

Capability and Culture of the NDIA

Opening Statement

NOSS Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to come before the Joint Standing Committee's inquiry into the Capability and Culture of the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) in order to contribute to the ongoing development and improvement of the scheme.

NOSS is a not-for-profit association established by in 1991 to provide day support and supported employment options for people with disability - at a time when the Willow Court institution was being closed. NOSS is an NDIS registered provider of supports and employment for approximately 150 people in Launceston and the greater Launceston area through to George Town.

What is working well

With such a growing and complex scheme, we want to acknowledge some things that are going reasonably well:

1. Making claims

We have found the staff to be helpful and fair when we have had difficulties.

2. PACE

We have not had difficulties with PACE. With only 4% of our clients having transitioned to PACE, the process has been smooth so far with Coordinators of Support now understanding that we need to be Participant Endorsed Provider.

Issues

3. Supported Employment continues to lack recognition of its value by Planners

Bluegum Grounds Maintenance is our social enterprise, employing 20 people with disability who provide valued broad acres grounds maintenance services to large industries. Being an Australian Disability Enterprise, we feel that this employment option is often overlooked by NDIS planners, who either:

- neglect to ask participants about their employment goals, or
- fail to recognise that supported employment is a valuable employment option – one where people can be proud to work and find the fulfillment and mateship that we all seek in our jobs.

This appears to be a values-based judgement but may reflect a Planner's lack of knowledge or experience.

For example: We have had potential Bluegum participants usually approach us with an NDIS Plan, but no employment goals of finding and keeping a job. This causes a delay in their commencing employment, sometimes leading them to lose interest.

4. Support for decision making

We welcome the NDIS supported for decision making policy and implementation plan published in April 2023, along with accompanying Easy English documents. We hope that these result in an improvement in outcomes for participants.

We have found that when a participant has had a phone interview with the NDIA, and without the required levels of support for that conversation, they do not get the results they need. Talking over the phone – a person may say yes, because that is what they think they should say, and the person on the other end of the phone is not able to gauge well whether the participant has understood the conversation or be satisfied with the outcome. Without appropriate support person there may not understand the person's true capabilities and/or goals.

5. Adequate funding in a timely manner

Plan reviews, especially those requested because a participant's support needs have changed, need to occur in a shorter time frame.

Delays place additional pressures on families.

Example: The nominee of one participant with high support needs thought that they would have to withdraw from our services to ensure the plan would pay for inadequately funded SIL support. (They required a wake shift and not to have any housemates, because the participant would be very active through the night). To receive the SIL funding the person required, the family needed to obtain additional reports about their adult child's disability. This was a traumatic and devaluing experience. At a time when they expected to be focussing on what the participant could experience and do in their life, they were further focussed on the deficits.

Had the Planner met the participant, rather than relying on written reports, they would have been better able to understand the challenges in the participant's and their family's life. The review would not have been required in the first place.

To quote a friend of the family; "I don't know if enough of the human element is put in. They are making a decision about someone's life without understanding the far-reaching consequences".

Example: Living with others has always been difficult for one adult participant, triggering behaviours that are, in turn, not tolerated by housemates. After achieving funding to live on their own with support, this person was finally beginning to appear to be content and enjoy life. Now their stable accommodation is at risk, because the NDIA wants to move the participant back to shared accommodation – an arrangement that has failed many times in the past.

6. Plan Management

Plan management is a mechanism intended to support and promote the independence of people with disability, however it has inadvertently made it more difficult for some to receive the supports they require in a timely manner.

Example: On many occasions we have not been informed that the participant's plan has run out of money, because the plan manager required the participant to inform us. This is placing too heavy a requirement on some people who may not have the capacity to keep track of their funding or to understand that a provider might not be able to continue servicing them without funds.

7. Plan Changes

Where a participant does not have a Coordinator of Supports, we have experienced NDIS Plans expiring or being reviewed without warning and an opportunity to provide input. In these situations, the client has not understood that they need to keep an eye on their Plan review date or that they can obtain input from their provider or support from an advocate during the review. This has resulted in a Plan running out or not including the necessary support adjustments.

Example: In the case of one participant, their parent, also an NDIS participant, died. The parent and the adult participant had the same Coordinator of Supports. The Plan ended and was not renewed or rolled over as would normally occur

Implications for the participant include anxiety and going without necessary supports. As a provider we continue to provide the quoted and agreed supports to ensure continuity of care while the problem is addressed. In one instance we expected the delay to be 2 weeks, but it stretched to nine weeks. NOSS is a not-for-profit organisation and such delays impact our cash flow.

8. Staff Capability

There appears to be a high turnover of NDIA and related staff – such as local area coordinator partners and coordinators of support. Staff also appear to have a high caseload, which may contribute to the turnover and loss of knowledge and experience.

Our staff report often working with people who are just learning their roles and therefore not as skilled or knowledgeable to approve supports for the participant that a more experienced person would. Some participants do not receive the supports that are reasonable and necessary for them under the NDIS. This is also awkward in an environment such as Bluegum Grounds Maintenance where people with very

similar support needs have different supports in their packages and are able to discuss them with each other.

Example: One supported employee requested additional supports via the LAC in November 2022. The participant was advised to phone the NDIA, which they did, with a NOSS support person in December. The NDIA undertook to get back to the LAC. In June 2023 the LAC approached the NDIA again and the participant is still in a state called a Planning Approval queue with an NDIS Delegate.

Recommendations

- Decisions should be made more locally – where NDIA staff can meet with the client face-to-face and they understand the services in the local area.
- Speed up the Plan preparation and review process and provide updates where there is a delay.
- Ensure Planners ask participants about their employment goals and encourage them to consider employment opportunities
- Train staff to have a deeper understanding of disability and the impact that the type of supports a person receives can have on their own quality of life as well as that of their family and broader support network.

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