



# Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

## Disability Advisory Forum Meeting Report

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2 June 2020, 10:30am – 2:30pm (AEST) by videoconference

<b>PRESENT:</b>	<b>Nadia Moffatt</b> Ross Joyce Tony Starkey Julie Phillips Kyle Miers David Murray Steve Williamson Hayley Stone	<b>Chairperson (ACCAN Board Director)</b> Australian Federation of Disability Organisations Beyond Blindness Communications Rights Australia Deaf Australia Deafblind Australia Deafness Forum of Australia Physical Disability Council NSW
<b>ACCAN:</b>	Teresa Corbin Wayne Hawkins Meredith Lea Andres Merlano	CEO Director of Inclusion Disability Policy Adviser Accessible Telecoms Project Manager
<b>APOLOGIES:</b>	Nil	
<b>GUEST SPEAKERS:</b>	Kath Silleri, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communication (the Department) Chris Allen, Concentrix	

The purpose of ACCAN's Disability Advisory Forum (DAF) is to identify the most important telecommunications consumer issues from the perspective of key representatives in the disability community, with a view to using this information to inform ACCAN's future disability policy priorities.

The following meeting report provides an overview of the main issues raised and discussed. DAF participants are welcome to use this document in reporting back to their organisations. This report will also be sent to invited representatives who were unable to attend.

## 1. Overview of current communications content and ACCAN activities

ACCAN distributed several documents prior to the meeting to provide background for the discussions including a Consumer Issues Environmental Scan, Accessible Telecoms briefing note, Audio Description briefing note, National Relay Service (NRS) briefing note, Telcos and COVID-19 briefing note and the Ideal accessible communications in Australia policy paper.

Chairperson Nadia Moffatt gave a brief introduction to ACCAN and summarised the purpose of the Disability Advisory Forum (DAF). ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin provided a brief outline of several major consumer issues and a summary of ACCAN's outcomes for consumers in the past 12 months.

## 2. Discussion of Communications Issues and People with Disabilities

Participants were encouraged to introduce themselves and share any information about communications issues affecting people with disability.

Members and ACCAN staff identified the following current issues.

### COVID-19

- The need to be connected is more important than ever before. This pandemic crisis has highlighted telecoms as an essential service.
- With Telco call centres overseas – many customers can't access their services, which has seen a rise in complaints.
- NBN has increased bandwidth whilst Telcos have increased the capacity, they are offering customers on the broadband network. Being connected has been essential for those working, studying and relying on telehealth from home. There has been more pressure on telecommunications networks to deliver reliable services – overall consumers have been pleased with the positive response and support from Telcos.
- Information was not provided for the COVIDSafe App in any language other than English or Easy English or Auslan. ACCAN worked with community stakeholders to advocate for consumers to have access to better information to make informed decisions. The outstanding accessibility issues highlighted the digital divide.

### NBN

- A recent Telco law reform means NBN Co is now the responsible statutory infrastructure provider (if your premises does not have broadband access, NBN Co must complete the connection).

- Basic broadband was defined for the first time, at a speed of 25 megabits per second.
- In March NBN introduced education packages – free for families and households who did not previously have broadband and needed it for children accessing education. Service is free until September. Consumers want to advocate for the free education packages to continue for those who need it.

## Accessibility of information

- Significant work needs to be done in relation to bushfires and natural disasters and access to the information provided to consumers.
- Participants felt that there have not been enough gains in the accessibility of information provided through accessible formats. The only success has been regarding Auslan interpreters on television during emergency news briefings and in most cases, standards are being followed better.
- More work needed on live captioning quality which is still very poor.
- Government announced Audio Description on free to air television, 14 hours a week, on the ABC and SBS. There remains A lot of work for the successful implementation of these services. This has been a big win for consumers.
- National Relay Service (NRS) transition was completed however, while largely it has met the needs of consumers there were some areas where the transition was less than seamless. ACCAN has been pushing the government to produce or publish more information and statistics and performance benchmarks that are being met by the new NRS provider.
- The meeting was told about the ACCAN launch of the *Talking Telco* suite of materials in Auslan, Easy English, in screen readable formats and multiple languages. The importance of producing consumer education in all formats without delay was discussed. ACCAN welcomed any feedback on these materials.

