

Government Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Community Development Report on the Provision of Assistive Technology and Equipment for People with Disabilities

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Foreward

The Tasmanian Government commends the Legislative Council Standing Committee on its report that brings to the fore issues in the management of equipment services.

The issue of providing access to assistive technology and equipment for people with disabilities is complex, expensive and administratively difficult. Each jurisdiction within Australia has needed to confront these issues at some time and there are never easy solutions to the problems related to equipment provision.

These issues include managing a service where technological improvements mean that there is no ceiling to innovation. Such innovation is exciting and opens up new possibilities in the lives of people with disabilities, but the costs associated with the innovation must be managed. In addition, there will always be tensions involved between providing standard equipment to more people and providing very expensive and technologically advanced equipment to those few people who require it in order to live their lives as independently and comfortably as possible.

There are also tensions between the areas of government that have responsibility for provision of equipment with both state and federal jurisdictions involved as well as multiple areas of state government.

At a national level, states and territories have agreed to promote more consistent access to aids and equipment by the end of 2012. The Australian Government is developing a discussion paper for the Disability Policy Research Working Group to consider the scale, scope and timeframe for implementation. The work to date has already noted harmonisation of key elements of the aids and equipment programs such as: eligibility; initial and ongoing cost to the individual; and the types of aids and equipment provided, are issues requiring significant levels of collaborative work and change.

At state level in Tasmania, virtually every service unit in Health and Human Services has an interest in and is affected by the need for equipment for its patients and clients. This is also an issue for the Department of Education.

It should also be acknowledged upfront that any responses to improve access to assistive technology and equipment are likely to be expensive, with work needed to more precisely quantify the resource level that is needed. A proper business case will need to be developed to inform the budget process. Simply committing more funding without a major overhaul of the service model would not only be irresponsible but ineffective.

Response to Recommendations

The report contains 18 recommendations all of which have been closely considered as all involve complex matters and assumptions that demand attention.

A specific response to each recommendation is attached.

The Committee should note that it has been difficult to respond to recommendations in terms of a 'supported' or 'unsupported' dichotomy as there has frequently been the need for some level of qualification or clarification.

Many of the recommendations contain aspects that the Government fully supports. The recommendations also contain aspects that Government supports with some reservation or does not support. In some instances, while the basic issue raised may be accepted, it considers the proposed solutions may not resolve the problems identified. However, it should be emphasised that the Inquiry was very helpful in crystallising the issues and weaknesses within its systems and practices and suggesting a way forward.

Proposed Way Forward

Tasmania's response to issues raised by the Committee must be mindful of these complexities and yet seek to progress improvements. Soon after making its submission to the Inquiry the Department began some work to improve the administration of Tasmania's Community Equipment Service.

It is now proposed to extend this work and through a detailed project plan that will involve several stages of work over the next two to three years. I have the Department's commitment that this work will be undertaken. However, the Report stresses that a major overhaul of equipment and assistive technology programs is required. To do this properly will require time and resources. The work needs to be planned and properly scoped. In the present economic climate it will be necessary to redirect work of some officers and re-prioritise other commitments to allow resources to be directed to this project.

The work will be directed by a whole-of-agency Steering Group that includes representation from areas of the Agency that are affected including therapists and practitioners who are involved in implementation. I also propose to ask the Minister's Disability Advisory Committee to co-chair this Steering group so that there will be independent advice and scrutiny provided.

The Steering group will direct work on two fronts:

- 1 Policy and program development issues involving level of unmet need, eligibility, level of funding, equity of access, economic analysis and so on; and
- 2 Operational work including:
 - a. Developing a centralised database that will be able to track and monitor stock;
 - b. Undertaking a stocktake of all equipment, its state of repair and usefulness, location and purpose;
 - c. Developing an electronic inventory that is current and from which prescribing therapists and nurses statewide can access for equipment and gain delivery;
 - d. Developing a web page and pamphlets that clients can access that will in the first instance inform them of the services of the community equipment schemes and who they can contact and how; and
 - e. Gaining statewide consistency, wherever this is possible in the absence of increased resources, in the way equipment is managed, contracted for, ordered, identified, delivered and in the policies and procedures guiding this.

In the case of the operational work this group is already formed and is undertaking the work which will lead to some substantial improvements within the current parameters.

In the case of the policy work, this group is yet to be established. It will need to be completed to inform a business case before additional funding could be considered by Government.

The Government will commit to providing six monthly progress reports to the Joint Standing Committee on Community Development.

The Proposed Outcome of the Work

Those aspects of the Recommendations that are supported generally align well with the outcomes for assistive technology and equipment that the Agency sees as an appropriate model for the future.

The proposed model will be based on best practice principles and sound business management including:

- Well supported clinicians who prescribe equipment and deal with those aspects that are client focused and separated from the administrative burden of managing the warehousing business;
- Business practices for the warehousing activities of managing equipment, including purchase and contracting, data management, repair, distribution, cleaning decommissioning and tracking of equipment;
- Separation of processes for funding and allocation of equipment and assistive technology to people with disabilities from funding patients returning home after being in hospital, so that these two different cohorts are not competing for resources;
- Consistent and transparent policies so that people access equipment based on need and those with greatest need or greatest gain are prioritised; and
- Clear funding paths that can meet the defined levels of prioritised need.

The Steering group will have responsibility for further refining the proposed model during the course of its work, but the general vision will guide the work to be undertaken.

The Joint Standing Committee's report has set the scene for work that will have some immediate benefits in improving access to assistive technology and equipment as well as longer-term benefits in terms of the major overhaul of the system that has been suggested.

Attachment One

Response to the Recommendations

Recommendation one: *That the CES undergoes a service restructure to more effectively address its clients' needs.*

- This recommendation requests the Community Equipment Scheme undergo a service restructure and this is fully supported. Its implementation can be investigated once the work of the Inventory Management work-plan is completed and the data gained can inform direction and risk.

Recommendation two: *That Disability Services conduct comprehensive survey work and collect appropriate data to establish the full extent of the client base for assistive technologies and equipment in Tasmania and publish its findings.*

- This is supported with reservations.
- It requires that a survey is undertaken to establish the extent of the client base for assistive technology. It is agreed that information concerning the need of eligible and appropriately prescribed equipment is necessary but the method recommended is not agreed.
- Equipment is prescribed as a part of therapeutic assessment. Not all people who want equipment would be supported by assessment or be eligible for funding under the current system. Conversely not all people for whom equipment is prescribed wish to use it.
- Data for planning can be gained through the prescription recommendations once the current work-plan is completed and through population data.

Recommendation three: *That there is a need for an overhaul of CES budget management. The Committee recommends increased and indexed funding to meet increasing costs and increasing demand for services*

- This is supported with reservations. The first part seeks overhaul of the CES budget management. This is fully supported and will be implemented in part through the current work-plan.
- Decisions concerning the implementation of indexation of funding can only be completed once analysis of the data delivered through that work-plan is available. This will provide information concerning the actual cost of delivering an adequate service and will inform the decision of what can be funded.

Recommendation four: *That funding for aids and equipment be provided on a per capita basis to address the current inequitable distribution between regions.*

- This is supported with reservations. While equitable access is fully supported, it is dependent not only upon funding but also other variables including the ability to gain timely access to skilled assessment. A response about the method of funding and the other variables would be provided once the initial phases of work are completed.

Recommendation five: *That a more flexible assessment approach is needed to ensure that low income families do not struggle to meet their needs for aids and equipment. Due to the enormous costs involved this assessment may have to include middle income families if the cost of equipment is beyond their capacity, especially in respect to non-standard equipment.*

- This is supported with reservations. Once the initial phases of the work proposed are completed, phase three will need to examine the role of means testing for equipment in the state.

Recommendation six: *That there is need for maintenance planning for all CES equipment and recommends that a mobile maintenance service be established that can visit clients at home and be accessed outside of normal business hours in urgent cases.*

- This is supported with reservations. It is in two parts: the maintenance planning for all CES equipment will be reviewed during phase one of the current work-plan.
- The second, a mobile maintenance service, is not supported. The issues raised are more efficiently and effectively managed on an individual basis. The work-plan will review the options currently available.

Recommendation seven: *That Disability Services extend its maintenance services to all users irrespective of the ownership of the equipment.*

- This is not supported. It seeks to extend maintenance service to all users of equipment irrespective of ownership. This raises concerns particularly about liability issues of supporting equipment that is neither prescribed nor supported by the professionals in the agency.

Recommendation eight: *That as there is evidence that many items of equipment lay in storage in the community when no longer required by the original user, that a concerted campaign be conducted to have such items retrieved or donated for refurbishment and further use.*

- A campaign to retrieve equipment may be contraindicated. It is likely to be expensive and non-productive. It runs the risk of the community dumping unusable equipment that is not the responsibility of the Department. A system to manage and space for implementing the storage, sorting, assessment, cleaning, repair and disposal of any equipment collected would need to be secured and a system to log it would need to precede any action. This part of the recommendation is not supported.
- While this recommendation is not supported, the need to have an effective retrieval and refurbishment service is supported and this will be investigated in the current work-plan.

Recommendation nine: *That equipment purchased by the Education Department for the use of individual students in school be allowed to be used in out of school settings, where practical, to assist families and reduce costs and duplication.*

- This is supported with reservations. It seeks the ability to use equipment purchased through the Department of Education at home. This may be possible in some circumstances but not in others (e.g. transferring hoists on a daily basis). This requires further analysis in phase three.

Recommendation ten: *The establishment of a central facility within administrative regions that can act as a one-stop shop for the provision of aids, equipment and maintenance.*

- This is supported with reservation. It seeks the establishment of a central facility within the regions to act as a one stop shop for the provision of aids etc. The Australian Government provides some funding towards fulfilling part of this concept. The degree of centralisation that can occur is dependent upon gaining facilities; the skills base to support some specialised equipment; and the ability to fund trial stock. This should be reviewed and its feasibility assessed as part of phase three.
- Interim responses may be possible as part of current work-plan.

Recommendation eleven: *That regional equipment facilities be linked to a central on-line database that can provide information on the availability of equipment State-wide. A triage program should be incorporated into the system to ensure that the allocation of equipment corresponds with areas of greatest need.*

- One component of this recommendation is supported and the other supported with reservation. It seeks a central online database and this is fully supported. An interim database is proposed as part of the current work-plan until the research for a more comprehensive system can be undertaken.
- The purpose of the second function proposed is fully supported. Whether this or a different method of implementing is appropriate will be examined in phase three.

Recommendation twelve: *A case worker model be adopted in relation to people with disabilities to facilitate personalised life-long planning that will anticipate their equipment needs as their circumstances change, thus avoiding the current crisis management approach.*

- This is supported in principle. It seeks the implementation of a model of case management in the provision of equipment. The issue of caseworkers will be clarified with the implementation of the Gateway services under development within the Disability Reform schedule. It is to be noted that research shows that over management of clients can create dependencies rather than empower clients and it is important that such services are specifically targeted.
- With the current shortage of therapists in the state it is unlikely that a long-term case worker model referred to in *Recommendation 12* would be a feasible service through therapy services.

Recommendation thirteen: *That the Tasmanian Government with the University of Tasmania examine the feasibility of providing courses for allied health professions in Tasmania, including but not limited to, speech therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.*

- This is supported in principle. This is part of an initiative currently under development. DHHS and the University of Tasmania have incorporated course development strategies within the Partners in Health Initiative, including the examination and resolution of the needs for training and research and initiatives that will support the development of health services in Tasmania.

Recommendation fourteen: *That any new configuration of the CES includes funding for specialised communication equipment. Under the current scheme people with communication difficulties are seriously disadvantaged as communication devices are given low priority for funding.*

- This is supported in principle. The full cost of this would be analysed in phase three.

Recommendation fifteen: *That consideration be given to the amendment of building regulation to take into consideration the needs of people with disabilities.*

- This is supported in principle. This requires major input from multiple government and local government agencies, consumer organisations and the wider public including the building sector. This will be considered as part of phase three.

Recommendation sixteen: *That the establishment of a help desk that can provide information and assistance to people with disabilities and their families seeking access to aids and equipment and provide full and transparent explanations when their applications are unsuccessful.*

- This is in two parts. The implementation of a help-desk may not be the appropriate way to respond to the need.
- The need to provide transparent explanations of any decisions concerning funding and access to equipment, however, is fully supported. This requires a review of complex policy to establish clear eligibility criteria; prioritisation processes; consistent assessment and referral practices across the state; and resolution to the question of the inequities that exist within the current system. This is work to be undertaken in the second phase and would align with the tasks being undertaken through the National Disability Services Agreement, and begin in 2010 - 2011.

Recommendation seventeen: *That the current Federal Government review of taxation includes a consideration of tax breaks for employed individuals who require disability aids and equipment for themselves or their children, but are ineligible for assistance under current equipment schemes due to their employment status.*

- This is supported in principle. It seeks tax breaks for certain people with disabilities who are ineligible under the current scheme. The policy of means testing for equipment would be reviewed in phase three and may supersede the need for this recommendation.

Recommendation eighteen: *That the Tasmanian Government consult with the Commonwealth on the possibility of making the provision of aids and equipment to people with disabilities a national scheme funded by the Federal Government under the Medicare scheme. The Committee expects that all other recommendations will be enacted in the interim.*

- This is supported in principle. It seeks consultation with the Australian Government to fund equipment provision through Medicare. This may be considered as part of phase three and through the work under the National Disability Services Agreement