

POLICY OPTIONS

MAKING COMPLEX INTERFACES WORK FOR THE NDIS

Support Coordination in the NDIS

October 2020. Borg S, Venning A, Foster M, Hummell E, Fisher K.

Policy context

Support Coordination is a critical aspect of the implementation and ongoing coordination of participants' NDIS plans. The Support Coordinator role is designed to support participants in understanding and implementing the funded plan supports and link participants to community, mainstream and other government services¹. Support Coordinator responsibilities include²:

- Connecting with providers and negotiating about services and associated costs
- Ensuring service agreements and service bookings are completed
- Building participants' ability to exercise choice and control
- Assistance in planning ahead to prepare for plan reviews
- A focus on supporting participants to build skills and direct life
- Optimising plans to ensure participants are getting the most out of their funded supports.

Participants can engage a Support Coordinator at various stages of their NDIS plan (as part of their initial package or following a plan review) and irrespective of their type of plan management. Depending on the type of plan and specific needs, participants can request either support connection, support coordination, or specialist support coordination to be included in their plans.¹ Recently, support coordination line items were added during the COVID-19 pricing update with items duplicated into the Core Support budget to increase access to support coordination services.² For quarter 4 of 2019-20, 44% of active national NDIS participants had support coordination (including across all three tiers) compared to 38% for previous quarters.²

For many participants, the NDIS funded plan will comprise a complex mix of supports which involve multiple providers and sector interfaces creating challenges for navigation and coordination. Consequently, understanding how support coordination is occurring, how Support Coordinators perform their roles and the challenges they confront will assist in ensuring that this role benefits NDIS participants. The research findings reported here, based on interviews with Support Coordinators, contribute to developing this knowledge base.

Key findings

Support Coordinator role

The complexity of the role was evident, with Support Coordinators agreeing that effective support coordination required a high level of professionalism and a broad understanding of both disability and non-disability organisations, systems, and processes.

- **Varied role:** The work of support coordination varied substantially, often experienced as highly administrative, and widely perceived as a person-centred case management role. While not

¹ NDIS, Support coordination: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/participants/using-your-plan/who-can-help-start-your-plan/support-coordination>

² NDIS Quarterly Report 2019-2020 Q4

acknowledged by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as a caseworker role, Support Coordinators highlighted the complexity of the role and the similarity it bore to case management.

- **Intermediary:** Support Coordinators acknowledged being a critical central link for communication between participants and providers, including across a breadth of services and interfacing with organisations to manage more complex matters such as legal issues, public guardianship, and public trustees.
- **Financial management:** Regular review of appropriate spending to meet participant goals and tracking unspent funding was common, with some coordinators acknowledging that they “are financial managers as well”.
- **Participant education:** Educating participants who were unfamiliar with the NDIS and helping them navigate the process was noted as a large part of the role, including managing expectations for what can be reasonably delivered through a package.
- **Capacity building:** Although capacity building is part of the role, several Support Coordinators spoke about the unsuitability of preparing some participants for self-management due to the complexity of plans; lack of informal support (e.g. family members); and/or complex disabilities.

Challenges associated with the Support Coordinator role and its effectiveness

Numerous challenges were identified in performing the role, including role clarity, transparency, the setting and maintenance of boundaries, heavy administrative loads, time constraints and managing participant expectations.

- **Role clarity:** The lack of clarity around the role and the absence of clear guidelines was described as challenging, with Support Coordinators overall perceiving they were performing (or over-performing) their role effectively despite this lack of clarity. Support Coordinators reported completing tasks beyond what is funded through the budget allowance, as well as frustrations around advocating for participants, including being unable to voice concerns in some instances (e.g., during a plan review).
- **Changes to the Scheme:** The role was made more challenging and complicated by frequent NDIS changes, which were time consuming and confusing to keep up to date on and could result in misunderstandings and miscommunication by participants about their plans.
- **Transparency:** Balancing confidentiality with transparency when arranging new service agreements was challenging. Lack of transparency from families created difficulties when they independently organised service agreements but were not willing or failed to communicate details of the service agreements. Insufficient transparency was also evident from providers, where multiple providers would make bookings for a single participant but fail to notify the Support Coordinator.
- **Managing conflicts of interest:** Ensuring appropriate boundaries are clearly identified and maintained was a challenge, and particularly emphasised when Support Coordinators were from an organisation also providing services to participants. Another tension raised by Support Coordinators was having to navigate presenting provider choices when certain options clearly offered less risk: “sometimes it’s not really suitable to give them the two options”.
- **Heavy administrative loads:** Support Coordinators emphasised the heavy administrative load of paperwork for participants and their plans, in managing and arranging service agreements (including regular signing of new service agreements relating to NDIS protocol changes); and facilitating and coordinating communication or meetings across multiple providers.
- **NDIA communication:** Poor communication lines to the NDIA were noted, as well as increasingly complicated bureaucracy, resulting in lengthy communication durations: “weeks later, you’ll get a response”.
- **Time constraints:** In suggesting providers, Support Coordinators regularly used known service providers with established reliability. In cases where new providers were required, coordinators acknowledged time constraints in investigating suitable options.
- **Participants’ expectations of the role:** It was reported that participants often had expectations beyond the Support Coordinators’ scope of work, with assumptions that they would fix any problem or crisis. This was accompanied by expectations that the Support Coordinator would be