## Background briefing and ACCAN accessibility policy directions

### COVID-19

- ACCAN is promoting the NDIS announcement allowing NDIS participants to flexibly use their funding package to access communications technologies that they need in the COVID-19 specific environment.
- It was noted that during the COVID-19 period, the Government has not provided additional interpreters or expanded the NRS video relay hours to allow Auslan users to access services. Deaf Australia contacted Concentrix, who responded there were

not enough interpreters available, contradicting the Auslan user communities understanding that there are many interpreters available on standby.

- It was noted the transition from the National Auslan Booking Service (NABS) is separate to the NDIS, creating issues for some members of the Deaf community who are experiencing a slow transition.
- It was noted that there is demand for technology for NABS and NRS Auslan users, issues for 65+ cohort who don't have any options to obtain technology or funds for interpreting, as well as telehealth services. Deaf seniors are quite disadvantaged in this space.
- It was noted that the NRS video relay is quite limited in terms of availability, not willing to expand hours of operation and all other relay services are English based, which is a Deaf person's second language.
- It was noted that consumers with severe communication impairment can't always communicate – many have left school without having learnt literacy or numeracy. Many do not have the knowledge to make decisions about communication options, no access to technology but also no skills to use it – as well as no communication method. All current crisis issues have overpassed this cohort of people.
- It was noted that there are COVID-19 related issues not solely regarding technology. For many Deaf children learning from home, there is no access to human tech support as well as no digital devices. This creates ongoing lack of equity. There needs to be more Government policy and other approaches to build upon this goal.
- It was noted that there are issues also for people who speak other languages, not just English, their issues go beyond access to technology.
- It was also noted that 1.2 million Australians rely on captions. There was poor levels and quality of captioning on television and social media during the east coast bushfires, and now the pandemic captioning has shown no improvement.

## **Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap**

ACCAN has compiled an Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap based on consultation with 35 organisations and 9 people with disability independently of organisations. The final version of the Roadmap has been circulated for feedback. The Roadmap will be published on the ACCAN website, while the Solutions Action Plans (7 separate documents) will be internal, kept only for supporters of the document.

There were questions about the communication roadmap compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG2).1. It was noted that this is a strategic action of the process and solution document, to make sure that all government services as well as organisations with government funding provide a minimum of AA level WACG compliance on their websites.

Issues regarding financial and technological difficulties surrounding AAA compliance, particularly for non-profit organisations, were discussed. It was discussed that Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) are all doing their bit to make everything as accessible as possible.

It was noted that there needs to be an ongoing discussion about what is reasonable and necessary technology to access communications. i.e., Deaf people need powerful computers for sign language, how do we approach the government to set a minimum standard? It will be different across the sector with differing needs. The Roadmap provides an opportunity to advocate for minimum standard.

It was noted that there are limitations of NDIS support for purchasing tech equipment during COVID-19. ACCAN supported the NDIS announcement regarding making funding packages flexible for communications technology purchases noting it was quite restrictive.

## **Accessible Telecoms**

ACCAN has implemented and developed an accessible telecommunications information and referral service. The service has been broadly adopted by the community. There have been more than 55,000 unique page visits and the service provides more than 400 individual resources on accessible features of devices, tablets, apps, accessories, NRS and training. ACCAN is currently in the process of making a mirror website, which will be hosted separate from IDEAS beginning July 2020.

The service has been funded by a National Disability Insurance Agency Grant received in 2018, concluding in June 2020. It was noted that ACCAN is working to secure future funding for the service. ACCAN will contact NDIS minister Stuart Robert, with a co-signed letter with Telstra, Optus, Vodafone and AFDO CEOs. ACCAN is also contacting the Minister of Communications.

Currently ACCAN is creating new information resources, including easy English documents for the website.

## **Discussion and feedback for 2020/21 ACCAN Priorities**

### **Broadcast Television Live Captioning report**

ACCAN commissioned a report into the quality of live captioning on free-to-air television. It was noted that the ACMA Caption Quality Standard doesn't differentiate live caption vs pre-recorded captions. The report recommended that quality should be differentiated between live and pre-recorded captions.

