

Mark Fitt
Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme
Department of the Senate

Via Email

2 July 2014

Dear Mark

I am writing in hopes of bringing to the attention of the Joint Standing Committee a number of issues concerning the staff recruitment processes of the NDIA which I - along with many other NDIS supporters and campaigners around Australia - believe raise serious questions warranting further investigation.

(As background, I have gathered this information both as a freelance journalist who has been writing about disability issues in general and the NDIS in particular since March 2009, when I first interviewed Bruce Bonyhady for a feature article published in *The Weekend Australian Magazine*; and, as the mother of a very severely disabled son [deceased July 2011, aged 21], a long-time supporter of and campaigner for the NDIS, including as co-founder with fellow journalist and mother Fiona Anderson of the online-based, grassroots NDIS lobby group, *Australians Mad as Hell*, in March 2010.)

Over the past 12 months or so, I have been reading and collecting social media comments and emails to me from other parent/carers and people with disabilities re their inability even to get an interview for NDIA positions for which they are entirely well-qualified, let alone gain employment, and also these commentators' observations on the relevant qualifications – or lack thereof – of those whom the NDIA has employed. As just a small sample, these comments include:

I'm very annoyed about the people who were recruited in the Geelong office. I'm a vision-impaired Social Worker who applied for a job with them and they told me I didn't get the job as a planner because I didn't have enough experience doing assessments, however they recruited people from DHS [Dept of Human Services Victoria] without a degree qualification because they were going to lose their jobs, and one guy who only had a Cert 3 qualification who used to be a plumber but couldn't do his job anymore. Fair? I don't think so!!

The way they're going about many of the staff appointments is very disappointing. They are certainly avoiding people they think might be controversial within the Agency – and this is a tendency they have shown from the beginning, I believe. Some SA parents report good experiences with planners but others are having a terrible time (as we saw with the Parliamentary NDIS Committee hearings). We also know there's a log jam on assessments, delays in payments/information transfer, and the NDIA has not yet employed planners/coordinators in SA they interviewed two months ago (so the delays seem to be their own fault!)

I applied for seven different jobs in the disability area but never even got an interview and was over-qualified for all of them. I finally figured they want commitment to the implementation "processes", not individual outcomes for PWD as such - so I was never going to "fit the culture". It was good to finally figure that out though (painful as it was to face up to) because it made it possible to stop hanging on to a world I thought I belonged to and look elsewhere - move on. In reality, when Jack [disabled son, deceased] was gone, the disability world passed me by with barely a ripple or acknowledgement for what I'd done for it, and there was no place for me there

when he was gone. Truth is, I never chose to be in the disability world, it chose me and when you look back, much of what is done to you by service providers is severely traumatising.

One of the problems in looking for work within the NDIA is that public servants who have taken redundancies over the last few years are also doing the same thing, and the reality is that they know the culture. There are thousands of them in the job market now, and they certainly seem to have the inside running when it comes to NDIA positions!

All the public servants just changed positions. Most of DACT staff moved across to the various NDIS groups as they're expecting DACT to be closed down as the NDIS gets up and running. And sadly the couple of lowly positions that were filled by people (women) with 'lived experience' were given to folk who were so out of their depth it was pitiful to watch them flounder, as they had no skills to do the jobs they were given. I think they were only given the jobs as reward for supporting DACT - and they were never going to rock the boat in any way.

I was alarmed to learn that many people previously employed by the ACT Public Service in Disability ACT have now got jobs in the NDIS as DACT is starting to gear down position.

My horror story is that last year DACT lost my respite care money and claimed for months not to be able to find it. I have had community organisations asking about it over the past year. They finally found it this May and told me to spend it myself under the supervision of a community organisation by June. So one lot of really incompetent people have simply moved sideways or, even more frightening, have been promoted to a higher rank in the APS. It goes on and on.

I was pretty pissed off to not even get an interview for a LAC position last year. Maybe we don't have enough "lived experience"....? [SA mother of a teenage son with Down Syndrome]

And finally, excerpts from a recent Facebook NDIS discussion thread -

- *I think there needs to be more planners with lived experience of disability. Do you know any so far?*
- *I don't know of any, I want to be an assessor and planner for Indigenous families but have no clue where to go.*
- *I don't know any or anyone that does either. Everyone I've spoken to says their planner didn't have a clue.*
- *Was told today there are opportunities for suitably qualified people with disabilities to apply through National Disability Insurance Agency. That's the plan anyway but it would be extremely good if people with a lived experience of disability applied.*
- *Problem is you're probably just going to move from one person who doesn't have a clue to another, unless you specifically know someone to ask for.*
- *One of the major problems with the NDIA, and hence the NDIS, is that the people responsible for selecting and appointing staff have no lived experience of disability themselves, and therefore have no idea how valuable this experience is when it comes to dealing with disability policy issues or directly with people with disabilities and families, so they are appointing other people with no lived experience, who then appoint others with no lived experience - and on and on and on it goes. This is a classic example of people not knowing what they don't know.*
- *The 'planner' I had at the Geelong office in February had no idea what she was doing, with a disastrous outcome for me! Would like to know her background - librarian perhaps?? I have a university degree, many years experience in community service work and MS and feel I*

would have been able to do a far better job, but I didn't realise there were job vacancies available.

