



Simple summary—Communications accessibility: 2016 and beyond consultation paper

The Australian Government has put out a paper seeking comments about communications for people with a disability. This is a summary of the ideas in the paper.

Why has the Australian Government put out this paper?

The National Relay Service or the NRS is a phone service for people who are deaf, speech or hearing impaired. It has operated in Australia for a long time to let people make phone calls to their friends, family and business. More people are now using the NRS. Use of the NRS has gone up by 25% over the past two years. This means the NRS costs more money to run.

Now technology has also changed and got better. This means that people can use mobile phones and computers to make telephone calls and do not always need to use the National Relay Service. They can use email, facebook or live chat instead, if they want to.

The paper has some ideas about how to improve communications options for people with a disability. It wants to make sure the NRS continues into the future and allows more people to use new services to contact their family and friends.

Ideas in the paper

The paper has eight main areas where we would like your comments:

- 1. Increase the money available each year to fund the National Relay Service.**
This will let more people use the NRS and it will stay the same. To make this happen, the amount of money that phone companies will have to pay will go up.
- 2. Find a way to manage the demand for the NRS.**
This could involve putting a limit on the number of minutes each person could have to use the NRS. Or you could change the hours the NRS is open for. It is important to remember that there would still be a way to ring 000 or 106 if this happened.
- 3. Find ways to support fair access to the National Relay Service, including greater enforcement of fair use policies.**
This could involve checks to make sure only people who needed the NRS could use it. It could also be done by requiring people to register to use the NRS.
- 4. Get the National Relay Service outreach programme to focus on different things.**
This could mean reducing the amount of general promotion and awareness of the NRS to potential new users. But increase the time and effort spent on assisting people with complex communication needs. These people may need the NRS more as they may not find it easy to use other devices or services.

5. **Look at the current range of NRS call options and other services available to make sure that the NRS can continue in the future.**

We could look at how we can get more people to use mainstream technologies and equipment, like smartphones when it is the best and fastest way of communicating. The NRS could be kept for the times when users have no other choice. For example, Video Relay is for Auslan users to communicate in their first language—They cannot use other mainstream options to make a call to a person with a normal voice phone. But other NRS users may have a greater range of call options.

6. **Remove or change some regulations about disability equipment programmes that are out of date.**

Both Telstra and Optus have special equipment programs for customers with disabilities. This helps them to meet the requirements under the law. New mainstream equipment, like smartphones, may be better. In some cases special equipment, like teletypewriters may not be needed. If these regulations were changed, we may need a new program to make sure that customers with disabilities are able to access the equipment they need.

7. **Encourage phone companies to offer more affordable data-rich plans.**

This option involves encouraging phone companies to offer plans with more data and less voice calls. This may help people who cannot make voice calls and rely more on text based alternatives, like Instant Messenger or SMS. This could also include a device, like a smartphone in the plan.

8. **Find ways to encourage people with disabilities to learn about, and use new technologies and new services, like video-based communications.**

There may be benefits in offering awareness raising programmes that focus on promoting the benefits of mainstream technologies for people with disability.

How to ‘Have Your Say’

We also want your ideas. You can send an email to accessibility@communications.gov.au until 6 May 2016.

Press this link to go to the department’s website.

<https://communications.gov.au/have-your-say/communications-accessibility-2016-and-beyond>.

You can download a full copy of the paper from there.