



National Disability Insurance Scheme

# You said, we heard: planning policy for personalised budgets and plan flexibility

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# 1. CEO introduction

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was born from the idea that Australians with disability should have greater choice and control over their own lives.

Its purpose is to support individuals with a significant and permanent disability to be more independent, and engage more socially and economically, while building genuinely connected and engaged communities and stakeholders.

We are now over 7 years on from the first trial of the Scheme, and in August 2020, we announced a major Scheme Reform program that will deliver a better NDIS – one that is simpler, fairer and more flexible for participants

These reforms also deliver on the [Australian Government's plan for the NDIS](#) and aligns with Government's [response to the 2019 independent review of the NDIS Act](#) (known as the Tune Review) which agreed, or agreed in principle, to all 29 recommendations from the review. As part of those major reforms, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) announced the [Participant Service Charter](#), where we committed to empowering participants by asking people with disability and the community to help us develop and test our processes.

We have actively sought feedback on reform proposals through a continued, comprehensive consultation program. In November 2020 we released 3 consultation papers, and encouraged participants, families, carers and the wider sector to respond to questions on:

1. [Access and eligibility policy for independent assessments](#)
2. [Planning policy for personalised budgets and plan flexibility](#)
3. [Supporting young children and their families early, to reach their full potential.](#)

I want to thank everyone for taking the time to make a submission providing us with your views on the questions we have asked and contributing to making the NDIS simpler, fairer and faster for participants. Over the last 3 months we have collected feedback from participants, family members, carers, providers and other stakeholders.

These consultation papers sought feedback on how we can best deliver new policies and processes to support the roll out of independent assessments – which will deliver more consistent access and planning decisions - and more flexible personalised budgets for participants.

The planning paper asked for feedback on how we can best support participants to transition to the new planning model, how we can develop easier to understand plans, and help participants prepare for planning meetings and use more flexible budgets. We also sought feedback on the timing of the release of funds and how we should check-in with participants as they are implementing their plans.

With the input of participants, families and carers, we will reform the NDIS to be a Scheme that Australians can trust and rely on now and into the future. One that gives a participant:

- more control over their supports and who delivers them
- increased transparency over how and why decisions are made
- a more flexible budget to use as needed
- clarity about what the NDIS covers
- a smooth and easy experience

The feedback received through this consultation process will inform how these reforms are delivered and the support, resources and information provided to participants, planners and Local Area Coordinators. The consultation submissions are currently being considered and your feedback will be used to adapt our current ways of working and plans for the future. From here we will:

1. Incorporate feedback into our design and implementation plans.
2. Undertake further targeted consultation on specific topics, such as how to best deliver independent assessments and personalised budgets in rural and remote, culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
3. Actively participate in legislative processes and parliamentary processes, including the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS inquiry into independent assessments.

Starting in late 2021, this new planning policy will progressively apply to all participants over 7 years old in line with the gradual rollout of independent assessments and subject to the passage of legislative amendments.

By the end of 2021, independent assessments will be required as part of the plan review process. This is part of a new approach to planning that will mean plan reviews are based on life stages, instead of a year or two.

Before the policy is introduced, we will develop and release information, tools and resources, host information sessions and workshops. We will explain the new planning process and plan flexibility so that participants are prepared to make the most of their personalised plan budget.

It's important we provide clear communication to ensure understanding of the reforms we are undertaking and I want to reassure you that the introduction of independent assessments is fundamental to delivering fairer, more accurate and more consistent decisions on access and planning.

The rollout of independent assessments is critical to informing a new way of building personalised budgets for participants – budgets that will be more consistent and accurate and in turn provide participants with more choice and control over how they spend their budgets on the supports best for them.

Participants will continue to receive funding for the disability supports they need and the overall NDIS budget will continue to grow sustainably.



We need to not only deliver on the disability supports participants now to participate both socially and economically in the community, but look forward to ensure the NDIS will be here for them throughout their life, and for people who may need the Scheme in the future. We continually monitor and publicly report on this growth to ensure the future of the Scheme is secure and in place to support future generations of Australians.

