



Meeting Minutes

Communications Accessibility Consultative Committee Meeting One

Date: 1/11/2024

Time: 9:30AM – 11:00AM

Location: Virtual

Chair: Sam Grunhard, First Assistant Secretary, Communications Services and Consumer

Attendees

Name	Organisation/position
The Hon Michelle Rowland MP	Commonwealth Minister for Communications (guest)
Sam Grunhard	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, First Assistant Secretary, Communications Services and Consumer Division
Jodi Cassar	Department of Social Services, Assistant Secretary, Australia's Disability Strategy Branch
Kathleen Silleri	Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, Assistant Secretary, Consumer Safeguards Branch
Jasmin Fielder	Department of Social Services, Director, Australia's Disability Strategy Implementation
Steve Williamson	Chief Executive Officer, Deafness Forum Australia
Debra Swann	Chairperson, Deaf Australia
Rebecca Adam	Chief Executive Officer, Expression Australia
Debbie Celenza	Business Development Manager – Service Delivery, Expression Australia
David Swayn	Disability Policy Officer, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network
Ben McAtanmey	National Policy and Advocacy Officer, Deafblind Australia
Catherine Dunn	Senior Advisor – Policy and Government Relations, Deaf Connect

Name	Organisation/position
Brent Phillips	Chief Services Officer, Deaf Connect
Jonathan Craig	Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Vision 2020 Australia
Rosie Lane	Access and Inclusion Index Lead, Australian Disability Network
Tania Smith	Communications and Media Manager, Inclusion Australia
Maeve Kennedy	Deputy CEO, Inclusion Australia
Jackson Reynolds-Ryan	Senior Policy Officer, Blind Citizens Australia
Maddison Inglis	Auslan Interpreter, Deaf Connect
David McQuiggin	Auslan Interpreter, Deaf Connect
Donna Rumph	Captioner, Bradley Reporting

Apologies

Name	Organisation/position
Phil Harper	Deaf Australia

Minutes

Agenda item 1: Introduction to the Communications Accessibility Consultative Committee

- Sam Grunhard (Chair) opened the meeting by welcoming guests and explaining the accessibility arrangements for the session.
- Sam invited the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications to share remarks on the Government's priorities for improving communications accessibility.
- Minister Rowland highlighted the importance of accessible communications services to enable people with disability to fully participate in social, economic and community life.
- Minister Rowland emphasised the value of the Committee's work in helping the Government to shape policies that are responsive to the needs of people with disability. The Minister drew connections between the Committee's work and the findings of the Disability Royal Commission (DRC).

Agenda item 2: Introduction to Committee members

- Committee members shared their background, roles and the priorities of their organisations.

Agenda item 3: Update on work of the Communications portfolio in advancing communications accessibility

- Sam provided an updated on the NRS Open Tender process, with the Government selecting Concentrix as the preferred supplier of the NRS to 30 September 2027.
- Sam highlighted that Concentrix will introduce new and upgraded features to the NRS, including user assistance and community engagement functions as well as regular user surveys. Sam noted that feedback from Committee members can feed into the community engagement function.
- Sam provided an update on the progress of reforms to improve the accessibility of television. These proposals include requiring the provision of audio description on commercial free-to-air television and

catch-up services and simplifying and extending the captioning rules to include more captioned services on free-to-air secondary channels and on catch-up services. Sam indicated that Committee members would receive an invitation to comment on the proposed reforms and encouraged members to participate in this targeted consultation.

