDIA's system capability;
- Expanded disability awareness training of NDIA staff;
- Improved communications and training resources for plan management and plan implementation for regions to use with participants, their families and carers;
- Development of communication products for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communication products translated to ten languages other than English; and
- Enabling accelerated reviews for minor changes to a participant's plan.

There is also work underway to establish a better first contact and caller response to the Agency so that issues can be resolved more quickly.

In addition, the Independent Pricing Review undertaken by McKinsey & Company has reported.

## **5.1 Initial pilots of the new pathways**

### **5.1.1 Initial pilot of core participant pathway features (Victoria)**

This initial pilot will test a first set of features of the new participant pathway, focusing on the new planning process. Among the key changes to be tested in the pilot are:

- Participants provided with a consistent point of contact throughout the planning process, including developing, receiving and starting to use their plans;
- Planning meetings held face-to-face as the default, unless the participant prefers an alternative;
- The participant, their LAC and the planner are all present at the planning meeting, and develop the plan together; and
- In most cases—dependent on the participant's preference—plan documents will be produced and approved during the planning meeting and made available in accessible formats.

The first participants to experience the pilot of the new planning approach in Victoria were in the local government areas of Knox, Maroondah and Hume-Moreland from January 2018, with those in Port Phillip, Stonnington, Glen Eira, Bayside, Kingston, Frankston and Mornington Peninsula receiving first contact in February 2018. The pilot will run until the end of April 2018.

The experiences of participants involved in this pilot will be compared with groups of similar participants experiencing the current planning process. Further pilots will test other parts of the participant pathway, such as the access process, plan implementation and plan review. Tailored pathway features will also be piloted and refined for national roll out.

### **5.1.2 Pilot of enhanced *Provider Finder* (ACT)**

The *Provider Finder* is an online tool located within both the participant and provider portals. It is designed to connect participants with providers of supports. It is not currently available on the NDIS website.

Work is underway to develop an enhanced *Provider Finder*. The enhanced *Provider Finder* is important and desirable. Initial testing will be taking place in the ACT and will involve both the portal and website *Provider Finder*.

## 6. Conclusion

Engagement with participants, providers and a broader cross section of stakeholders through the processes described in this report, has allowed the underlying challenges with the participant and Provider Pathway to be identified. The origins of most of those issues arose from the period of moving from trial to transition, at a time when a significant ramp up occurred in the number of participants entering the Scheme.

Equally, engagement with the sector has helped identify a way forward. Solutions have been identified and pilots are now underway to ensure the pathways are being tested before being fully rolled out. In addition, workshops followed by pilots are underway for the tailored pathways.

These changes are being made while the number of participants entering the Scheme continues to ramp up significantly.

While the Board and management of the NDIA do not underestimate the nature of the challenge, they are unequivocally committed to the task of getting this right for both participants and providers, as well as for other stakeholders, particularly families and carers. At the same time, the Board and management recognises that continued deep engagement with the sector will be essential to continuing to get this right.

In the meantime, the NDIA expresses its deep appreciation of the goodwill and support that has been demonstrated to date by the sector during the participant and provider pathways review. The NDIA is committed to ensuring that participants receive quality plans that support improved outcomes, enabling them to live an ordinary life; that a vibrant provider network evolves; and that the Scheme remains financially sustainable.