14 February 2020

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to the elders, both past and present.

I would also like thank the Council for Economic Development of Australia for inviting me here today to share with you how the National Disability Insurance Scheme will shape Australia's social and economic progress in the years ahead.

The NDIS is a significant and world-first policy reform for Australia.

The scale of what we are trying to achieve is just huge. A national scheme across our huge country; aimed at providing individual customised packages of supports to be self-directed by the participant, to half a million of our fellow Australians.

It will shape future policy solutions considered by governments globally to deliver better economic and social outcomes not just for the most vulnerable but for all citizens.

Today I am going to talk to you about:

- The purpose and progress on the NDIS
- The impact of the NDIS on the economy and the future of employment in Australia.
- The role of service excellence and my vision for the experience of NDIS participants.

NDIS purpose and progress

The NDIS was born out of the drive to "do better" almost ten years ago.

Before the NDIS, funding for disability support would go to an organisation. As a person with a disability, you might not have had any choice about which organisation gave you support. You might not have had a say in who supported you and how. Support was capped, inequitable and dependent entirely on where you lived.

By transferring the purchasing power from governments to individuals, the NDIS has created one of the largest market opportunities in recent history. And by giving people choice and control over their own lives , the NDIS gives people with a disability the tools to make the kinds of decisions about their lives that so many of us take for granted.

Big decisions like where to live and with whom, and daily decisions like when to eat and when to shower.

Over time, the NDIS has been shown to open up all kinds of new pathways for participants and their families and carers.

Ultimately, the NDIS means that hundreds of thousands of Australians who have been locked out of shaping and leading their communities have the opportunity to change the fabric of Australia for the better.

It is a world first reform that in just six years has:

- brought together eight state and territory systems into one,
- become available across the whole country following a progressive roll out,
- grown quickly to deliver supports to more than 338,000 people, 40 per cent of whom have never received supports before,
- increased participation in social and community activities by 14% for participants aged 15 years and up who have been in the Scheme for three or more years, and
- decreased the number of young people in residential aged care under the age of 65 years by 13% between March 2017 and September 2019.

As a transformational reform, the path to ensuring the NDIS delivers on its promise has been challenging.

And while the NDIS is working well for lots of participants, it is true that with an undertaking of this size there will be things we can do better – we haven't got it right for every person, every time but we are getting there.
I talk to a lot of participants and no one has ever said they want to go back to the way it was.

For context, never again will so many participants enter the scheme in such a compressed time period. We are moving closer to a mature scheme, where new participants join due to changes in life circumstance and existing participants are able to focus on achieving their goals through full and flexible use of their plan.

Wait times have been a concern for both the Agency and our participants – with the Agency sometimes taking too long to make decisions and settle participant plans. It is pleasing to see in our latest quarterly report the:

- average time taken to determine eligibility is now 4 days, well below the 21 day target.
- Wait times, on average for a first plan are 42% lower for adults and 58% lower for kids compared to 6 months ago.
- And the number of children waiting more than 50 days for a plan has reduced from 1,686 to 712 over the October – December 2019 quarter.

While these results are encouraging, the drive to "do better" that launched the NDIS into being almost ten years ago is still calling.

But first, I want to talk to you about Cameron and the power of the right supports for a participant.

Cameron McMullen, 35, is a quadriplegic from Ulladulla in New South Wales.

Prior to breaking his neck during a swimming accident nine years ago, Cameron was very busy running his own business and raising two young sons.

After the accident he was largely housebound and unable to work or participate fully in family life.

When he joined the NDIS in 2017 his main goal was to drive again with a vehicle modified using his plan funds. He bought a van, modified it, went through the relicensing process and recently took delivery of the van.

Since then he has been regularly taking his sons to sporting activities, secured work as a delivery driver, and volunteered to deliver food to bushfire-hit communities on the NSW south coast.

The modifications he was able to get for his van as part of his NDIS plan, have totally changed Cameron's life.

From Cameron's example, I want to broaden out to consider the impact of the NDIS on the economy and the future of work in Australia.

Market growth and opportunities

Funding for disability services has increased from $8 billion in 2015-16 to $17.8 in the 2019-20 Portfolio Budget Statements.

The Productivity Commission estimates that the Scheme will be responsible for about 90,000 new jobs in the disability sector over the next five years. That means the number of people employed in the sector will almost double, from 100,000 to 190,000.

