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Conclusions and Recommendations

For the vast majority of general population respondents, NDIS participant experiences remain the most powerfully defining force in their views of the Scheme (aided and abetted by many 'switching off' from mainstream media). We again see attitudes to the NDIS that are defined by their empathy and an aversion to cost-cutting – indeed, a distaste for cost cutting narratives which are seen to contain a commentary about the "worth" or "value" of the lives of Australians with a disability. In short, compared with our research from early 2023, there is no real change to the underlying social licence of the Scheme *at this stage*.

However, it should be noted that – if anything – attitudes toward the Scheme from participants seemed to have sharpened since the previous research. Participants and carers spoke of the intensity of their fear with regard to NDIS funding and the bureaucratic decisions which – for them or their children – are often existential. This profound fear is accompanied by intense frustration and confusion in response to the Scheme's perceived complexity and "inconsistency". While such sentiments were present in the previous research, in this round of research, we also find a degree of disillusionment: participants had expected change from the incoming Labor Government and, instead, there remains a sense that no change is coming. The reforms announced in May 2023 are simply not known or recalled.

This research suggests that a continuing decline in participant attitudes toward the Scheme represents a bigger risk to public sentiment/social licence than negative media coverage about NDIS costs. Indeed, the media narrative only seems to work where it reinforces what the general public is hearing about the Scheme through their personal networks, not the other way around. This makes the more recent coverage of mistreatment of disabled Australians potentially problematic for the Scheme's social licence.

Within in this attitudinal landscape, there is recognition of the need for reform to the NDIS that a) makes it better for participants and b) makes it lasting/sustainable (it most certainly needs to be there in the future). Framing the objective of reforms with these dual goals works well to speak to participant and non-participant concerns about the Scheme.

Making the NDIS better for participants speaks to a 'core truth' that the Scheme is immensely complex and, furthermore, hostile in its complexity (i.e. where the complexity works against the interests of those the system is supposed to serve). Even in the general population groups, it seems everyone knows someone with a NDIS horror story.

Making the NDIS lasting speaks to the 'core truth' that the Scheme is being abused or rorted – primarily by "dodgy" providers – and that participants (not taxpayers per se) are largely the *victims* of this (robbing them the ability to get the quality support they need at a fair price). This is compounded by a perception of NDIS services being "over-priced" – the idea of the 'wedding cake tax' applying to all this NDIS.

Thus, the critical piece to a 'making it last' reform story is a) addressing fraud and "dodgy" practices by provider and b) normalising pricing under the NDIS, so participants aren't robbed of their value for money by over-priced services being written into the way the Scheme works: "Don't talk to us about cost blow outs when you set the prices!"

A key finding of this research is that talking about reform to the complexity of the NDIS is difficult. Firstly, from those with any direct contact with the Scheme, there is a sense that complexity will *always* be there – it's inherent to a system that attempts to provide person centred care. This adds a degree of conflict around complexity: no-one wants to lose the aim of making disability care person-centred. Secondly, in relative terms, addressing fraud and unethical behaviour in the Scheme is believed to be a more credible/believable aim for government compared with fixing the complexity. Thirdly, when talking about reforms in this space, the complexity puts the focus – for both participants and non-participants – on the *how*: a) how it will be done, in a way that doesn't add further complexity or increase opportunities for financial abuse of the Scheme, and b) how it is different to what exists now. Thus, we see discussions in these groups veer into issues of implementation or confusion that proposed reforms simply seem to be re-stating existing practices (or just disconnection, if participants have no frame of reference for the specific issue of complexity we're seeking to fix). Either way, reactions are *framed by existing experiences of the Scheme*. So, a focus on goals raises concerns about one participant's increases in funding coming at the expense of another who can't advocate for their goals as effectively, or a move to budget first planning puts more

burden on people with a disability to manage their money and increases the fear of an NDIA audit for those self-managing, while both are also seen to open the door to ineffective (i.e. non-capacity building) use of funds. Put another way, the changes tested here just aren't different enough.

The result is that it is *very hard to sustain a values-based conversation around fixing the complexity* – it drags you into the weeds. By contrast, previous research found it is easier – but still requiring careful treatment – to sustain a values-based conversation about fixing fraud in order to stop the exploitation of Australians with a disability.

The 'making it last' reforms tested in these groups did not include any related to targeting fraud or unethical behaviour. Rather, the reforms tested here were more around investment in the supports that sit *outside* the NDIS (in order to take pressure off the Scheme), i.e. early childhood supports in mainstream settings, foundational supports, and mainstream supports.

While there is generally agreement with the proposition that 'the NDIS can't be – *and shouldn't be* – the only safety net', these particular reforms run into a third 'core truth': that governments never fund services in this space to the degree that would enable them to work well. For example, there is no trust that governments will appropriately resource our already "over-loaded" schools in the early intervention of children with developmental issues, or that they will resource foundational support providers sufficiently so we don't just recreate waiting-lists and pay-to-jump-the-queue practices in that space. In this context, these reforms come to be seen as "passing the buck".

So, what are our ways forward?

1. The twin pillars of 'making it better' and 'making it lasting' work as the aims of our reform package – they speak to those core truths as outlined earlier. The opportunity is to wrap this up under a reform campaign brand that speaks to the core values that respondents see as being under-represented in the reality of the NDIS: "fairness", "equity" and "care". To that end, participants favoured brands like *Levelling the field or Putting participants first* because they spoke to these underlying values – vs *Putting the NDIS back on track*, which was inherently political (even for those who liked it), being seen as a kind of Trumpian slogan or an admission/accusation of (previous) government failure.

2. In terms of providing 'proof points' to create credibility for a claim of 'making it lasting', there is a strong need to have reforms that speak to addressing

(provider) fraud, as well as normalising prices. Noting that care needs to be taken to convey that we are not talking about cost cutting here, *but the protection of both participants and the future of the Scheme from exploitation*. Respondents want such reform and they are prepared to believe/trust it of the government. Without it, the risk of being seen as "buck passing" is high.

3. In terms of 'making it better', the current and previous research points to an opportunity around *humanising* the Scheme – i.e. humanising is '*the how*' to addressing hostile complexity. In the previous research we found that bringing *specialised* people into the Scheme – specifically into the interaction between participant and the Scheme – was seen to be a credible driver of greater empathy and understanding. It tells a (believable) values-based story because it is about people not processes. Indeed, in the current research, we again see this core frustration/anger from participants that decisions are made about them (their worthiness/humanity) by a faceless bureaucracy. Putting people (with relevant experiences that make them capable of introducing empathy and understanding) into the story could provide a foundation that then makes other changes – like greater focus on participants' goals – believable.The current research would also suggest that the interaction of such specialised NDIS workers with participants is the only real way to address information/knowledge gaps like explaining the meaning of 'reasonable and necessary'. At present, 'reasonable and necessary' is seen as a blunt bureaucratic tool used for beating participants over the head. A generic education campaign attempting to explain what we mean by 'reasonable and necessary' to people who feel victimised by the term could be disastrous.

4. Win the disability community first. While this is very much about their substantive experience of living with the Scheme, in a communication sense a key part is talking about the 'timetabled journey to making it better and lasting'. Participants in this and the previous research don't expect or want "quick fixes" or isolated "band aids" (that just sounds like a recipe for more complexity). They want serious, substantive, systemic changes to the Scheme, with recognition of the need to "learn as we go". Put simply, 'making it better' is an evolutionary process, not some quick outcome achieved through the rapid application of a series of reforms. It is not tick and flick. But neither can it be put on the never-never. We need a timetable for the changes that are on our horizon now, with consultative processes ongoing to identify the next horizon. Critically, consultation is not just about future changes, participants want to be involved in the implementation and evolution of

changes being made. Put simply, they want to be *participants in change*, not recipients of change.