This paper provides an overview of the consultation activities delivered over the last 3 months, the feedback we received about how planning, personalised budgets and plan flexibility will work in the future and offers some further information on topics that might have been misunderstood. Further information on the progress of NDIS reforms, changes to planning and introduction of independent assessments will be released separately.

Regards

Martin Hoffman  
Chief Executive Officer

## 2. How we received your feedback

You shared your thoughts with us in different ways, including through:

- online submissions, including audio and video files
- consultation events online and in person right across Australia
- direct conversations with sector representatives and peak bodies.

### 2.1 Consultation events

We hosted **57 public information sessions for communities across Australia, with over 1,000 attendees**. This included 29 sessions specifically discussing the access and planning policies, 10 of which were for rural and remote communities.

During this period, we faced the challenge of navigating restrictions on travel and public gatherings due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – so most of our events were held online. We surveyed attendees of the public information sessions where over 74% of respondents reported that virtual sessions enabled them to learn more about the NDIS and share their views

Our community engagement teams also held **over 150 local information sessions** targeting specific groups of stakeholders including the health and allied health, mental health, education, justice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, rural and remote, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

We hosted **6 virtual sessions specifically for providers with over 300 registrations**.

We consulted with participants through the monthly Participant Reference Group and the fortnightly Independent Assessment Participant Working Group. Targeted consultations were also held through 14 workshops with participants, their families and carers.

We actively engaged with the Independent Advisory Council, various sub groups and reference groups to seek input on the proposed changes. More than **112 discussions** occurred with the Independent Advisory Council, national peak bodies, sector representatives, state and territory governments', academic experts and other relevant stakeholders.

## 2.2 Online submissions

When submissions closed on 23 February 2021 we had received **769 unique online submissions** (noting submissions can respond to more than one paper).

- 450 responses to Access
- **293 responses to Planning**
- 192 responses to ECEI reset

Who responded	Number	Percentage of total
NDIS participant, family or carer	106	36.1%
Advocacy, community, sector, peak Body	68	23.2%
Provider	56	19.1%
Health/allied health professional/service	34	11.6%
State & territory government/mainstream	20	6.8%
Partners & connectors	10	3.4%
Agency-assisted submissions	8	2.7%
Person with disability (non-participant)	5	1.7%
Researcher	2	0.6%
General public	0	0.0%

\*Respondents may identify as more than one

### 3. What we asked for your feedback on

We proposed a new Planning Policy for Personalised Budgets and Plan Flexibility. We hope this will deliver a more consistent and fairer experience for all participants receiving supports through the NDIS.

We asked for your views about:

1. How should a participant's plan be set out so it's easier to understand? How can we make it easy for participants to understand how their funding can be spent?
2. How can we support participants to prepare for a planning meeting? What might be needed to support participant decision-making?
3. Which supports should always be in the fixed budget? What principles should apply in determining when supports should be included in the fixed budget?
4. How can we assure participants that their plan budgets are at the right level? (e.g. panels of the Independent Advisory Council that meet every six-months to review learnings and suggest improvements)
5. What new tools and resources should we provide to support people using their plan and new plan flexibilities?
6. What do we need to consider for children aged 7 and above in the new planning process?
7. What ideas do you have for how people can use their plan more innovatively?
8. How best to handle the timing of the release of funds into plans and rollover of unused funds?
9. How should check-ins be undertaken? Under what circumstances is a check-in needed? Who should be involved in a check-in?
10. How often should we check-in with participants in different circumstances?
11. How can the NDIS ensure positive relationships between participants and planners?
12. How can we best support participants to transition to this new planning model?



## 4. What you told us

The feedback we received was mixed. We heard clearly that respondents want the NDIS to be easier, they can see the inequity and inconsistency in our current practices, and want their experiences with the NDIS to be improved. But the perceived impact of these changes on people with disability, NDIS participants, their families and carers has caused concern.

Many advocacy organisations, providers, peak bodies and other stakeholders offered clear recommendations and suggestions for how we can roll out these reforms to allow for individual needs of different participants, their families and carers. This feedback will be used throughout the implementation of the new approach to planning.

