

NDIS history, design, progress, adaptation, challenges and opportunities

Bruce Bonyhady

National Disability Insurance Agency

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Larrakia people, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and to any other Elders who are with us this afternoon.

I also would like to acknowledge my fellow director of the National Disability Insurance Agency, Martin Lavery, who is also the CEO of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. We are very fortunate that Martin brings his expertise and deep interest in rural and remote Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples directly into the Boardroom of the National Disability Insurance Agency.

May I also acknowledge Jennifer Cullen, an aboriginal woman from Queensland, who is a member of our Independent Advisory Council and whose cultural knowledge and advice is invaluable to the Agency.

It's great to be back in the Northern Territory.

Over the past nine years I have been closely involved in the conceptualisation, design and now governance of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Two years ago, when the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments agreed to trial the NDIS in the Barkly Shire, I was delighted, because I wanted the NDIS to be tested in one of Australia's most challenging environments in terms of public policy implementation.

Before the Scheme started we knew that the trials of the NDIS in metropolitan Australia would tell us very little about how the Scheme should work in rural and remote areas.

We knew there would be challenges.

But we also knew there would be enormous opportunities, including the potential to develop new and innovative partnerships with allied sectors such as health.

The NDIS is therefore a great opportunity not just for people with disability, their families and carers but for many of you and your organisations, as together we seek to serve the same communities and explore mutually-beneficial partnerships.

It is in this context that I was especially pleased when Gordon Gregory invited me to address this conference and so open to this audience a conversation that he and I started many years ago, when the NDIS was little more than an idea I wanted to share with him.

'A light bulb moment'

The last time I was in the Territory was two months ago, in March, and I was again struck by the vastness of the country, its raw beauty and the sparseness of the population.

Together with seven colleagues, we spent five days travelling around the Barkly, including driving from Alice Springs to Tennant Creek and back.

It was an ideal opportunity for all of us to learn more, first-hand about the best ways to spread the NDIS through remote communities.

That's the nature of the NDIS in this current trial phase which began nearly two years ago on 1 July 2013: We build. We learn. We keep building and we keep learning.

That's why challenges are not just expected, they are welcomed – because every hurdle we encounter now adds to our knowledge, experience and capability and helps us prepare for the future delivery of the full NDIS.

It's why we owe a debt of gratitude to everyone in the Barkly who are working closely with us to get the scheme right for all remote communities.

During our visit it was a privilege to meet local community members.

- We went to community meetings.
- We visited local schools.
- We spoke with aboriginal corporations, local service providers and business people.
- We spent time with the local advisory group for the NDIS.
- We talked at length with our local team of very dedicated Agency staff.
- We met the Mayor and CEO of Barkly Shire and shire officers.
- And we met with the local MP, Gerry McCarthy.

They told us their vision for the NDIS.

- They wanted to see people with physical disabilities no longer pushing themselves around in old, broken down manual wheelchairs with flat tyres.
- They wanted the Agency to better utilise existing community infrastructure; to build on local strengths through new partnerships.
- They wanted to see people with a disability being included in community life, rather than existing on the margins.
- They wanted to see an NDIS that worked for Indigenous communities, rather than the other way around.
- They wanted to find the common ground between the Agency and their communities and develop relationships based on mutual respect.
- They wanted the NDIS to help sustain not just the individual with a disability but the community of which that person is a part.
- And they wanted it to no longer be a cause of shame to be a person with a disability or have a family member with a disability.

Their vision is now our vision.

Of course it will take time to build, but we are patient.

The discussions also highlighted that the Barkly Shire trial is actually many trial sites, because what will work optimally in Tennant Creek will not be best for Ali Curung or Utopia.

There are also fourteen different language groups in the Barkly Shire and none of them includes the word 'disability', creating significant language and communication challenges.

For me, personally, the visit was one of those lightbulb experiences, even though I had previously visited some of the most remote parts of Australia, had thought about what it might be like to live there with a disability and had an image of what community development and capacity building might mean..

As the parent of two sons with disabilities, I had thought long and hard about what the NDIS means for participants – long and hard.

I had also thought about the benefits for families: an end to begging for essential services and how the NDIS will give parents peace of mind when they are old...

... but I hadn't considered the Scheme enough from an Indigenous community and rural and remote perspective.

And that's one of the main reasons why I'm here today. To learn more, as well as share our experiences to date.

'The NDIS is controlled by the individual ... and their family'

So let me update you on the progress of the Scheme.

At the half-way point of the current trial period, as at 31 December last year, there were 13,646 participants eligible for the Scheme, which is in line with the take-on schedule governments set for us.

