

**Mana Whaikaha -
Flexible Funding as
Part of a Broader
Transformation to
Improve Outcomes
for Disabled People
and their Whānau:
Commissioning for
Pae Ora | Healthy
Futures case study**

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Purpose

This case study looks at how flexible funding options contribute to and promote the larger transformation of the disability support system, which aims to support disabled people and their whānau to exercise greater choice and control over their lives and supports. It also captures the challenges of trying new ways of working across a system that is in the early stages of transformation.

Method

Interviews were conducted with current and past Mana Whaikaha staff and Ministry of Health advisors. The focus was on the mechanics of moving to a flexible funding approach as a key first step towards wider system transformation.

For more details about Mana Whaikaha and the experiences of disabled people and their whānau, see the evaluation of Mana Whaikaha.¹

¹ Allen + Clarke. 2020. *Implementation Evaluation of Mana Whaikaha System Transformation*. Wellington: Allen + Clarke. URL: [Mana-Whaikaha-Implementation-Evaluation-Final-Version-3-March-2020-002.pdf](#) (accessed 8 December 2022).

Enabling choice and control for disabled people: Mana Whaikaha

Mana Whaikaha is a Ministry of Health funded prototype of a transformed disability support system in the MidCentral District Health Board region (now part of Te Whatu Ora). The service concept was co-designed with disabled people using the Enabling Good Lives philosophy ('Through Enabling Good Lives, disabled people and their whānau can choose to increase the choice and control they have in their lives and supports'²).

The initial Mana Whaikaha prototype in late 2018 employed about 40 staff. At this time, it was envisaged that the new system would include:

- access to independent facilitation to assist people to be aspirational and feel connected to their community
- a strengths-based process for people to identify their needs and goals
- a personal budget for disability support with funding from multiple government agencies
- flexibility and choice about how to use the personal budget and a range of options to assist its management
- capacity-building opportunities for disabled people and their families, as well as the sector and providers
- referrals to other agencies for additional services including learning and income support, with the new system streamlining the process for disabled people.³

² Enabling Good Lives. URL: www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/ (accessed 10 December 2022).

³ Ibid.

Vision

Mana Whaikaha is underpinned by the Enabling Good Lives (EGL) vision and principles, which were developed by a working group from the disability community.

The EGL vision is of a future where:

... disabled children and disabled people and their families will have greater choice, control and responsibility over their lives and supports and make more use of existing and universally available supports.

In essence, Mana Whaikaha is enabling disabled people to have more opportunities to participate in and contribute to the places, communities and people they live among. To start, disabled people are linked up with a Connector, who supports them as they explore their strengths, assets and aspirations, and steps to go about achieving these. People can then consider and choose which supports could build on their strengths and overcome the specific challenges they face as result of their disability.

Most support for people comes through existing networks and local resources, which can connect them to their community. However, funded supports are often required. One of the fundamental differences in Mana Whaikaha is shifting who holds the power over funding used to access supports. The flexible funding model is predicated on trust, with the power to decide what works best residing with the disabled person.

Supported decision-making is a key component of this process and an ongoing priority for Mana Whaikaha. This means that people are able to make their own informed decisions. Like most decisions, they may also be made in combination with whānau and with the support of relevant information.

Some important concepts

Mana Whaikaha seeks to be in the 'right relationship' with disabled people, respecting their uniqueness and authority to make decisions about their own life.

Mana Whaikaha honours the dignity of risk, which means allowing and supporting disabled people to take, and bear the consequences of, the same risks as other people.

Shift from 'needs assessment' to a strengths-based approach

Normally a disabled person would have their 'needs assessed' by a Needs Assessment Service Coordination agency and wait to get funding based on what they are eligible for (which is a limited range of supports, such as for personal care, household management, residential care, respite care, and equipment and modifications).

In this model, needs assessments are a deficit experience because they quantify deficiencies rather than support strengths, abilities and aspirations. The 'choice and control' the disabled person can exercise is also very limited.

To enable choice and control, Connectors of Mana Whaikaha work with people to develop a plan for meeting their needs and goals. It's about disabled people deciding what is important to them and accessing the support that is best suited to them, with agencies and organisations supporting this as needed.

As shown in Table 1, the key roles also change to support this shift.

Table 1: Key roles in the shift from 'needs assessment' to a strengths-based approach

Needs assessment	Enabling choice and control
Role: Needs Assessors Purpose: We assess you and tell you what's wrong and what services and support you are eligible for.	Role: Connectors Purpose: We recognise your aspirations and then support you to get there, whether it's a funded service or something else.

Are personal budgets the same for everyone?

A disabled person (or when appropriate, the whānau on behalf of their child) who is entitled to a personal budget first identifies and defines their needs and goals. This is then reflected in the level of funding they can access and use to overcome barriers they face as a result of their disability.⁴

Mana Whaikaha moderates funding requests so that the available funds are allocated fairly between disabled people. This also ensures people receive the funding they require regardless of their experience and confidence in navigating the system.

