



Australian Government

Department of Communications and the Arts



Communications accessibility: 2016 and beyond: Consultation outcomes

Reform of National Relay Service—implementation plan

June 2017

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Background

In 2016, the Department of Communications and the Arts (Department) released a wide ranging consultation paper on communications accessibility for people with a disability, *Communications accessibility: 2016 and beyond*. The paper included a number of options for managing demand 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. There has been particularly rapid growth in the use of the proprietary handset captioned relay service access option. Use of this option grew by nearly 350 per cent in 2015–16 alone.

The total cost of delivering the NRS in 2015-16 was \$26.3 million (including GST), with the relay service component costing \$22.1 million (including GST) and the outreach service component costing \$4.2 million (including GST). This represents an increase of nearly 22 per cent when compared to the delivery costs in 2014–15. The growth has continued in the 2016-17 financial year, with the total cost for the nine months July 2016 to March 2017 reaching \$24.1 million (including GST).

The unexpected rapid increase in the use of the NRS has led to the overall cost of delivering the service exceeding expectations previously provided by the Australian Government to telecommunication carriers of the liability they would face in funding the provision of this service through introduction of the Telecommunications Industry Levy (TIL). The expectation of ongoing NRS costs provided to telecommunication carriers was consistent with the level of ongoing costs incurred in previous years, with an allowance for the introduction of new service access options.

The Commonwealth's expectation of costs to be incurred within a specific funding envelope in delivering the NRS over a five year period from 1 July 2013 was tested in a competitive tender process in 2012. A funding envelope of \$22 million (including GST) per annum for the provision of relay and outreach service components was confirmed from successful completion of the tender process.

In this context, and following careful consideration of the submissions made to the *Communications accessibility: 2016 and beyond* consultation paper, the government proposes to make changes to the NRS, which will begin to come into effect during 2017, within a short-term increased funding ceiling for 2017–18.

The changes to be put into effect involve both to the NRS itself and a rebalancing of the current NRS outreach services and contains a number of elements, as described below. It is considered that these changes will assist in appropriately managing demand for the NRS and improve efficiencies in service delivery.

Outcomes of consultation process

The consultation paper attracted responses from a broad range of stakeholders with an interest in communications accessibility issues. Respondents included users of the NRS and their family members, community stakeholders, telecommunication carriers and commercial organisations with an interest or involvement in the sector.

Formal submissions to the consultation paper made public can be found at:

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

Options canvassed in the consultation paper about ensuring the sustainability of the NRS generated particular interest in many of the submissions received and are the focus of the findings addressed here.

The consultation process revealed a generally polarised response between different groups of respondents. Option 1 in the paper canvassed addressing the funding allocation required to sustain delivery of the service over the remaining life of the current agreements. Most stakeholders with an involvement or interest in the sector supported largely unchanged delivery of the service, which generally means uncapped user demand at no additional cost to users. Telecommunications industry representatives were concerned about the rapidly increasing cost of funding the service beyond original expectations, in an environment where text-based alternatives for voice communications, have proliferated rapidly, in terms of availability and take-up.

The government has decided to make changes to both the relay and outreach service components.

Changes to be made to ways in which the NRS is delivered will be:

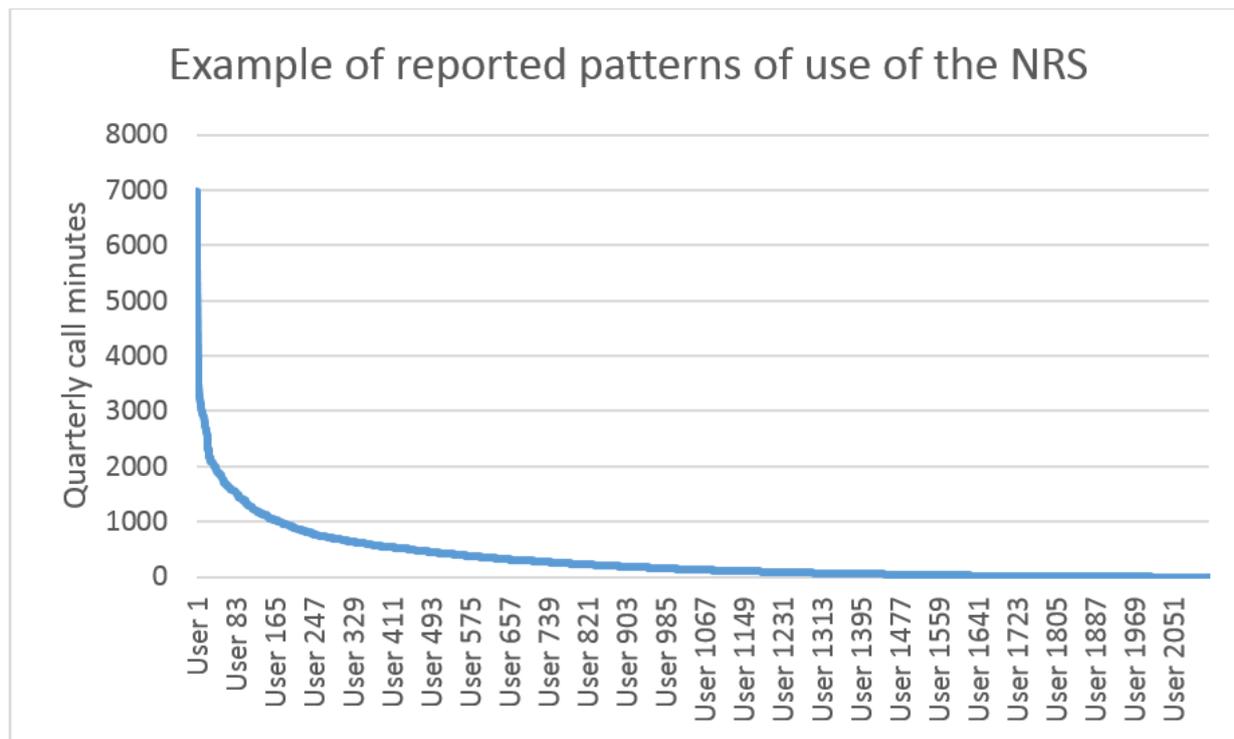
- the introduction of a compulsory registration requirement to access the service; and
- rebalancing of the NRS outreach service.

A procurement process will be conducted later in 2017.

More specific details of each of these reform options can be found below.

Options 2 and 3 in the consultation paper raised questions related to the introduction of measures to manage demand for NRS services and more specific requirements to support access to the service. While a number of individual submitters were willing to register to use the service, there was considerable user resistance to limiting use of the service. While this is understandable, information recently provided by the relay service provider on patterns of use emerging from connections established with the service for particular service types suggests very high levels of use by a very small number of NRS users occurs, regardless of the type of inbound connection made. The information provided also suggests that this concentration of heavy use of the service in a very limited number of hands is followed by a rapid fall off in the level of use by the majority of individuals connecting with the service.

Diagram 1: An example diagram of reported patterns of use of the NRS



Given this, the government may consider the introduction of acceptable use policies.

The original purpose of the NRS outreach program was to raise awareness, provide training and other forms of customer support to users and potential users of the service. This goes back to a time when other communication options for people who were deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired, were not widely available, if at all. Option 4 in the consultation paper proposed change to the existing NRS outreach program to focus on communication options for people with disabilities.

There was little support for the current delivery of the NRS outreach service from any sector in submissions made to the consultation paper. The changing communications environment suggests that a program focused on only promoting and training use of the NRS is no longer the most appropriate use of the funding provided for an outreach program, with a wider range of communications accessibility options now available for people with disability. The small numbers of frequent users of the service illustrated in the reported patterns above may also suggest that the service has limited appeal as a first choice communication option, taking into account significant awareness raising and support activities undertaken through a number of channels reaching out to potential users of the service.

The government intends that messaging will be repositioned to ensure that a broader range of information is provided to users and potential users of the service to place the NRS as one of many options available when a speech or hearing impaired person needs to make contact with another party. This means that information will be provided to deaf and hearing impaired Australians on other viable options that may be available, across a range of situations.

The government also intends to make a necessary legislative instrument to establish an appropriate policy objective to support this repositioning of messaging about the NRS.

Building on reforms to the relay service component, the Department expects to undertake further research to better understand and assess how the NRS is used in practice and the extent to which users of different NRS services make use of mainstream forms of communications. This research will inform

consideration of whether particular targeted shorter-term initiatives and messaging approaches will be required in the future.

