11 March 2021

The NDIA has responded to concerns raised today in media, following a statement from disability organisations regarding the rollout of independent assessments this year, including releasing a joint submission with DSS to the Joint Standing Committee inquiry into Independent Assessments.

The Agency wants to reassure participants, their families and carers that the NDIA is committed to ensuring they continue to receive the supports they need, and have greater choice and control over those services.

Independent Assessments are one element of the NDIS reform program, which will create a fairer, simpler and more flexible NDIS. They are not an end in themselves. They are an essential tool to ensure greater flexibility, transparency and consistency for participants.

They are critical to ensuring eligible participants can access and use the Scheme, and to building more flexible plans, where participants can have more choice over how they use their NDIS budget.

The NDIS was born from the need for a system where people with disability could have better opportunities to be included in their communities, be more independent and have greater control over their lives.

For many the NDIS has lived up to this vision - providing people with permanent and significant disability with individual funding, more independence and choice and control over the supports they need and who provides them.

It is clear that, for many Australians, the NDIS has been life changing, but others have told us it is not as fair, simple and flexible as it could be.

Functional assessments have always been part of the NDIS. The Scheme has always been based on a person’s functional capacity, rather than medical diagnosis.

To access and use the Scheme, NDIS participants have always been required to have discussions about their lives with people they may not know such as health care professionals, NDIS Local Area Coordinators and Planners – to help inform important decisions such as plan funding, to ensure they have the right supports in place for their individual needs.

The current approach to functional assessments relies on individuals seeking their own assessment at their own expense, however this approach has resulted in a number of issues impacting directly on participants.

These inconsistencies and burdens in gathering information have contributed to inconsistency of access and planning decisions, resulting in inequity for people applying for and using the

Scheme.

Importantly, Independent Assessments will also allow for participants to have a more accurate, flexible plan through use of an improved way of developing personalised budgets.

NDIS participants are the experts in their own lives, so it is the NDIA's job to ensure they have the right funding in place – and that the funding is flexible enough – so that they can choose the services they need, within the guidelines of what is covered by the NDIS.

Participants will receive an indicative personalised draft budget based on their functional capacity, environment and personal factors identified through an independent assessment, to ensure they have funding for the supports they need.

The suite of tools used for the independent assessment have been selected to improve upon the existing assessment approach, providing a more holistic and consistent view of a participant's functional capacity and their environment. This assessment data will be used to estimate a participant's budget.

This will mean participants will receive a more accurate plan, based on their support needs, for them to use flexibly.

Personalised budgets will be developed based on participant data from the last 7 years of NDIS experience, as well as the more than 4000 participants who will take part in the independent assessment pilot, and expert knowledge to develop model plans and personas that will help determine what level of flexible support funding a participant may need, dependent on their circumstances.

Development of personalised budgets is ongoing, with more information to become available closer to the roll out of the tool.

It is not accurate to say there has been no consultation on independent assessments. They are part of the reforms to the NDIS which will deliver an element of the Productivity Commission's original design for the Scheme as outlined in 2011 and are based on recommendations from reviews and inquiries, including the 2019 Independent Review of the NDIS Act by David Tune AO PSM.

More recently there has been additional consultation to support the roll out of independent assessments. Over the last three months the NDIA has collected feedback from participants, family members, carers, providers and other stakeholders. The feedback received through this consultation process will inform how the reforms are delivered and the support, resources and information provided to participants, planners and Local Area Coordinators.

The NDIA continues to seek the feedback of participants and their families, through a comprehensive consultation program and continuing pilot, however, we want to clarify a

number of issues that have been incorrectly communicated in media today:

1. There will be no time limit on assessments and they may be conducted over one or more days. They will be completed by health care professionals, people will be able to choose their assessor from the panel where possible, and whether to have the assessment in their home, and they will be free – paid for by the NDIS.
2. Decisions will continue to be made by NDIA delegates. The decision review process also won't change. If a participant thinks a decision made about them or their plan is wrong, they will be able to request a review and then an appeal if necessary – the NDIA respects everyone's right to do so.
3. Participants can choose to bring a trusted support person who knows them well to their assessment such as a family member, carer, support worker or health professional. Participants can choose to have a support person at the assessment for the whole time, or just for parts of the assessment.
4. Independent assessors, and the assessment tools do not replace the relationship a person has with their treating medical or allied health professional. To make sure the independent assessment process is consistent, independent assessments can only be done by an allied health professional on the independent assessor panel, so all participants, regardless of their situation have the same access to internationally recognised, evidence based assessments.
5. We have made sure the recommended tools meet certain criteria, are focussed on functionality and are disability-neutral, so can be used across all disability-types. In fact, the approach of assessing function is designed to ensure that the impacts of all disabilities are well understood, where a focus on the diagnosis or disability may not identify all of the ways the disabilities affect a person's life. Independent assessments are designed to capture a person's functional capacity as well as the environmental factors that impact on their ability to live an ordinary life, without making assumptions based on disability or diagnosis, including people who have complex, rare or multiple disabilities.
6. All assessors will undertake cultural competence training, as part of their appointment to support people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. If a participant has a particular preference for cultural reasons, we encourage them to indicate their preference at the time they are contacted for their Independent Assessment appointment. Participants can also be matched with an assessor who speaks their language. If this is not possible, an interpreter will be provided for the independent assessment.

The introduction of independent assessments has been part of ongoing discussion regarding improvements to the NDIS experience, including consultation with more than 40 peak health and disability bodies from across the sector, ongoing completion of two pilot programs to trial independent assessments and gather feedback from participants and their families on their experience and release of consultation papers, with submissions closing last month.

Read the NDIA's joint response to the Joint Standing Committee inquiry into independent assessments (DOCX 106KB) detailing the introduction of independent assessments. An Easy Read version of the JSC submission will be available soon.

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