How can personal budgets be used?

A personal budget may include funding to support a disabled person to build the life they are seeking now or enable them to invest in building a better life in the future.

Disabled people and their whānau can manage and buy support with their personal budget in several different ways. They can:

- manage the funding and buy support themselves
- get support and coaching to manage their funding
- buy support from a government-contracted provider
- use a mix of these approaches.

How are the risks of personal budgets managed?

A central role of Connectors is supporting disabled people to develop safeguarding arrangements for managing any risks they may encounter. This includes supporting them to manage the risks associated with personal budgets – especially as many people have had limited opportunities to exercise this freedom of choice previously.

The educative and preventative role of Connectors and other people working in the system may be complemented by more intensive support for people when required.⁵

⁴ For funding purposes, **disability** is defined as any self-perceived limitation in activity resulting from a long-term condition or health problem lasting or expected to last six months or more and not completely eliminated by an assistive device.

⁵ At times, there has been some overspend as people and whānau are learning, but this has been rare and corrects itself over time.

Not everyone gets a personal budget, but they do get connected to the right support

If a person isn't eligible for a personal budget, they will be connected to someone else who can help them. In addition, some people who are eligible for a personal budget may instead choose to use their own resources to access support that is generally available through the community.

Examples of flexible funding to support choice and control

Supporting self-management and independence

The traditional system for 'personal care' was typically understood to entail a personal carer coming to a person's home and supporting them with a range of tasks for an allocated period of time. Many disabled people have used flexible funding to redefine this. Some may choose to go to the local barber for a beard shave, rather than rely on a paid carer to come in. Others have become less reliant on paid carers for daily tasks, for example, through adopting technology for and making modifications to their homes that enable independent management.

Providing choice to support outcomes that matter to disabled people and their whānau means funding will be used in new ways. This also broadens the conversation beyond purchasing services and enables self-directed ways to support whānau wellbeing and sustainability.

Redefining taking a break

The ability for both disabled people and their whānau to have a break is important for many. Under the old system, whānau needed to find paid caregivers or 'approved' care facilities to access 'respite care'. Under Mana Whaikaha, flexible funding allows people and their whānau to decide what works best in their own lives and access supports that are effective for them. The focus shifts from whānau being released from caregiving to the idea that everyone needs a break from everyday life, including the disabled person, so the funding can support this.

One example of this simply involved buying a coffee. In this case, a mother needed a break and wanted her disabled son to be around the noise of other children at the playground facilities while she rested and had a coffee. Rather than accessing traditional 'services', which may have been expensive and harder to access, she chose her own solution to her family's needs at that time.

Alternative and self-defined options for having a break can be very low cost. They may require a change in the way funding is allocated.

'Holding the course' while a new approach is used

It is possible that some funding decisions may come under scrutiny, as not everyone will understand the everyday barriers some people face or the range of personal and often innovative ways to overcome them. This can be managed by understanding how these decisions lead to improved outcomes for disabled people and whānau and can avoid costs for services and support that do not work for people.

Warm running water can calm and soothe some people with particular disabilities, by helping them to self-regulate and manage their emotions. For some, the ability to have funding to access a spa pool can also change the whole family dynamic. There are positive health- and wellbeing-enhancing moments created by time spent in the water that might otherwise not be feasible. In the past, the same or likely more funding would have been spent on a service for the disabled child and traditional 'respite care' for whānau.

Approval for funding is based on the disabled person wanting an item, service or support to overcome barriers to living their life resulting from their disability, and what is purchased needs to be consistent with the Purchasing Guidelines. While the Purchasing Guidelines ensure the purchase is made to overcome challenges resulting from their disabilities, the form this takes is decided by the person and their whānau.

Measuring outcomes that matter

Meaningful outcomes for disabled people can be hard to measure; how do you capture or put a value on people feeling like they have choice and are part of a community? Across the disability community there will also be great variety of views of what a 'good life' is. For some, this might look like a sense of belonging, pursuing one's purpose and talents, or achieving greater independence, which can be difficult to measure.

As well as building ways of capturing outcomes that matter to disabled people and their whānau, work is underway to capture system-level benefits of this new way of working.

One type of system benefit is reducing any 'wastage' by providing or enabling supports that lead to outcomes that matter to disabled people, in contrast to continuing to provide 'what's always been done in the past' even if it didn't work well for all.

Over time, it is expected that the costs of providing disability support services will decrease (per head of population), as disabled people and their whānau are enabled to get the support that works for them, and can more meaningfully participate in community supports that are part of belonging.

Improving response to whānau

Mana Whaikaha's focus on enabling choice and control reflects:

- good practice in commissioning
- Whānau Ora's vision for improving outcomes for Māori through:
 - supporting whānau aspirations
 - having flexible and holistic services and support.