Implementation Plan

Introduction of compulsory registration to access the NRS

Compulsory online registration will be introduced as a requirement to access the NRS. This will assist in ensuring that the funding allocation available for 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, including such items as name, address, date of birth and relevant phone numbers from NRS users. Users will also be required, on registration, to attest to hearing loss or speech impairment, to confirm the need to use the NRS. Information provided will be held on a strictly confidential basis, with retention and access arrangements for such information 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.

The information to be collected through the registration process will allow for more comprehensive analysis of the needs of the users of the NRS in the future. This will assist the government to ensure appropriate arrangements remain in place for the NRS to be available for those who need to use it in particular circumstances or situations and that arrangements can be appropriately modified from time to time, taking into account the needs of users shown through their use of the service.

The requirement of compulsory registration to access the NRS will be introduced following the completion of the procurement process.

Outreach service

Rebalancing of NRS outreach services

Information recently provided by the relay service provider suggests that there is a limited take up of regular use of the service, when compared to the numbers of potential users and intermediaries exposed to this communication option through NRS outreach program activities. This outcome follows funding of an active and engaged outreach service component over a significant period of time and suggests there may be better value for money available in directing parts of the current funding allocation for a specific NRS outreach services to other purposes. Repositioning the NRS as one element in a range of communication options now available to those who could use the service is therefore a desirable outcome.

The government has introduced changes to the outreach service delivery model to cease promotion, awareness raising, training and research activities with the current helpdesk availability in specified hours, continuing. Specific stakeholder engagement activities will also continue over the life of the current services agreement, including the NRS Stakeholder Reference Panel and the NRS National Advisory Committee.

These changes have already taken effect. Therefore, in 2017–18, the last year of the current outreach contract, the NRS outreach services will have a specific focus of supporting users of the NRS through a number of carefully targeted consumer liaison and stakeholder engagement functions.

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

Short-term programs

It is also intended that specific short-term programs may be utilised 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. Evidence based research will be the focus of initial programs, to establish a better understanding of efficient and effective pathways to be taken in future programs.

Such programs would also facilitate increasing the digital literacy of some users, which could increase their use of a variety of communication options. Opportunities to increase the availability of text and video-based communication options in communicating with businesses and other organisations around Australia may also be provided in such short-term programs.

Online presence

Access to more streamlined and carefully targeted information about the NRS will be available through the current NRS website URL, www.relayservice.gov.au. It will include more detailed information about alternatives to the NRS that might be suitable for users of the NRS. The website will maintain current online call pages which provide access to the internet relay and web-based captioned relay service access options. Online training options for the NRS, such as the call tutorials currently found on the website, will also be maintained.

The creation of this reformed online presence will mean the closure of other online accounts for the NRS, including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts. Presentation of the NRS as an ongoing safety net option for communities who may use the service will be a key factor in maintenance of an online presence for the service.

This transition in the online presence for the NRS has already begun.

Regulations

To assist in facilitating these changes to repositioning messaging and the range of communication options now available to users and potential users of the NRS, an appropriate legislative instrument is intended to be put in place under the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999*. It is expected that the new regulation will take effect later in 2017, subject to consultation and approval by the Governor-General.

Procurement for continued provision of relay services

In light of the increasing cost charged to the Commonwealth for delivery of the relay service in recent years, 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 shortly to test the market for value for money in the ongoing operation of the relay service and helpdesk support. New agreements are expected to be in place no later than 1 July 2018. The tender will be designed to test the most efficient offer for provision of the relay service and helpdesk, with a maximum annual ceiling for delivery costs of \$22 million (including GST).

The Commonwealth must establish specific funding allocations available when entering into contractual arrangements with external parties to ensure responsible financial management. Given the levy funding

arrangements in place for the NRS, it is also considered reasonable for eligible carriers who will be invoiced for costs to have a level of certainty about the amount they may be called upon to contribute in any financial year. Avoiding significant underestimates or overestimates of costs to be incurred in any financial year is to the benefit of all parties.

The procurement process will test for efficiency in continued delivery of the range service access options currently available for users of the service within the designated annual ceiling figure of \$22 million (including GST). The Commonwealth will look for equity of access between different groups of users of the service to be maintained within the funding ceiling. This will take into account distinctions such as the user's ability to speak their side of the conversation which may limit or broaden service access options available to particular individuals.