

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY; A POWERFUL ENABLER OF PARTICIPATION

Since the roll out of the NDIS, application, approval, funding and timely receipt of assistive technology particularly for participants with complex disability has remained contentious. Knowledge and expertise gaps of NDIS planners, prescribers/assessors and other delegates along with cumbersome and unresponsive administrative processes remain to be the pivotal reasons why the NDIS pathway of AT is still highly problematic to participants, families and service providers dealing with non-standard and complex equipment requests.

Adding these grassroot changes to the regulatory framework that governs AT is instrumental in improving AT outcomes for people with a disability, including positive social inclusion, independent living, employment prospects and simply empowering and equipping them to take control of their own lives.

BACKGROUND

With the growing tensions over the inequitable access and provision of assistive technology, the Joint Standing Committee on NDIS held an inquiry on this issue in 2018. The Committee proposed eight key recommendations to assist in improving access to AT. Broadly, these recommendations can be categorised in to three key areas; upskilling the agency staff, reform the application pathway to be more user friendly and addressing market-based issues impacting the accessibility, timeliness, diversity and availability of assistive technology.

Alliance20 also acknowledges the new initiatives undertaken by the agency since the beginning of 2019, including the New Standard Operating Procedure for AT (September 2019) and changes added to the Pathway Program (June 2019) which have proven to be highly influential in;

- Approving low cost, low risk AT without requiring further assessment, quotes or approvals.
- Reducing the need for multiple quotes for AT costing greater than \$1,500
- Providing a notional budget for standard AT items with the requirement of only one quote.
- Replacing AT, particularly like-for-like items to be approved without needing re-assessment and only requiring one quote.

While these changes are expected to support 60% of participants whose ATHM requests are under 5k and 93% of participants whose ATHM requests are under 15k, the 7% of the participants whose AT requirements are the most complex and non-standard due to the nature and complexity of their disability has still not received the due notice or action. In addition, the majority of the participants regardless of the level of AT still face extreme

underfunding for AT repairs and maintenance, especially if they use multiple pieces of AT to support their daily activities.

CURRENT ISSUES

- Inadequate funding for equipment and repairs especially for non-standard and complex Assistive Technology.
 1. The agency tends to allocate limited funding for participants who have high cost equipment recommendations, especially those items costing greater than \$15,000.
 2. Benchmark pricing is being applied to a variety of AT, but a one size fits all method is not always practical due to the highly individualised needs of participants, particularly those with complex conditions, requiring AT.

***Example:** Often AT requests for non-standard and complex devices are declined due to its cost being above the benchmark pricing though the high cost is clinically justified. Experts in the field have also confirmed that benchmark prices are lower than many standard and accepted prices of AT in the market.*
- NDIS planners are not well equipped with the knowledge and expertise necessary to comprehend and efficiently assist participants on their AT requests of varying complexity levels.
 1. Many incidents have been reported where the planners were not competent enough to understand the clinical recommendations of the plan. As a result, planners increasingly seek advice from the Technical Advisory Committee even when necessary devices are already included in the AT report by skilled AT consultants.
 2. Such issues not only incur unjustifiable waiting times and financial costs for participants and service providers, but it also delays the participants' access to the devices necessary for their daily living.
- Gaps in communication, transparency and clarity on the process of application, assessment, approval and reviewing AT requests.
 1. The process regarding the AT requests is not sufficiently transparent to understand who should be submitting the application (the service provider or the participant), to whom and through which means.
 2. Limited acknowledgement, update or provision of information by the NDIS for the families/service providers on the receipt, progress, review or rejection of a request for AT.
 3. Frequent changes to the methods recommended to communicate with the agency regarding AT requests, has resulted in breakdown in communications and consequently caused delays in delivering required AT to families.

***Example:** Originally the requests were sent to a generic NDIA email address and since the 16th of September 2019 the email boxes have been redirected to the National Contact Centre; a process that is very time consuming and prone to human errors and there is no clarity as to whether participants or providers should be using this Contact Centre.*

- Lack of providers of trialling equipment and loan pools in the market are causing severe grievances to clients and families whose AT requirements are non-standard and complex.
- Absence of a robust decision-making criterion to better prioritise AT requests based on the urgency and developmental/functional needs, and the probable impact of *not* receiving AT supports on time, especially for young children with disability and developmental delay and participants with complex conditions.
- Often AT requirements undergo constant modifications due to the changing physical needs of the participant. There is no provision in the scheme for a “light touch” revision to the plan that allows for these modifications without triggering a full plan review, throughout which period the participant would not access the necessary AT.

IMPACT STATEMENT

IMPACT FOR PARTICIPANTS

- Extreme delays on receiving the essential AT impact participants’ independence and community participation while also limiting their choice and control.
- Participants undergo unnecessary frustration, distress over potential health and safety concerns due to the absence of equipment necessary to assist their daily personal living.
- Less timely access to vital AT increase the probability of functional deteriorations of many participants, consequently augmenting the care responsibilities of parents/carers which are beyond ‘reasonable and necessary’ supports.
- Young children aged 0-6 face significant risks of developmental delays due to not receiving the right equipment at the most critical development stages of a child.

IMPACT FOR PROVIDERS

- Due to inadequate system processes and decision making by the agency on AT requests, the service providers spend increased amounts of time and bear heavy costs for administration and coordination efforts to resolve such issues on behalf of the participants.
- Due to a lack of a systemic timeframe by the NDIA for assessing and reviewing AT request, therapists must constantly issue new quotes to participants every three months due to the three-month quote expiry rule. This jeopardises the precious time of the therapists while causing extra wait times for participants as well.

IMPACT FOR THE MARKET

- Loan pools and assistive technology equipment providers who can provide devices to trial are limited in the market and this is imposing long wait lists for trialling items before a participant can request one.
- Though the demand for the complex AT is high, the supply is highly regionally scattered and limited in scope.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Consideration could be given to:

- Educating and training a special team of NDIS planners specially for level 3 and 4 AT requests, so that participants have access to a planner who is knowledgeable and competent around specific conditions and thus the level of complexity of the AT required.
- Upskilling the NDIS planners, prescribers/assessors and other delegates involved using above means will result in the grant of adequate funding for prescribed new/replacement assistive devices for participants without causing them unnecessary wait times, safety issues, stress or other related grievances.
- Enhanced utilisation of NDIA CRM portal to include a file note and the status of the lodged AT application under individual participant's file. This not only provide the families and the service providers more clarity on their request, but a recoded history of such data also can be utilised as a resource to the planners to provide the participants with more accurate and personalised AT outcomes.
- Devising a market initiative in consultation with key sector groups like Alliance20 to close the assistive technology loop including specialist assessors, equipment providers, loan pools and trialling equipment; and also to ensure the consistent provision of equipment across the state.

CASE STUDY

About the participant

This participant is a six year old boy who has Cerebral Palsy. He has been classified as GMFCS5 with a requirement for level 4 equipment to assist him with his daily activities.

Timeline

- In October 2018, Mr T lodged an AT application for a Hi Lo Bed (a bed with powered functions).
- In January 2019, Mr T lodged a request for a powered wheelchair.
- In April 2019, Mr T lodged an application for a Zing Stander.
- In April 2019, the ECEI team discussed to bring the plan review forward for Mr T to prompt the NDIS to review and approve the current AT applications already submitted.
- In June 2019, Mr T's plan was approved with funds for capacity building supports but not for the Assistive Technology.
- In August 2019 the NDIS planner agreed to look at the plan again and advised that the Zing Stander and powered wheelchair needed to go to the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) because it was beyond benchmark pricing.
- In August 2019, the family had to take out a personal loan to buy their own Hi Lo Bed as they couldn't get by without it and had no agreement for the funds from NDIS.
- In August 2019 the participants' mother wrote a lengthy letter to the planner detailing the physical, emotional and financial stress the family had been under due to poor management of her son's applications. She received no response.
- In September 2019 the ECEI team was informed that the planner handling the case had changed but that there had been no handover to the new planner. The family and ECEI team then had to brief in the new planner on the issues and outstanding applications.
- In early October 2019 the planner communicated that the applications to the TAC were lost and had never been received by the TAC. The family and ECEI planners were then required to provide new trial reports for both items to justify the need for them. The TAC then requested further information on the appropriateness of the stander given it was more expensive than benchmark pricing.
- In October 2019 the application for the funds for Hi-Lo bed were approved. They were also informed that the applications for the wheelchair and stander were approved, however the participants hasn't received these items yet.

Issues

- The family received no correspondence about any of their requests until they followed up in April, and then received little to no communication about any subsequent issues or requests.
- The family were out of pocket for the cost of purchasing the bed for many months.
- The child had to attend school in a stroller during that period, which has caused significant physical and mental distress.
- The family experienced significant financial and emotional stress during this time.

