20 November 2019

Good morning

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet. We are standing on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you to National Disability Services for the invitation to speak this afternoon. It is an important opportunity so early on in my appointment as CEO of the NDIA, and one I was very pleased to accept.

The people in this room have been involved every step of the way, from the early days of advocating for the creation of an NDIS, to the beginning of trial, and through transition to full scheme.

You have worked with the Agency through the challenges and learning curves of rolling out a world-first Scheme. I know we will continue to work together on the path ahead, and I look forward to connecting with you all further and will value your guidance and collaboration in delivering the NDIS.

Today I’m going to discuss with you:

- The Progress of the NDIS and our plan to improve stakeholder experiences with the Scheme,
- Our latest Participant Outcomes report and most recent Provider Satisfaction and Sentiment data, and
- The opportunities and leadership role we have in the area of employment of people with disability.

During transition, the NDIA’s focus was bringing a large number of participants into the Scheme. Never again will we see this volume of people with disability becoming NDIS participants in such a compressed timeframe.

The Agency worked closely with the states and territories in aiming to deliver on the Bilateral Agreements signed by governments.

The NDIS now supports over 311,000 participants, about 114,000 of whom are receiving funding for disability supports for the very first time.

The number of providers supporting participants increased by 797 in the September quarter to 13,434, an increase of 6%, with relatively higher growth in assistive technology providers including vision, hearing and communication providers.

This is a remarkable achievement for Australia, and people with disability.

Now as the Scheme moves to full maturity, we need to examine every aspect of the participant experience.

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.

The NDS State of the Disability Sector report released today reinforces the areas that we still need to improve but also highlights the progress that has been made.

I want to start by acknowledging some providers are waiting too long to be paid and our payments processing times aren't good enough.

Payments is one of those areas I want to tackle quickly so you can get on with your core business of delivering services to participants.

I know what it is like to run a not-for-profit largely dependent on the timing of receipt of government grants. It kept me awake at night back then, and it may well do so for you today. I don't know yet exactly what can be done and by when, but it absolutely is a priority for before Christmas.

This morning, Minister for Government Services and the NDIS, Stuart Robert spoke about his recently-announced plan for the NDIS.

Together, the Minister's plan and the NDIA Corporate Plan provide a clear blueprint for how we will deliver on our commitment to get it right for every participant.

The Agency's work will be driven by our five aspirations:

- a quality experience and outcomes for participants
- a competitive market with innovative supports
- a connected and engaged stakeholder sector
- a financially sustainable Scheme, and
- a high-performing NDIA.

Guided by these aspirations, we keep our participants at the heart of everything we do. We learn from the feedback we receive, and make changes to improve the Scheme in the pursuit of better outcomes for participants.

I see my role as leading the Agency to deliver on these aspirations and plans. This is not a strategic challenge – we know what we need to do, and the roadmap is in place.

Instead, my focus is on resolving the operational challenges we face in achieving our goals.

I am committed to removing the road blocks and making the improvements that will deliver a faster, more satisfying, and more streamlined service for participants and providers.

I also note the State of the Sector report showed many providers not feeling respected or supported by the NDIA. I want to fix this and ensure that you are supported and respected by the NDIA.

A healthy market is vital for the NDIS to be successful.

And there is huge business opportunity and innovation needed to help deliver improved outcomes for participants.

Across a number of areas, the Agency has worked with participants, providers, and peak bodies to make tangible improvements to the Scheme.

We are already seeing those efforts produce important improvements for participants.

The latest Quarterly Report, released last week, showed some significant progress on plan wait times in particular.

- Between June and September 2019, the timeframe for outstanding access decisions in progress has dropped from an average of 38 days, to 12.
- Similar to access decisions, first plans are being approved more quickly after an access decision has been made. Between June and September this dropped from 133 days on average, to 88 days on average.
- Unscheduled reviews also continue to decrease over time and provider and participant complaints are trending downwards.

In August, we released the Participant Outcomes Data report, another key way for us to know how we’re performing.

The NDIA surveyed 140,000 Australians with disability, as well as 77,000 family members and carers when they entered the NDIS. It’s one of the largest surveys of people with disability, their families and carers in Australian history.

