

April 2020



FIRES: No New Year, no summer, no Easter, what next . . .

Somehow it feels like I've lost the best part of 2020, although I encountered early signs of what we could be facing on my return drive from a short family Christmas break I had in Adelaide. Travelling between Bairnsdale and the Victorian/NSW border (December 30) I passed convoys of firefighting trucks heading towards the Omeo Mt Hotham region. Huge plumes of smoke were billowing over the mountains and even then, the magnitude of that fire was frightening.

What we experienced after my return to Merimbula (January/February) we all know just too well. The catastrophic fires with the for ever lingering smoke was nothing I've seen or lived through before, but in the end, most of us in Eden, Merimbula, Tura Beach and Bega came out of it unscathed. Unfortunately, some of our support workers were not so lucky, losing everything. But in true Aussie spirit, the community rallied to assist them and hundreds more, to at least make life in recovery a little more bearable.

During the ordeal our office with limited service provision and limited personnel still managed to keep the door open. This emergency situation tested everyone to the limit, including our care staff and thankfully, they all performed in magnificent fashion; a special thank you to all of them.

PANDEMIC: As if we haven't had enough problems . . .

With circumstances changing every day, I wanted to let all of you know how 'Connections Plus Australia' is responding and adapting to the COVID-19 situation.

The safety and wellbeing of the people we support and our office and care teams is our priority. This means remaining informed, level-headed and as prepared as possible. We're altogether travelling in uncharted territory constantly guessing what may happen if . . .

We're continually assessing, planning and implementing additional practices to keep our care team and our participants safe.

It's important that we all continue to observe the advice provided by leading experts and authorities. To stay up-to-date try and visit the 'Australian Government Department of Health website' for the most current resources.

If you have questions we may be able to answer, please give us a call on our normal office number 6495 3797 or 0427 953 794 for Rainer, 0427 953 795 for Sharyn.

On a personal note, I would like to encourage you to keep a couple of things in mind as we navigate this uncertain time. First and foremost is to look out for those more vulnerable members of the community and secondly treat **everyone** with kindness.

Stay well and safe, cheers, Rainer

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A special thank you to our Support Workers

Special thanks go to our Support Workers who, even when faced with fire and losing everything themselves, selflessly put their hands up to support those in need in our community.

We are seeing the same dedication now faced with pandemic.

Through these difficult times we have seen our community shine brightly in the way that we support each other. We are extremely proud of our Connections Plus community who are going above and beyond.

**WATCH THIS SPACE
BUILDING WORKS TO
START SOON**



Time to think out of the square.

Our regular programs are suspended, but we are looking at other ways to support your social participation. Give Sharyn a call on 0427 953 795 to discuss ideas on how to stay connected and how we may be able to help.



The NDIS has set up a frequently asked questions page on using your budget:

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/coronavirus/participants-coronavirus-covid-19/using-your-budget>

Here is an example of some of the questions they cover:

I need additional support that is not included in my plan. How will this be covered?

Our priority is to ensure the disability supports and services you are receiving meet your immediate needs. We can make changes to your funding through a change of circumstances plan review, so your plan meets your needs during this time.

I'm worried that supplies I need—including essential items—will run out.

We encourage providers to give you essential support and ensure you have adequate supplies. This means your provider may need to do some different tasks for you, like visiting the pharmacy to ensure you have adequate supplies of medication, or doing some grocery shopping for you.

Can we have support from support workers to do things via skype—like learn new skills or practice something? We are not having workers come to the house but want to stay connected.

Talk to your support workers about how they can support you remotely.

Some providers are using telepractice or telehealth so that they can continue to support participants and families to deliver supports like speech therapy and occupational therapy.

You should develop a clear plan for what support you want delivered remotely, and know how it will help meet your immediate needs, or help you achieve the goals in your NDIS plan.

Same Wave Pambula – Fun in the Sun

Fun and games were enjoyed by some of our participants when they joined in Pambula's Same Wave program. A range of beach activities and surfing the shallows brought huge smiles and much joy to the many faces of participants and volunteers alike as they enjoyed fun, exercise and friendships.

The Pambula Surf Club's 'Same Wave' program is a beach program designed for people with additional needs which may include physical or intellectual disabilities, and is open to participants of all ages and abilities.

The program runs each Saturday morning between 9:30 and 10:30am throughout the first term of school, unfortunately cut short this year due to COVID-19. If you want join in 2021, please contact Michelle or Peter Bootes. Anybody who is reasonably fit and healthy is able to volunteer.



Special thanks to Peter and Michelle Bootes and all the volunteers that make the Same Wave program possible. Our participants not only had fun, but also learnt some valuable life skills. We look forward to next season.



Keen to be a part of the Same Wave fun in 2021?

Contact Michelle or Peter Bootes on 0416 292 367 or send them an email to m.p.bootes@gmail.com

Your feedback is important

Thank you to those who completed our last customer survey. Your feedback is important for us to know what we are doing well and what we need to work on to improve our services.

We planned to circulate a survey recently, but unfortunately, with all that's been going on in the region, we haven't got to it yet. We will be sending one out soon.

Please remember, if you have feedback for us, you don't need to wait for our surveys. You can email your feedback to connections@connectionsplus.com.au or, if you prefer to remain anonymous, you can send a letter to PO Box 199 Merimbula NSW 2548.



