**NDIS: An inside look at what’s new in 2022.**

**A candid conversation with NDIA CEO Martin Hoffman.**

**George:** Hi and welcome to Reasonable and Necessary, Australia’s premier podcast series on everything you ever wanted to know about the National Disability Insurance Scheme, brought to you by the Summer Foundation. I’m your host, Dr George Taleporos and in this episode I’m speaking with the NDIA CEO, Martin Hoffman, about what’s new in the NDIS for 2022. We talk about co-design, NDIS appeals, COVID and much more. So, check it out. Hey Martin, thanks for joining us.

**Martin:** George, good to be with you this afternoon.

**George:** Martin, we’re going to focus on what’s coming up for the NDIS in 2022 but before we go there, I think it’s important that we talk about COVID. It’s been a very hard summer for people with disabilities and I’d love to hear from you about some of the initiatives or some of the assistance that the NDIA has been providing people with and how people can access that support.

**Martin:** Sure, George. It’s a good thing to talk about. It certainly has been a hard summer and not the one that participants and everybody was looking forward to. Of course, it does seem now - the good news is that the Omicron wave has peaked, so certainly daily infections and hospitalisations are much, much lower than they were even just a few weeks ago which is great news and of course, all the way through this, infection and mortality rates for participants in the scheme have been a lot lower than the general population overall and that’s an important point, that infection and death rates have been lower for participants than the general population. That’s not to say there haven’t been some real impacts of the pandemic and it’s been a hard summer.

I guess we’ve been really focused on doing everything we can to maintain critical supports that participants need and working directly with providers to do that and also working with participants to do that and that’s been for a range of things to help access to vaccines, to boosters, to help access to RATs both in physical distribution - that’s rapid antigen tests of course, the new word, RATs - for distribution physically to major providers, funding arrangements, use of plans, etc.

So, certainly, there’s been disruption. We understand that but we’ve been working very hard directly with, as I said, providers, directly with participants through participant representative organisations to really try and ensure that to the greatest extent possible in the middle of the disruption of a pandemic, those central supports are maintained to the greatest extent possible.

**George:** I know that there was a decision relatively recently to support people to claim the cost of their rapid antigen tests if they needed that in terms of continuing their supports. What other kinds of things are being funded?

**Martin:** Well, of course the whole purpose and way the scheme works is to use the funding within the core funding and the capability funding flexibly to meet particular needs as they change and that’s continued on. As I mentioned, there’s been the support for people, both workers and participants, to get vaccinated, to get boosted and they’ve been important things as well. Some of the arrangements we’ve had in place for some time now of course during the 2 years now of the pandemic have continued around telehealth use, supports delivered via video, the use of iPad technology in that sort of situation, so those things have been continuing.

**George:** Do you think that there’s been additional costs imposed on people’s plans as a result? I’m concerned that there is a lot of cost that people didn’t predict as a result of the pandemic and that’s putting a lot of pressure on people’s NDIS plans. If you’re paying for RAT tests and PPE and all of those additional things, that can put a lot of strain on a person’s funding package.

**Martin:** Well, George, we’ve continued to see strong use of people’s funding packages. The expenditure has been consistent with the forecasts and with the budgets. Spending has continued to increase on the previous year and that’s all as expected. Overall, there’s still plenty of room in people’s plans in terms of utilisation of spend versus the plan budget and that gives the flexibility for use of the plan for different needs as needs change and of course, where plans have been or are very close to limit, that’s probably a good time for review of the plan but that’s been working reasonably well. So we’re seeing plan adjustments being made and we’re seeing plan spend at the level expected with still capacity between the spend level and the budget level.

**George:** The last time that you and I had a conversation, it was last year and I recall there was a hot topic at the time, independent assessments was a big priority for the agency but a lot has changed since then, hasn’t it Martin?

**Martin:** Yeah. We’ve continued with the pandemic and of course, the decision the minister’s made not to proceed with independent assessments in the middle of last year has changed the environment but let’s talk a bit more about that, George.

**George:** How did you feel when that happened?

**Martin:** It’s an interesting question, sure. Honest answer, I was disappointed. I’ve been very open since then in terms of acknowledging the difficulties, acknowledging the real concerns that were there in the community and I certainly regret that and I’ve expressed that a number of times formally and in parliament and in writing in our annual report so I absolutely believe that. At the same time also, I know myself and the thousands of staff at the NDIA were working in complete good faith attempting to do the best job possible to make the scheme as best as possible and the sort of issues that independent assessments were attempting to address remain with us, and that is how do we make good and fair decisions about access to the scheme and then what is reasonable and necessary?

And we need to continue working - and I say ‘we’ meaning the agency and the community, participants - we need to continue working on the best way to answer those questions. What information do we need and then how is that information used and translated into decisions?