This is part of the NDIA’s commitment to sharing insights on the Scheme’s impact, on top of the comprehensive quarterly data and other reports we regularly release to assist stakeholders in their understanding of how the Scheme is performing.

Results from the Outcomes survey show the NDIS is improving people’s lives. From children having more friends to play with, to families and carers increasing their time at work - the NDIS is making a real difference in homes and communities across Australia.

Crucially, we are seeing positive improvements for young children after just one year in the NDIS.

The percentage of children who have friends that they enjoy playing with increased by almost 11 per cent in a single year.

And the percentage of parents who say their child is able to tell them what they want has increased by 9.4 per cent in a year.

The percentage of participants aged 15 to 24 taking part in a community group in the last 12 months increased by 6.5 per cent.

This raises a crucial point about the success of the Scheme. Families and carers lives will also be changed by the success of the NDIS.

The Families and Carers Outcomes Report 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.

For the families and carers of participants who have been in the Scheme at least one year as at 30 June 2018, employment rates have increased 3.1 per cent for families and carers of participants aged 0 to 14, and 3.3 per cent for families/carers of participants aged 15 to 24

This is encouraging progress in a short time.

And we expect that as people spend more time in the Scheme, we will continue to see improved outcomes for participants, their families and carers.

We know there is more to do. This new data helps us to identify what is working and what could be done to get it right for participants.

The survey provides us with valuable data to make sure participants and their families are getting the very best out of the NDIS, and are given equal opportunity to achieve their goals, get involved in their communities, and get a job. This is what the Scheme is all about.

I had the opportunity to review an early version of the NDS Report which is being released today, and am pleased to see some improvements in several headline areas. This is an important report which takes a pulse on the ground. However, there are still other places where more work needs to be done. While conditions have improved, we need to do more so that providers feel financially sustainable, and to simplify rules and processes for engagement.

Providers are essential to participants achieving those improved outcomes. And while there has been significant effort to resolve pain points for providers, I acknowledge that there are

ongoing challenges, and we need to do more to address these.

In early September, we opened our national Provider Sentiment and Satisfaction survey, allowing providers the opportunity to give us direct feedback. This survey provides us with insights that complement your State of the Disability Sector report.

The survey is designed to give us a sense of how providers are feeling about the NDIA, and the general level of confidence in the Scheme.

Today I am pleased to share some of the key findings of that survey. They give us a clear picture of where we have improved, and where there is more work to do.

In total, we had 2930 response, or in other terms, nearly one quarter of all active providers responded.

Reassuringly, provider sentiment has improved with 47 per cent of providers feeling optimistic about the health of the NDIS market – an increase of eight percentage points over the last survey, conducted in December 2018.

The overall satisfaction when interacting with the NDIA has also increased, from a baseline score of 4.7 out of 10 in December last year to 5.3 in September of this year.

While this score could be higher, I take heart that providers feel the Agency is moving in the right direction.

In fact, many key indicators have improved over time – showing us the Scheme is heading in the right direction.

In particular, providers are seeing more opportunities for business growth, with 68 per cent of providers responding they will increase the range of NDIS supports and services they offer in the next 12 months.

This can only lead to improved outcomes for participants.

While providers appear more confident and optimistic about the long-term success of their business, I know we can do more.

The NDIA continues to listen to providers and ensuring your voices contribute to growing and improving a Scheme that gets it right for every participant, every time.

We know that while on the whole things have improved through transition, there are some ongoing areas of concern for providers.

All of us – participants, providers, and the NDIA – are working together to ensure the Scheme is doing what it was set up to do – change the lives of people with disability.

However, we still continue to experience some of the challenges that arise from rapid growth of staff, partners and locations. Despite the fact the average plan budget has increased across the Scheme, we acknowledge people have had different experiences and for some, their experience has been poor.

We know there have been inconsistent decisions, inappropriate plans, and the need to improve support for LACs and planners.

We have also learnt where processes and policies needed better design to work well on the ground. This includes the processes for assistive technology, and being too prescriptive with the supports in participants' plans. The NDIA is committed to improving access to AT, through removing quoting for low cost items and making it easier to arrange urgent repairs.

Many providers see opportunities for growth and diversification with the NDIS, this needs to be better supported by opportunities for participants and providers to connect.

