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Canberra resident Phillip Dodd's mobility was severely impacted following a motorcycle accident in the 1970s that resulted in a serious leg injury and an above-the-knee amputation in 2015.

When Phillip, who works full-time, became a participant in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), he received a new prosthetic leg and modifications to his home and car to increase his independence. He is one of thousands in the ACT who had never received any type of disability services or support before the NDIS.

As Deputy CEO of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), I regularly meet participants like Phillip, people whose lives are being transformed by the NDIS.

The ACT is the first state or territory in Australia in which the NDIS has been fully rolled out. This means that while ACT residents were among the first to benefit from the NDIS, some participants have also experienced the inevitable challenges that will arise from such a large and complex reform.

While much has been achieved during the trial and transition periods in ACT, we know there is much more to do.

The most significant achievement is the number of people in the ACT who are now benefitting from the Scheme. As at 31 March 2018, 6,613 people had an NDIS plan in place. Of those, 52% (or 3,468) were not previously receiving support from either the ACT or Commonwealth Governments. To emphasise the point, these people, like Phillip, needed help, but previously were not receiving it.

As a result of the NDIS, participants and their families in the ACT are telling us that the NDIS is helping them in many ways. Ninety-four per cent of parents of pre-school aged children are saying that the NDIS has improved their child's development and 74 per cent of people over 25 are telling us that the NDIS has helped them exercise greater choice. Australia-wide, 84 per cent of surveyed participants were satisfied with their NDIS experience.

However, as highlighted by the current ACT Parliamentary Inquiry into the implementation of the NDIS in the ACT, the roll out of the NDIS remains a work in progress and some participants' experiences have fallen short of our standards. It is clear that at the forefront of these challenges is the need to improve the planning process, which is why a new general participant pathway has been designed and is in the final stages of being tested.

In addition, the NDIA has already taken significant steps to address many of the issues which have been raised as part of the Inquiry.

For example, the rate of unscheduled reviews in the ACT during transition is high and has been the subject of significant work by the NDIA.

As ACT was amongst the early trial sites and the NDIS was brand-new, some mistakes were made in planning. We have worked closely with participants to address the issue and where broader issues were identified, introduced new processes or means to solve them.

In particular, many unscheduled reviews have occurred where assistive technology is part of a plan. We have implemented new assistive technology changes, which will help the 45 per cent of participants likely to require low cost assistive technology items to access funding and equipment in a timely manner.

It's also important to address some misconceptions around the underpinning principles of the NDIS, especially around people exiting the Scheme and variations in funding for participants' plans.

The NDIS is an insurance based Scheme. It is not welfare. It is underpinned by the fundamental proposition that by taking a life-time approach and investing in people early, the opportunity for individuals to live an ordinary life is maximised. This is particularly the case with children with developmental delay. A significant upfront investment will provide a lifetime of benefits.

There have been similar misconceptions around plan variations with reports that participant plans are being systematically reduced. In contrast, a large percentage of plans in ACT in the last year were increased by more than 10% on review. Moreover, in an insurance based Scheme, as opposed to a welfare system, there should be no expectation that plans should not be reduced. In some cases, reductions reflect a one-off investment in assistive technology; while in other cases, it results from the achievement of a goal that no longer needs funding.

It is possible there will be more challenges ahead as we continue to implement one of Australia's largest ever social reforms. But the opportunities and the benefits of the NDIS outweigh the challenges many times over. At last, people with disability have choice and control over their lives and can receive the reasonable and necessary supports they need.

As Phillip puts it: "The NDIS has really changed our lives. The thing I like most about the NDIS is that I was able to ask for the supports that I needed to live my life. I made the choice. I had a voice and was listened to.

"I saw that the NDIA is evolving and changing to become more client-friendly and that showed me that it was worth it."

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My colleagues and I are absolutely committed to building a world-leading NDIS that empowers people with disability to achieve their goals in inclusive communities and workplaces.

Vicki Rundle is Deputy CEO of the National Disability Insurance Agency

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