- Debbie Celenza raised a concern about the NRS website, which advises that emergency calls can be made through the service but suggests it's not preferred during emergencies. Debbie stated that this poses a disadvantage to individuals who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or deafblind.
 - Sam explained that relevant NRS website text about emergency calls is exclusively about video relay calls stems, and stems from the difficulty of prioritising such calls, as video relay services are provided via Skype, an over-the-top service that can't be prioritised in the phone network.
 - Kath Silleri noted ongoing discussions with State and Territory governments to modernise access to emergency services, potentially introducing new communication methods such as text or video messaging. She also mentioned a successful trial by New South Wales Police allowing video streams between the caller and the police, which may be expanded across other emergency service organisations. Kath reassured the Committee that other NRS channels can be used to access Triple Zero 24/7.
 - Sam reaffirmed that emergency call prioritisation is a key issue, with regular discussions happening between the department, Telstra, and emergency services to find solutions.
- Ben McAtanmey emphasised the need to address the undersupply of Auslan interpreters and the gap in training of interpreting skills for the deafblind community.
 - Jasmin Fielder explained that the Australian Government is working with State and Territory governments to develop a national plan that includes accessible communication standards. These standards will provide clear expectations for government communications and encourage the private sector to adopt similar practices. The plan will focus on the availability of relay services, audio descriptions, captioning and improving the Auslan workforce. Jasmin emphasised the importance of considering intersectional needs, such as those of non-English speaking and First Nations communities, and to upskill public servants to better understand the issues faced by people with disability. She outlined that this Associated Plan, aligned with Australia's Disability Strategy, will be developed over the next two to three years, and the Committee will be updated regularly.
- Catherine Dunn raised concerns that many people are unaware of communication services like the NRS and noted that people may be hesitant to use these services due to confidentiality concerns. Catherine explained that the NRS used to have an outreach service that engaged communities in rural, regional and remote areas. She suggested that reinstating this outreach program would be beneficial.
 - Sam acknowledged Catherine's feedback, noting that community engagement has been expanded under the new contract with Concentrix but agreed that there is room for further expansion of these efforts.
- Jonathan Craig highlighted the importance of outreach services and suggested that outreach should target individuals newly diagnosed with disability to provide essential information and support.
- Debra Swann highlighted the challenges faced by the Deaf community in accessing emergency services through text-based approaches, which can be delayed. She suggested that emergency services should be trained to understand the emotional impact on people with disability during emergencies, especially for those whose first language is not English. Debra agreed with the need for an outreach program and emphasised that training emergency service providers on those communication barriers should be a priority.
- Rosie Lane noted that there is limited understanding of the NRS among customer service teams. She highlighted the need for capacity building to ensure these teams can support callers effectively, using various methods to meet diverse needs.
- Steve Williamson commented on the difficulty of achieving consistency across agencies, retailers, and government departments. He emphasised that establishing consistent standards and protocols is ambitious but necessary.

- Steve suggested that the NRS might have a limited lifespan due to evolving technology and user preferences. He proposed a future focus on universal accessibility for all users of government services. Steve also raised the need to address the shortage of Auslan interpreters.
 - Sam expressed agreement on the shifting landscape over the next five to ten years. He proposed adding this topic to the agenda for the next meeting to further discuss future directions.
- David Swain expressed interest in the implementation of total conversation technology in Australia, such as real-time text and video calls, in light of advancements in Europe, the United States and Canada. He also emphasised the importance of digital accessibility in legislative reforms, especially with upcoming Disability Discrimination Act changes.
 - Sam confirmed that the department is closely monitoring developments in emergency services technology. He suggested adding this topic to the agenda for a future meeting to provide updates.
 - Kath echoed the excitement around global advancements. She highlighted the rapid pace of technological development and its potential for adaptive uses to meet specific communication needs.

Agenda item 4: Discussion and agreement on draft Terms of Reference

- Sam noted that the draft Terms of Reference (ToRs), covering the scope, aims, membership, composition and the selection process for the Committee, had been circulated to members. The ToRs state that the Committee intends to meet twice a year to provide advice to the department. The ToRs also suggest developing a work plan in consultation with all members to prioritise issues and keep Ministers updated. Sam highlighted that standing agenda items, like the National Associated Plan for Accessible Information and Communications, would be included.
- Brent Phillips expressed support for the draft ToRs. However, he suggested increasing the meeting frequency to four times a year to drive progress.
- Sam proposed providing more regular updates to the group and emphasised the importance of keeping communication channels open, allowing members to report or discuss issues between formal meetings.
- Steve raised a question about the Committee's function, asking whether it serves as a consulting body or operates in a co-design model. He suggested that groups representing the Deaf community might be interested in meeting separately to bring back informed recommendations to encourage more collaboration outside the formal structure of meetings.
- Jonathan echoed the suggestion for more frequent meetings. He also recommended considering how the Committee might respond quickly during emergencies, highlighting the pandemic as an example. He suggested that this flexibility should be reflected in the ToRs.
- Maeve Kennedy supported the suggestion for quarterly meetings, noting that this frequency aligns with other committees that Inclusion Australia participates in.
- Sam concluded by noting that the suggested changes would be incorporated into the ToRs, with a final version to be circulated for approval.