This represents one in five of all new jobs created in Australia over the next five years.

As the purchasing power shifts from block funding by governments to individuals, new and innovative businesses are being created. The opportunity is perhaps the largest in remote and rural areas of Australia where the market for disability services has traditionally been thin.

Since the start of the Scheme, 13,986 providers have supported participants.

For example, there have been a range of new providers have entered the disability market including platforms to match NDIS participants with support workers such as HireUp, Mable, Home Care Heroes and CareSeekers.

These different platforms engage support workers in different ways, some employ support workers directly and others provide access to workers who have set themselves up as independent contractors.

In many cases, supports engaged via online platforms are at a discount to the standard NDIS price guide, because the online platform provides savings to the service provider from reduced overhead costs and advantages from technology. This means more support hours for less money for the NDIS participant.

Mable for example raised $15 million in venture capital funding to further develop the marketplace to meet growing consumer need.

The business has grown 140% in their last year alone, and since they launched, they have facilitated more than two million hours of support care, with more than 5600 active carers on their books.

The enormous growth in spending in disability services from the NDIS provides an incredible platform for innovation and there are hundreds of stories like these platform businesses. The opportunity for businesses to find new and efficient ways for people with a disability to achieve their goals is limitless.

We are committed to encouraging businesses to embrace the NDIS market opportunity by:

- Encouraging new entrants to the market and helping businesses make data-driven decisions by publishing information about the number of services being delivered, and the number of participants using and funded to purchase services in any given district. We have a range of data sets and tools on the NDIS website to support providers and new entrants to the market make informed decisions on their service offerings.
- Reviewing the pricing for services provided under the NDIS, consulting widely and being more transparent in communicating our decisions. The NDIS Annual Price Review is well underway. We need provider and sector input to ensure pricing updates reflect the challenges participants and providers are facing. We are working closely to ensure we publish updates to the Price Guide early enough for providers and participants to adjust their pricing and service delivery models. We’re also recruiting new expert members to our Pricing Regulation Reference Group to ensure that the sector is widely represented.
- Improving the way we do business with providers. We need to refine our systems and processes so we are getting it right for every participant, every time. We are also very conscious of the provider experience, recognising how integral providers are to the success of the Scheme - a good participant experience and good provider experience often go hand in hand. We have set up a network of contacts across each state and territory dedicated to working with providers, to ensure that businesses have a single gateway to raise questions, get information they need and provide a streamlined

escalation process. We are also currently trialling digital API integration with six large providers to enable seamless and secure integration with the NDIA Business System in real-time, and plan to significantly expand this to providers big and small, as well as other platforms, software providers and integrators.

Economic impact and employment

The economic impact of the NDIS isn't just about the money participants will spend.

It's about enabling people with disability more opportunities to fully engage in the workforce.

It's about enabling carers the ability to engage in paid work because the people they care for have adequate support.

It's about unlocking the potential of a workforce eager to work, and adequately supporting them to enter the workplace.

Let me talk a little more about carers.

Our Families and Carers Outcomes Report, in which we surveyed 140,000 Australians with disability as well as 77,000 family members and carers, shows us that the rate of employment for parents and carers of people with disability is at least 30 percentage points lower than the rest of the population.

But that is changing.

The employment rate for families and carers of participants under 25 in the Scheme over the first year has increased by 3.1 percentage points.

The hours worked have also increased, with the proportion of family members and carers surveyed working 30 or more hours per week rising from 41% to 43%.

This is encouraging progress in a short time.

We are also working hard to ensure better access to employment for participants.

Today, 83 per cent of all people with disability in Australia are not in the workforce.

That places us at number 21 out of 29 OECD counties for employment of people with disability.

This is not good enough.

But we also know that for individuals, economic participation means so much more than just getting a job. It becomes part of our identity and gives us a sense of belonging. Working can unlock the door to becoming truly independent and we all have a right to seek independence

through work. It also has major consequences for the health of the economy.

Participation, alongside population and productivity, is one of the three P's of economic growth.

As part of our Participant Employment Strategy, we are committed to increasing the number of working-age NDIS participants in meaningful work from 24% to 30% by 2023.

We have developed an implementation plan to support participants to enter the workforce and find employment that suits them.

The strategy also sets about increasing market innovations that improve the path to paid work and improving confidence of employers to employ NDIS participants.