**George:** But we’re going to do it differently, aren’t we Martin? I know that there’s been a commitment that’s been made to work with the disability community in order to make sure that we don’t make those same mistakes. We’ll talk about that a bit later but I promised viewers that you’re going to tell us about your top 3 priorities for 2022, so please, tell us what’s on the cards.

**Martin:** Thanks, George. Three things I’m happy to mention, firstly there is just the ongoing operations of the scheme. This is a really big scheme now. We have 500,000 participants at the start of this year. We make something like 10 or 11 thousand decisions every week around access, around plans, around plan reviews and we just need to continue doing those operations as well as possible, making them timely against the participant service guarantee, making them as reasonable as possible, making them well communicated, consistent, predictable and timely.

**George:** There’s been a lot of stuff in the media, it’s all on the 7:30 Report about people’s plans being drastically cut and I was very concerned to see - there was a story where the person had the plan - I think it was cut by 30% and this led to them not being able to leave the house. I’m hearing lots of these experiences. What do you have to say about that?

**Martin:** George, I hope you’re also hearing about the experiences of the plans that are increasing by 30% and by 50% because those stories are just as many and I think that’s the point where the scheme is at now. We’ve been very open about the facts, about the data in our quarterly reports that show that the average plan change at review is now about 1 or 2%, so consistent with inflation. So, on average, plans are going up at review by 1 or 2% but there’s a big variation around that average. Some plans, yes, are going down and just as many plans are going up by small and large amounts and that reflects that we’re at the point now where we’re making decisions about - there might’ve been a prior capital investment in a plan, there might’ve been a prior capacity building investment in a plan that’s worked its way through and so changes are being made.

So, we’re making individual decisions about individual plans going up and down and averaging out at around 1 or 2% increases at the reviews and then people’s spending of those plans continues to grow strongly. So, on average, the spend for the last 6 months is 12% higher than the spend for the previous 12 months for the same group of people. So, there is still plenty of funding in people’s plans and that’s increasingly being used and that’s a good thing. We all want to see that. We want to see it used and used well.

**George:** Yeah, I understand that capital costs, a lot of that stuff is upfront and you would hope that if you’ve put capacity building funding upfront that over time, the need for that to go down would be absolutely reasonable and necessary but I’m just thinking when I hear people’s core supports dropping significantly, I do worry - and I hear in the community there’s real concerns that plans are being slashed but you’re saying that’s not the case.

**Martin:** George, I really - as I’ve just said, the facts are that on average plans go up, which means just as many plans are being increased that are being decreased and I don’t think words like ‘slashed’ help the community or help individuals in that sense. We’re very transparent about the data, very transparent about the results. As I said, there are just as many plans going up by large amounts as there are plans going down.

**George:**  Let’s talk about your other priorities then.

**Martin:** Sure. So, I’ve talked about the operations one. The other is the one that you started to touch on a bit earlier which is around co-design and around reform and development and improvement of the system. As I said, we’ve really got to focus on how we make the best possible decisions that people can have confidence in and can understand and are consistent and that depends upon getting the right information and then translating that information into decisions and the process we use for that is I think the highest priority in terms of how we improve the scheme and that’s what ministers at the middle of last year called upon us all, the agency and participants and their representatives, to work together to co-design a better way of doing that and I’m absolutely focused on making real progress on that this year.

**George:** On that, because I know that we use the word ‘co-design’ a lot in the sector, some people hear the word and they think, ‘oh, there’s another jargon word that hasn’t got a lot of meaning behind it’. I don’t feel that way but I do think that it’s important to be clear about what we mean when we say co-design. So, what do you understand as the meaning behind the term and the practice of co-design?

**Martin:** Yes, thanks George, that’s a great question about “What is co-design?” It can mean many different things to many different people and it’s got a very particular technical meaning for some with a body of knowledge and techniques and approaches to be used. At its core, what I’m thinking is, it’s got to have a genuine attitude, a genuine mindset of engagement, of listening, of understanding, of seeking the solutions together, having first worked on what the problems are rather than presenting solutions and asking for feedback on an answer already decided.

So, there’s got to be a genuine openness to discussion, engagement in a range of different ways it might be done around “let’s talk about the problems and then, let’s together talk about the solutions”. There’s always an Act and there’s powers and there’s laws and there’s authorities and ultimate decision-making responsibilities, etc and co-design can’t take away from that but within that context of still operating within the Act and the powers and responsibilities of various parties, there’s an awful lot we can do to come up with the way we all want the scheme to work together, and I’m really excited about the opportunities for what we can do in that space this year.

**George:** I’m equally excited and I think you’ve made a good point. It’s about meaningfully engaging people and it’s not about the traditional ‘tick the box’ approach that sometimes you see and obviously, that conversation that we can have together as people with disabilities and the agency, it’s a really important conversation and I had a good experience with working with some of your team members on the self-management work and the important work that’s going on there and it was very, very different to what I had experienced in the past. It was refreshing to be involved at the start. You involve people as you’re developing the ideas, as you’re considering the policy and you develop it with people. In the disability movement, we say “nothing about us without us” and I think that’s where we need to focus on.