We can group the feedback we received on the consultation questions into 8 themes:

- Planning experience
- Personalised budgets
- Plan Flexibility
- Plan implementation
- Innovation
- Support children and young people
- Check-ins
- Moving to a new planning approach

### 4.1 In response to our consultation questions

#### Planning experience

The planning policy outlined changes to the planning experience that many submissions provided feedback on. Submissions included responses to the specific questions asked, including advice on how we can adapt our planning processes to improve participants' experiences.

This included feedback about:

- Uncertainty about the function of a planning meeting when plan budgets have been informed by assessment results.
- Ability to discuss individual circumstances and needs before a plan is drafted, and impacts on the adequacy of plan funding and ability to exercise choice and control.
- The role of goals in a participant's budget and plan, the ability for plans to be tailored to support individual goals and aspirations, and the cultural appropriateness and relevance of goal setting for different individuals and communities.

Respondents were concerned that participants would lose choice and control over their funded supports as the power to negotiate their budget would be reduced if budgets were based on independent assessment results alone.

Many submissions suggested and recommended that we should communicate more with participants about how to prepare for the planning meetings rather than just providing a draft plan before the meeting.

A provider/disability worker has said:

“To prepare for a planning meeting, provide participants with a checklist to use in simple language, including a list of documents and reports to bring, and if quotes are required. When giving them a draft budget to look at prior to the meeting, give them a list of questions they may want to consider before the planning meeting e.g. What supports do you think you will need? What equipment is a priority and why?”

Other suggestions included:

- Providing more guidance about what participants can spend the funding on.
- Providing an opportunity to adjust and tailor draft budget based on individual goals, needs and circumstances.
- Ensuring we have clear, simple and accessible communications products about the planning process.
- Delivering disability specific training to planners and local area coordinators.
- Increasing the number of people with lived experience working as local area coordinators and planners.

A carer has said:

“The idea of giving the consumer a draft personalised budget plan is very important. It needs to be made clear on this document that it is a rough draft, perhaps based on limited information held/obtained by an agency NDIS. For a constructive (less negative) meeting to be held the consumer needs time to digest the information, plan/document and prepare discussion items/ changes based on best knowledge. Appropriate support persons for the consumer is a must. Don't rush meetings on the day and prior: give people time to work through their own issues.”

A person with disability has said:

“It is always good to know what information the planner requires, and an idea of your goals and how you wish to achieve them. Those new to the system probably need more support as it is not clear what to expect than those experienced with navigating the planning process.”

### **Further information on the planning experience**

Your planning meeting will still happen – that won't change.

You will still meet with your planner. You will still be able to choose to meet in person or virtually through phone or video conversations. We'll continue to support you no matter which option you choose.

Here's what will change – you will get a draft plan before your planning meeting. This might have your details and draft amount of funding.

This means you will be able to start thinking about what supports and services you might like to purchase with the NDIS funding before you meet with your planner.

You will have a much more flexible plan. You won't need to use your planning meeting to justify every support, down to the hour, to plan for the next year or beyond, as you have done in the past. You will be able to make decisions and changes to supports week to week as you need so that they fit better with your life.

You are the expert in your life and planning meetings will be an opportunity to discuss how we can help connect you to community, mainstream and other support systems to help you pursue your goals.

You can make changes to the draft budget for specific things like assistive technology and home modifications that support participants to maximise their independence.

Our decision review process also won't change. If you think a decision made about you and your plan is wrong, you will still be able to request a review and then an appeal if necessary – we respect everyone's right to do so.

### **Personalised budgets**

Many respondents wanted to know more about how independent assessments will be used to help build plan budgets. Those at our consultations events requested more clarity regarding how budgeting decisions would be affected by the introduction of independent assessments, particularly if people will experience large changes in their NDIS plan funding.

Submissions from participants reflected concerns about how independent assessments will be used to build plan budgets, whether there will be avenues to review or appeal independent assessment results and the possible impacts on choice and control over NDIS plans and budgets.

A number of submissions outlined concerns about the use of standard assessment tools to determine plan budgets – there was a perception that this may lead to a 'one size fits all' approach and loss of individualised plans, aligned to goals and unique needs.

