

Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Additional submission documentation prepared by Hear and Say, September 2021

Background

Hear and Say welcomed the opportunity to appear before the Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in Caloundra, Queensland on 28 June 2021. A written submission was also provided to the Committee following this occasion, summarising Hear and Say's ongoing concerns associated with the impact of the NDIS for our vulnerable cohort of clients. These matters primarily focused on Hear and Say's capacity to sustainably deliver the highly specialised services required to support children with hearing loss to grow up learning to listen, speak and reach their full learning potential under the current framework and execution of the Scheme.

As noted in Hear and Say's submission to the Committee, an increasing trend of self- or plan-managed NDIS plans has been seen within our client cohort, thereby reducing the burden of plan management on the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). However, families continue at times to misunderstand the implications of different plan management options. Some families also do not fully understand what is involved with these decisions or the longer-term impacts.

The following document addresses the Committee Chair's request for additional information regarding some such NDIS participants who hold self- or plan-managed plan status, but who Hear and Say believes did not fully understand what this entailed. In many cases, this has led to unnecessary stress and confusion from families working to access their NDIS funds, as well as Hear and Say being at risk of not receiving payment for services delivered. The final three case studies are illustrative of NDIS participants who have been provided funding plans which do not meet their current support needs.

Hear and Say case studies

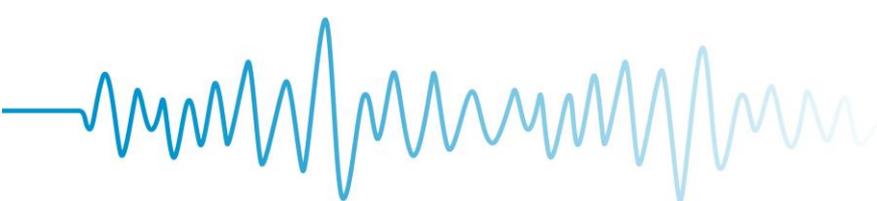
Case studies have been deidentified for privacy.

Hear and Say's interdisciplinary, evidence-based programs have a lifelong impact for families, and reduce the economic cost to the community required to support these children across their lifespan. Disappointingly however, this continues to remain largely unaddressed by the NDIS as highlighted by the below case studies. Many of these families' situations also highlight the significant influence of Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) partners' commentary, without recognising the specialist and holistic nature of whole-of-life programs offered by services such as Hear and Say.

Confusion over plan management types

Joshua, two years old

Joshua has moderate hearing loss in both ears and wears two hearing aids. He currently accesses fortnightly, highly specialised speech therapy at Hear and Say. Joshua received a new NDIS plan in late 2020, which was issued as self-managed. After Hear and Say commenced invoicing the family directly and these went unpaid, it was discovered that they were unaware their plan was self-managed, or the process involved in claiming from their plan. As the family did not wish to manage their own funding due to a range of factors, Hear and Say recommended they contact their ECEI provider and request to be plan-managed. Hear and Say supported the family to choose a plan management provider, with this commencing from early 2021. Invoices issued from Hear and Say before this time remain outstanding, as the family has been unable to process claims through the portal despite ongoing assistance from Hear and Say. As the invoices are now more than 90 days old, the family is required to request manual payment from the NDIA.



Hamish, four years old

Hamish wears two hearing aids to support his hearing loss identified in early childhood, after initially passing his newborn hearing screen. He currently accesses weekly speech therapy and Group Social Skills programs from Hear and Say. Hamish's previous plan was plan-managed, and his family were unaware there was a change with their new plan issued in mid-2021 until Hear and Say began issuing invoices directly to them. As they had been satisfied with being plan-managed in the past, they were unhappy with this change. The family has remained self-managed despite support offered by Hear and Say, and three invoices for services are still outstanding.

