

Letter to the Honourable Bill Shorten
Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme

RE: Utilisation of Social Workers within the NDIS

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This letter has been prepared by Amanda Hicks, Accredited AASW Allied Health Social Worker.

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Overview

“I have never seen a plan with Social Work included in Capacity Building. The NDIS cannot double up on services. LACs, Support Coordinators and Social Workers do the same thing.”

comment made by Senior NDIS Planner in a plan meeting 13th February 2024.

“Why would they need a Social Worker if they have Support Coordination?” Comment made by a planner. March 2024.

“I will just put in Support Coordination as it is cheaper than Social Worker.” Comment made by a planner. March 2024.

These comments and numerous others have fuelled the initiate of this submission in order to address the obvious gaps in the NDIS, of the important and necessary role of Social Workers within this space.

Whilst the NDIS has recognised the role of Social Workers with two item numbers that specifically relate to Social Work practice, there is a significant and concerning lack of foundation knowledge within the NDIS on the role we provide.

If we are to adhere to the principles of the NDIS then Social Workers must be acknowledged alongside other Allied Health colleagues as of **equal value**. This starts with the education of NDIS planners, LACs, support coordinators and plan managers. To do anything less continues to promote those living with a disability as being unworthy of the assistance Social Workers can provide to improving their daily wellbeing and addressing injustices within the system.

Purpose of Submission

My role within writing this report, as an accredited Social Worker and under the AASW Code of Ethics is in promoting a just and fair society through the pursuit of social justice and effective social policy. In accordance with the concept of disability is its representation in the larger and more complex interaction between an individual with impairment and the

structures and processes of society. In order to adhere to my ethics, this submission clearly explains and offers suggestions to the NDIS in how to remediate the obvious gaps in its processes regarding Social Workers within the NDIS. Our professional standards and ethical guidelines require that we present recommendations that promote fair and equitable therapeutic interventions that support an individual with a disability, and are in line with the CRPD and a human rights.

The Social Work Profession

Social Work is a **tertiary qualified profession** recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social Workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of Social Work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional Social Workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social Workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination (AASW, 2020).

In all contexts, Social Workers operate from a person-in-environment perspective which recognises that individuals can best be understood within the multifaceted context of their environment. With this perspective, Social Workers are well equipped to assess the internal psychological and emotional strengths and needs of a person in interaction with the social, community economic and physical aspects of their situation. Social Workers focus on individual, family, carer and community strengths and needs, taking a holistic approach that includes the individual and systemic factors.

Having conducted their holistic, strengths-based assessments, Social Workers work collaboratively to support people to achieve the lives they want. Along with the person-in-environment approach to assessment, case management and care co-ordination has always been a core skill of the Social Work profession. For Social Workers, care coordination is about developing a relationship with a person that seeks to foster collaborative decision-making in assuring that services are well targeted and person/family-centred. Social Workers understand that care coordination is most importantly about building a positive working relationship with a person in order to develop care plans that address their needs, strengths, and goals (AASW, 2015).

Australian Association of Social Workers 2015. "The Scope of Social Work Practice Care Coordination and case management." *Australian Association of Social Workers*. December. Accessed April 18, 2019.

Social Workers within the NDIS

The values of 'choice and control' that underpin the NDIS are consistent with the values and principles of self-determination and empowerment that have guided the Social Work profession for many decades. The AASW Code of Ethics aligns closely to the Objectives and Principles of the NDIS Act and the UN Declaration on the Rights of disabled Persons.

Because Social Workers focus on enhancing quality of life and empowering people to full social and economic inclusion, the values, qualifications, and skills that Social Workers bring are a perfect match with the person-centred approach of the NDIS.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of disabled Persons,
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/RightsOfDisabledPersons.aspx>

Social Workers are present throughout the NDIS in a variety of roles, working as individuals or in organisations. Many of our members have made, or are making, the transition to working within the NDIS. Many who have extensive experience in assessment, planning and case management with people living with multi-faceted disabilities are providing support coordination or specialist support coordination. Social Workers are also working in other roles within the NDIS including service development, psycho-social support, planning, local area co-ordinators, supervisors, and service co-ordinators.

Concerns of Social Workers within the NDIS

Whilst Social Workers exist within the NDIS space, there is a growing concern that their role is misunderstood and undervalued compared to other Allied Health roles.

We feel that there is a:

- Lack of knowledge on the role of Social Workers by LACs, Planners, Senior Planners, Support Coordinators and participants.
- Lack of knowledge on how to appropriately utilise Social Workers for participants.
- No minimal qualification standard for Support Coordinators.
- Social Workers are seen as 'support workers.' The narrative requires immediate change.

Impact on the Participant

Social Workers are adamantly aware of the significant gap in the knowledge base of NDIS workers around the role of Social Workers within the space. The impact upon participants can have long term implications when a Social Worker is not considered as a necessary support mechanism.

- Participants may be unfairly marginalised as Social Workers are not part of planning discussions.
- Social Workers form a central and necessary part of multidisciplinary teams.
- Social Workers 'speak the language' of allied health. Participants miss out on this interdisciplinary team in planning.
- Support Coordinators and LACs do not have compulsory minimal qualifications which can lead to misunderstanding, misrepresentation and exacerbation of disability and social injustices.

Whilst Social Workers support and understand the role of support coordinators in this space, there is no required minimum qualification or professional membership required. As Social Workers, we adhere to strict ethical guidelines in our Code of Ethics and Practice Standards

that direct our decisions and care. We have access to continuing professional development and are committed to the advancement of human rights and social justice.

Social Workers are masters of policy development, case management and human relationships. We interact at the micro, meso and macro levels, have an in depth understanding of disability rights and the CRPD. This is the **minimum standard that individuals with a disability deserve.**

Recommendations

1. Minimum qualification required for Support Coordinators and/or individuals offering facilitation of support for individuals. Facebook groups are not considered minimum qualifications or satisfactory for understanding complexities of individuals with a disability.
2. Mandatory training for all NDIS planners, senior planners and LACs on the role of Social Workers.
3. Participants have choice of whether to have support coordination or Social Worker funding added to their plans.

The Social Work profession plays an imperative role within the disability space and does not receive the recognition it deserves as other Allied Health roles. Social Workers bring such a varied and significant knowledge base to the NDIS space in the support of individuals with a disability. However, with clear gaps in knowledge base of LACs, planners, senior planners and participants themselves, Social Workers will continue to be the marginalised Allied Health profession that has the ability to change the disability narrative and its supports.

A reply to this letter would be appreciated as it is a stepping stone towards a conversation and ultimately change that is so desperately needed with NDIS space.

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