



SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

National Disability Services and the ACT Disability Sector

NDS is the national industry association for disability services, representing over 650 not-for-profit organisations. Collectively, our members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. NDS's members range in size from small support groups to large multi-service organisations, and are located in every State and Territory across Australia.

In the ACT, NDS plays a key role in supporting a wide range of organisations associated with disability services. During 2009, it was funded by the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) to undertake a project examining issues and options around the ongoing viability of the non-government disability services sector. Entitled "Strengthening the Sector", this project focussed on practical deliverables associated with key governance and corporate areas of business including, among other things, procurement and financial management.

Linked to this, and based on feedback from the sector regarding government funding processes, ACT Procurement Solutions was invited to provide an information session to NDS ACT members. This took place on 4 March 2010 and raised a number of issues which are deemed important to bring to the attention of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts in the interests of providing a better basis upon which the disability services sector can respond to the needs of people with disability and their families and carers in the ACT.

Timing of Tender Processes

To ensure quality submissions which have been fully and accurately costed against sound business models, it is important that organisations be in a position to commit sufficient time and resources to respond to requests for tender.

NDS ACT member organisations have raised concerns about the timing of tenders, including:

- An insufficient length of time being allowed between tender processes. For example, several requests for tender were issued recently with deadlines which were close together in time.

- The time of year at which requests for tender are issued impacts on planning and capability to respond effectively. It would be useful to have an indicative time frame for procurement activity to assist non-government organisations in planning their workload to allow them to respond. Similarly, it would be useful if requests for tender were not issued during periods of peak workload.

Linked to this, it is clear that not all providers are aware of the process by which tenders are advertised. There may be some benefit to publicising more widely the search and notification options available via the ACT Procurement Solutions website.

- NDS ACT would be happy to assist in this regard, including through the NDS website and/or by hosting further information sessions in this area of interest.

Responsiveness to Sector Queries

Open and transparent processes are key to continuous improvement. Where strong communication protocols exist, the ability of the government and non-government sector to respond to community needs is greatly enhanced. This includes:

- Communication to raise awareness of upcoming procurement processes;
- Communication to respond to queries and issues arising during procurement processes; and
- Feedback to unsuccessful applicants to allow them to better understand the areas where improvement is necessary and to raise awareness of the strategic directions of government in models for service delivery.

NDS ACT understands that delays in responding to questions about tender processes are the responsibility of the relevant ACT government department. We also understand that the closing date for submissions is usually extended if there is a delay in responding to questions.

Several organisations have advised that they have submitted questions to DHCS and not received a response for a period of up to two weeks. An extension in the deadline for submissions has not, in these cases, been offered. NDS ACT believes that a commitment by the ACT government to a) the timely response to queries and b) automatic extension in deadline is important.

Cost of Engaging in Tender Processes

Preparing lengthy and complex tender submissions places a burden on the resources of non-government organisation. Agencies invest significant time and effort to prepare quality responses to requests for tender and, while it is clearly recognised that not all organisations will be successful in any given tender process, there may be ways of streamlining the process to reduce the call on resources.

One option may be the introduction of an “Expression of Interest” step in the tender process. This would allow organisations to forward their interest in applying for the tender and outline their business and services delivery models in a briefer document which the government staff responsible for the tender process could review. Only those organisations from which government wished to receive a comprehensive tender application would then move to the standard tender submission process. This would minimise the resources utilised sector wide in preparing tender applications. Unfortunately, NDS ACT has been advised that this would not comply with current procurement legislation.

Another option may be the increased use of pre-qualified panels of providers for a broader range of services. This would allow government to establish panels for various types of service which would provide detailed information at the point of establishing the panels, with more detailed information in response to specific business needs provided as and when specific procurement needs arose. NDS ACT understands this is an issue being examined as part of the DHCS Outcomes Based Funding Model project.

Contact

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