responsive to calls and emails outside of business hours, where such high expectations could result in breakdowns of relationships.

- **Interface with other NDIS roles:** The high turnover of plan managers and perceived ineffectiveness of the Local Area Coordinator (LAC) role were also identified challenges. A common view was that LACs lack the full picture and engage in short assessments of the participant, raising concerns about compromised decisions and advice for participants.

Mechanisms to facilitate effective support coordination

Several mechanisms facilitating the Support Coordinator role were identified, including good relationships and transparency from participants and providers, and connection with communities of practice.

- **Relationships, trust and communication:** The development of relationships and trust with both participants and providers was a main driver of effective support coordination but time constraints and limited funding made developing these challenging. Support Coordinators recognised that stronger relationships with participants would make working with participants easier and facilitate good communication.
- **Open lines of communication:** Building open lines of communication was critical to delivering the support coordinator role and goes hand-in-hand with the development of good working relationships. Effective, open communication with providers was critical for addressing and resolving participant issues. Difficulties arose when participants or providers were not willing to communicate and for participants lacking the capacity to communicate their needs.
- **Self-directed information gathering to perform the role:** There was a consensus that informing themselves about the Support Coordinator role, providers and the system, and how to problem solve and seek information about suitable providers was a key facilitator of the role. This included a broad understanding of the different systems, beyond the NDIS.
- **Communities of practice:** Communities of practice were regularly used for seeking advice, problem-solving role-specific issues and obtaining information about NDIS rules and suitable providers.
- **Applying a specialised skill set and knowledge of disability:** There was a general view that specialised knowledge (e.g. social work training) provided substantive quality and effectiveness to the role that was otherwise compromised without such training and education.

Policy options

Several policy improvements are indicated by these early insights into support coordination in the NDIS, including the need for:

- **Agreed guidelines** concerning the scope and expectations of the Support Coordinator role.
- **Agreed minimum education and training** requirements for support coordinator positions across all tiers to ensure competency to deal with a complex interface role with multiple functions and significant quality and safety challenges.
- **Review** the appropriateness of the current 3-tiered support coordination model under the NDIS.
- **Increased funding** to enable Support Coordinators engagement with communities of practice and other networking forums to maintain skill development and information sharing.

Methods

Table 1 describes the ARC Discovery Project - Complex Interfaces study and levels of data. Of relevance here, in-depth interviews have been conducted with 18 front line workers, including 13 Support Coordinators. Interviews were conducted to explore perceptions and experience of front-line personnel in planning coordinated, funded supports relative to other providers and participants; the nature of interface relationships and networks, adaptive practices and incentive and disincentives for interface work. This document represents early impressions from interviews completed with the 13 Support Coordinators only, representing 5 Disability Provider and

Coordination and Support Services and 8 Community and Mainstream Services. Further interviews are planned.

Table 1. Complex Interfaces study design and methods overview

Level of analysis	Aim	Method	Participants
Organisational	To map the structure of organisational relationships in the NDIS market	Analysis of online hyperlink relationships (completed)	n=216 websites
	To explore how organisations are adapting to the NDIS and coordinating funded supports	Semi-structured interviews (completed)	n=28 managers
Frontline (support coordinators/personal support workers)	To explore how supports are being implemented and coordinated for participants	Semi-structured interviews (currently underway)	n=25 (18 recruited to date including 13 SCs)
Participants with a funded package	To understand the experiences of participants who have funded supports	Semi-structured interviews (currently underway)	n=20 (8 recruited to date)
		Online survey (progressive roll-out current)	n=150 (estimated)

Acknowledgements:

Making Complex Interfaces work for the NDIS is funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (ARCDP190102711) grant.

Correspondence for this work to: michele.foster@griffith.edu.au

The *Complex Interfaces* research team:

Chief Investigators: Professor Michele Foster¹, Professor Karen Fisher², Professor Catherine Needham³

Research team: Dr Eloise Hummell¹, Alyssa Venning¹, Samantha Borg¹.

Affiliations:

¹ The Hopkins Centre, Griffith University

² University of New South Wales

³ University of Birmingham



UNSW
SYDNEY

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM