

Assistive Technology for All - NDIS Review Position Paper

ATFA firmly believes the NDIS Review's final report presents a significant opportunity to enhance support systems for individuals with disability in Australia and improve their access to assistive technology. This paper highlights key findings and actions from the report and makes several recommendations to address any gaps in its recommendations.

In doing so, we highlight our previous work that has influenced both our advocacy and the NDIS final report, particularly *The Australian Assistive Technology Equity Studies: Improving access to assistive technology for people with disability who are not eligible for the NDIS* by Professor Natasha Layton and Dr Natasha Brusco, as well as ATFA's, *Exploring the Benefits and Challenges of Timely Access to AT When Ineligible for the NDIS*. These studies highlight gaps in access to AT and home modifications for those not eligible for the NDIS, emphasizing the need for a more equitable approach to AT provision.

This paper underscores the critical need for equitable and affordable access to AT for all individuals, particularly those not eligible for the NDIS. It highlights gaps in the proposed system, emphasizing the importance of affordability to ensure accessibility and sustainability. Further, we advocate for comprehensive support systems, streamlined administrative processes, and targeted initiatives to address the specific needs of diverse and marginalized groups. We call for coordinated efforts to implement national AT schemes and enhance service quality. By incorporating these recommendations, the NDIS can better fulfill its promise of inclusivity and support for all Australians with disabilities.

ATFA emphasizes that building a comprehensive system through foundational supports is contingent on universal access to assistive technology, ensuring that everyone, regardless of age or care system, can benefit from the support they need. Equitable access to assistive technology not only enhances the quality of life for individuals with disabilities but also promotes independence and reduces reliance on other support systems. It is crucial that all government policies and programs are designed to provide timely and appropriate access to assistive technology for all.

Key Recommendations

Accessibility and Provision of Assistive Technology

Relevant NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 1.10: Develop a nationally consistent approach for the delivery of aids and equipment outside the NDIS.
- Action 8.1: Establish a fair and consistent process for setting housing and living budgets for NDIS participants.
- Action 9.1-9.3: Invest in diverse and innovative housing supports, ensuring funding for shared support facilitation, and providing opportunities for participants to try new living arrangements.

Current Challenges:

Accessibility to assistive technology (AT) remains uneven, particularly in rural and remote areas. Older adults who acquire a disability after the age of 65 are often excluded from the NDIS, creating significant gaps in support. Additionally, there is concern about the shift towards automated assessments, which may overlook the nuanced needs of individuals requiring AT. The affordability of AT also is a key issue.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA recommends that any reform of AT provision, including changes stemming from the NDIS Review, should ensure that there is equity in the provision of AT, including for those aged 65+, so that all who need AT support can receive necessary supports similar to those under the NDIS.
2. ATFA emphasizes the importance of maintaining affordability in AT provision to ensure accessibility for all individuals.
3. ATFA recommends maintaining human-to-human assessments for AT needs to ensure personalized and accurate evaluations.
4. Investment in infrastructure and training for remote and rural areas is essential to improve AT accessibility.
5. ATFA advocates for a system that allows for the fast-tracking of AT provision for individuals with rapidly changing needs to ensure timely and appropriate support.

Support Systems and Market Dynamics

Relevant NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 1.1: Develop a unified set of foundational disability supports through joint design and funding efforts.
- Action 1.4: Invest in navigation support services for people with disability outside the NDIS.
- Action 10.1-10.6: Enhance digital infrastructure to centralize information and streamline processes for better accessibility and acquisition of assistive devices.

Current Challenges:

The support systems for individuals with disability are often fragmented, leading to inconsistencies and confusion. The administrative burden on service providers is high, impacting their ability to focus on service quality. Affordability of assistive technology remains a significant barrier for many individuals, particularly those outside the NDIS. There is also a need for a coordinated approach to implementing new AT schemes alongside aged care and NDIS reforms.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA advocates that foundational disability supports, both general and targeted, are adequately covered and funded to ensure that participants receive the support they need and want, especially in the case of AT aids and equipment.

2. ATFA emphasizes the importance of making assistive technology affordable to ensure broad accessibility and sustainability. Affordable AT solutions can reduce overall support costs by promoting independence and reducing reliance on additional services.
3. ATFA advocates for simplified administrative processes to reduce the burden on service providers, enabling them to deliver higher quality services.
4. Ensure a coordinated timeline for implementing new national AT schemes alongside aged care and NDIS reforms to avoid service disruptions and confusion.
5. ATFA supports the development of integrated digital platforms that centralize information and streamline the acquisition of AT.

Specific Needs of Diverse Groups

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 2.10: Develop a national strategy to improve the quality of the disability ecosystem for First Nations people with disability.
- Action 2.11: Implement legislative changes to allow participants over 65 to receive supports from both the NDIS and aged care systems concurrently.
- Action 5.1: Ensure participants receive accessible info tailored advice to support informed decision-making.

Current Challenges:

Diverse groups, including older Australians, First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse people and the LGBTQIA+ community, often face unique challenges in accessing and navigating support systems. There is a need for tailored approaches that respect and address their specific needs.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA advocates for support systems that are inclusive and tailored to the specific needs of diverse groups, ensuring equity in access and quality of services.
2. ATFA supports legislative changes that allow for concurrent support from the NDIS and aged care systems, ensuring older adults with disability receive comprehensive care.
3. Develop and implement targeted strategies to improve the disability ecosystem for First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse people and other marginalized groups.