Digital investments will play a key role in reducing the administrative burden on businesses, allowing providers to focus on what's most important – improving participant outcomes.

Improving the technologies we use is key to this, so providers want to see further improvements to the interface and useability of the system.

A significant area of attention for the Agency is making sure providers can access consistent and accurate information about the Scheme, and Agency processes. This touches on a number of areas – from direct contact with the Agency, to the availability and transparency of pricing information we release.

Encouragingly, a number of providers mentioned that the introduction of their Relationship Manager made it easier for them to get reliable information easily.

We also know wait times for contacting the National Contact Centre have improved since the NDIA transitioned to a new supplier. This year;

- the average speed of answer has dropped from nearly five minutes, to less than 30 seconds;
- abandon call rates have been reduced from 17.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent;
- 85 per cent of callers now have their issue resolved on first contact; and
- quality score results for the call centre are averaging 91 per cent.

These results reflect that we are eager to ensure providers have a positive direct relationship with the Agency.

In this vein, we have a network of contacts across each state and territory dedicated to working with you to provide:

- A single gateway to raise questions or concerns and to get the information you need to grow your business; and
- A streamlined escalation process.

We're working hard to set up operational improvements to make it easier to do business with NDIA.

We know we can do more to get important information into your hands to get the most of the NDIS.

And we are proud of the provider representation through our Industry Reference Group, SDA Reference Group and the Autism Advisory Group.

Importantly, we have increased our engagement with providers and the sector more broadly through pricing and market reviews.

Price settings is just one example of how the NDIA is engaging and supporting the market.

The 2019 increases in price limits provide an opportunity for providers to innovate, and increase the opportunities for markets to grow.

In addition to the price increases on 1 July 2019 for attendant care and therapy, the NDIA has released the NDIS Pricing Strategy and the NDIS Cost Model for Disability Support Workers. The Cost Model estimates the full costs, to a provider, of engaging workers covered by the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010 (SCHADS Award).

This quarter the NDIA also published reports on the WA Market Review and the Therapy Services Review, and released comprehensive regional market data. To encourage transparency and growth in the market, the Agency released comprehensive data on utilisation, market concentration and participant choice and control by geographical regions, participant characteristics, and support categories.

And this morning Minister Robert announced the commencement of the NDIS Annual Price Review for 2020-21. The review will look at current NDIS price limits and related policies to ensure they continue to be appropriate to the market, to understand where changes may be required and provide recommendations.

Sharing this information enables participants and providers to better understand investment opportunities, and gives providers information they need to expand into new and growing markets.

We are consciously and deliberately improving sector consultation around NDIS price settings through:

- broader engagement with providers, participants, industry experts and governments,

- changes to the Pricing Reference Group with a focus on independent, external representation,
- work on establishing benchmark data as a condition of the Temporary Transition Payment, and
- special measures to support participants in remote communities where use of standard price control arrangements may be insufficient to attract supply.

We will be putting more effort into sharing information in a timely way. We have made a start by publicly releasing the rationale for key pricing decisions and market review reports.

I want to expand on this last part. The data tells us we all need to be investing more in remote and very remote regions to deliver the Scheme's aims in these communities.

The Minister spoke this morning about growing the market across regional and remote communities.

There are historical challenges Government service delivery has encountered in regional and remote locations.

We know these challenges are not new but the NDIA is committed to working across Governments to identify and roll out new and innovative ways to address these challenges.

Stimulating market activity in regional and remote communities remains a key focus for the Agency. Recent consultation with providers across remote parts of Australia has revealed that financial risks are a major barrier to the supply of disability supports in thin markets.

We listened and we have begun making a number of changes to encourage and support providers who want to meet the needs of Australians in remote communities.

The July 2019 price review included:

- expanded boundaries for rural and remote service delivery to better reflect the nature of delivering supports in some areas
- remote loading of 40 per cent (increased from 20 per cent) and very remote loading of 50 per cent (increased from 25 per cent) to reduce the financial risks for providers, while maintaining participant choice and control
- An increased cap in provider travel claiming from 45 minutes to 60 minutes in regional areas
- An hourly rate for non-face-to-face care activities conducted on behalf of the participant.