- *I can't believe that in Geelong I have had a lot of discrimination in employment, even though I graduated at the top of my class in 2013 and won an Award from Deakin Uni. I have three other friends who are also social Workers and are blind, one of us even has a PHD and still NDIA are telling us we aren't experienced enough!*

I would like now to relate -as briefly as possible - my own, frankly quite bizarre, experiences in attempting to become involved in working (on a paid basis, that is) to promote the NDIS.

Following the death of my son in July 2011 and the termination of the Carers' Payment which had been my chief means of financial support, I indicated to a number of key people, including Bruce Bonyhady on several occasions, that I needed to find paid employment and could think of nothing I would rather do than be involved in some capacity in the roll-out and implementation of the NDIS.

I heard nothing further until two months ago, when I was contacted out of the blue by a Ms and invited to fly from Sydney to the Geelong national office immediately to attend an interview for what she told me were several still-vacant positions in the Agency's Communications & Engagement Branch. (I was not informed as to which one, nor sent any position descriptions or selection criteria documentation, nor had I previously seen any advertisements for these positions).

The interview panel was comprised of the agency's deputy Director, Helen Glanville, another NDIA staffer, _____, and Ms _____, who did not say where she was from, but whom I assumed to be some sort of external HR consultant.

Two weeks later, after Ms Glanville rang me at home late one evening to advise me that "on this occasion, your application has been unsuccessful", I decided rather belatedly to make some further inquiries as to the nature of the positions being filled in that Branch – 13 in total, as I discovered – as well as the skillsets specified and selection criteria, and also to check who Ms _____ was exactly and the reason/s for an external consultant's involvement on an APS interview panel.

After numerous emails and/or phone calls to Ms Glanville, NDIS HR staff and eventually David Bowen, I was eventually sent the 13 position descriptions, followed later – after further follow-up emails –by the formal Candidate Information Pack. As you may note from the attached (in email to follow), these 13 positions comprise:

- one SES Band 1 position (Branch Manager, Communications & Engagement Branch)
- three EL2 positions (Director Media & Online; Director Strategic Communications; Director Engagement)
- three EL1 positions (Media Manager Media & Online; Communications Manager Strategic Communications; Assistant Director Engagement)
- three APS6s (Media Officer Media & Online; Communications Officer Strategic Communications; Senior Engagement Officer)
- two APS5s (Strategic Communications Officer; Engagement Officer)
- one APS3 (Engagement Assistant)

Reading through these 13 position descriptions, I was genuinely shocked to note that the ONLY one to describe as "highly desirable – understanding of or lived experience in the field of disability" was the APS3 position!

The SES Band 1 position did also list, under Technical Experience, "Experience working with people with disability or lived experience of disability". (However, asked recently on an online NDIS discussion site what, if any, experience she had of disability, the successful candidate, Kym Charlton, responded that she had no

specific in the disability field, but did have “some friends with disabilities, which has given me a glimpse into the challenges faced...”)

The only other mention of desirable disability experience in the other 11 position descriptions was in two Engagement Officer positions (an APS6 and an APS5), where “relevant experience in the disability field *or a related customer service area*” [my emphasis] was listed.

In addition, the general Candidate Information Pack I eventually managed to wrest from the NDIA included the following statement: “We are committed to becoming a model employer for people with disability, who are specifically encouraged to apply”, and the third of six Selection Criteria was: “Understanding of the needs of people with disability or lived experience of disability.”

I have since asked Louise Glanville on several occasions now if she could please tell me the names of all successful candidates appointed, as she indicated to me in mid-May she would be able and was happy to do, but to date I have received no further response from her.

Meanwhile, re Ms [redacted] -- turns out she is not a HR consultant after all, but was Kevin Rudd’s Director of E-Communications from 2007-09, at which point she left to set up a “boutique communications company” called [redacted] which now has on it staff several ex-Labor Government staffers, including one who worked in John Curtin House for many years as an election campaign director.

Quite what such an obviously (and proudly self-declared) politically partisan person would be doing sitting in an Australian Public Service selection panel, playing what certainly seems to have been a key role in helping select NDIA Media & Communications officers, is entirely beyond me, particularly as the NDIA is – or most certainly should be, and absolutely perceived to be – entirely politically non-partisan.

However, although I have also raised this issue with Bruce Bonyhady, David Bowen and Louise Glanville on several occasions now, I have received no response or explanation whatsoever from anyone.

In conclusion, I therefore very much hope that the Joint Standing Committee monitoring the roll-out of the NDIS might be able to ask the NDIA and NDIS Board members some questions of its own about one or more of the issues flagged in this letter, and that Committee members will have far greater success in eliciting some substantive answers than I’ve had.

Yours Sincerely,

Sue O’Reilly