



## Making the NDIS work

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**NDIS Review – Australian Services Union**

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I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we are meeting today – the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation – and pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and emerging.

I also want to thank Angus McFarland for inviting me to speak today.

I have great respect for Angus, who I've known since his days as president of the National Union of Students.

If anything, my respect for Angus and the people he represents has grown during my time as Co-Chair of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review.

My respect has grown, because I've seen first-hand what ASU members do to not just make the NDIS work, but help secure its future.

With that in mind, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to the ASU and the disability support workers you represent.

Thank you for – day-in, day-out – making the NDIS work.

There simply would be no NDIS but for your work.

Also, thank you for your extraordinary efforts during the pandemic to not just support, but keep safe, people with disability.

Thank you for your long campaign for systemic reform of the NDIS and for fair pay and conditions and for greater stability for workers and participants.

And thank you for your contributions to the NDIS Review.

All of which is a long way of saying I'm delighted to be here today.

I've come for three reasons.

First, I want to brief you on the work of the NDIS Review.

Second, I want to share the emerging views of the Independent Panel.

Third, I want to listen to you and learn from your experiences.

Let me start with a bit of context: last October, the NDIS Minister, Bill Shorten, set up the Independent NDIS Review.

He asked us to find ways to improve the experiences of participants and families; ensure the NDIS is sustainable; and restore trust in the Scheme. The Review covers the whole Scheme and beyond.

Since then, we have received more than 2,800 public submissions, travelled to every State and Territory, and met thousands of Australians.

And – as my Co-Chair Bruce Bonyhady said in Newcastle yesterday – we have been dismayed by much of what we have found.

Dismayed by the systemic inequity – for example, too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not supported by the NDIS.

Dismayed at how much people in regional and remote communities are missing out.

Dismayed by the rising trajectory of costs which wasn't predicted by anyone.

Dismayed by the lack of innovation – with too many decisions based on poor and incomplete data.

And dismayed by the lack of fairness and consistency in what supports are considered 'reasonable and necessary'.

What Bruce said yesterday in his speech to participants – and repeated later in a webinar with service providers – was that, unless significant action was taken, the integrity of the NDIS could be in danger.

Bruce also said that every part of the disability sector shared a responsibility to act now to protect the sustainability of the NDIS for future generations.

But none of that is news to the ASU.

After all, you have been sounding the warning for years.

You warned about poor employment and pricing practices and how they were connected to poor participant outcomes in 2017.

You warned about poor workplace conditions and staff churn in 2020.

You warned about the impact of COVID-19 on disability support workers in 2020.

And your warnings were almost always backed up with research.

You've also made numerous submissions to inquiries – including joint standing committees and the NDIS Review.

In addition, your contributions to public debate on the direction of the NDIS have been thorough and constructive.

That constructive approach is clear from the four pillars of the ASU's NDIS campaign:

1. Decent pay and conditions.
2. Secure jobs.
3. Workforce engagement.

#### 4. Professional standards.

All of which is why – when Bruce spoke to providers yesterday – he not only flagged that I was speaking to you today; he also said the NDIS Review is ‘listening very closely to what the ASU has to say’.

That is the context for our conversation.

Here is the content.

We released our interim report – *What we have heard* – on June 30.

The ASU’s submissions on the workforce issues and the quality and safeguards framework informed our report.

Needless to say, we found your contributions thorough and constructive.

As Angus and the CEO of Aruma – Martin Laverty – stated in a letter to the NDIS Review:

‘We support the right of participants to have choice and control over the supports they receive and we also understand that this requires a degree of flexibility in the workforce as participants needs will evolve and change over time.’

In that joint letter – as in the ASU submissions – Angus and Martin advocated for the introduction of a portable leave and training scheme in the NDIS.

They made a strong case.

And we strongly support your call for a portable leave and training scheme.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that the introduction of portability and recruitment and retention of capable staff are linked.

That’s why we have already put your call to all ministers for disability in February.

What we recommended to Ministers was that they:

‘Design and trial workforce attraction and retention initiatives for the care and support sector, including sector-wide portable training and sick and carer’s leave schemes.’

And our commitment is in the paper we published on our website.

Believe me, I’ve been pushing portability with the Department of Social Services and anyone else who will listen.

And props to you and the good employers you’ve been working with, who are willing to give this a go as soon as possible. Now I’d like to give you a broad outline of our overall vision for the Scheme.

We recognise, progress has – and is – being made.

The last Federal Budget made significant investments to build the capacity of the NDIA as well as prevent fraud.

In addition, the number of appeals to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal have been significantly cut and hospital discharge rates have been significantly improved.

And, for the first time, 50 per cent of the members of the NDIA Board are people with disability.

The challenge ahead of us is to keep pushing for progress.

First, we want to see real, measurable outcomes for people with disability – as does the ASU.

Second, we want to see a renewed focus on quality of care – as does the ASU.

Third, we want to strengthen and offer greater stability to the workforce – as does the ASU.

Those are the headlines. But what does it mean for the workers represented by ASU?

It means this: we want disability work to be a sustainable career choice.

We want people to be secure in their jobs and safe in their work and rewarded for their excellence.

And we want people to work in a sector where they continuously develop new skills and qualifications which they carry with them.

That means that – as I've said – we strongly support portability of leave and training.

We are also seriously considering differential price caps to recognize the work of people who support participants with complex needs, as well as in regional and remote areas.

Differential pricing could also help manage workforce demands.

We know that the NDIS needs another 128,000 workers by mid-2025.

Not all of those workers will go on to have a career in the disability sector.

As one parent of a young adult with Down syndrome said to me, there is a real need for short-term workers – such as university students.

Let me be clear, I'm not saying such workers are the answer to the Scheme's workforce shortages.

What I am saying is that the sector needs a diverse workforce able to carry out everything from straightforward to complex tasks.

That means there is a need for both career and casual support workers.

One more thing. There could be an unintended benefit from the use of young Australians as casual workers, too.

The benefit is this:

Some of those young workers will find their calling – and turn disability support work into a career.

Others will leave the sector but become ambassadors for people with disability.

But I'm getting away from the matter at hand.

Before I open up for questions, let me finish on this point.

The NDIS cannot work without disability support workers. Not only that, the NDIS cannot improve without disability support workers.

We – and by ‘we’ I don’t just mean the NDIS Review; I mean the Australian people who have invested a decade in the development of the NDIS – we need your engagement and input.

The point I am driving at is that I am here to listen. I really am.

You’ve heard what I’ve had to say. But I am far more interested in what you have to say.

So, please, tell me:

How do we get more people to come and work in the NDIS?

How could support workers play more of a role in helping participants connect to community?

What are the needs of participants and workers in regional / remote areas?

If there was ONE thing to do to make the NDIS better, what would it be?

And then there might be areas of concern I haven’t mentioned – such as unregistered service providers.

Whatever is on your mind, I want to hear it.

So, let’s talk.