To improve its response to whānau, Mana Whaikaha now works with Te Tihi (a Whānau Ora Alliance) to help make stronger connections to whānau-centred services, which are culturally anchored in te ao Māori and kaupapa Māori.

Challenges when operating in a partially transformed system

System transformation starts with changing system purpose. It then takes time to make the changes needed to live out this purpose, including:

- changing mindsets to understand that disabled people are best able to say what they need
- creating policy, funding models, contracts and performance monitoring that work together to support better outcomes for disabled people and their whānau.

For system change to occur, everyone in the system needs to change too.

Disabled people and their whānau

An advisor at Mana Whaikaha described the change for disabled people and whānau as a shift 'from "care and control" into a social model where people can live the life they want'.

After years of little or no choice, people with disabilities and their whānau need to first trust in a new way of working and be supported as they acquire new mindsets and skills. Connectors can help support this process.

The same advisor noted, 'We're saying, "the funding will come to the individual", but they are not used to the funding coming in bulk. It's a huge mind shift.'

A Specialist Connector for Mana Whaikaha emphasised that relationships are the key to success: 'The work is relationship-based on so many levels.'

Relationships are built from the moment a person calls and asks for help.

We never say, 'sorry not us' because that causes great wounding for families when they go through system after system that neglects to help with their basic needs.

Key components of Mana Whaikaha

Flexible funding as one tool to enable self-determination

Funding flexibility is only one of the first 'on-the-ground' changes seen as part of the larger, longer-term disability system transformation that is underway. In some ways it is a catalyst for and important first step in enabling greater choice and control for disabled people; a key aim of Enabling Good Lives and Mana Whaikaha.

The significance of the shift to flexible funding and the associated longer-term learning opportunity was not lost on the people who contributed to this case study. The practice manager at Mana Whaikaha told us that:

I feel it's our responsibility to the whole of the country, in what is really the most significant opportunity for disabled people and their families in a generation. I feel we've got this sense of responsibility to this population to be able to generate as much learning as we can that then can be reflected across the country. Because I know there are people all around New Zealand, and the world, watching us thinking, 'When do we get this flexibility?'

Working with other providers

Mana Whaikaha's philosophy is about flexibility and being fully person-/whānau-directed and driven. But other agencies may find it challenging to work in this flexible way. Some have workforces and operating models that can support a paternalistic way of working with disabled people ('We know what's best for you, and it's us').

A Mana Whaikaha manager highlighted the struggle by saying, 'The barriers for us start when we walk out the door to do this in practice.'

To help navigate this, there are now two full-time positions within Mana Whaikaha to deal with cross-sector engagement and ensure a broader range of supports and solutions is available for people around their community and across agencies.

Leadership and commitment at all levels

Full commitment to new ways of working from senior leadership in local providers to support workers on the ground is crucial to success. This can take time, and the experience of Mana Whaikaha suggests different organisations are at different stages of their journey. Senior leadership support is critical for these changes, and those on the ground must also be enabled to shift to a new way of thinking and of enabling disabled people to exercise choice and control.

Funding approaches

In the disability sector, the current contracting and funding approach can create a perverse incentive for providers to retain clients over a long period of time, as this helps ensure consistent funding. A focus on funding that rewards meaningful outcomes and longer-term funding models could help change this dynamic and ensure a focus on the people they support.

There can also be internal tensions between nationally driven funding approaches and local delivery. For example, the national model of the Needs Assessment and Service Coordination agency may not be structured to achieve the self-direction and autonomy needed for flexible funding arrangements.

The traditional system of needs assessment and funding eligibility can result in a more rigid imposition of rules and eligibility criteria that do not fully prioritise and enable people's will and preference. In contrast, flexible funding and personal budgets help providers to moderate the overall funding received and guide its use, with people still able to determine how best to meet their individual needs and challenges.

System change

For funding flexibility to work well, wider system changes need to occur on many levels.

- **Mindsets:** People at every level in the system need to recognise that disabled people (supported by their whānau) are best able to identify what they need and commit to enabling that change.
- **Leadership:** Leadership is needed to ensure the intent of the system transformation is upheld at all levels: national, regional, local and provider levels.
- **Workforce development:** The workforce coming in will need to be supported to challenge and shift their thinking. If workers are learning and practising more paternalistic styles of caregiving in their formal training, it will be harder for them to adopt this flexible, person-/whānau-directed model when they enter the workforce.
- **Contracts management:** Government agencies need to ensure contracts within individual agencies and across the health and social sectors use contractual arrangements that support shared outcomes. Providers need clear and unambiguous

outcome-focused requirements in government contracts. For example, contracts with output-based incentives can distract from the overall outcomes sought for people.

- **Geographic boundaries:** Where a person lives can dictate what services and funding are available to them. Not all government agencies share the same boundaries. For example, if someone 'lives on the wrong side of the bridge', they might not be eligible for something they need. This can result in inequities and make it hard for providers and whānau to keep track of the various rules created by these different boundaries.