

Data

'Guinea pigs': Govt readies to launch NDIS app



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The federal government is preparing to launch an NDIS app within months, amid concerns raised by former NDIS Technology Authority chief Marie Johnson that experimentations with new technologies through the scheme could lead to a "dangerous future".

National Disability Insurance Agency chief executive Martin Hoffman told a Senate Estimates hearing last week that Services Australia has been developing the My NDIS app since late 2019, with plans to launch it widely in the next quarter.

The app provides a version of what is currently available to NDIS participants through the web browser on smart phones, including viewing budgets, current plan timelines and to make and manage claims.



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Services Australia ran a pilot of the app from July last year with 422 participants, which was "very popular and well received", Mr Hoffman said.

"Currently access to information about participants' plans and the ability to make claims and so forth is only available through a full web browser. We think it will enhance the participant experience if it is also available through a mobile app," Mr Hoffman told the hearing.

"I think it's a great app but it's not exactly a radical thing these days to provide services and information via an app. It's something we should do."

Five private suppliers have worked on the NDIS app in recent months. This work was not put out through public tender, with the suppliers selected from a Digital Transformation Agency-maintained panel.

The most prominent contractor is Melbourne-based digital consultancy DB Results, which has received \$1.393 million, while Optus has been paid \$112,000 for penetration performance testing, while law firm Clayton Utz has also landed \$11,000.

Ms Johnson, who is the chief executive of the Canberra-based Centre for Digital Business said that NDIS participants are saying they feel like "guinea pigs" in the government's wider digital strategy, with a trial of blockchain technology also recently completed.

Ms Johnson said she is also troubled by the potential for these technologies to be combined, with Labor senators at the Estimates hearing questioning whether myGov will be linked with the new NDIS app.

In response, Mr Hoffman said the current version of the app does not do this, but it will likely be linked in the future.

This is the ultimate end goal of the government's digital strategy, Department of Social Services secretary Kathryn Campbell said.

"We're hoping for one app to be for all Commonwealth government services. One to rule the world. It would come up and tell you each of those, it'd make life a lot easier," Ms Campbell said at the hearing.

"It'd be able to tell people when they have appointments coming up and obligations. That is our long-term plan for government digital."

The NDIS app will also soon allow participants to track their cases, Mr Hoffman said.

"We are investing in our IT systems such that being able to case-track where your particular claim or particular inquiry or review matter might be up to through the process. I really want this to be a leading app in terms of accessibility for people with a disability," he said.

The app will be launched in the coming months pending final bug testing, accessibility enhancements and improved API data flows with Services Australia.

"A lot depends on those three factors. We don't want to be going out and be slow in terms of getting data – people have expectations about how apps should work," Mr Hoffman said.

In a recent submission to an inquiry into the NDIS Independent Assessments, Ms Johnson warned about a "dangerous future" as a result of the government's tech experimentations through the NDIS which could lead to significant human rights violations.

"The committee needs to be alerted to the linkages between future blockchain and facial recognition applications as a means to control and monitor NDIS participants, and the risks that algorithms pose for people with disability in accessing services," Ms Johnson said in the submission.

"The absence of an ethics and co-design framework exposes NDIS participants to potential human rights violations from these experimental whole-of-government digital activities."

The Digital Transformation Agency recently trialed the use of blockchain technology to make payments through the NDIS, in partnership with the Commonwealth Bank. This was done through another app, called Smart Money, which allowed for payments for specific uses by specific people through the NDIS.

Technology shouldn't be used at the expense of people with disabilities, Ms Johnson said.

"Australian civil society must not tolerate the actions of government that forcibly and arbitrarily subject people with disability to lifelong examination, study and monitoring. History is a reminder of where these actions can lead," she said.

"That this control of people with disability will be effected through technologies such as biometrics, algorithms and blockchain is anathema to a harmonious and inclusive civil society and the human rights of all people."

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Ali
6 days ago

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The NDIA's information online is woeful, hard to understand and impossible to figure out. The government would be better to look at how private companies have stepped into the gap and offer great websites that clearly interpret the NDIA's mumbo jumbo plans into plain english. The web browser is lacking and so it is hard to see how the app will be any better.

Scary. Millions of dollars paying big corporations (liberal mates ?) to make dodgy systems.

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