

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA)
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ATSA Submission to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales - Parliament of New South Wales

Improving Early Access to Assistive Technology for Children and Young People with Disability in NSW

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About Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA)

Assistive Technology Suppliers Australia (ATSA) is Australia's national peak body representing the needs of assistive technology suppliers, distributors, manufacturers and technicians. We also work closely with the allied health sector, with allied health professionals being eligible for affiliate membership.

ATSA requires our members to adhere to a comprehensive Code of Practice on the provision, sales and servicing of assistive technology (AT).

We are a registered not-for-profit organisation with charitable status, ensuring we advocate for the rights of people with disability and older persons to access the most appropriate assistive technology to provide for their ongoing independence and individual needs.

Our Purpose is to support the assistive technology industry to enhance the lives of Australians with disability by:

- Ensuring the provision of quality equipment
- Upholding ethical business practices
- Conducting research
- Promoting education
- Cultivating partnerships
- Advocating for positive change with government and other stakeholders

We are also a member of the Australian Ethical Health Alliance.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The NSW Government work collaboratively with other states and territories through the Disability Reform Ministerial Council to establish a nationally consistent approach to AT provision outside the NDIS, in line with Recommendation 1, Action 1:10 of the Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Recommendation 2

The NSW Government ensures a mix of flexible and timely AT supply options (including direct purchase, loan or hire) to meet the changing needs of growing children, regardless of NDIS status.

Recommendation 3

The NSW Government works with the AT sector, other jurisdictions and other service systems such as NDIS and Department of Education to provide clear eligibility information and consistent access to AT for children and young people.

Recommendation 4

The NSW Government provides additional support to help parents and carers navigate access to AT across service systems, particularly for those ineligible or awaiting approval for NDIS funding.

Recommendation 5

The NSW Government commit to working with the AT sector to ensure the National Disability Data Asset is capable of effectively monitoring key outcomes relating to assistive technology across jurisdictions, and across service systems.

Introduction

ATSA welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports available for Children and Young People in New South Wales - Parliament of New South Wales. This inquiry provides an important opportunity to highlight the crucial role that assistive technology plays for many children and young people with disability and the significant barriers to timely access that many families face in accessing AT, particularly those who are unable to access support through the NDIS.

This submission addresses the following two terms of reference outlined for the inquiry:

1. The role of assistive technology on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing (1a)
2. Gaps and barriers to early access to assistive technology and their impact on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing, as well as on their family or carers and other government services and systems (1d)

Response to Terms of Reference

(1a) The role of assistive technology on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing

Assistive technology plays a critical role in the early development and wellbeing of children and young people with disability or developmental delay. The term, "assistive technology" refers to any equipment, device, product, or software that supports a child to perform tasks more easily and safely. It enables them to explore their environment, develop independence and improve social interaction. This enhances their overall quality of life and that of their families and carers¹. AT supports participation in communication, learning, mobility, play, self-care and social engagement.

When provided early, evidence shows appropriate assistive technology can:

- Enhance a child's independence and functional capacity^{2,3,4}
- Support school readiness, education participation and social inclusion^{5,6}
- Reduce the burden on caregivers and families^{2,3}

(1d) Gaps and barriers to early access to assistive technology and their impact on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing, as well as on their family or carers and other government services and systems

According to the World Health Organization:

*"Access to assistive technology is a fundamental human right, a legal obligation for all countries within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a prerequisite for the full and equitable achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals."*⁷

Despite this, approximately 16,900 children and young people with disability living in NSW (0-19 years) report an unmet need for assistive technology⁸.

ATSA members frequently report that families face significant barriers to accessing AT in NSW. These include:

- Ineligibility for the NDIS or delays in getting approval, despite the presence of functional impairment.
- Delays in approval for AT, particularly for complex, customised items, which prevent early AT intervention.
- Limited funding pathways outside the NDIS, including unclear access to EnableNSW for children with temporary or emerging needs.
- Difficulty accessing affordable occupational therapy assessments, particularly in rural and regional areas.
- Challenges in obtaining new equipment or having equipment modified as children grow and their AT needs evolve.

Together, these barriers may have lasting consequences, including:

- Missed developmental milestones
- Delayed entry or exclusion from early education settings
- Increased reliance on carers and public health services and
- Reduced quality of life and long-term cost to government.