In August 2019, $10 million in grants were announced for the Jobs and Markets fund, to help address under-supplied markets in the NDIS – including in rural and remote areas.

And we have delivered a range of reforms to build confidence in the Specialist Disability Accommodation market including changes to rules, policies, pricing and payment settings announced in August.

Finally, we are working to make sure our work in rural and remote areas is culturally appropriate, and specific.

A range of Community Connector initiatives are currently taking place in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

These initiatives target remote and very remote areas and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities within them. The Remote Community Connector Program is a cultural brokerage initiative which aims to engage and assist participants from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds through the NDIS pathway.

I know there is more work to do to ensure the Scheme is accessible and available to all communities. I am eager to hear how providers are adapting, innovating and growing to meet the needs of Australians with disability in rural and remote areas.

I am pleased that earlier in November, the NDIA released our NDIS Participant Employment Strategy.

The Strategy is bold and ambitious.

By 2023, we are aiming to have 30 per cent of NDIS participants of working age in employment. This means around 78,000 people in jobs.

That’s an increase of about 7 per cent over the next three years.

We want to make sure the NDIS is supporting people to find age- and skills-appropriate work that aligns with their goals – wherever that might be.

Achieving this goal is going to require the support of many – government, business and industry groups, community organisations, families and carers, and most of all – Australians with disability.

This is a great opportunity for providers, with your deep understanding of the sector, to support more participants into the workplace.

Whether it is innovating in areas of service delivery and product offering, or employing people with disability yourselves – I challenge you all to help break down the barriers to getting a job that many people with disability face every day.

The NDIA has already incentivised the delivery of employment supports, and we are working with Australian Disability Enterprises to support their transition to the NDIS market.

In October, we announced a new supported employment pricing framework. And in November we released an information and consultation paper that sets out a timeline for implementing the new pricing, the transition arrangements, and clarity on how to interpret and apply the pricing.

To help facilitate a smooth introduction, the new pricing framework will be implemented in stages. This will ensure that ADEs are supported to move to the new pricing while continuing to support their employees with access to the right supports to thrive at work.

It is pleasing to see providers like Life Without Barriers setting down their own deep and ongoing commitment to provide people with disability the same employment opportunities afforded to everyone else.

In their Accessibility Inclusion Employment Plan, they acknowledge their role as leading provider of disability support services. Life Without Barriers intend to lead the way for all employers nationwide when it comes to changing their policies in order to practice real inclusion.

In 2017- 2018, Life Without Barriers employed 153 new staff who identify as having a disability, meeting their target of 4 per cent of new hires.

Their target for the next plan is 8 per cent of new hires and

4.5 per cent of staff in total identify as having disability by June 2020.

And I am proud to say the NDIA is joining them in leading the way. This financial year the NDIA continued to lead the APS in disability employment with almost 12 per cent of our staff identifying as having a disability.

We also recognise that while diversity may be achieved through representation, true inclusion is achieved by making sure everyone is treated fairly and without bias.

That is why the NDIA is committed to making sure our workplace represents the communities we serve, and that we continue to learn from a wide variety of experiences.

We are finalising our Diversity and Inclusion Framework based on the lived experience of our employees with disability, and their feedback on how the NDIA can best support them in their workplace and career development.

We are a better workplace for these efforts, better positioned to deliver the NDIS in the best interests of participants.

I encourage other organisations and providers to follow Life Without Barriers' lead, and share their commitments to employing people with disability and supporting better work outcomes for NDIS participants.

That is why I am eager to start working with you all. We know getting it right for every participant, every time, takes coordination, collaboration and partnership.

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

We continue 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 taking a leading role in addressing these issues.

There are many moving parts involved in improving the lives of people with disability. And while the NDIS can make immediate improvements to the lives of participants, we also have a sense of the historical context to what we are doing.

We are still in the relatively early days of a huge shift for Australia in terms of how we ensure adequate support exists for people with disability, their families and carers. So the NDIA has to look at the big picture and work with our partners in government and the private sector to address large systemic and technological challenges.

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 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.

Already, the NDIS is making significant progress in improving the lives of people with disability.

I look forward to working with all of you to make sure we get it right for every participant, every time.

Thank you.

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