Agenda item 5: Update on development of an Associated Plan for Information and Communications Services

- Jasmin Fielder provided an update on the Government's response to the DRC, highlighting the Associated Plan for Accessible Information and Communications (the plan). This initiative will implement Recommendations 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 of the DRC. She noted that all governments, including the Australian Government and State and Territory governments, support the development of the plan. Jasmin explained that the Department of Social Services (DSS) will lead the development of the plan, working across governments and consulting closely with people with disability and their representative organisations. The Australian Disability Strategy Advisory Committee will also be involved, with DSS meeting them several times a year.

- Jasmin emphasised the importance of engaging this Committee as the plan progresses and mentioned that DSS will set up a technical advisory group composed of experts and people with disability to assist with developing draft standards for communications, including those used during emergencies.
- The plan will also explore the potential of artificial intelligence in communications for people with disability, ensuring safeguards are in place. Jasmin added that the initiative aims to build capability across the Australian Public Service and potentially State and Territory governments, with a goal of compulsory training across the public service.
- Jasmin acknowledged that the plan will take three years to fully deliver but assured that work will continue during this period to improve services and address critical issues, such as the inclusion of emergency management communications. The plan will be signed off by the Minister for Communications and the Minister for Social Services, and ministers responsible for disability matters across the country.
- Ben noted that he is part of a working group in NDIS focused on workforce capability and culture, which is currently producing frameworks around key skills and competencies. Ben suggested that there could be valuable insights and resources to share that would assist in advancing these objectives of the plan.
 - Jasmin highlighted the involvement of NDIS in workforce capability discussions.
- Brent raised a question regarding Recommendation 6.1 from the Disability Royal Commission, specifically about developing a baseline or minimum standard for communication access for people with disability, particularly Auslan users.
 - Jasmin acknowledged Brent's point and explained that the plan aims to set best standards while also considering resource availability.
 - Catherine inquired whether regulation would be explored alongside workforce capability. She asked about potential mechanisms to ensure compliance with accessibility standards.
 - Jasmin added that the Government will consult with people with disability and their representatives on how to ensure these standards are met and exceeded.

Agenda item 6: Other business

- Sam confirmed that the department will make amendments to the draft ToRs based on the feedback from Committee members. He noted that some of the substantial items raised in the meeting would be included on the agenda for the next meeting, which is planned for early in the new year.
- Catherine noted that Zoom would be the best video platform moving forward. She asked about the transparency of sharing the ToRs with her networks.
 - Sam clarified that there are no concerns with sharing information from the Committee and that he supports transparency. He noted, however, that Zoom presents challenges with government systems.
- The department flagged the intention to make information about the Committee accessible on the Access Hub website.

Action items

Action Item	Due date	Responsibility	Status
1. Prepare a presentation for the next Committee meeting on international developments in accessible emergency services technology and explore how these can be adapted for use in Australia.	Next meeting	DITRDCA	In progress
2. Revise the draft ToRs based on Committee member feedback to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase meeting frequency to four times per year, • allow for the formation of working groups to address specific issues between meetings, and • include provisions for convening during emergencies. 	To be circulated to Committee members for their endorsement before the next meeting	DITRDCA	Completed
3. Consider options to increase ease of accessibility for future virtual Committee meetings.	Next meeting	DITRDCA	In progress
4. Upload information about the Committee on the Access Hub website	Next meeting	DITRDCA	In progress