Milla, four years old

Milla is profoundly deaf in both ears and wears two cochlear implants. She currently accesses weekly speech therapy and regular audiology and occupational therapy support through Hear and Say. Milla's previous plan was agency-managed, however their new plan issued in late 2020 was self-managed. The family were unhappy with this change, and requested a plan review to change back to agency-managed. In the meantime, they were required to access their NDIS portal and pay invoices directly until they received their reviewed plan.

Lukas, eight years old

Lukas's moderate-to-severe hearing loss was identified at age two; he now wears hearing aids on both ears. Lukas receives weekly speech therapy to target specific language development goals, together with audiology support as required and Group Social Skills programs. Lukas's plan issued in 2019 was plan-managed, when he had previously been agency-managed. The family requested a plan review which took five months. During this time the family were unwilling to engage a plan manager and their NDIS funds could not be accessed. Ultimately, the family received a reviewed plan that was agency-managed, however invoices from Hear and Say in the period between plans could not be claimed and were eventually written off.

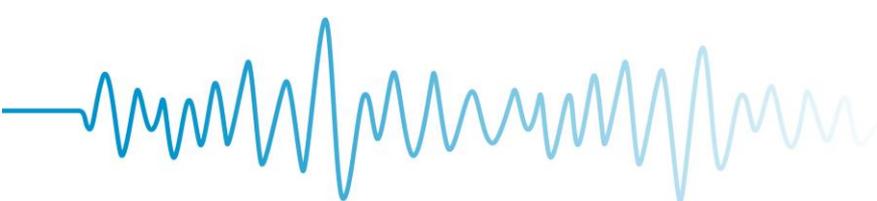
Underfunded plans

Annie, two years old

Annie was born with severe to profound hearing loss in both ears, and has a cochlear implant on her left side and hearing aid on her right. She currently accesses fortnightly speech therapy via telepractice and regular audiology services at Hear and Say. Following a plan review in mid-2021, Annie's family was advised that her plan (currently plan-managed) would be reducing by over 25 per cent from the previous year, which has left the family without adequate funding to cover all their support needs. In addition to her hearing loss, Annie has significant occupational therapy and physiotherapy requirements, to assist with issues associated with her vestibular system. Additionally, as Annie only received her cochlear implant at 14 months old, she is still in a critical phase in terms of speech and language development. Feedback provided by the ECEI partner as to rationale for the funding decrease included that the maximum funding for capacity-building supports has been reached for a standard ECEI plan. The family have applied for a plan review; an outcome is pending.

Georgia, five years old

Georgia was diagnosed with hearing loss in one ear at birth, and now wears a cochlear implant to provide optimal access to sound. Georgia currently accesses weekly speech therapy together with regular audiology services at Hear and Say to ensure her speech and language skills are continuing to develop at an age-appropriate level. Following a plan review in late 2020, Georgia's family was advised that her (self-managed) plan would be reducing by over 55 per cent from the previous year. Feedback provided by the ECEI partner as to why funding was decreasing included that too much funding had been allocated to non-face-to-face supports (which are required because such supports are an essential part of individual, specialised therapy, as recognised by the NDIA in the



NDIS Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits guide), and therefore a review was not going to be successful. The family have elected not to pursue a review based on this feedback.

Jasper, five years old and Liam, two years old

Siblings Jasper and Liam were born with significant hearing loss. Jasper has two cochlear implants; Liam currently has two hearing aids. Both children are accessing fortnightly speech therapy together with regular Group Social Skills programs at Hear and Say to ensure their speech, language and social communication skills are continuing to develop at an age-appropriate level. Following reviews in early 2021, the family was advised that their (self-managed) plans would be reducing by over 66 and 54 per cent respectively from the previous year, even though both had expended more than their current NDIS budget on Hear and Say's services in their last plan period. Both siblings received the same amount of funding, despite having individual plans reviewed. Feedback from the ECEI partner included that because both children were progressing well, the level of support recommended was not required. However, without maintaining the level of support it is likely that their progress would begin to decline. New plans were received after a review was requested, however funding is still less than their total Hear and Say program amount.

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