Recommendation 1

The NSW Government work collaboratively with other states and territories through the Disability Reform Ministerial Council to establish a nationally consistent approach to AT provision outside the NDIS, in line with Recommendation 1, Action 1:10 of the Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Recommendation 2

The NSW Government ensures a mix of flexible and timely AT supply options (including direct purchase, loan or hire) to meet the changing needs of growing children, regardless of NDIS status.

Lack of available services outside the NDIS

Funding for AT outside the NDIS is currently provided via a complex and fragmented mix of schemes and service systems⁹. Feedback to the NDIA shows that children's ability to access to AT is hampered by a lack of flexibility and timeliness of AT supply arrangements¹⁰. ATSA recommends the NSW Government supports a strong AT supply market by ensuring a mix of flexible and timely AT supply options (including direct purchase, loan or hire) to better meet the changing needs of children as they grow, regardless of NDIS status.

ATSA also recognises the need for greater consistency across jurisdictions and service systems to support better access to AT for children. ATSA therefore supports the following recommendations from the Independent Review of the NDIS¹¹:

- The Department of Social Services, with states and territories, should develop a nationally consistent approach for the delivery of aids and equipment outside the NDIS (Recommendation 1, Action 1:10); and
- National Cabinet should agree to jointly invest in early supports for children with emerging development concerns and disability (Recommendation 1, Action 1:12)

Regrettably, the Federal Government has still not handed down its official response to the recommendations arising out of the NDIS Review. Despite this fact, ATSA recommends the NSW Government work collaboratively with other states and territories through the Disability Reform Ministerial Council to establish a nationally consistent approach to AT provision outside the NDIS.

Recommendation 3

The NSW Government works with the AT sector, other jurisdictions and other service systems such as NDIS and Department of Education to provide clear eligibility information and consistent access to AT for children and young people.

Lack of information and navigation support

Feedback to the NDIA shows that families' access to AT is hampered by a lack of information on AT, its availability and publicly available product reviews¹⁰. The NSW Government has previously recognised that the rollback of vital mainstream supports such as those provided through the NSW Ability Links program, has led to a situation where people outside of the NDIS are left with little support in navigating access to services¹².

Therefore, ATSA recommends the NSW Government work with the AT sector, other jurisdictions and other service systems such as the NDIS and the Department of Education to provide clear eligibility information and consistent access to AT for children and young people. The NSW Government should also provide additional support to help parents and carers navigate access to AT across service systems, particularly for those ineligible or awaiting approval for NDIS funding.

Recommendation 4

The NSW Government provides additional support to help parents and carers navigate access to AT across service systems, particularly for those ineligible or awaiting approval for NDIS funding.

Issues relating to capturing data and tracking outcomes

The issues we have already outlined are perpetuated by a lack of publicly available information and data on outcomes relating to the provision of AT. Data must be purposefully and consistently measured across service systems in order to inform future policy frameworks and improve service delivery options. While the National Disability Data Asset promises to provide more complete data against Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31, AT related data within this is extremely limited.

A lack of comprehensive and transparent AT data is a significant barrier to, and understanding progress against, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention) and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31, particularly as it relates to access to AT for children and young people. Article 31 (2) of the Convention identifies the importance of comprehensive and disaggregated data for the formulation, implementation and assessment of policies to give effect to the Convention¹³.

ATSA therefore recommends the NSW Government commit to working with the AT sector to ensure the National Disability Data Asset is capable of effectively monitoring key outcomes relating to assistive technology across jurisdictions, and across service systems.

Recommendation 5

The NSW Government commit to working with the AT sector to ensure the National Disability Data Asset is capable of effectively monitoring key outcomes relating to assistive technology across jurisdictions, and across service systems.

Closing

Assistive technology is foundational to inclusion, development and wellbeing for children and young people with disability. However, many children in NSW, particularly those not participating in the NDIS, are experiencing delays or are unable to access the AT they need to thrive.

We urge the Committee to prioritise the role of assistive technology within foundational supports and ensure every child in NSW has timely and equitable access to the equipment they need to reach their full potential.

Should you require further information in relation to any of the matters raised throughout this submission, please feel free to contact ATSA's Director of Policy and Advocacy, Lauren Henley.

References

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- ¹³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCR). (2020). Article 31: List of illustrative indicators on statistics and data collection, Human Rights Indicators on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).