The NDIA also takes a strong leadership role by leading by example as an employer of choice for people with disability. At the NDIA we have 12% of staff who identify as having a disability, this is more than the public service average but again we need to do better.

We know that for employers, employing people with disability can improve your workplace in countless ways.

Employees with disability are:

- Reliable – people with a disability take fewer days off, take less sick leave and stay in jobs longer than other workers according to the Australian Safety and Compensation Council.

And the International Labor Office's investigation into 'Disability in the workplace' in 2010 showed Employees with disability are:

- Productive – once in the right job, people with a disability perform as well as other employees
- Safe – workers with a disability are no more likely to be injured at work than other employees.

Employing a person with a disability is proven to be good for business as well.

Evidence tell us that employing people with disability:

- better reflects the customer base and improves customer engagement
- broadens the range of talent and experience in your workforce
- leads to improved retention through employee loyalty.

All of us in this room have a responsibility to do more to close the gap in employment for people with a disability. Employing people with a disability is not a kindness or a charity- it has been shown that a workplace that reflects the wider diversity of our community is likely to lead

to greater customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Start thinking about whether your workplaces are physically accessible. Are your meetings set up so that everyone can participate? How are you ensuring that your recruitment practices are inclusive? I challenge you to consider how you can make a difference in employing more people with a disability.

Service Delivery Excellence

Improving choice and control for people with disability is the WHY of the NDIS.

It is why we are here, and why we are driven to “do better”.

As the NDIS transitions from roll out to full scheme, it is imperative we revisit the HOW.

From 1 July 2020, the Participant Service Guarantee will set new standards for the time it takes for key steps in the NDIS process. This means there will be agreed timeframes for people to receive a decision on whether they will be covered by the NDIS, to receive an NDIS plan and to have a plan reviewed. This guarantee is one of the key recommendations of the recently released Tune Review. The PSG also calls for our activities to be built around five engagement principles.

The NDIA should be:

- Transparent – Participants and prospective participants have access to information about the NDIS and their plans that is clear, accurate, consistent, up-to-date, easy to understand and available in formats that meet their needs.
- Responsive – Participants and prospective participants are supported and their independence is maximised by addressing their individual needs and circumstances.
- Respectful – Participants and prospective participants are valued, listened to and respected.
- Empowering – Participants and prospective participants are empowered to make an access request, navigate the NDIS system, participate in the planning process and use their plan supports.
- Connected – The NDIA breaks down barriers so that participants and prospective participants are connected to the services and supports they need.

Today, I would like to share with you my vision for what we are going to do to deliver a Scheme that meets those principles.

Communicating with and getting information from us

Let me start by talking about how we will improve the way we communicate with participants and the way they get information from us.

We know that one of the most significant areas we have to improve is the simplification of our communications as a whole: our forms, letters, the rules we have. Participants deserve to understand how we make decisions and why we've made a decision.

So, in future, participants will have a single point of contact for all of their interactions with us. We'll put the name of a real person on our letters to them. And they'll be able to use online forms and services and track online where their case is up to.

Our decision letters, about access and plans and so on, will have reasons in plain English for why we've decided something.

Participants will be able to access their personal data and plan details without having to ask through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request.

Equity also means using simple language that everyone can understand.

Here is an example.

The NDIS funds reasonable and necessary supports relating to a participant's disability to help them live their life and achieve their goals. But we know that what is reasonable and necessary can be subjective. That's why our guidelines will come with plain English descriptions and examples and clearer and more certain guidance on what reasonable and necessary means.

We are also making it easier to find what you need on the NDIS website:

- We have introduced web chat to help people find the information they need more easily on our website. This function will develop and improve over time.
- We have started developing easy read sections of the website, displaying the information in a format more accessible for all people. The first section is all about employment and how we can support people to get involved in paid work.
- We are in the process of refreshing the participant portal; the tool that participants use to manage their plans, to make it simpler to use, and easier to understand
- And soon it will be simpler for participants to apply for the Scheme using improved online access forms.

Finally, we'll have new publicly available guidelines and procedures so there is consistency and more transparency in how we make decisions.

Getting access to the Scheme and support for engaging with us

We also want to improve the way participants get access to the Scheme and increase support for engaging with us.

Increasingly, we will be using independent functional assessments to provide an objective and consistent evaluation of a participant's functional ability. This means that no matter where you are, be it Manuka or Broken Hill, support funding will be based on a fair and equitable assessment of your needs.