Changes at the office

We are doing our best to slow the spread of COVID-19

Our team is still here to help, but some of us are working from home. This may mean some changes to contacting us. If the office number doesn't answer, try our on-call numbers:

0427 953 795

or

0427 953 794

If you are isolating yourself but would like to see us face to face, talk to us about setting up a Zoom meeting via your computer or smart phone.



Programs suspended

Unfortunately, with the current restrictions due to the Coronavirus, all of our programs have been temporarily suspended.

We will be in contact with our usual participants as soon as we have plans to get them up and running again.

Dane is supporting his community reduce the spread of COVID-19

From being out in his community sharing his smile and good will every day, to staying home with his mum and only venturing out each afternoon for a run on his secluded local beach. You may say this is the case for most in Australia at the moment, but this is especially difficult for someone living with Autism who relies on routine and structure to get through each day.

Dane is not doing it easy. The black dog has a heavy presence. For Dane, this sacrifice is worth it to keep his community and his mother safe. He, like everyone else, is waiting for COVID-19 to finish.

Dane is just one of so many of our Connections Plus Community doing their part to keep our community safe **and it's working**, with no new cases in the Bega Valley for days now.

We are all well versed in what we should be doing to reduce spread of COVID-19

- Stay at home. Don't go out unless it's essential.
- Stay 1.5 metres from other people
- Wash your hands

And we are doing this well.



When it was safe to fly, Dane realised his dream of flying over the Antarctica. He looks forward to when it's safe to travel again.



We also need to be focused on what we can do. Social distancing does not have to mean social isolation. In our world of technology, there are many ways to reach out to others and it's important that we reach out to those we know could be struggling. Give your friends and family a call, send a text, a nice message through social media, contact them through zoom, skype or face time. You could also arrange to watch a TV program at the same time and share notes, or, just knowing your friend is watching too could be comfort enough. Stay connected.

Is your NDIS Plan due for a review soon? Here's some important information from the NDIA:

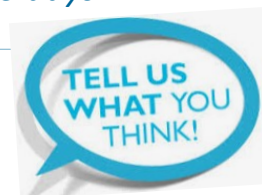
The NDIA is making some changes to the plan review process in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

If a participant has a scheduled plan review, the NDIA will contact them by phone or email to undertake their review. As part of this plan review process, a participant can discuss having a new plan in place for up to 24 months.

In addition, the NDIA will be making changes to NDIS systems over the weekend to make sure participants have the funding they need during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

To ensure participant plans don't end, on the day a plan is due to expire, it will be automatically be extended by 365 days. <https://www.ndis.gov.au/coronavirus/latest-advice-ndis>

Participants who have plans that expire soon, do not need to do anything to have their plans automatically extended by 365 days.



Feedback and complaints procedure

Delivering quality services which meets the needs of individuals is important to us. If our service is not meeting your need, or you are not satisfied with any aspect of our services delivery, please let us know so we can take measures to resolve any concerns. Its also nice to hear when we've exceeded your expectations too, so please don't hold back in letting us know.

To provide feedback, or lodge a complaint, you can talk to the Service Manager or another preferred representative on 02 6495 3797, via email to connections@connectionsplus.com.au or in a letter addressed to Connections Plus Australia, PO Box 199, Merimbula NSW 2548.

If you're not satisfied with the response of the representative or do not want to talk to this person, you can:

- Make the complaint to a member of the management committee, addressing the correspondence to The Management Committee, Connections Plus, PO Box 199, Merimbula, NSW 2548. Letters marked "Private and Confidential" will be forwarded unopened to an appropriate committee member
- Contact the National Disability Insurance Agency by calling 1800 800 110, visiting one of their offices in person, or visiting [ndis.gov.au](https://www.ndis.gov.au) for further information.
- Contact the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission on 1800 035 544 or submit a complaint contact form via <https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/participants/complaints>



A great outcome for transport

The Minister for the NDIS, Stuart Robert, announced more flexibility and increased choice for participants accessing transport funding in their plans on 3 February 2020.

From 1 March 2020, NDIS participants will be able to flexibly use their plan's core support funding to claim service provider costs associated with transporting participants to and from NDIS funded community-based activities.

Providers will be able to claim some of their vehicle running costs when offering transport to a participant in conjunction with the community activities identified in their NDIS plan. These costs – which are in addition to the support worker's time – are factored at a per kilometre rate and can be claimed by providers as a separate item as part of the support they are delivering to participants.

Minister Robert said transport funding in NDIS plans has always been about assisting participants to access the community and to maintain or increase their independence.

'This change will give participants more autonomy in their plans, and greater choice and control over the services and supports they need,' Mr Robert said.

What this means is that, whether you have your transport payment paid into your account as a fortnightly payment or not, you are able to use your core support funding to cover your travel with us. Pretty much, back to business as usual. What's also refreshing about this news, is that the NDIA is responsive to the feedback of its participants.



Connections Plus Australia Inc

Established by local families in 1988 and formerly known as Respite Care Bega Valley. Although we have grown considerably from 1988, Connections Plus Australia still maintains the personalised approach of a small service in the delivery of disability services in our community.

1/35 Beach Street
PO Box 199
Merimbula NSW 2548

Phone: 02 6495 3797
E-mail:
connections@connectionsplus.com.au
www.connectionsplus.com.au



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