Barriers to High-Quality Service Delivery

NDIS Review Recommendations:

1. Action 10.2: Enhance the usability of the digital platform to make it more accessible.
2. Action 10.4: Implement streamlined processes to improve efficiency and ease of use.

Current Challenges:

Service providers face numerous barriers, including complex regulatory requirements, insufficient funding, and lack of support from the system, which hinder their ability to deliver high-quality services to individuals with disability.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA advocates for the simplification of regulatory requirements to reduce the burden on service providers, enabling them to focus on delivering high-quality services.
2. ATFA recommends enhancing system support for providers, including technical assistance and access to best practices, to improve their capacity to deliver high-quality services.

Navigational Support for Individuals with Disability

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 4.1: Lead the commissioning of a local navigation function to help people with disability find supports in their community and make the best use of their funding.
- Action 4.2: Commission a Specialist Navigation function for participants with more complex or specific needs.

Current Challenges:

Many individuals with disability struggle to navigate the complex web of services and supports available to them. There is a need for better navigational support to help these individuals understand and access the resources they need.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA advocates for the development of comprehensive navigational supports that guide individuals through the process of accessing services and supports.
2. ATFA supports the provision of personalized assistance to individuals with complex needs, ensuring they receive the appropriate supports in a timely manner.
3. ATFA recommends the implementation of centralized information systems that provide clear and accessible information about available services and supports.

Equitable Access to Services and Supports

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 2.10: Develop a national strategy to improve the quality of the disability ecosystem for First Nations people with disability.
- Action 11.2: Implement legislative or process changes to allow access to the NDIS for Disability Support for Older Australians program participants.

Current Challenges:

There are significant disparities in access to services and supports for different groups, particularly those in rural and remote areas, as well as marginalized communities such as First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse people and the LGBTQIA+ community. The high cost of assistive technology often puts it out of reach for many individuals, exacerbating these disparities.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA advocates for policies and practices that ensure equitable access to services and supports for all individuals with disability, regardless of their location or background.
2. ATFA supports targeted initiatives to improve access and support for marginalized communities, ensuring their specific needs are addressed.
3. ATFA recommends ongoing monitoring of access disparities and the implementation of corrective measures to address any inequities identified.
4. ATFA stresses the importance of making assistive technology affordable to eliminate financial barriers to access. Ensuring that AT is affordable will help promote equity.

Implementation of a National AT Scheme

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 1.10: Develop a nationally consistent approach for the delivery of aids and equipment outside the NDIS.
- Action 4.3: Adopt a joint commissioning approach to deliver local navigation support within a nationally consistent framework.

Current Challenges:

The absence of a unified national scheme for assistive technology results in discrepancies in access and quality of AT across different regions and systems. This fragmentation complicates the process for users and providers, leading to inefficiencies and inequalities.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA strongly supports the establishment of a single, national approach to the delivery of assistive technology that integrates health, aged care, and disability sectors.
2. ATFA urges for the implementation of consistent policies and procedures across all regions to eliminate disparities in access to assistive technology.
3. ATFA recommends the seamless integration of the national AT scheme with existing support systems to provide a cohesive and user-friendly experience for individuals with disability.

Impact on Service Providers and Workforce

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 9.7: Invest in workforce development to ensure responsive delivery of quality supports.
- Action 3.4: Introduce new needs assessment processes to more consistently determine the level of need for each participant and set budgets on this basis.

Current Challenges:

Service providers face significant administrative burdens, which hinder their ability to deliver high-quality services. Additionally, there is a shortage of qualified professionals to assess, prescribe, and support the use of assistive technology, leading to delays and reduced service quality.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA recommends streamlining administrative processes to enable service providers to focus more on delivering high-quality services rather than being bogged down by paperwork.
2. ATFA supports significant investments in training and developing a skilled workforce capable of meeting the diverse needs of individuals requiring assistive technology.
3. ATFA recommends policies that provide greater support and resources to service providers to help them navigate and comply with regulatory requirements.

Rights-Based Approach and Regulatory Framework

NDIS Review Recommendations:

- Action 2.1: Develop a unified and contemporary approach to disability rights, discrimination, and inclusion legislation.
- Action 7.5: Require providers delivering psychosocial supports to be registered, demonstrating compliance with new support-specific Practice Standards.

Current Challenges:

There is a need for a stronger rights-based approach to the provision of assistive technology, ensuring that all people with disability can access the AT they need. Additionally, the regulatory framework must be proportionate and supportive rather than punitive, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

ATFA's Position and Recommendations:

1. ATFA promotes the adoption of a rights-based approach that guarantees access to assistive technology as a fundamental right for all individuals with disability.
2. ATFA supports a regulatory framework that emphasizes empowerment and continuous quality improvement, rather than punitive measures, to enhance service quality and safety.
3. ATFA recommends that all policies and regulations are inclusive, considering the diverse needs and circumstances of individuals with disability to ensure equitable access to support.