Assessors will not be making recommendations on the supports or services a participant may need or the level of funding the participant should receive, this is a decision still made

by a planning delegate within the NDIS. But respondents were still concerned about the use of independent assessments to inform funding amounts.

In response to a question about ensuring budgets are set at the right level, many submissions noted the process needs to be rigorously tested and evaluated and transparently developed for people to have confidence. A number of submissions also talked about the need to have a clear process to ensure budgets are set at the right level which considers the views of the participant, their family and supports, in addition to the historical budget use. Other suggestions included establishing a new Independent Advisory Council reference group, a participant survey and additional reporting in external quarterly reports.

There is a common view that the results of an independent assessment will not accurately capture a full picture of a person's life, aspirations and support needs, and as a result any plan funding which is based on these results will be insufficient.

Submissions also spoke about:

- The appropriateness of using functional capacity assessment tools to inform funding amounts.
- Ability for participants, their families and carers to ensure the independent assessment results are accurate before they are used to develop plans
- A possible loss of choice and control in receiving a pre-determined budget without the ability to change funding allocations.
- Opportunity to change draft plan budgets based on assessment results.

An advocacy organisation has said:

“[We are] concerned that whilst the proposed changes will increase participant choice and control with respect to how funds are spent, they remove participant involvement with respect to what funds are needed. The proposed idea of determining a participant's plan budget based upon the outcome of a mandatory independent assessment relies upon the premise that independent assessments will accurately capture the true extent of a participant's reasonable and necessary support needs, a notion strongly contested above.”

A peak body organisation has said:

“... plans are being derived from the budgets allocated to them based on their independent assessments. Independent assessments alone, (without expert reports integrated and planning conversations) do not provide enough information about someone's functional capacity.”

### **Further information on personalised budgets**

Assessors provide the assessment information to the NDIA, they do not make decisions about a person's access to the NDIS, or a participant's plan budget.

Independent assessments provide an understanding of your functional capacity which includes things like how you function at home and in the community, as well as the overall impact your disability has on your life.

The assessment will provide the information we will use to inform the amount of funding provided in your draft plan. We will also share the outcome of your independent assessment with you.

Independent assessments provide consistent information to help us deliver consistent decisions about the total amount of funding participants receive. How you choose to spend that amount of funding to meet your disability-related support needs will be up to you.

In the future, planning meetings will be about how you can work within the plan budget to purchase the support and services you need to meet your disability-related support needs, as well as the supports you may receive from mainstream and community services.

Your plan will be checked and signed off by a person at the NDIA.

For more information on independent assessments and planning visit [our website](#).

### **Plan flexibility**

Many submissions supported flexible budgets, and recommended what types of funding should fall into fixed budgets – things like high cost assistive technology and home modifications.

There was support for plan flexibility and simpler budget categories. Most submissions were comfortable with budgets being fixed, as long as participants could 'top up' fixed budgets with flexible funds if needed. Many submissions also highlighted that individual preferences and circumstances should be considered in allocating funds. Some people may want to fix amounts for ongoing regular supports to make their budgeting easier. Many submissions also welcomed longer term plans.

A health service has said:

*"In general, the move to more flexibility within the use of funds is supported. Budget categories and sub-categories in plans can be confusing, and are restricting how participants can use their budget to best pursue their goals."*

### **Plan implementation**

While being supportive of improved plan flexibility and longer term plans, some respondents concerns about how personalised plans would be implemented.

A health service has said:

“In general, the move to more flexibility within the use of funds is supported. Budget categories and sub-categories in plans can be confusing, and are restricting how participants can use their budget to best pursue their goals.”

An allied health association has said:

“The complexity of the NDIS budget system cannot be understated. Simplifying budgets will serve the participant, provider and NDIA. Providers constantly express frustration at the inability to receive payment for supports that have been provided but were mistakenly allocated in the “capital” budget rather than the “core” budget or vice versa. Flexible and fixed budgets may work to alleviate these issues, but care must be taken to ensure participants can access their supports in a timely manner.”

There was also advice on making plans easier to understand and use – reinforcing the importance on knowing how you can use your NDIS funding, especially as plans become more flexible.

A provider peak body has said:

“Plans need to be presented in a plain, transparent and clear manner, without the government speak. The NDIA’s track record of communication is less than ideal. The language, style and focus used for participants is focused heavily on the positive and ‘fluff’ (Tune, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2017; NDIA, 2017; IAC, Oct 2014), rather than accurately describing and providing detailed information on how a process or interaction actually happens / works.”

Many submissions were not supportive of the proposed approach to the release of funds – they said it will limit choice and control over how they spend their money and limit their ability to save for planned or unexpected events. There were concerns the periodic release of funds would be counterproductive to flexibility. The proposed changes to the release of funds, which would result in self-managing participants no longer receiving annual funding amounts, was seen as a backward step and an unnecessary change. Providers also commented on how disruptive this would be for their operations.

Submissions also raised concerns about:

- Limits to the roll-over of un-used funds, including how this takes into account when bigger purchases may need to occur.
- How participants would be supported to use flexible budgets – recognising that this change is significant and will require support and education to ensure participants continue to receive the disability-related supports and services they need.
- The advice, resources and support needed to assist some participants in getting the most out of a flexible plan, and clear guidance on what NDIS funding should be used for with examples participants can relate to.

An advocacy organisation for children with disability has said:



“We are concerned that with the proposed ‘funds being released at intervals’ will result in drip-feeding of funds to participants, taking away the choice and control in how funds are spent and potentially necessitating shorter service agreement periods, increased service bookings and other administration activities by services providers and associated administrative and cost implications.”

A provider/disability worker has said:

“Moving to a model where providers are required to create or ‘top up’ a service booking on a monthly or quarterly basis in order to continue to claim payment for a regular service, will place a huge administrative burden on organisations. For smaller service providers, this may mean they are unable to support the ever-growing administrative cost of dealing with the NDIA, and they make a decision to leave the industry...this is a poor outcome that is contrary to the aims of the Scheme.”

Many submissions mentioned plan managers and/or support coordinators and the important role they will play in helping participants to use their new flexible budgets. Participants value having a plan manager or support coordinator to help them navigate the NDIS and were concerned that the role of these support people under the new planning policy was not clear. Respondents raised the importance of planners, support coordinators and local area coordinators having relationships with the individuals and communities they support and that this takes time to build.

There was a desire for clarity about the role of support coordinators and Local Area Coordinators. The role of support coordinators and decisions regarding how funding for support coordinators would be included was also raised at our consultation events and through submissions.

An advocacy organisation has said:

“Increase the availability and quality of support for plan implementation available from delegates, Support Coordinators, Local Area Coordinators.”

A peak body organisation has said:

“A Support Coordinators ability to provide expert and reliable information, pertinent to the geographical area the participant will be supported in, is crucial for a delegate to use in their decision making for the overall success of the NDIS.”

### Further information on plan implementation

In your planning meeting, a planner who is a delegate under the NDIS Act will confirm the reasonable and necessary amount of funding in your plan. The amount of funding will take into account any funding for supports which have not been included in the draft plan, for example Specialist Disability Accommodation or high cost equipment. The decision on the amount of funding will be in accordance with the NDIS Act and Rules.

The planning meeting will cover:

- the participant's statement, including any goals and aspirations you want to pursue
- what informal, mainstream and community services and supports are available
- the reasonable and necessary level of funding the NDIS will provide
- the kind of supports and the services you may choose to purchase or use
- any available information about effective and beneficial services and decision making supports to help you implement your plan
- identify any specific supports which can be included in the fixed budget (for example, we may add funds for high cost assistive technology or move funds to the fixed budget to ensure the funding is used for a particular purpose)
- release of funds, including up front release of an amount (for example if you need to make a bulk purchase)
- how you will manage your plan (Agency managed, plan managed or self-managed)
- when or the circumstance in which, the plan will be re-assessed
- When we will check-in.

The NDIA is working on resources, including Participant Decision Guides, to assist participants to access the best available information, including research to make informed decisions at the point of plan development and during plan implementation.

### Innovation

Many submissions said supporting participants to be innovative with their budgets is only possible once there is more transparency for participants on how decisions are made.

