

Submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry

15 December 2023

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The National Disability Insurance Agency acknowledges that for some National Disability Insurance Scheme participants, discussions about COVID-19 can be distressing. We also acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on participants.

Ensuring the wellbeing, safety and continuity of supports for participants is of utmost importance to the Agency. Participants who are impacted by COVID-19 and require support should contact the Agency's National Contact Centre on 1800 800 110.

1. Foreword

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission in line with the Terms of Reference to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry. The Department of Social Services' (DSS) submission will provide a broad overview of the social services portfolio COVID-19 measures, which also provided a range of supports for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants. The NDIA's submission specifies the NDIA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting the operational and funding measures implemented by the NDIA, in addition to certain portfolio measures implemented by DSS. This submission therefore should be read in conjunction with the submission from DSS.

2. About the NDIA and NDIS

The NDIA is the agency responsible for administering the NDIS in line with the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* (Cth).

As of 30 September 2023, the NDIS is supporting 631,529 participants, with a further 19,454 children being supported via the Early Childhood Approach. This includes 32,973 participants living in Supported Independent Living (SIL) arrangements, 23,277 participants with Specialised Disability Accommodation, and 1,565 younger people in residential aged care settings. More information is available via the NDIA's [Quarterly Report to Disability Ministers](#).

The NDIA has more than 13,690 staff including APS, contractors, and outsourced workers. The NDIA's Partners in the Community include Local Area Coordinators and Early Childhood Partners, and the NDIA engage with networks of 200 community-based Connectors reaching more than 300 remote communities.

3. Current status of COVID-19 supports

The NDIA maintains targeted COVID-19 measures to address the needs and continuity of safe practices and services for NDIS participants and NDIS providers, in acknowledgement of the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. In July 2023, the NDIA met with its Participant Reference Group (PRG) to discuss access to COVID-19 vaccines and supports, and test knowledge of COVID-19 supports available to them via the NDIS.

Through PRG, the NDIA heard that COVID-19 is still a concern for many NDIS participants, that participants wanted more information about the supports available to them, and to better understand COVID-19 vaccination advice from the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI).

The PRG's advice has informed the NDIA's ongoing approach to COVID-19 measures. The NDIA continues to distribute accessible information about COVID-19 to participants and has increased engagement with providers to encourage ongoing discussions to support participants to get vaccinated and maintain critical services.

The COVID-19 vaccination enabling payments are available to help participants to receive vaccinations, and the NDIA in collaboration with DSS and DoHAC remain focused on removing barriers to supports and services to mitigate COVID-19 risk.

Participants are encouraged to use their plans flexibly to prevent or manage COVID-19 impacts, including the purchase of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) where participants receive close personal supports – a support the PRG referenced as highly important.

The NDIA continues to work with governments, states, and territories to improve outcomes for people with disability and to keep NDIS participants safe from COVID-19. Further information about collaboration across governments is available in **Appendix A**.

An estimated 23% of participants over the age of 18 years have received a 2023 vaccine in accordance with Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) February 2023 advice. Due to mandatory infection reporting changes and developing data systems it has not been possible to identify participants eligible for vaccination and targeted supports.

3.1 Governance

In March 2020, following the meeting of the Council of Australian Governments, the NDIA introduced targeted measures to reduce the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has on NDIS participants and more broadly people with disability. The NDIA COVID-19 measures are consistent with advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and DoHAC and the NDIA regularly reviews its measures to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

A range of public health mandates were announced by state and territory governments throughout the course of the pandemic impacting service delivery for NDIS participants such as social distancing, isolation and quarantine requirements. Although many of these mandates have ceased, the NDIA's measures such as meal preparation and delivery and plan flexibility remain to increase opportunity for participant social and community participation and minimise disruptions to supports and services. A list of measures is at **Appendix B**.

The NDIA's COVID-19 responses are primarily coordinated through the COVID-19 Portfolio Taskforce (the Taskforce), led by DSS and encompassing DoHAC and the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission (NDIS QSC), to address specific COVID-19 responses for people with disability. State and territory governments continue to participate in regular bi-lateral meetings with the Taskforce. In addition, a Provider Peaks COVID-19 meeting monitors workforce issues and provides information directly to the disability workforce sector.

In addition, the NDIA has well established memberships across various advisory bodies, including the Disability Advisory Committee (DAC), established in April 2020 and led by DoHAC, reporting directly to the AHPPC. Relationships with the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Services Australia, state and territory governments and associated working groups support data sharing arrangements between governments peaks. The NDIA also provided data to DSS to allow regular reporting of COVID-19 infections in disability accommodation settings, with this information provided to DoHAC and National Cabinet via DSS.

Through its participation in DAC, the NDIA assisted in developing the Management and Operational Plan for People with Disability.

3.2 Broader health supports for NDIS participants

COVID-19 has a greater impact on people with disability due to a range of factors including increased susceptibility to severe illness and disease, difficulty in implementing social distancing recommendations, barriers to accessing supports and inaccessible public health information. [University of Melbourne research](#) – conducted in 2020 in partnership with the NDIA (**Appendix C**) – found that some services were closed or suspended leaving participants without support. This report showed 28% of the 1,672 participants surveyed had at least one allied health support cancelled. Findings are further explored via the NDIA's summary report at **Appendix D**.

The first tranche of the NDIA measures in March 2020 boosted existing supports and services to reduce instances of COVID-19 disruptions for participants and providers. Planning meetings were moved online or via telephone, and high-risk participants were proactively contacted. New support items for Support Coordination allowed participants to use Core or Capacity Building Support budgets for support coordination, helping to engage essential services.

The rapid response required to COVID-19 left some systems underprepared and ill-equipped to support NDIS participants' needs. To support participants for priority vaccine distribution, the NDIA introduced enabling vaccination payments for providers, worked with provider peaks to implement in-reach vaccination services, and coordinated with DoHAC to identify Younger People in Residential Aged Care (YPIRAC). Enabling vaccination payments were extended in December 2020, recognizing the importance of removing barriers to participant vaccinations. The NDIA continues to work with DoHAC to increase availability of in-reach services, and vaccination sensory clinics to increase participant vaccine opportunities.

Since their introduction, the NDIA COVID-19 response measures continue to encourage eligible participants to use plan funds flexibly for support such as one-off deep cleans where a support worker attends their home and tests positive to COVID-19, and meal preparation and delivery services for participants who usually have a support worker help them prepare meals at home or help with grocery shopping, but cannot due to COVID-19.

The NDIA uses its communication pathways to share the latest COVID-19 health and disability advice, and supports and participates in health information campaigns and working groups to keep NDIS participants informed of the latest health advice. Throughout the pandemic, the NDIA has worked with DoHAC to ensure COVID-19 vaccination and health advice has been available in Easy Read, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific advice, and translations to various other languages to support Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities.

3.3 Support for industry and businesses

In March 2020, the NDIA announced financial assistance to NDIS providers, to support financial viability and assist in retaining staff. This allowed providers to claim a one-month advance payment based on monthly average supports (providing immediate cash flow relief), a 10 per cent COVID-19 loading added to price limits for certain supports, as well as temporary adjustments to service cancellation pricing arrangements.

The NDIA supported providers experiencing workforce disruptions to maintain their services through a single provider of workforce support, GenU until 31 January 2023. Where deployment of supplementary workforce was deemed to be warranted via GenU triage, GenU coordinated with a network of providers in each State and Territory to source options for providers in need. The NDIA resolved 75% of all requests for workforce supports through remote coaching and support, without the need for further interventions.

In addition, in preparation for winter 2022, the NDIA worked with IPA recruitment, a subsidiary of GenU, to establish the Winter Relief Workforce. This comprised retired disability workers and other qualified workers to provide a stand-up workforce in the event of catastrophic workforce shortage.

The Taskforce also worked with Aspen Medical to deliver a Clinical First Response, to ensure infection control procedures, PPE and nursing supports were in place for residents and workers in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak in group home settings. Positively, providers were able to appropriately manage outbreaks without additional support from the Clinical First Response team and Aspen Medical instead delivered a series of webinars to deliver online training and advice on infection management and outbreak control. These measures provided the sector with confidence of available supports and showed these could be stood up in the event of a future pandemics.

The NDIA continues to offer Additional Support Payments to eligible SIL providers to recognise the increased costs associated in keeping participants safe during COVID-19 infections and outbreaks. Support worker enabling vaccination payments for providers were extended in December 2022 and acknowledge the burden providers face in reducing the impacts of COVID-19, unlike the experience of the aged care sector where vaccines were largely available at work sites.

In July 2022, the NDIA worked with DoHAC to distribute more than 6.8 million RATs to SIL settings in line with AHPPC guidance, since the ending of this initiative the NDIS Support Worker Cost Model pricing increases allow providers to purchase RATs commercially.

The NDIA also communicates with provider peaks to share COVID-19 safe practices for participants and providers and promotes health and policy messaging, including information on the Disability Worker COVID-19 Leave Grant, led by DSS.

Appendices

Appendix A – COVID-19 Communication and Engagement Summary NDIA.

Appendix B – National Disability Insurance Agency COVID-19 Support Measures

Appendix C – University of Melbourne Report – Research into Participant Experiences with National Disability Insurance Scheme funded Allied Healthcare Services during COVID-19

Appendix D – NDIA Research into Participant Experiences with NDIS Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic