



Communications accessibility: 2016 and Beyond: Consultation outcomes

Reform of National Relay Service

In 2016, the Department of Communications and the Arts released a consultation paper on communications accessibility for people with a disability, *Communications accessibility: 2016 and beyond*. The paper included a number of options for managing increased demand and costs for the National Relay Service (NRS) and improving communication options for people with a disability.

Demand for the NRS, and therefore the cost of providing the service, has been progressively increasing exceeding expectations previously provided to telecommunication carriers who provide funding for the service. With careful consideration of the submissions made to the consultation paper and other relevant factors, the government proposes to make changes to the NRS, which are beginning to come into effect during 2017.

Outcomes of the consultation process

The consultation paper attracted responses from a broad range of stakeholders.

The main points to note include:

- Stakeholders with an involvement or interest in the sector supported largely unchanged delivery of the service, generally meaning uncapped user demand at no additional cost to users.
- Telecommunications industry representatives were concerned about the rapidly increasing cost of funding the service, in an environment where text-based alternatives for voice communications have increased rapidly in terms of availability and take-up.
- There was considerable resistance to limiting the use of the service, however individual submitters were open to having to register to use the service.
- Information recently provided by the relay service provider on patterns of use suggests very high levels of use of the service made by a very small number of NRS users occurs.
- There was little support for the ongoing delivery of the NRS outreach in its current form. The original goal for NRS outreach program was to raise awareness and provide training and support to users and potential users of the service. With a wider range of communications accessibility options now available for people with disability this focus is no longer the most appropriate.

A copy of the consultation paper as well as formal submissions made public can be found at: <https://www.communications.gov.au/have-your-say/communications-accessibility-2016-and-beyond>

The changes to be made to ways in which the NRS will be delivered are:

- Rebalancing of the NRS outreach service; and
- The introduction of a compulsory registration requirement to access the service.

A procurement process will be conducted later in 2017.

Implementation Plan

Introduction of compulsory registration to access the NRS

Compulsory online registration will be required to access the NRS. This will assist in ensuring that the funding allocation available for the provision of the service is being used effectively and efficiently in addressing the requirements of those with a genuine need to use the service

The government's intention is for the registration process to collect a basic level of personal information from NRS users, including formally confirming their need to use the NRS. Information provided will be held on a strictly confidential basis adhering to the Australian Privacy Principles.

It is intended that an education and support program will be run to assist users with the introduction of the registration system. Voice callers attempting to reach a user of the NRS will not be required to register.

Compulsory registration to access the NRS will be introduced following completion of the procurement process.

Outreach service

The changes introduced to the current outreach service includes ceasing promotion, awareness raising, and training and research activities. The current helpdesk availability in specified hours and certain stakeholder engagement activities will continue, including the NRS Stakeholder Reference Panel and the NRS National Advisory Committee.

Other points to note include:

- It is intended that specific short-term programs may be used in the future to position the NRS as one element in a range of communication options available to people who are deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired
- Access to more streamlined information about the NRS will be available through the current NRS website URL, www.relayservice.gov.au.

To assist in repositioning messaging about the range of communication options now available to users and potential users of the NRS new regulations will take effect, subject to consultation and approval by the Governor-General.

The government will not enter into a specific NRS outreach services contract when the current agreement finishes. The majority of funds saved will be used to provide relay services above the current budgeted level. It is intended that service desk functions will be procured as part of relay service contracts.

Procurement for continued provision of relay services

In light of the above information the government has decided it is timely to go to market to ensure that the relay service is provided in an efficient manner. The Department will conduct a procurement process later in 2017 to test the market for value for money in the ongoing operation of the relay service and helpdesk support, with a maximum annual ceiling for delivery costs of \$22 million (including GST).