30 May 2024

This is a summary of the Participant Reference Group's (PRG) recent meeting.

The PRG consists of 22 participant and carer representatives across Australia.

The PRG is a key platform to ensure the participant voice is heard and understood by the NDIA.

Feedback from meetings is used to inform strategy, policy development, system and service delivery development and review, to support continuous improvement.

Chairperson's welcome

Belinda Wilson, Assistant Director, Participant First chaired this meeting and welcomed members to the fifth PRG meeting for 2024.

Belinda introduced Pene Winslade and Fiona Cromarty from the NDIA Partners, Providers and Home and Living group, to talk about improving the Partners in the community program (Partners program).

Presentation. Making the Partner Program better.

The NDIS Review made a number of recommendations to help improve the NDIS. It will take time to create solutions for any recommendations that are accepted.

Pene Winslade spoke to the PRG about the need to improve the current Partners program while we work toward a better future.

The Partners program has two components, Local area coordinators and Early childhood partners.

In 2021, PRG members told us what they wanted partners to do, and this led to changes in partner contracts.

The object of this meeting was to help us find other ways to improve the partner program right now so people can still get the help they need today.

PRG members broke into groups and talked about what partners did well, and what improvements partners could make today and into the future.

They also spoke about the importance of face to face services and being able to have a choice of partners.

What can be done to make the Partners program better now?

We heard:

- There is a need for partners to have some specialisation in disability. It would be good to work with partner staff who understand different disabilities and the supports needed.
- Building a trusting relationship is very important. Participants want to work with someone who listens and understands them. They want to be able to keep working with the same person where possible.
- Working with partners with lived experience of disability builds trust and helps make a positive experience.
- It would be good if partners simply had more time to spend with each participant. Key performance indicators (KPIs) make it very difficult for partners to have enough time to listen well, show respect, and work with that person to properly support them.
- KPIs also make the job very stressful for staff and leads to burn out and high staff turnover.
- Partner communications need to be in the format the participant has requested.
- Communications need to be timely and up to date with the correct information.
- It is difficult for participants when they receive conflicting advice from Partners and the NDIS. Partners need to stay up to date with changes to the NDIS and provide consistent advice.
- Give participants constant updates. Send follow up emails to confirm what was discussed in meetings and provide details about their plans and budgets and why something might not be included in a plan review.
- It would be more efficient if participants received a draft of the NDIS plan so they can talk about any issues before it the plan approved. This would stop the need for a review when a plan has been approved and it is wrong or missing vital funding.
- Provide clear information about what partners can help with and what they are not responsible for.
- Public information sessions or webinars on the role of Partners would be very helpful. This was done very effectively during the rollout of the NDIS across Australia, but it does not happen so much anymore. There are still new people coming into the NDIS who need this information.
- In Cultural and linguistic diverse cultures (CALD) it is important to have partners who speak the same language and have knowledge about CALD specific organisations and services.
- Create a confidential phone service for partner staff to lodge a complaint if their organisation is doing the wrong thing or are asking their staff to do the wrong thing.

How important are face to face services and having a choice of partners?

We heard:

- Partners need to provide a choice for how participants work with them. Some people prefer face to face meetings at a place the participant is most comfortable. Other people prefer to meet virtually.
- A participants preference on where or how to meet may change frequently, so providers should be flexible.
- Having a partner visit the participant in their home can be very useful to help them see exactly how the participant functions in their home environment. This can give a better understanding of how important it is for a participant to receive the right supports.
- The NDIS Review highlighted how important it is for face to face meetings to build workforce capability and the empathy needed to create a culture of helping participants.
- Not everyone feels safe or comfortable having someone in their home. It is not always the same staff person which can be very stressful having a stranger in your house.
- The participants preference for how a service is delivered must always come first.
- It is very important for participants to have a choice of partners. If the relationship is not working for the participant, they need to have other options.
- Sometimes it is more important for a participant to be able to choose an individual person to help them find the right supports. For some, this might be more important than being able to choose a partner organisation or having the option to meet face to face.
- In areas where there are not many partner organisations available, it is still important to be able to have a choice of person to work with within that organisation.
- It can feel like you need to have a partner to help navigate so much about the NDIS and to help get the right supports. It is important to be able to choose who that partner or individual is.
- There can be a power imbalance between the partner and a participant which can impact the supports a participant receives. It is very important for participants to have the choice to change partners to avoid that power imbalance.
- Participants need to be able to choose a different partner if they are not receiving the service they need. This could be because staff have impossible targets or have too many participants to work with.
- It is very important that participants are able to choose a partner organisation that aligns with their own beliefs.

Final comments and close

Belinda spoke about the topics for the June PRG meeting and reminded everyone the PRG meeting for July will be held face to face in Sydney. Members will be contacted about flights and accommodation.

Belinda thanked Pene, Fiona, and the NDIA Partners, Providers and Home and Living team for attending today. She also thanked PRG members for their valuable feedback on improvements to the Partner Program.

Next meeting

Wednesday, 12 June 2024

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