Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme – General Issues – Annual Report

Ensuring timely and equitable supply of Assistive Technology under the NDIS

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About Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA)

Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA) is Australia's national peak body representing the needs of assistive technology suppliers, distributers, manufacturers, and technicians. We also work closely with the allied health sector, with allied health professionals being eligible for affiliate membership.

ATSA requires our members to adhere to a comprehensive Code of Practice on the provision, sales and servicing of assistive technology (AT).

We are a registered not-for-profit organisation with charitable status, ensuring we advocate for the rights of people with disabilities and older persons to access the most appropriate assistive technology to provide for their ongoing independence and individual needs.

Our Purpose is to support the assistive technology industry to enhance the lives of Australians with disability by:

- Ensuring the provision of quality equipment
- Upholding ethical business practices
- Conducting research
- Promoting education
- Cultivating partnerships
- Advocating for positive change with government and other stakeholders

We are also a member of the Australian Ethical Health Alliance.

Introduction

Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in relation to the implementation, performance, governance, administration and expenditure of the Scheme.

Assistive technology (AT) accounts for just 3% of total NDIS spending, but plays a vital role in improving the lives of people with disability. AT includes equipment such as mobility and daily living aids, communication devices and home modifications that support greater independence and facilitate participation in community, work and daily life. Ensuring timely and adequate access to AT has also been shown to decrease expenditure in other areas by:

- Decreasing the need for ongoing personal support,
- Reducing the risk of accidents and falls,
- Preventing or delaying the onset of secondary health conditions, and
- Enabling people to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible.

Despite recent improvements, many ATSA members continue to report systemic barriers preventing the efficient provision of AT under the scheme. This submission will focus on:

- inconsistent and delayed decisions on AT funding; and
- a lack of publicly available data and performance transparency on the provision of AT under the scheme.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The NDIA should be formally directed to urgently identify and resolve the root causes of delays in assistive technology (AT) approvals. This must include a comprehensive review of policy, administrative and operational barriers contributing to delays, and the implementation of measurable actions to improve timeliness.

Recommendation 2:

The NDIA should strengthen its oversight of Plan Managers and Local Area Coordinators (LACs) by introducing clear performance expectations related to AT provision. This should include mandatory training on AT processes, standardised escalation protocols for unresolved delays and accountability mechanisms tied to service quality and timeliness.

Recommendation 3:

The NDIA should incorporate distinct AT-specific service indicators into the NDIS Participant Service Charter and Participant Service Guarantee. These indicators must be routinely reported in the agency's quarterly Report to enable public accountability and track progress in improving AT service delivery.

Issue 1: Inconsistent and delayed decisions on AT funding

The NDIS *Participant Service Guarantee* sets out maximum timeframes for the approval of AT (28 days for low and mid-cost AT and 50 days for high-cost AT)[1]. These timeframes continue to be surpassed, with some participants waiting upwards of 12 months for critical AT that is needed to facilitate their safety, inclusion, participation and quality of life. Participant impacts such as out-of-pocket costs for equipment rentals; loss of employment and deteriorating health and wellbeing could have been avoided through the timely provision of AT.

The AT sector is also suffering under the weight of these delays. Many suppliers have continued to experience financial hardship, resulting in staff redundancies and the threat of closure. This further exacerbates the delays that are already being experienced by participants.

On 6 November 2024, senior leaders from ATSA and the Australian Orthotic Prosthetic Association (AOPA) met with then Minister for the NDIS, the Hon Bill Shorten MP to discuss this matter in greater detail. Key staff from the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) were also included in this discussion. During our meeting, the Minister **committed to ensuring the NDIA would resume timely reviews of AT requests in line with the stated commitments outlined under the *Participant Service Guarantee* by early 2025.** Since then, we have met regularly with the Director of AT Markets at the NDIA to ensure consistent action against this commitment.

Between late December 2024 and January 2025, we collected data from 7 ATSA member businesses on outstanding quotes in order to better understand the extent to which Minister Shorten's commitment was being progressed. Collectively, this small sample of businesses reported had they had:

- 699 quotes that had been pending for between 6 and 12 months
- 749 quotes that had been outstanding for more than 12 months.

These quotes had a combined total value of $25M and mostly related to mid and high-cost AT. 82% of ATSA members are small businesses that simply cannot remain sustainable under these circumstances. These delays are also having a devastating impact on scheme participants, as demonstrated in the following case study.

Participant Case Study: Nihal

In February 2024, Nihal's orthotist identified that her prosthetic socket was loose and unsafe, causing pain and increasing her risk of falls. While temporary adjustments were made, a new socket was urgently required.

A request for replacement was submitted that same month. By late March, the NDIA confirmed receipt of the quotes and documentation, but no

further updates followed. With her condition worsening, Nihal was forced to rely on a wheelchair.

In July 2024, she was hospitalised after a suspected stroke and a blood clot developed in her remaining functional leg—complications linked to prolonged immobility. The delay in receiving her prosthesis led to serious health consequences and higher costs for both the NDIS and the health system due to additional hospital care and rehabilitation.

To further complicate matters, AT suppliers are often waiting months on end before receiving any communication about the approval of AT. The inconsistency, unpredictability and lack of communication is having significant impacts on businesses, limiting their ability to plan ahead or intervene earlier in the process to ensure a good outcome for participants. This is demonstrated in the following case study.

Participant case study: Jason

Jason, an NDIS participant, had trialled a high-cost power wheelchair and received a quote from an AT supplier. His request for approval of the wheelchair was submitted to the NDIA in March 2024. Jason awaited approval from the NDIA over the subsequent 12-months. His request was not approved until March 2025.

Once the approval had been granted, the supplier submitted an updated invoice reflecting increased costs due to inflation and supply chain pressures. Jason's Support Coordinator indicated that unless the supplier honored the original, outdated quote, they would seek an alternative provider.

To prevent further delays for Jason, who had already endured a year-long wait, the supplier chose to absorb the additional costs and proceeded with the provision of the wheelchair. This case underscores the urgent need for streamlined AT approval processes to ensure timely support for participants, and maintain a viable, responsive supply sector.

Despite Minister Shorten's earlier commitments, issues surrounding the delay in AT approvals have still not been adequately resolved. Of growing concern are increasing instances where Plan Managers are requesting extensive justifications and multiple quotes for lower-cost, often unsuitable products. This is creating unnecessary administrative red tape for allied health professionals, suppliers and participants - resulting in further delays and additional costs.

Members still consistently report excessive delays in the approval of high-cost items in particular. Many cases continue to extend well beyond the 50-day benchmark,

with a small number of cases surpassing 2 years. The approval experience also often varies from case to case without any clear rationale or explanation.

We note that the NDIA's *AT Action Plan 2021-23* clearly committed to improving delays in the approval of AT and driving innovation and sustainability across the AT sector to enhance participant choice and control. While this action plan has now come to the end of its lifecycle, the agency continues to fall short of these goals.

We acknowledge and welcome the work that the NDIA has undertaken to improve access to AT and communication with AT suppliers through the recent implementation of a dedicated Provider phone line, additional training for National Contact Centre staff and the implementation of a new fit for purpose IT system. While these general improvements may prove to be helpful in time, more targeted action is needed to address the multiple factors contributing to delays in accessing AT.

Recommendation 1:

The NDIA should be formally directed to urgently identify and resolve the root causes of delays in assistive technology (AT) approvals. This must include a comprehensive review of policy, administrative, and operational barriers contributing to delays, and the implementation of measurable actions to improve timeliness.

Recommendation 2:

The NDIA should strengthen its oversight of Plan Managers and Local Area Coordinators (LACs) by introducing clear performance expectations related to AT provision. This should include mandatory training on AT processes, standardised escalation protocols for unresolved delays, and accountability mechanisms tied to service quality and timeliness.

Issue 2: Lack of publicly available data on AT provision under the NDIS

The lack of publicly available data on AT provision under the NDIS makes it difficult to assess how well the scheme and the AT sector are performing. Without this data, it's challenging to identify inequities in access, detect supply issues, or support evidence-based improvements to the system.

While the NDIA is required to make a decision about approving AT in someone's current plan within 28 days (low and mid cost) and 50 days (high cost) (How can you get assistive technology in your plan? | NDIS), there is currently no publicly available data reporting on performance against these targets. Instead, performance on AT-related decisions is grouped under the broader categories of plan reassessments and plan variations. This makes it impossible to see how the scheme is performing specific to AT approvals.

Recommendation 3:

The NDIA should incorporate distinct AT-specific service indicators into the NDIS Participant Service Charter and Participant Service Guarantee. These indicators must be routinely reported in the agency's Quarterly Report to enable public accountability and track progress in improving AT service delivery.

Closing

ATSA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's annual report and would welcome further engagement to support the development of a more responsive, efficient and equitable approach to assistive technology within the NDIS.

Should you require further information in relation to any of the matters raised throughout this submission, please feel free to contact ATSA's Director of Policy and Advocacy, Lauren Henley.

Lauren can be contacted by phone on 0422 098 369, or by email at lauren.henley@atsa.org.au.

[1] NDIS (2023) How can you get assistive technology in your plan? Available at: https://ourguidelines.ndis.gov.au/supports-you-can-access-menu/equipment-and-technology/assistive-technology/how-can-you-get-assistive-technology-your-plan?_gl=1*ohtepr*_gcl_au*MTE0OTE5MTg4MS4xNzQ1OTYyNTgy#high-cost