It was highlighted that the report's primary recommendation was for ACMA to monitor live captions rather than waiting for consumers to lodge complaints. There was discussion about the use of automated captions. The report recommended that automated captions are not good enough at this stage to be used on TV and more research into automated captions should be undertaken.

ACCAN reported that it had received feedback from SBS, they are looking at their process and how to provide live captioning. ACMA indicated that they don't have capacity to discuss the report until later in the year. They have requested feedback from the free to air broadcasters on the report. ACCAN will follow up with the ACMA in July.

There was good discussion about the use of automated live captioning, both the benefits and the drawbacks. There was a consensus that it is good to allow the technology to improve, and welcome improvements with positive feedback. Caption users need to be consulted in how this is researched and how it is implemented.

### **SBS and ABC Television Audio Description (AD)**

ACCAN reported that AD officially starts July 1<sup>st</sup> on ABC and SBS – trial runs have already commenced. Minimum of 14 hours a week across a range of genres. The introduction of AD has been funded by the Government with One-off funding for 2020/21.

It was noted that it can be difficult to teach people how to turn on AD without sighted assistance. Changing the channel or turning the TV off can disengage AD. ACCAN provided research to ABC and SBS about TV capabilities.

Some issues regarding AD are starting to emerge. Initial consumer feedback has indicated that AD on some of the trial programming has been unsatisfactory. In some cases, AD is coming from UK broadcasters, while people in Australia are more used to a more comprehensive AD, from the USA via Netflix for example. It was noted that the AD from the UK is minimal, whereas some Australian shows broadcast during the ABC's iView trial had better audio description.

It was highlighted that advocacy and community pressure will be required to get ongoing funding and to expand the requirement to the commercial free to air television and ideally subscription television.

## **National Relay Service briefing by the Department**

The Department reported the NRS has been operating very well. During the lockdown period NRS usage accelerated 25% with wait times maintained at an acceptable level. It was

noted that there had been extensive growth in video relay minutes – April 2020: 26,743 video relay call minutes, whilst September 2019: 12,500 video relay call minutes. Concentrix has succeeded in meeting the Government requirements while having staff working from home with limited impact on the range of services, this also allowed them to employ interpreters across the country.

Outside of the NRS, the Captel handset was no longer supported by the relay service from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020. It has continued to operate out of the USA, but it is unclear what level of support they are providing to users in Australia. The Department has contacted 1000 Captel handset users (faced difficulties due to outdated data base). Contacting Captel users was planned to cease in April, however, has continued due to COVID-19, in order to reach those who may be in vulnerable situations without access to communication. Also included a check-up, for those who have already received training. Approx. 40 people are still using Captel, they have been invited to take training on other alternative services.

Questions about the training providers were raised. It was reported that multiple providers were being used depending on where the user is based. Ernst & Young designed the training and it is delivered at the home of the participant by allied health professionals experienced in disability.

There was also discussion about the cost of the increased VRS, capacity of VRS relay operators, Concentrix being awarded the NZ relay contract, and increased VRS operation hours and how to balance increased VRS and availability of trained Auslan interpreters.

## **ACCAN future policy directions and outreach opportunities 2020/21**

### **Issues to be prioritised**

- Public procurement of accessible ICT equipment.
- How to improve communications services for those with little or no speech.
- Problematic issues using Cloud based services such as delays with screen readers. Basic minimum performance for screen reader speed is necessary.
- Suggestion to propose that people eligible for Job Seeker or Job Keeper have access to assistance such as getting broadband at no charge.
- Need for audio visual content on social media to be captioned. It was noted that there is an opportunity to raise this with the ongoing work since the Digital Platform Inquiry.
- Consensus that all Government announcements, especially about hazards and disasters must have captions that are built into the initial broadcast and remain there when the information is rebroadcast.
- Advocate to improve the limited communications service support for people over 65 (not eligible for the NDIS). It was noted that this is included in the Ideal Communications Roadmap.

- There were also questions and discussion about how people are going to be informed in regional areas now that so many newspapers will only be offered online.

## **Next Meeting**

ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin, thanked the DAF participants and Nadia, the chairperson for their time and valuable contributions.

The chairperson closed the meeting at 2.30pm.