



Position statement

Independent Assessment and the National Disability Insurance Scheme

December 2020

Introduction and context

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) under the National Disability Strategy (NDS) has improved the lives of many Australians living with disability.

Vision 2020 Australia’s members strongly support the scheme’s priorities of providing choice and control, and have seen it deliver both for some Australians who are blind or have low vision. Our sector remains strongly committed to the aspirations of the NDIS and its potentially transformative impact for people living with blindness, low vision or other disabilities.

Members are aware that independent assessments are being introduced as a response to feedback from participants, the disability sector, the Productivity Commission, and Recommendation 7 of the Tune Review. It is vital that independent assessments meet the more specialised needs of people living with blindness and low vision.

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Vision 2020 Australia’s members are committed to working with the NDIA to create an assessment process that is “simpler, faster and fairer” but any changes to assessment processes must address some of the current system’s shortcomings as they relate to people with vision loss.

It can be challenging for staff charged with assessing people with a vast array of disabilities to understand everyone’s individual needs, or what options might be available to support them. This is particularly so in the

area of blindness and low vision, where ongoing developments in technology and supports can offer greater independence than ever before but are challenging to remain abreast of. The degenerative and progressive nature of some vision conditions also sets all those affected apart from many of the more-traditional disabilities commonly experienced in Australia.

In some instances, such knowledge gaps have resulted in people with vision loss being refused supports and services which were recommended by blindness and low vision specialists, or provided options that are not suitable for their needs, without a clear rationale. This is not acceptable.

Vision 2020 Australia’s members support improvements to assessment processes that both achieve the desired increase in consistency and ensure that people living with blindness and low vision get the appropriate technology and supports.

Such processes need to be accompanied by effective, independent review mechanisms¹. To deliver on the commitment to participant choice and control, it is essential that participants have genuine opportunities to both shape the content of their plans and seek independent review if they are not satisfied with what is proposed.

The ability for specialist expertise to shape that planning process is essential in areas such as blindness

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¹ Recent consultation papers released by the NDIA reveal that independent assessments will soon be used to decide eligibility and funding for participants. But these papers do not provide information about a review or complaints mechanism for independent assessments, which will not be reviewable by the Administrative Appeals tribunal. If the NDIS is to continue delivering the choice and control it promised for people who are blind or have low vision, the NDIA must address some significant concerns from our sector.

and low vision, given the technically complex and changing nature of both the underlying conditions and the supports available to minimise their functional impacts.

The potential benefits of enhancing assessment processes is recognised

Vision 2020 Australia and its members are committed to enhancing current NDIS assessment processes to ensure that Australians living with blindness and low vision have the same opportunities for social and economic participation as other Australians.

Effective assessment processes are critical to this, as they provide potential participants with their first substantive contact with the scheme, and ultimately determine what level of support each person receives.

A range of independent reviews have identified challenges with existing assessment processes, and Vision 2020 Australia members acknowledge that the introduction of a well-built independent assessment process could have significant benefits. These include:

- The NDIA directly funding independent assessments may help remove cost as a barrier to access for some participants, as long as the assessments funded are sufficient to support participants getting the support they need.
- The use of transparent tools and processes could potentially help participants and providers better understand what decisions have been made, and on what basis – an important consideration, given concerns to date with lack of transparency around decision making, particularly where expert opinions are overridden.
- An increasingly consistent assessment process, supported by a performance framework, could assist broader efforts to enhance quality and safeguarding and address the concerns raised to date regarding a lack of consistency in decision making.
- Assessment based on functional capacity rather than diagnosis could potentially recognise unique barriers an individual may face, particularly for those with multiple disabilities. It should however be noted that such an approach minimises opportunities to front-load supports for people who have progressive conditions with established patterns of progression, such as degenerative eye conditions.
- The agency's stated goal of minimising the need for participants to highlight their deficits to receive supports has the potential to make the planning process less disempowering and confronting, providing they retain a genuine role in determining what support they receive and how they receive it.



Issues to be resolved

The need for pre-rollout consultation and testing

Vision 2020 Australia members have previously met with the NDIA to discuss the functional assessment pilots being undertaken in two areas, relevant to the intended national rollout. The assessment needs of people who are blind or have low vision, the challenges and opportunities related to current arrangements and what the sector would consider helpful for inclusion in a functional assessment tool have all been discussed with the NDIA.

At that time significant concerns were raised:

- The first functional assessment pilot did not include vision-related conditions.
- Some of the proposed assessment tools, and how they interact with specific disabilities such as blindness or low vision, are problematic – discounting the specialist knowledge and training which is required for health professionals working in the blindness and low vision sector.

The NDIA stated intentions to include blindness and low vision participants in the second pilot, which was due to begin in early 2020 but was discontinued due to COVID-19.

The NDIA has since stated its intention to seek the experiences of people with different disabilities as part of the second pilot, which has recently resumed. Vision 2020 Australia members remain eager to be included in this process, because:

- Significant testing is required to establish how the assessment tools can be applied to unique factors related to vision loss.
- In the absence of strong understanding of blindness and low vision, the independent assessment process could have limited capacity to recognise and accommodate individual needs.

The sector can assist with identifying these gaps, and how to rectify them, during the pilot.

It is also understood that the assessment tools were chosen specifically to be disability/diagnosis agnostic, based on the idea that diagnosis cannot measure functional capacity. But members have repeatedly found that in the case of people who are blind or have low vision, a generalist approach has resulted in inconsistent planning decisions, higher numbers of reviews, and lower rates of satisfaction.

Clearly, therefore, robust, active consultation with both service users and service providers is necessary before Independent Assessments are further implemented. Members appreciate the decision to delay the rollout until later in 2021, in order to provide more time for this consultation. In order to best use that time, members request extensive and realistic testing of the independent assessment tools, and transparency around the assessors providing them, as part of the second pilot.

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The need for specialist advice and input

Vision 2020 Australia's members are supportive of ongoing work to improve the quality of assessments

for potential and current NDIS participants. However, people who are blind or have low vision are likely to face new difficulties and obstacles if their assessments are not carried out by people equipped to understand their needs.

Within a broad system of disability supports, the needs of people who are blind or have low vision are comparatively complex, for the following reasons:

People who are blind or have low vision are likely to face new difficulties and obstacles if their assessments are not carried out by people equipped to understand their needs.

- People who are blind or have low vision have varied needs for key supports, which will differ according to how they spend their time and the things they want to do, as well as the characteristics of their vision condition, particularly for those whose vision will degenerate over time.
- Some of these conditions, associated needs, and available supports are highly technical and constantly evolving as technology and other factors change.
- Alongside ongoing support, there may be a need for episodic or ad hoc supports, particularly as a range of vision conditions are degenerative, resulting in a change in need over time.
- A range of common life events (such as moving house or starting a new job) are likely to require timely assistance from practitioners with in-depth knowledge of blindness and low vision such as orthoptists, orientation and mobility specialists or occupational therapists with specific expertise.
- As a range of sight threatening eye conditions are progressive, there is sometimes a time limited opportunity for affected people to be trained in the use of equipment and supports while they still have a level of functional vision. Such training is much easier to complete early in the course of their condition, and better equips them to manage the impacts of further deterioration in their sight.

It is essential that any new system effectively identifies and addresses variation, and also acknowledges that when conditions are progressive, the potential to increase functional capacity over time may not be readily achievable (indeed, the opposite may occur).

Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the intention for participants to have an Independent Assessment at “important points” (e.g. new life stage, starting school, new job, ,change in circumstances). However, it is critical that the NDIA and the panel of assessors understand the impact of these transitions for people who are blind or have low vision.

Members note that, as part of the recommendation which the NDIA has used as the basis for this process, the Tune Review states that the agency “...should not implement a closed or deliberately limited panel of providers to undertake functional capacity assessments”. This seems to contradict the tender process the agency is undertaking, with the agency indicating that it is likely occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech pathologists, clinical and registered psychologists, rehabilitation counsellors and social workers might be included in the proposed panel of assessors.

These workforces are unlikely to have sufficient knowledge to complete the assessments necessary to accurately plan for the support requirements and specialist needs of people who are blind or have low vision as this requires a deep understanding of:

- The functional impact of vision loss and its variability.
- The availability of low vision aids and equipment to help reduce functional loss.
- Which supports and services will have the greatest impact in improving quality of life.
- The episodic nature of vision impairment.
- The intersection of blindness or vision loss with other aspects of identity and culture.

Vision 2020 Australia and its members recommend the inclusion of specialists familiar with issues relating to people who are blind or have low vision on the panel of assessors.

Given this, Vision 2020 Australia and its members recommend the inclusion of specialists familiar with issues relating to people who are blind or have low vision on the panel of assessors. These specialist assessors could potentially apply the assessment tools in a way that accounts for the complexities of this low prevalence disability without the need to train a large number of workers in issues relevant to a small cohort of participants. This could include, for example:

- Orientation and mobility specialists
- Orthoptists
- Occupational therapists with specific knowledge of blindness and low vision.

