

Submission to the Government Administration B Inquiry Disability Services in Tasmania



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To Whom it May Concern,

Expression Australia (previously Vic Deaf & Tas Deaf Societies) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the government's inquiry into Disability Services in Tasmania. Expression Australia is a not-for-profit organisation providing information, interpreting, programs, and education to thousands Deaf and hard of hearing clients each year across Australia through our diverse range of services.

Established in 1884, it is our vision that our clients and community live in an accessible, inclusive society with equal opportunity in all areas of life. Our network of services is backed by a committed and uniquely bilingual and bicultural team of staff providing:

- Language Services, including Interpreting, translating, captioning, transcription, language consultancy and video productions
- Australian Sign Language (Auslan) and cultural competence training
- Community awareness, consultation, and education programs
- Community programs, events, co-design, and information services
- Disability employment services
- Audiology and speech pathology
- Technology and assistive devices
- Independent living skills and supported accommodation (SIL)
- NDIS supports such as Support Coordination and Support Work

We provide our services across Australia via remote delivery and our offices throughout Victoria and Tasmania. Expression Australia is a registered NDIS service provider, supporting predominately Deaf and hard of hearing participants. We have approximately 300 employees and operate out of 8 sites (Hobart, Launceston, East Melbourne, Melbourne CBD, Oakleigh, Preston, Geelong, and Ballarat). There are approximately 600 NDIS participants in receipt of supports from Expression Australia and we have been operating under the scheme since initial roll out in the Barwon region.

Expression Australia is proudly a bilingual and bicultural organisation with almost 40% of our staff identifying as deaf, and many more of our practitioners fluent in Auslan. Our ability to offer services in our community's primary language, Auslan, is a key principle of our service. We pride ourselves on our investment in our staff, supporting many of them to become fluent in Auslan and to understand the specific needs of the community.

Expression Australia is committed to maintaining effective business systems in key areas such as Quality, Risk Management and Governance. Currently we are accredited in AS/NZS ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System and have been approved as a registered provider of disability services NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission.

As part of continual improvement process, procedures are in place that document the operation of the complaints handling process that complies with the AS 10002 (Customer Satisfaction-Guidelines for complaints handling in Organisations) standards.

Governance

Expression Australia is a Registered Company (Victorian Deaf Society, ABN 56 004 058 084 / ACN 004 58 084) and a registered Not for Profit with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). Expression Australia is governed by a Board of Directors with sound skills, experience and qualifications.

I welcome further discussions on the work of Expression Australia, the Tasmanian government and sector partners can do as part of this important disability support policy and program reform. Our organisation manages the needs of a substantial population of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, many of whom are not eligible for NDIS but for whom, without our support, would not have the choice and control and advocacy and access they need to live their lives.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicky Long", on a light blue rectangular background.

Nicky Long
Chief Executive Officer
Expression Australia

In response to the inquiry into the Tasmanian government's responsibilities under its' co-arrangement with the NDIS, we would like to highlight the following areas:

1. *Visual smoke alarms for people over 65. Prior to the NDIS, a government subsidy was provided for visual smoke alarms. This funding stopped 2 years ago - 2019. Now smoke alarms may be requiring repair, or those over 65 who did not access the subsidy may be requiring a new smoke alarm. This is a major risk for Deaf people's safety at home. It can also impact people's mental health – they deserve to feel safe at home.*
2. *Mental health may create a barrier to accessing the NDIS. For example, a client with a mental health problem who has been involved in the Justice will not participate due to past trauma relating to relationships with government institutions. Our suggested approach for clients in this category is that an accredited organization, like Expression Australia, could apply on a client's behalf to bridge the trust barriers and where mental health is prohibitive to seeking support. The NDIS focus on the individual may not suit those without capacity to apply, fill in an ARF, or exercise choice and control.*
3. *Funding for clients who cannot apply for the NDIS. For those over 65 who approach Expression Australia, we have a duty of care to not turn them away, so we support them at our own expense, connecting them to a broader community of Deaf seniors, providing events, newsletter, and updates. This approach is not offering a holistic model and is unlikely to be sustainable for organisations like our, with diminishing additional funds who cannot act as 'welfare' managers in addition to providing high standards of services.*
4. *For workforce development and training opportunities: the availability of Auslan interpreters in Tasmania is very low. Mainland interpreters move to Tasmania, however there are not enough at high level qualification and many prospective interpreters leave Tasmania to access interpreting education on the mainland. We find ourselves using interstate interpreters via Zoom in order to meet demand, but this is not a long-term solution. We need accredited Auslan courses in Tasmania – Cert II-Diploma of Interpreting. The demand for services has increased with the rollout of the NDIS and we want to encourage clients who, for example, live in Queenstown, or Flinders Island (let alone Hobart, Launceston, Burnie), to be able to access Auslan courses and local interpreting insofar as possible.*
5. *There is a lack of qualified interpreters in schools; teacher's aides are unable to bridge communicative and cultural barriers. Itinerant teachers of the Deaf cannot provide sustained support to Deaf students. When the Claremont Project was running, Tasmania had perhaps the most well-respected education model for Deaf children in Australia – bilingual, bicultural, and sustainable. Now, with Claremont School closed, Deaf Tasmanian children are mainstreamed. Mainstreaming can be successful if a school has the funding for the right support (full-time interpreting, cultural awareness training for teaching staff, and so on).*

6. *Children who attend government schools cannot use NDIS funds for improving their experience at school. Children can apply for the NDIS, but often their parents or teachers cannot understand it. While it is a school's responsibility to provide disability support, this is often not done satisfactorily and children go without the formative/foundational years of support they need.*

Expression Australia recently undertook a review of the Terms of Reference as outlined in the Tasmanian Government's correspondence dated 28 October 2020.

Comments from our employees who work face to face in the community

Ali Dowd – Staff Interpreter, Expression Australia

"Over 65s do not necessarily understand that they could access to free interpreting e.g., through NABS or free 40 hours. Clearly communicating these options to Deaf people over 65.

Lack of interpreter access in hospitals and nursing homes; making sure staff know to book interpreters in advance, ensuring that interpreters are available.

Staff in government departments need to be made aware of their obligation to provide interpreters for Deaf clients, and be provided with cultural awareness training. They should know where to find interpreters, and how to make their services accessible.

Accredited Tasmanian Auslan and interpreting courses – supporting local people to get qualified and provide the Tasmanian Deaf community with their services".

Jo France – Access Coordinator, Expression Australia

"A deaf 80yo came to Expression Australia requiring assistance with managing budgets. I had to refer them to My Aged Care. Although My Aged Care may assist with ramps or railings, it will not pay for home modifications for the safety of Deaf people. The price of Bellman and other devices is prohibitive, making it difficult for elderly Deaf people to realistically achieve a safe home environment.

A lot of people over 65 approach Expression Australia and we are unsure of where to send them. "Insufficiently" hard-of-hearing people who are not eligible for the NDIS, or those without an audiology report.

Client was court ordered to attend a course related to custody of their children. The client was asked to provide an interpreter through their NDIS plan, despite the course being provided by the Department of Education. This was a vital course for the client to attend and an interpreter was a vital requirement for them which was not provided despite it being a Department of Education policy. The client ended up missing the course and will have to attend later in order to regain custody of their children".

Stephen Nicholson, Manager – Support Coordination and Tasmania, Expression Australia

“People over the age of 65 are not eligible for the NDIS. They are encouraged to use a My Aged Care plan. These plans do not provide interpreting. Choice of services for aged care are limited, and very few, if any, provide deaf-aware services. If elderly people could choose their preferred service providers, they would often use Expression Australia to prevent communication breakdown. They are a small but vulnerable group. For example, a number of clients in the North are paying fee-for-service for Expression Australia staff to help them with errands, rather than using a My Aged Care plan. My Aged Care staff are not aware of how to support Deaf clients. They cannot sign or do not show cultural understanding”.