Many submissions also want examples of how other people have used their plans and want to be actively supported by the NDIA, Support Coordinators or Local Area Coordinators to be able to use their plan in the way that best suits their needs. This requires confidence, trust, transparency and a strong commitment to a collaborative relationship between participants, planners and relevant support networks focusing on the individual's needs and aspirations.

People also want timely information about evidence-based practice and want more options to choose from a vibrant 'market' with innovative approaches developed with communities through Information, Linkages and Capacity Building grants and promoted through the NDIS website and other relevant networks.

Other submissions asked the NDIA to develop mobile applications to help participants track their budget. The NDIA could also share more examples of innovation, through case studies.

A provider said:

“We suggest the development of applications that will help participants track their budget, plan their budget, and project the funds needed if the participant wants to change supports.”

Another theme focused on the need to develop and release clear guidelines on what NDIS funding can and cannot be used for, and to provide quick, clear responses to on policy questions.

### **Support for children and young people**

Ensuring there is flexibility to support key life transitions was a feature of the submissions about supporting children and young people through the new planning approach. Many submissions mentioned the planning process needs to be flexible and responsive to support children and families. This includes more frequent check-ins and additional support around planned transitions, such as moving from school to work.

An allied health association has said:

“Understanding that there can be times of increased needs in and around significant life transitions and development through childhood and adolescents and into adulthood. Having an increased ability to review and adjust support provision.”

There was also strong support for a dedicated pathway for school-age children that recognises the needs and intersection with relevant systems and mainstream services, such as education. Also, there was feedback to recognise the time restrictions for supports outside school hours, which led to more supports on weekends which often had thin markets.

### **Check-ins**

The purpose and timing of check-ins was raised with feedback provided about what information should be available before and after a check-in takes place, the desired frequency of check-ins and the importance of this being decided with the participant.

A provider/disability worker has said:

“It will be important that the triggers for conducting check-ins are focussed on those positive items, like ‘how can I help to access needed services’ rather than those just affecting plan funding, otherwise there is a risk that they will become regarded as ‘check-ups’ rather than proactive and genuine ‘check-ins’.”

Submissions stated the importance of allowing participants to choose who is involved in their check-in and set their preferences for the timing, location and method (face to face, online, on the phone). They suggested we should communicate early about the check-in, and in the participant’s preferred communication style. We also need to make sure we explain the purpose of the check-in and any potential actions from the check in to the participant, and publish guidelines on who can conduct the check-in. It was suggested that support coordinators, if involved in the participant’s plan, should also take part or attend the check-in. Some responses suggested the support coordinator or Local Area Coordinator could conduct the check-in and report back in a consistent format to the NDIA.

They want to see a genuine check-in established, with concerns it would be '5 minutes' or a 'tick the box' exercise with someone who doesn't understand the participant's circumstances.

Check-ins must be undertaken with accessibility front of mind – in plain language, with options for the communication channel, access to translators and interpreters and support to ensure people with intellectual disability fully understand and can participate.

Some people felt check-ins could add another level of effort and create stress. Responses noted that some participants won't feel the need for a check-in, suggesting these be optional and/or a 'self check-in' completed online, with the timing to be agreed with the participant.

A check-in is needed in circumstances including:

- unexpected use of funds (underutilisation, rapid utilisation, on unusual or unexpected supports, large amounts being used by one provider)
- where someone has only one provider and limited informal supports
- if there has been a deterioration, emergency, hospital admission, natural disaster, or a life stage transition
- making sure there is consistent communication where a participant has a longer plan, and to support the transition to more flexible plan budgets.

Respondents told us it is important for all participants that the check-in is conducted by someone familiar with their story, circumstances and plan. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, check-ins should be conducted in-person and by someone with an appropriate understanding of cultural safety.

Submissions mentioned there should be a number of options for frequency of plan check-ins. How often we should check in with a participant depends on their individual circumstance and any associated risks and the need to take account of factors including: personal preference, age, life stage, any formal and informal supports in place, the nature of their disability, expected rate of progress in reaching goals, and levels of isolation. Respondents also suggested participants with a newly acquired disability or who are new to the NDIS should have more regular check-ins.

While responses were consistent that the frequency should be agreed between the participant and planner, general suggestions were made across a number of submissions on timing: every 3 months when new, every 6 months in particular circumstances (such as vulnerable or homeless participants, participants with a housing goal, for people with episodic, fluctuating or deteriorating conditions) and at least annually for longer plan durations, or at the discretion of the participant.

There was support for the ability to initiate check-ins as needed, by participant or the NDIA, and that this needs to be a fast and responsive process.

An advocacy organisation has said:

*"In line with participant choice and control, check-ins should be undertaken in line with participant-identified preferences for communication – i.e., for some this may be*

via text-messaging, others via a phone call, some could be done via video conferencing and in some cases house calls/drop-ins, where practical. This could require an associated escalation process should the NDIA or its delegate be unable to contact a participant.”

An NDIS participant has said:

“The check-in idea makes me incredibly anxious, as I am not good at casual conversations with strangers over the phone or in person. I would require prior knowledge of the conversation, have time to work out how the plan is going and a support person. Perhaps a 6 monthly check-in with prior notice, and the availability of a support person/coordinator prior to and during the conversation.”

### **Moving to a new planning approach**

In the consultation sessions and submissions, there was a lot of feedback about the introduction of independent assessments and the communications, information and resources participants will need to better understand these changes.

Information should be clear and in the right format to support people to understand this change, how it impacts them and what to do. A particular focus was language, including the use of plain English, no jargon, languages other than English including Auslan and culturally safe ways of communicating.

A provider/disability worker has said:

“There needs to be explanations that come with the plan and not buried on the website where people have to go looking for them – as they often do not.”

A person with disability has said:

“The problem is whole NDIS things and plan is too hard to understand to participants. Once they understand, decision-making is not hard.”

A provider/disability worker has said:

“Information should be available in suitable formats – Braille, audio, visual, plain English and different languages. A contact (online & phone) should be available where they can ring and ask someone from the NDIA if they have uncertainty. More LACs on the ground to answer questions as well would be helpful.”

This also included feedback on how planners, Local Area Coordinators and our call centre should work with participants and answer questions. It was clear that many felt we could reduce complexity of information and that this would be increasingly important as the planning process changes and we introduce plan flexibility.

An allied health association has said:

“Participants go into planning meetings without much of an idea about what is possible with their funding. The terminology used by the NDIS is confusing and does not adequately describe to people clearly what the funding can be used for.

Participants need a simple glossary of terms for their NDIS plans so they can better understand the wording and funding categories.”

A provider/disability worker has said:

“Educate NDIA staff on how to provide correct information but in a supportive way – ‘that is the rules/there is no other option’ is not supportive – it causes anxiety, frustration, and stress when they are already struggling. Ensure that all NDIA staff deliver consistent messaging – we sometimes find that the quality of responses from the NDIA depends very much on who picks up the phone when we call.”

An advocacy organisation for people with disability has said:

“Communication is crucial. NDIS planners should be available to participants when they have questions or concerns. They should provide clear and transparent information around the process and expectations. Planners also need to take time to get to know participants, to build rapport and gain the trust of participants.”

Submissions recommended we develop clear and easy to understand guidance material, providing information about the change and how it affects participants. This includes information and training for services providers, allied health professionals, and support coordinators so they too understand the change. Some participants will need more support than others, so it is important that a tailored approach for participants is developed.

Further co-design with participants and stakeholders and extensive trialling of the process prior to it being implemented is also recommended.

#### **Further information on communications and resources**

We have published a range of information about independent assessments and what they mean for participants on our [website](#).

Over the next 6 months we will be developing new products and guidelines to explain the new planning process, as well as more useful resources for participants such as decision making guides. These will be tested with participants, translated and available in a range of formats.

We are also working to deliver on the actions in our [Service Improvement Plan](#) to reduce jargon and improve the usefulness and accessibility of information about the NDIS.