The Scheme was therefore on time.

Of these participants, 11,029 had approved plans at a total cost of \$560 million and this was consistent with the original cost estimates from the Productivity Commission.

So the Scheme was on budget.

And, most importantly, client satisfaction was a remarkably high 95%.

Since then, internal Agency data shows that the Scheme continues to be on time and on budget – and client satisfaction remains overwhelmingly positive.

At full scheme we expect that the NDIS will have 460,000 participants.

It will include all those Australians under the age of 65 or 50 in the case of Aboriginal Australians, whose disability is permanent and which severely affects their functional capacity.

It will include people with intellectual, physical, sensory and psychosocial disabilities, as well as early intervention services for children and adults with progressive disabling conditions.

All participants will receive reasonable and necessary disability supports based on their needs. The NDIS funds disability supports; it does not fund health or education supports that people with disability need to access and which are part of the universal service obligations of these sectors.

Most importantly the NDIS is controlled by the individual with a disability – and their family.

They receive the funds to purchase the supports that best meet their needs and this is already leading to new services and new markets.

The Scheme is therefore very different to other Government programs.

It is not controlled by Canberra or Sydney or Darwin... or Geelong, where the National Disability Insurance Agency is headquartered ... because we are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

It is people with a disability who will have control over the services they purchase to make the most of their abilities ... and live a better life.

And because everyone is different and has different goals the Scheme is tailored to individual needs and aspirations.

The NDIS is currently operating in seven trial sites.

On 1 July this year we will start transitioning to the full scheme in a new location, in the Nepean and Blue Mountains areas of Western Sydney.

This is a very significant landmark and demonstrates the confidence of the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments in the Scheme.

In this new phase, as well as the ongoing trials, we will keep learning and building, building and learning, because that is the nature of an insurance-based scheme such as this.

We must continuously monitor the Scheme to compare experience or actual results with the forecasts – and thereby identify improvements.

The NDIS also invests in participants through early intervention and building capacity, because it seeks to maximise opportunities and minimise costs over a person's lifetime.

We are planning and investing for a person's lifetime.

This lifetime approach is also a feature of insurance schemes – and contrasts with welfare schemes, which generally seek to minimise costs in the short term, usually a single fiscal year.

That difference is important: The NDIS is not welfare. It is insurance and covers all Australians.

One of the most exciting changes to the NDIS, since we started the Scheme, is that we have built an outcomes framework to measure over time the benefits of the NDIS for participants and their families.

The outcomes are in eight domains:

- exercising choice and control
- daily activities
- relationships
- home
- health and well-being
- lifelong learning
- work
- social, community and civic participation.

Monitoring the outcomes across these domains, as well as the financial metrics, will help us ensure the Scheme is sustainable and is an economic as well as a social reform.

Another very important area of work for the Agency is in the area of mental health.

We are fortunate that Eddie Bartnik, who is the former Mental Health Commissioner in WA and Australia's foremost expert on local area coordination, has joined the Agency and led this work.

Eddie has consulted widely and there is now agreement on the boundaries between the NDIS and health-related mental health services.

We are also reaching out and listening to other important stakeholders.

This is why we have set up Rural and Remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands Working Groups.

In addition I am hoping to come away from this conference with more ideas on ways to accelerate the progress of the Scheme.

I'm here with Sue Ham, the Manager of our Barkly Trial Site, to meet people. To listen to people.

So if you have an idea, if you see a barrier to the progress of the NDIS or an opportunity ... Martin Laverty, Jennifer Cullen, Sue and I are all very keen to hear what you have to say.

Solid progress in the Barkly

Let me now brief you on the progress of the NDIS in the Territory and also touch on our experiences in the APY Lands, where children have been able to enter the Scheme since 1 July 2013.

The Barkly trial site was established on 1 July last year, less than 11 months ago.

Since then it's made good progress.

So far around 50 people have become NDIS participants, compared with the estimate before the Scheme started that 150 people would enter the Scheme.

Our experiences across other trial sites tells us that it takes time for people to enter the Scheme.

This can be because of natural reticence to engage with something new or cultural and linguistic differences.

We have also seen in other trial sites that the estimates of participant numbers are usually inaccurate, because the NDIS eligibility criteria is different to those of other programs.

Consequently, I am not surprised by the results to date.

The current trial will continue until the middle of next year and then over the next three years we are scheduled to make the transition to the full scheme covering all of the Northern Territory.

The NDIS will be built across the Territory, across other remote parts of Australia and the Scheme will succeed ...because the NDIS is too important to fail.