Impacts on Planning and Eligibility

The NDIA has indicated independent assessments will play a significant part in delegates' decisions about:

- Whether a person is eligible for the scheme
- What a person's support needs are, and
- A participants' planning budget.

Rather than being based on a participants' goals, the agency intends that plan budgets will be decided almost entirely based on the results of an independent assessment. The NDIA also notes that draft budgets can only be changed in specific circumstances, for example, emergencies, significant behavioural needs, or to include high-cost assistive technology.

This means that planning meetings, which were previously the most significant opportunity for participants to explain their needs, will now be primarily about establishing how to use funds already prescribed as a result of the independent assessment process.

While planning decisions are reviewable by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, a body independent of the NDIA, independent assessments will not be. But with planning decisions so significantly informed by independent assessments, it is essential that they be accountable to a similar review process.

It is essential that independent assessments, and the people and organisations conducting them, be subject to a robust, independent and accessible review process.

The agency has said that an independent assessment can be rendered invalid if it is considered to have been inconsistent with the independent assessment's framework, or if there is a significant change in a person's functional capacity or circumstances. It has promised that a complaints process will be established for those dissatisfied with assessments or assessors. But it has also noted that it does not intend to fund new assessments for those who disagree with the results.

A poorly performed assessment will have a severely negative impact on a participants' plan, and therefore their choice and control over how they live their life. Because of this, it is essential that independent assessments, and the people and organisations conducting them, be subject to a robust, independent and accessible review process.

Unique Barriers for First Nations and CALD Peoples

Members support the NDIA's stated intention to seek the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse peoples as part of the second pilot of Independent Assessments. These participants make up 6.4 per cent and 9.2 per cent of NDIS participants, respectively.

Our members have raised problems particularly relating to how First Nations peoples, who are three times more likely to experience vision loss than other Australians, have interacted with the NDIA. CALD peoples may face similar barriers to access, which could be exacerbated by the Independent Assessment process. In order to ensure that First Nations and CALD peoples do not face even more difficulty accessing the scheme, we suggest the NDIA ensure the following considerations are taken into account:

- How can the tools and workforces providing independent assessment be selected to ensure that both the cultural and functional needs of these communities are actively understood and accommodated in assessment processes?
- How else will cultural safety for these communities be assured?
- How will access to translators and accessible, translated materials be made available?

Shortage of the proposed assessment workforce

Further, the proposed use of allied health providers, who will only be able to conduct assessments related to their profession, is problematic. Given the existing thin markets and workforce shortages across many of these professions, particularly outside metropolitan and regional centres, it may simply not be possible to have allied health providers perform the assessment functions. More so if they are only able to conduct assessments relevant to their profession.

In conclusion

Vision 2020 Australia and its members stand ready, willing and able to work with the NDIA to support enhancements to current assessment processes that ensure the needs of people living with blindness and low vision are met.

Changes to assessment that make the assessment system more consistent and transparent are welcomed, if these do not have the adverse consequence of making it harder for people with less common conditions such as vision loss to benefit from the equipment, training and support that can maximise their independence and participation.

Providing scope for assessments to understand and consider the progressive nature of some conditions and accommodate 'front loading' of training and supports is also essential as such early intervention equips participants to better manage the subsequent functional loss that occurs in conditions with a well known and established pattern of progression.

Providing capacity for assessments to be conducted by practitioners with the necessary knowledge of common sight threatening eye conditions, their prognosis and functional impacts, and the ever evolving range of supports available to minimise the impact of those functional impacts is essential.

Ensuring that participants have a genuine say during assessment processes, and retain the right to readily seek independent review of key decisions, is also essential to deliver on the overarching policy of choice and control.

Vision 2020 Australia looks forward to working with the NDIA, government, the sector and other interested parties to enhance assessment processes and deliver Australians living with vision loss the same opportunities as other Australians.



About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector. Working with and representing over 40 member organisations, we focus on supporting policy and funding change to prevent avoidable blindness, enhance eye care delivery and better meet the needs of people who are blind or living with low vision.

Our members span a wide range of areas and are involved in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support. This means that the work we do in developing sector-supported policy and advice brings a diverse range of expertise and perspectives to bear.

By working in partnership across government, non-government, private and community sectors, avoidable blindness and vision loss in Australia and our region can be prevented and treated and ensure that people who are blind or vision impaired of all ages, have equal access to services to support their independence and community participation.

For further information about this position statement, please contact Vision 2020 Australia at policy@vision2020australia.org.au or 03 9656 2020.