## **4.2 Other issues you raised**

### **Concern about the reforms**

Fear of losing NDIS support, experiencing reductions in plan budgets and anxiety about having to complete independent assessment to reconfirm their eligibility to the NDIS was heard through a number of submissions, and particularly those from participants and organisations representing people with disability.



## Independent assessments

Many submissions agreed that the NDIS needs to improve the consistency of decision making and equity of plan funding, but concerns about the introduction of independent assessments was outlined in both the Access and Eligibility Policy and Planning Policy papers. This meant that many respondents provided submissions that focused on the idea of independent assessments themselves rather than the planning policy more specifically.

Some submissions expressed support for independent assessments being used in the access process, but did not support or understand how it can be used to deliver individualised planning and made it clear that we need to provide further information about how this will work.

Many submissions provided practical feedback and solutions to how we can implement independent assessments, and what we need to consider to ensure it is done well. Common feedback about independent assessments included:

- Making sure information about the assessment experience is clear including where and how the assessment can be undertaken, who the assessor is and their skills and knowledge and who a participant can have support them if they want.
- Ensuring the assessment tools are appropriate for all communities, are delivered sensitively and that assessors have appropriate training.
- Establishing and communicating clear rules about exceptions.
- How we should deliver assessments to best support participant's to participate in the process, including the reasonable adjustment we need to make to ensure the assessments are accessible, including the use of interpreters and alternative communication techniques.
- How exemptions to independent assessment will be managed and whether assessment results will be reviewable.
- How we can manage the availability and quality of assessors, including what knowledge, skills and experience assessors should have.
- Ensuring there is adequate time allocated to complete assessments (possibly over more than one day or at separate appointment times), to capture 'good days' and 'bad days'.
- Delivering a clear and easy to follow review and complaints process for assessments.
- Providing people with disability and participants with their full independent assessments results.
- Making sure there a strong safeguards around independent assessment.

Our information sessions also provided a large amount of feedback regarding the experience of people in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. We received feedback about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with government, with discussions focusing on how people can be supported to understand and participate in ways which respect traditional beliefs and cultural practices. Feedback also raised specific factors we should consider when introducing independent assessments. These included the availability of services, the need to cover large distances, the use of telehealth services and the importance to take the time to build trust and understating of people in these communities.

#### **Further information on independent assessments**

No matter where you live across Australia, if you are a new or existing participant aged 7 years and over; you, your family member, or carer will be able to choose the organisation your independent assessor comes from.

Across 90% of Local Government Areas (LGAs), you can choose from at least three organisations for an in-person independent assessment.

Across the remaining 10% of LGAs, you can choose from at least two organisations for an in-person independent assessment.

You also have the option to do your independent assessment by video call. You can choose:

- where and when your assessment happens
- if your assessor is male or female
- if you'd like your assessment done in one session, or over a number of days.

Participants in remote and very remote areas of Australia will have access to independent assessments from two or more panel organisations, either in person or by video call.

To conduct independent assessments fairly and consistently, regardless of where a person lives, we have also created a pricing structure which reflects the higher cost of delivering services in remote and very remote areas.

We're talking to participants, their families and carers, and the disability community, to provide more information about independent assessments before they start in 2021.

There is still work to do to design and implement these changes. We are working to deliver information on the new access and planning processes in clear and accessible formats. Resources will be released over the coming months.

For more information on the independent assessment experience visit [our website](#).

## 5. What we will do with this feedback

We are working towards a future NDIS that is simpler and fairer. That will empower participants to exercise greater choice and control over their lives and ensure the NDIS remains sustainable.

The feedback collected over the last 3 months will be used to inform draft changes to legislation, policy, implementation approaches and guidance for participants, staff and partners – ensuring we can deliver these significant reforms to the NDIS in a way that works best for NDIS participants.

We will also conduct further engagement and consultation activities over the next 6 months on the range of improvements we are making to the NDIS. This includes:

- Supporting the Department of Social Services with the release of draft changes to the NDIS Act for feedback.
- Stakeholder engagement on the personalised budget approach and how independent assessments will be used to inform plan budgets.
- Stakeholder engagement about the Quality Assurance Framework for independent assessments.
- Targeted engagement and consultation on key areas such as home and living and support for decision making.