We currently expect to be at full operation nationally in 2019-20, but we also know that the Scheme cannot be rushed.

We must get it right. He Scheme must be sustainable.

The detailed preparations for the full scheme in the Territory are being progressed through an operational plan, which we are developing with the NT and Commonwealth Governments. It covers all key aspects of the Scheme's full implementation, including key areas of collaboration.

More generally, to overcome the tyranny of distance we expect to be working closely with all governments, where it makes good sense; identifying local strengths to build on; and using new technologies as they become more accessible.

We are therefore not just seeking to partner with disability organisations in traditional ways.

For instance, in remote areas we think that some of our strongest partnerships will develop through building capacity directly with communities and working closely with aboriginal corporations and service providers in health and other allied sectors.

That's why we're partnering with the First Peoples Disability Network in South Australia and the Northern Territory – to establish local support groups and to help train local community connectors.

That's why we've engaged the National Rural Health Alliance as a critical friend – to ensure we take advantage of their expertise as we develop a Regional and Remote Servicing Strategy.

We are also building our knowledge in key areas, such as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, by partnering with the Telethon Kids Institute.

And we are listening closely to feedback from our remote trial sites, which is why we have paid particularly close attention to a recent report from the NPY Women's Council, which gave us some very important messages. They were:

- trust is everything
- patience and persistence is important – as is respect for local culture
- the most powerful and productive way for the NDIS to engage communities is to go to those communities and talk to people – face to face
- and an Indigenous person's connection to the family, community and land to which they belong must not be broken.

In the Barkly region, it is clear that, in too many cases, there are no local service providers with the capabilities or the capacities to give participants in the Scheme the help they need to make the most of their abilities.

We want to work with communities, governments and local service providers who share our vision of building capacity in remote communities.

Nationally, the NDIS is likely to create 90,000 new jobs – which would mean around 1000 new jobs in the Territory.

We want as many of those new jobs as possible to go to local community members.

The NDIS is therefore an opportunity to improve the quality of life of not just people with a disability – but their families and communities as well.

The benefits of the NDIS are bigger than the individual participants.

If we invest the time and effort now in communities, families and people with disability, the payoff for current and future generations across the Northern Territory and all rural and remote areas of Australia will be immense.

And the vision for the NDIS which the people of the Barkly shared with us, which is now our vision, will be on the long road to reality.

Conclusion

Before I finish, let me leave you with a further thought.

When the NDIS was first suggested back in 2006, the odds were stacked against it ever being considered – let alone approved.

In some respects it was an old idea, as the Whitlam Government was planning to debate the legislation for a National Compensation Scheme on the day it was dismissed in 1975.

Not only that, the disability rights movement had lost impetus and the disability sector had become balkanised – as groups were forced to compete against each other for increasingly scarce funding.

The NDIS was also an orphan, as it didn't have the backing of a major lobby group, political party or government department.

Yet, by 2013, the disability sector would unite, the mandarins of the Commonwealth and state governments would be won over, the support of all governments and all political parties would be secured, and reform would be established.

The key factors that created this transformation were leadership, unity, language, economic evidence and sustained engagement to win community and stakeholder support.

Together they have universal applicability for all reforms, in both their design and implementation phases.

They therefore have great relevance to this conference and its themes of People, Places and, especially, Possibilities.

They are also integral to the way the National Disability Insurance Agency is implementing the NDIS – so that we continue to succeed and the NDIS takes its place beside the other great social and economic reforms of the past 50 years, universal health care and compulsory superannuation.

Thank you.

Presenter

Mr Bruce Bonyhady AM is Chairman of the National Disability Insurance Agency Board.



Mr Bonyhady was formerly the President of Philanthropy Australia and also formerly the Convenor of the Independent Panel appointed to advise the Productivity Commission and government during the Inquiry into long-term care and support for Australians with disability. He is a Member of the Disability Investment Group and the Reference Group for the Pension Review. He was Deputy Chair of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Advisory Group to the Council of Australian Governments and former Chairman of Yooralla.

Mr Bonyhady has also held a number of senior positions in the funds management industry and insurance industry in Australia and internationally. He is Chairman of Acadian Asset Management Australia Limited and a Director of Dexus Wholesale Property Limited. His former roles include senior positions in the funds management industry, including Managing Director of ANZ Investments and Executive Vice President at BT Funds Management. His earlier career was as an economist and econometrician in the private sector and the Commonwealth Treasury.

He is the father of three adult sons two of whom have disabilities. Mr Bonyhady was appointed as a member of the Order of Australia in 2010 for services to people with disabilities, their families and carers and to the community.