**Martin:** Good and I’m glad you mentioned that example of the self-management policy work because as well as the big one of the decision-making, how we do a person-centred model of assessment and decision-making, this is such a big scheme now that is quite complex, covers many different people at different stages of their life with different sorts of disabilities but there’s so much to do and we talked about the self-management policy, we know there’s also work of the same type we want to do around home and living supports as they’re so fundamental, around participant safety policy, around support for decision-making by participants and ensuring we are living up to the ideal that the scheme was built on, which was to increase the ability for people with disability to make their own decisions.

The psychosocial recovery framework is another really important policy area that we’ve been working on well in this same way. So, there’s - as I said, there’s so much to do and we’ve got to find ways to get the right people who are interested, who are knowledgeable, who are affected by those policies involved right from the start.

**George:** There is a lot to do but I do think that when you work alongside people in conversation, it might take a bit longer to work out the policy and get it right but the long-term benefits are definitely worth it and I think in the long term, you do save time because the policy setting is supported by the community.

**Martin:** I think that’s right. It brings to mind the old story of the tortoise and the hare and which approach gets there faster in the end.

**George:** Absolutely. Other areas of priority, Martin?

**Martin:** Well, I’ve talked about 2, which was the straightforward operations day-to-day, secondly the co-design work particularly around information gathering and decision-making, then the third area is really to make sure that in the midst of all that work, we don’t lose sight of the outcomes that the scheme was set up to achieve and we mentioned too, firstly employment, that’s a super important area. A lot of the scheme was built around the idea that we need to increase participation of people with disability in the workforce.

Our levels are low compared to other developed countries and so we’ve really got to make sure we push hard on the employment outcome and then the second I’d mention is really the outcomes for kids with developmental delay particularly and initial diagnosis of autism and of course, we’re seeing they’re an increasing proportion of the scheme now. Over half of entry into the scheme every month now are young kids usually with developmental delay and or autism and getting the outcomes of improvement, of catch-up, is - of that early intervention approach which is a key part of the scheme - is one of those outcome areas that is super important for us this year.

**George:** I know the stats in the reports around sustainability, there’s a lot of observations by the agency and by the minister that the early intervention cohort or the group that comes in through early intervention are staying in the scheme or they’re not leaving the scheme as quickly as had been predicted. Is that a concern?

**Martin:** That is a concern but not a concern necessarily from a financial perspective. The concern is, “is the early intervention investment working?” That’s the point that the focus is on. We want kids who need it to be in the scheme or to be supported in other ways so that they get the early intervention, as the words say, so that a real difference is made and that’s where the focus is on. Yes, that then translates into the spreadsheets and the predictions that the productivity commission made about exit rates and so forth but the focus is not on that. That will follow if we get the supports and the outcomes right, then the mathematics takes care of itself.

**George:** Martin, are you concerned that the mainstream systems like education are not doing their part and therefore, it’s becoming an issue for the NDIS and the sustainability?

**Martin:** I think certainly, there was a big focus on the NDIS in the last few years as the thing for disability. I think the new Australia’s Disability Strategy, the new 10-year strategy hopefully really signals a recommitment of all governments, because all governments have signed up to the ADS, that a genuinely inclusive society is not just about having a great NDIS but is about thinking in all our service systems, in all our employment areas, in health and education and justice and transport, that there is a real focus.

So, I’m hopeful that the ADS is the signal, the Australia’s Disability Strategy, is the signal of a recommitment to a society-wide, a sector-wide focus on inclusion. Hopefully, the appointment of Dylan Alcott as Australian of the Year gives us the symbol of that and we’ll look forward to the work he does this year as well as a symbol of saying, “it’s not just the NDIS. It’s all our sectors and all our service systems”.

**George:** Absolutely. I think it’s very exciting that we have an Australian of the Year who is going to be advocating strongly on disability issues.

**Martin:** Very much so and the employment issues that I was speaking about before I know is an area very close to Dylan’s heart.

**George:** Absolutely and we know that employment has so many benefits for people but we also know that not everyone can have a job, so it’s important to remember. Martin, any last messages for our audience in terms of what you are hoping for the year ahead?

**Martin:** Sure. So, George, really, it’s in essence the nature of what we’ve just been doing here for the last half-hour, having a great conversation, being open and honest and genuine about things even where we might not agree fully but having the conversation. So, I’m looking forward to having another conversation with you if you’ll have me back later in the year and having more conversations with participants, with their representatives as we try and make the scheme everything we want it to be.

**George:** Thanks, Martin. Looking forward to our next chat.

**Martin:** Okay, bye now.

**George:** Bye. That’s all we have time for on today’s episode of Reasonable and Necessary brought to you by the Summer Foundation. To be notified of future episodes, don’t forget to hit the subscribe button and the notification bell. Thanks for watching and until next time, stay well and reasonable.