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NDIS Pathways Review Released- Signs of Positive Change to Come

The Pathways Review was released without much fanfare earlier this week. But this important document offers hope that change is afoot, writes Sara Gingold.

If you blinked, you might have missed the NDIS Pathways Review published on Monday. This significant document represents an acknowledgement of problems that have occurred during the rollout of the Scheme and the NDIA's plans to address them. To sum it up in three words, it is the Agency telling the community "we hear you." This is a really refreshing change.

NDIS Pathways are the interactions participants, families, carers and providers have with the Scheme – largely, they're about planning. The Review was announced in April 2017 to address the resounding feedback that the Scheme was falling seriously short of expectations.

The findings of the review will not surprise anyone who has interacted with the NDIS. Participants reported concerns about:

- Phone meetings
- NDIS representatives having a limited understanding about specific disabilities
- Inaccessible communications (like letters sent to participants with vision impairments or the Portal only available in English)
- Inconsistent experiences
- Having to retell their story to multiple staff members
- Not receiving appropriate information.

Specifically, participants said they wanted greater support during the planning

stage, more information about other government services available, and transparency about how the Agency was using their information to develop their plans.

SO, WHAT'S CHANGING?

The Agency have taken the feedback from the Review to design a number of new “Participant Pathways”. These are the General & Supported Pathway that will be used by most participants, the pathway for people with complex needs, and the ECEI pathway. At this stage, only the General & Supported Pathway has been approved by the Board- see the image below.



The new General & Supported Participant Pathways will include:

- **Face-to-face engagement during the planning process, unless the participant elects otherwise (hallelujah!).** The goal is that plans should be created and approved during the planning meeting, so no more putting the information into a computer and seeing what it spits out later down the track.
- **Participants will now be given a consistent point of contact in the LAC.** They will be given the email address and phone number of this contact so that they can, you know, contact them.
- **A stronger focus on the broader systems of support for people with disabilities.** Informal and mainstream supports will now be discussed in more depth in the planning meeting.

- **Transparent communication during the planning process.** So that participants understand what is happening, what will be required of them and where their information is going.
- **Communication that is clear and available in accessible formats.** The Agency is planning to do away with jargon. Participants will receive a copy of their plan in their preferred format, and their LAC contact will be available to explain each support.

In turn, providers reported that they wanted:

- More consistent information on policies and guidelines
- A reduction in the administrative burden of using the portal
- Greater ease in claiming payments
- A more straightforward registration process
- Help to connect with participants and to be notified when important changes occur.

Unsurprisingly, providers also indicated that they did not want to spend long periods of time on hold to the 1800 number. Many issues with provider pathways related to aspects of the participant pathways, particularly the quality of plans, inability to make minor changes without triggering a lengthy review, and limited support for participants to understand their plan.

Consequently, the new provider pathway will include:

- **Clear and coherent policies and guidelines.** Rules are, hopefully, going to be clearly explained and reviewed at predictable cycles. The Agency also plans to do away with unnecessary barriers to entry. Yet how exactly they plan to execute this is not exactly “clear and coherent” yet.
- **An updated Portal that enables seamless transaction.** The Provider Portal will become more user-friendly. A taskforce has been set up to get through the backlog of payment issues (good luck to them!). There is also an email address specifically for payment issues (provider@payment.ndis.gov.au) and a new 1800 will be coming shortly.

- **Rapid resolution of online and phone enquiries.** This includes an increase in first-call resolution and call centre staff will now be able to see the Provider Portal. When necessary, providers will be given a consistent point of contact.
- **Improvements to the Provider Finder.** The new, updated Provider Finder will be designed for a wide range of users- including support coordinators and plan managers. Our initial impression is that it is certainly an improvement on what came before, though it still has a way to go.
- **Notifications on significant changes.** The Agency is now planning to alert providers in advance of changes that might affect them, giving them the essential time needed to prepare.

The Agency has also acknowledged that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Further work is underway to develop specific pathways for children under six, people with complex needs, people with psychosocial disabilities, people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people living in remote or very remote communities, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The new pathways will be trialed and tested in select regions over the coming months before being rolled out across the country. The Agency will continue to consult stakeholders during this time, so this will be an essential moment to provide them with feedback on what is and is not working.

This Review represents what the NDIS could be at its best: a Scheme that is responsive to the community and adequately addresses teething issues as they arise. It will be our job to hold the Agency to account, and ensure the promises made in this Review soon become a reality.

Read the full Review and find out more about the new pathways here:

www.ndis.gov.au/medias/documents/pathway-review-report/Report-NDIS-Pathway-Review.pdf