We'll have the support of specialist community connectors in, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD communities to deeply understand how participants want to engage with us. And we're recruiting Justice and Hospital Liaison Officers to help at risk participants interact with the Scheme in each state and territory to get them out of hospital quicker and have access to the right supports.

There will also be an NDIS carer connect network for ageing parents of people with a disability and our frontline teams will have improved cultural and disability awareness.

Making and using your plan

The NDIS was built on the idea that everyone's situation is different. That is why we have flexibility in planning, and why everyone's plan is different.

It's clear that the processes and systems we used to be able to manage the fast pace of transition didn't always suit individual circumstances.

So, we are listening, and we are changing. We want to give participants more flexibility in how they make and use their plan.

To do this, we will focus on equitable planning decisions, ensuring funding is more certain, fair and decisions made quicker.

We will use the information received from functional capacity assessments to be the starting point for a plan budget. This will ensure consistent planning decisions and funding is fair and equitable no matter where you live.

We'll build goals in participant plans together that are clearly defined, realistically attainable and participants will be able to have a face-to-face meeting with the person who makes a decision about your plan supports and funding.

Participants will be able to get plan summary statements and draft plans before their plan is approved so they can check their information is right and there are no surprises.

We will also look to extend plan duration even further so that wherever possible and appropriate plan reviews are only initiated in line with significant life milestones, such as

starting school and finishing school, getting a job, moving house or other changes in support needs

Plan budgets will be a lot more flexible so participants can use their funded supports as they wish and not be limited to specific budgeted amounts by category.

Support for Particular Groups

Finally, we will increase our support for particular groups. We know there additional obstacles for people with complex support needs or those exiting justice, hospital or other settings in setting up and using their NDIS plan.

That’s why we will increase our direct support for you if you have complex needs and require critical supports.

There will be fewer Young People in Residential Aged Care who are NDIS participants with no new entrants to aged care.

We will also begin trialling commissioning services directly for participants in remote and very remote areas and early intervention supports for children more flexibly.

So here is where you come in.

We should be so proud that all Australians have the peace of mind if they, their child or loved one is born with or acquires a permanent and significant disability, they will get the support they need.

Everyone in this room plays a part in creating a more inclusive Australia. The NDIS was always part of a broader vision for people with a disability.

Many of the challenges facing Australians with disability are historic and have their foundations in our communities long before the NDIS.

The whole community, not just the NDIA, needs to address these foundational issues such as lack of housing, lack of accessible transport, thin markets outside the metro areas, and widespread lack of access to employment for people with disability.

These issues do not have a quick fix and have been long-standing.

It requires cooperation and coordination between states and territories, different governments and agencies, and between us here in this room.

The NDIA and our partners, and the broader Australian community, need to do more to ensure our communities and workplaces are inclusive of people with disability.

We are actively involved in the consultations to shape future national disability policy, including a new disability strategy for beyond 2020. The National Disability Strategy provides a unified, national approach to improving the lives of people with disability, their families and carers, and also provides leadership for a community-wide shift in attitudes.

The creation of Services Australia also means comprehensive change to how Australians engage with Government services – including using improved technology to make sure people have a seamless experience between the NDIS and other systems.

We know there is more to do, and we can do better.

I would like invite each and every one of you to help.

The story of 25-year-old Kate in Melbourne demonstrates to me the impact Scheme is having and where you all can contribute.

Through the NDIS, Kate who has Down Syndrome, uses her NDIS funding to maintain a busy schedule including acting, dancing, volunteering, studying and working on her own radio program.

She is also studying a Certificate III in childcare, while volunteering at a local childcare centre.

Kate’s NDIS funding covers support workers who help improve her literacy, numeracy and time management and planning skills. Critical skills to get her into the paid workforce.

Kate and her family say the NDIS is allowing her to have more learning opportunities and she is now working towards paid employment and moving out of home.

Think about your next recruitment round, your disability employment strategy. Think about the services you provide, and how you can make them more accessible for people with disability.

How can you support someone like Kate take the next steps towards paid employment?

Think about how you and you organisation can “do better” for people with disability.

Thank you for your time.

I look forward to answering your questions.

Related articles

CEO Address to the National Disability Services Annual CEO forum

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20 November 2019

Pricing update and more support for participant choice and control

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