



Hot issues

Accessibility issues in 2018

The National Relay Service, audio description services and accessible ICT procurement were among the issues on the agenda at ACCAN's 2018 Disability Advisory Forum on Wednesday 7 March in Sydney.

Held yearly, the Disability Advisory Forum brings together groups representing people with disability to discuss telecommunications issues and accessibility and advises ACCAN on its policy priorities for the upcoming year.

Read this article for a summary of some of the issues covered at the meeting.

National Relay Service

At the Forum a number of issues relating to the National Relay Service (NRS) were raised. These include the proposed funding cap of \$22 million per year for the life of the new contract (July 2018 onwards), proposed compulsory registration for NRS users and the scaled-back outreach program for the service.

The introduction of video relay, SMS relay, two-way internet relay, the NRS app and captioned telephony in 2012 made the NRS a world's-best service. However, there are concerns that without appropriate funding, the NRS will be wound back to below 2012 levels of service. This would leave many of the current and growing number of Australians who need and rely on the NRS without critical everyday communications services. The Government has informed ACCAN that there is no change to their policy for supporting the on-going provision of the NRS.

National Disability Telecommunications Service

The Forum also considered the proposal for a National Disability Telecommunications Service. Communications access has become an essential requirement for economic, social and community participation in Australia. However, many people with disability face a number of barriers to getting connected. These barriers include: lack of access to appropriate equipment and devices, lack of awareness about mainstream options, lack of suitable connection, set-up, training and ongoing support and affordability barriers.

ACCAN believes a 'one-stop-shop' National Disability Telecommunications Service, a resource for communications product and service information, referrals for training and support and access to communications equipment is required. This will benefit people with disability, their families and carers, increase economic, social and community participation, grow industry customer-base and alleviate many of the barriers that people with disability face accessing communications.

The participants also discussed the limitations of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in providing access to telecommunications services. They highlighted the need to provide information to both recipients of the NDIS and those not eligible about accessible features on telecommunications equipment and where to buy these devices.

Audio description on Australian television

Audio description (AD) was another hot topic at the Forum. AD is a verbal commentary used to describe key visual elements of a television program, film, live performance or event. Unlike other comparable countries – the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and the United States – Australia has no AD services on television. This lack of access impacts hundreds of thousands of Australians with vision impairment leaving them without access to our foremost medium for news, information and entertainment.

ACCAN has recommended the Government amend the Broadcasting Services Act to mandate the inclusion of AD across all free-to-air broadcasters as is the case for the provision of closed captions. ACCAN recommended a requirement for a minimum of 14 hours per week of AD, with annual increases as has been implemented in the United Kingdom.

ACCAN hopes that the Government will publish a report from its recent committee deliberations on pathways forward for introduction of AD in Australia soon.

Public procurement of accessible ICT

ACCAN has a long-held interest in government ICT procurement. Over many years ACCAN, in alliance with a number of Australian disability organisations, has been calling for increased awareness across all levels of government of the important role publicly funded procurement of accessible ICT has in providing greater access and inclusion for many Australians with disability..

Rapid changes in the information and communications technology landscape continue to change the way we engage with government services and obtain government information. While ACCAN sees this as necessary for a robust and sustainable Australian economy in the 21st century, we are concerned that many Australians with disability continue to be excluded and disadvantaged through barriers created by inaccessible ICT products and services. Without requirements for accessibility in government ICT procurement a 'disability' digital divide will further disadvantage many Australians with disability.

The Forum discussed the fact that Australia now has a Standard on Accessible ICT Procurement, there is a need to encourage agencies at all levels of government to adopt policies that reflect this standard.