



Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

Disability Advisory Forum

Meeting Report

Wednesday, 10 March 2021, 02:00PM – 04:30PM (AEDT)
by videoconference

PRESENT:

Nadia Moffatt	Chairperson (ACCAN Board Director)
Kyle Miers	Deaf Australia
Steve Williamson	Deafness Forum of Australia
Hayley Stone	Physical Disability Council of NSW
Denise Boyd	STAR Victoria
Susan Thompson	Vision Australia

ACCAN:

Teresa Corbin	CEO
Wayne Hawkins	Director of Inclusion
Meredith Lea	Disability Policy Adviser
Andres Merlano	Accessible Telecoms Project Manager

APOLOGIES:

June Reimer	First Peoples Disability Network
Mija Gwyn	Youth Disability Advocacy Service

GUEST SPEAKERS:

Kevin McGowan	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (the Department)
Seaton Cairns	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (the Department)

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 incorporating these into ACCAN's future policy priorities for the 2021-22 year.

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.

ACCAN distributed the following documents prior to the meeting to provide background for the discussions:

- Environment Scan 2021
- Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap
- Final and Confidential – Roadmap Action Plan
- ACCAN progress on short term actions

1. Overview of current communications context and ACCAN activities

Chairperson Nadia Moffatt gave a brief introduction to ACCAN and summarised the purpose of the DAF. ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin gave an overview of activity undertaken by ACCAN in relation to disability over the last 12 months, including:

- maintaining and seeking ongoing funding for the Accessible Telecoms service,
- finalising the Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap and Action Plan, and starting work on various actions,
- supporting the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications' implementation of ACCAN's Accesshub project recommendations,
- reviewing the Konnekt Captioned Videophone,
- submitting to the National Disability Strategy stage 2 consultation,
- submitting to the Disability Royal Commission,
- providing funding to two grant projects focusing on accessibility – first, the Telcos For All project run by the Centre for Accessibility Australia, and second, the Access on Demand project run by Curtin University.

Teresa Corbin thanked DAF attendees for their contributions to the Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap and for their ongoing engagement with and support of this work.

Wayne Hawkins gave a briefing on the Accessible Telecoms service. Accessible Telecoms has been active for three years. It was originally funded through a National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant, however this funding ended on 30 June 2020. ACCAN has been looking for alternate funding sources to continue to run this service. Accessible Telecoms remains a valuable resource for consumers, with many call centre contacts and thousands of page views every month.

In response to ACCAN's concerns about ongoing funding for Accessible Telecoms, Minister Fletcher called a roundtable of telecommunications providers to discuss how the industry could support the service. ACCAN now has in-principle support from the telcos and handset manufacturers and are very close to securing funding for the 2021 calendar year. This funding will allow ACCAN to maintain Accessible Telecoms as a reliable, up-to-date and independent service that consumers with disability can use to get information they need about accessibility features of phones and communications equipment.

2. Discussion of Communications Issues and People with Disability

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

DAF participants and ACCAN staff identified the following current issues:

- DAF participants commented that directory services and telecommunications issues are common topics raised by their members.
- Some DAF participants offered their assistance to promote Accessible Telecoms once ACCAN has secured funding and noted that Accessible Telecoms should be linked to by the Disability Gateway. ACCAN has contacted the Disability Gateway to suggest this but has not yet received a response confirming that Accessible Telecoms will be included on the site. DAF participants supplied contact details for ACCAN to follow up.
- DAF participants asked whether data from the NDIA about the inclusion of accessible communications technologies in NDIS plans could be used to reaffirm the necessity of the Accessible Telecoms service.
- DAF participants asked whether equipment on the Accessible Telecoms service is reviewed by people with disability and whether this could be an area of future work. The suggestion was made that CHOICE could be approached to assist with reviews.

3. NRS Update

Kevin McGowan gave an NRS update on behalf of the Department. The following information was provided:

- Concentrix has made steady improvements after a difficult transition period and is meeting their contractual performance measures. Wait times were an issue earlier in the transition however they have been reduced and are much better now.
- A registration system has been introduced for NRS users. Registration will be open until 20 April 2021. People who are not registered after 20 April 2021 will not be able to make NRS calls without registering (except for emergency calls which may be made by unregistered users). There will be no extension to the registration timeframe.
- The decision to introduce registration requirements was made following the 2016 consultation regarding the NRS. The purpose of the registration requirement is to determine how many people use the NRS, when they use it and how Concentrix can provide a more efficient service for NRS users into the future.
- A few NRS users have refused to register, but after speaking with the NRS Helpdesk they changed their minds and ended up registering. If an NRS user continues to be concerned they can be directed to the Department.
- The Department did not have information about the breakdown of registration information about different groups (such as people who are Deafblind) as no information is required about the exact nature of the NRS user's disability.

DAF participants expressed concern that not that many people had registered, particularly considering the numbers of Auslan users in Australia (estimated by DAF participants to be around 10,000-11,000 people) in addition to those who use hearing devices or have speech impairments.

Some DAF participants questioned whether the registration process was correct and whether the Department was using appropriate channels to communicate the registration requirement to current or potential NRS users. The Department has been providing information via Accesshub and all NRS callers receive a message about the need to register.

DAF participants were worried about registration being inaccessible, due to the different forms and evidence needed to register. The Department explained that Helpdesk staff are available to assist people through the registration process.

Some DAF participants were concerned about registration being a data-gathering exercise, whether there is adequate transparency about what NRS user data will be used for, and whether NRS user registration data is being adequately protected by Concentrix. The Department explained that Concentrix is held to strict privacy arrangements as part of its contract with the Department and that these contractual requirements are assessed regularly.

DAF participants were encouraged to provide further questions about the NRS and/or registration for ACCAN to forward to the Department.

4. ACCAN policy directions for discussion and feedback 2021/22: Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap and Action Plan

Wayne Hawkins and Meredith Lea spoke to the Ideal Accessible Communications Roadmap and its associated Action Plan. ACCAN has been working on short term actions identified within the Action Plan. Wayne Hawkins and Meredith Lea provided details about progress made on the short term actions and sought feedback from DAF participants around whether these were the right priorities and whether additional actions need to be explored.

Topics discussed included:

- The difficulties people with disability experience when interacting with overseas call centres. Older people with disability in particular may not be able to go to a website for assistance with their telco issue. Another concern is people with fatigue issues who are unable to wait on the phone for hours on end to get a resolution to their issues. Accessible customer service, regardless of where it is based, is essential. ACCAN is concerned about digital only telcos that are pushing consumers onto digital platforms rather than giving them phone service.
- The importance of people with disability being consulted in relation to telco issues, for instance in the development of Disability Inclusion Action Plans. ACCAN is planning to raise this with the CEOs of the major telcos and Communications Alliance.
- The need for mobile plans that meet the needs of Deaf consumers (e.g. data-only plans). ACCAN is looking to review current data-only plans in the market to see whether these meet consumer needs.
- The frustration of having complex discussions with telecommunications providers via web chat and spending considerable time and data to do so, including long waits between responses from web chat staff. Additional frustrations are felt by consumers who receive calls from telcos despite explaining that they can only be contacted by SMS or email only.
- The need for formalised community consultation on NRS issues.
- The continued limitation of the Video Relay Service (VRS) and questions about the number of trained and certified Auslan Interpreters. ACCAN is planning to talk with the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association about the current workforce and possible research into the supply and demand of Auslan interpreters in Australia (which would be beneficial for many sectors, not just in relation to the VRS).
- The reliability of communications technologies and services, particularly during power outages, and the need to educate consumers with disability about the potential limitations of their devices and services. DAF participants felt this consumer education would be

useful for all consumers, not just consumers with disability, and could follow a survey into how people currently stay connected to communications services during power outages.

- The limitations of existing priority assistance arrangements, and ACCAN's work on developing a draft priority assistance policy position. ACCAN is currently consulting on this draft.

5. ACCAN future policy directions and outreach opportunities

Given time constraints and a few DAF participants having to leave early, DAF participants were asked to provide feedback via email on further policy directions and outreach opportunities for ACCAN to explore.

6. Meeting close

ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin thanked DAF participants and the Chairperson for their time and valuable contributions.

The meeting was closed at 4:30pm.