Guide to Reasonable and Necessary (R & N) decisions

Assistance animals

What are assistance animals?

Assistance animals, including dog guides, are animals specially trained to help you do things you can't do because of your disability. We only fund assistance animals that meet our definition of an eligible assistance animal and our NDIS funding criteria.

When an assistance animal meets our definition, we then consider if the assistance animal meets all of our NDIS funding criteria. This includes whether the assistance animal is an NDIS support for you.[1] We can only fund an assistance animal if it's effective and beneficial based on evidence and is value for money.[2] We'll also think about the welfare of the assistance animal and if the assistance animal will cause harm to you or someone else.[3]

For more information on assistance animals look at Our Guideline – Assistance animals including dog guides.

How are assistance animals different to other types of support?

An assistance animal is not a pet or a companion animal. Pets and companion animals are day-to-day living costs and are not an NDIS support.[4] There are sporting, social and recreational opportunities for people with disabilities that include animals which you may wish to participate in, for example, horse riding. If you need extra help to participate in the activity because of your disability, the extra help can be funded in your plan.

There are also times when a therapist may include an animal as a therapy tool as part of a therapy program. To find out more about animal-assisted therapy and animal therapy, go to Would we fund it – Therapy animals.

Case example 1

Zahid lives with cerebral palsy which has affected his balance and mobility. He also has a hearing impairment. He is anxious about going out into the community alone. This includes being in public areas where there are crowds and where he may need to manage uneven

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surfaces such as kerbs and steps when crossing the street. He's been working with several capacity building supports, such as a physiotherapist, to help him be more independent. Zahid also uses a cane to help him with his balance.

Zahid's allied health professionals think his ability to go out without support isn't likely to change much over time. He doesn't want to rely on support workers to be able to go out. Even though Zahid uses a cane to help with his balance, he doesn't feel confident moving through crowded places.

So, Zahid's occupational therapist and physiotherapist recommend that he thinks about an assistance animal to actively help him with specific tasks. For example, helping him to find level crossing areas and being a buffer between him and other people. Zahid's allied health professionals recommend an assistance animal to help him become more independent and go out in the community without fear. They provide evidence that Zahid has trialled an assistance animal and there is evidence this will reduce his need for other funded supports. Zahid asks us for funding for an assistance animal and its ongoing upkeep costs.

Would we fund this?

Yes, we could fund an assistance animal to help Zahid:

- be more independent
- need less of other NDIS supports
- become more involved with social and work activities.

Why would we fund it?

To decide if this is an NDIS support for Zahid, we think about the information he has given us against the NDIS funding criteria.

For us to fund an assistance animal it must meet all of the NDIS funding criteria. It must:[5]

- help Zahid to pursue his goals
- help Zahid to improve his social and work activities
- not generally be something that could be given by his family or friends
- be, or is likely to be effective and beneficial in helping him
- be good value. This means that the costs of the assistance animal, its training and ongoing upkeep are reasonable when comparing the benefits it will give Zahid versus the cost of alternative supports
- be directly related to Zahid's disability support needs.

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What else do we think about?

If we decide that an assistance animal is an NDIS support for you, we may provide funding to help you take care of your assistance animal. But we won't fund:

- training for you or others to learn how to train your assistance animal.
- support workers to care for, feed and exercise your assistance animal for you.

Case example 2

Eric is 5 years old and has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He has recently been showing behaviours of concern. To help manage these behaviours, Eric's allied health professional recommends an assistance dog. The allied health professional thinks the dog is likely to be a calming influence and will help Eric settle into school. The allied health professional also thinks taking care of the dog will teach Eric about responsibility.

Eric's parents ask us to fund an assistance dog. They include in their application:

- the allied health professional's recommendation for the dog
- a quote from a local dog trainer, who says an assistance dog should be available for Eric within the next 3 months
- an estimate of the yearly ongoing upkeep costs for the dog.

To work out if an assistance animal is an NDIS support for Eric, we look at the information Eric's parents give us, and whether it meets all the NDIS funding criteria. We also think about whether:

- the dog meets the definition of an assistance animal and is trained to actively do tasks that will help Eric with his disability support needs
- Eric needs an assistance animal because of his disability support needs
- the animal will be a risk to Eric or others
- other supports will help Eric manage his disability and become more independent, without needing ongoing support
- an assistance animal is the most appropriate support for Eric, or if there are other supports that would achieve the same or a better result
- the assistance animal will be, or is likely to be, effective and beneficial for Eric, taking into account current good practice
- the assistance animal will be value for money compared to other supports available, including other best practice behaviour supports.

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In Eric's case the planner decides:

- there are other best practice support options available that could help Eric manage his emotions
- there isn't enough information to show that an assistance animal is the most appropriate support for Eric
- it isn't clear what tasks the assistance animal would be trained to do for Eric that he can't do himself because of his disability
- what evidence-based results the dog will achieve for him
- it isn't clear how the dog will help Eric settle into school or manage his behaviours of concern
- Eric could be taught about responsibility in another way, as would any other child of his age. For example, being given simple chores around the house like setting the table for meals
- if the animal will help Eric to learn about responsibility, the animal is like a normal pet rather than a disability support
- while Eric may need supports to help manage his behaviours of concern, there isn't enough evidence to show that an assistance dog will be effective in doing this
- the cost of training and upkeep of the assistance animal plus the cost of other behavioural supports Eric needs while the animal is being trained, isn't value for money compared to the cost of other best practice supports. For example, the benefits he could get from using a positive behaviour support plan.

The planner decides the assistance animal doesn't meet NDIS funding criteria. The support isn't approved.

The planner recommends that a positive behaviour support plan be looked at for Eric. This may help Eric and his carers to understand his triggers and identify early warning signs. This could help to reduce his behaviours of concern. It's also likely to give consistent support in managing his behaviours, whether at school, at home or elsewhere.

For more information, refer to:

- Our Guideline – Assistance animals including dog guides
- Our Guideline – Reasonable and necessary supports
- Our Guideline – Social and recreation support
- Would we fund it – Pets and companion animals

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- Would we fund it – Therapy animals

Reference list

[1] NDIS Act s 34(1)(f).
[2] NDIS Act ss 34(1)(c)(d).
[3] NDIS (Supports for Participants) Rules rr5.1(a)-5.3(a).
[4] NDIS Act s 34(1)(f), NDIS (Getting the NDIS Back on Track No. 1) (NDIS Supports) Transitional Rules, Sch 2 item 7(a), NDIS (Supports for Participants) Rules 5(1)(d).
[5] NDIS Act s34(1).

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