



Australian Government

Department of Health and Aged Care

Ref No: MC24-016896

Ms Margaret Zanghi
QACAG@nswma.asn.au

Dear Ms Zanghi

Thank you for your correspondence of 1 November 2024 to the Minister for Aged Care and Minister for Sport, the Hon Anika Wells MP regarding the aged care system. The Minister has asked me to reply.

The Australian Government currently provides assessment services through Regional Assessment Service (RAS) and Aged Care Assessment Team (ACAT). RAS organisations are part of the My Aged Care assessment workforce engaged to deliver Home Support Assessments to determine a client's eligibility for Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) services, while an ACAT will assess a client's eligibility for a Home Care Package (HCP) and other services under the *Aged Care Act 1997*.

I appreciate you raising the concerns that have been reported to you by your members. Please see below where I have addressed these concerns.

Assessment Setting

When assessing a client's eligibility for home care services, including a HCP, it is standard practice for the ACAT to conduct the initial assessment face-to-face in the client's usual accommodation setting. This will assist with the environmental, physical, and social components of the assessment by observing the client's level of independence, functioning, and existing support arrangements in familiar surroundings.

The ACATs and hospitals have an established, well integrated relationship. Hospital discharge planners and discharge planning teams are responsible for arranging a discharge plan for the client and liaising with appropriate services. If the discharge plan includes the need for a comprehensive assessment, the hospital will either refer the client for a comprehensive assessment and/or liaise with ACAT. For clients who are in a stable condition and require approvals for Transition Care Program, Residential Respite Care or Permanent Residential Care, the assessment may be undertaken in the hospital setting.

Where face-to-face contact between the assessor and client is not possible (e.g., when assessing a client in a remote area or the client is inaccessible due to exceptional circumstances such as a seasonal weather event), a teleconference, video conference or telehealth assessment may be undertaken. The assessor must make additional efforts to ensure the quality of assessment is not compromised when conducting a telehealth assessment and that assessment decisions remain evidence based.

Another suitably qualified person (such as a local health worker) and/or the client's agent or representative may attend the assessment with the client to assist the assessment process.

Support Services

To complement the My Aged Care phone line and website, face-to-face support is also available for older people and their families to access the aged care system. This support, delivered by Aged Care Specialist Officers, is currently available in 80 Services Australia service centres across the country. More information about this service is available by contacting Services Australia on 1800 227 475 Monday to Friday 8:00am to 5:00pm or at: www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/getting-aged-care-services.

Clients are also able to contact the Older Person's Advocacy Network (OPAN). OPAN provides free advocacy services to support clients to access and interact with Commonwealth-funded aged care services. OPAN can be contacted on 1800 700 600 Monday to Friday between 8:00am and 8:00pm and Saturday between 10:00am and 4:00pm or online at: www.opan.com.au/contact-us.

Single Assessment System

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety included recommendation 28, which recommended the replacement of the Aged Care Assessment Program and the Regional Assessment Services with one assessment process.

In response, the Department of Health and Aged Care has developed the Single Assessment System. The Single Assessment System will simplify and improve the experience of older people in Australia by providing a flexible system that can quickly adapt to their aged care needs.

Under the current system, older people can be 'bounced' between assessment organisations due to changes in their needs. Under the single assessment system, all providers of aged care needs assessments will be required to offer a full service from entry-level to complex needs, making the system easier for older people to navigate.

Wait times and service availability

In terms of service availability, there are instances where CHSP providers may not have capacity to accept referrals and services are not immediately available. The department is aware of the increasing need for assistance through the CHSP and many services are in high demand. In addition, CHSP providers continue to report ongoing issues with workforce recruitment and retention which further impacts their ability to accept new referrals and deliver services to clients. The department monitors these issues and grant funding opportunities have been available for providers to address excess service demand.

This includes the recent 2024-25 \$100 million growth funding opportunity which will assist providers to deliver additional services, including domestic assistance, home maintenance, transport and allied health and therapy in eligible Aged Care Planning Regions (ACPR) across the country.

HCP allocation is not an immediate or automatic process. As you can appreciate, there are a lot of people in Australia seeking aged care services at the same time and as such, we have a queue. Once approved for a HCP, care recipients are placed on the National Priority System (NPS) to await assignment of their package. The NPS ensures equity of access to services for to aged care services. A person's place on the NPS depends on the date of approval and the priority placed on the approved package, both of which are determined by well qualified independent ACATs.

It should also be noted that the number of HCP approvals in recent months was higher than expected. As there is a limited number of funded packages available, this flows through to changes in how long a person may need to wait before being allocated a package. As of 30 September 2024, the wait time for a medium priority level 4 package was 12 to 15 months, post assessment.

The Government is working to address long HCP wait times by announcing an extra 24,100 HCPs in the 2024-25 Budget. These additional packages will reduce wait times to an average of six months and support more older people to access in-home aged care. These packages complement the roll-out of the Single Assessment System.

With service availability continuing to fluctuate, clients are encouraged to remain in contact with their local providers as this will assist in accessing services when they become available. Clients are also encouraged to contact My Aged Care for assistance with their referrals and to locate providers who may have service availability. The My Aged Care contact centre can be contacted on 1800 200 422 (free call) between 8:00am and 8:00pm weekdays and between 10:00am and 2:00pm on Saturdays.

Home care services

The HCP Program supports older people with ageing related care needs to live independently. A HCP delivers a co-ordinated package of care and services to meet the care recipient's assessed ageing related care needs. Care and services delivered must align with the individual home care budget and the scope of the Program.

These may include services and supports to keep care recipients:

- well and independent – including personal care, nursing services, allied health
- safe in their home – including cleaning, home maintenance and modifications specific to ageing related capabilities, assistive technology
- connected to their community – including transport, social support services.

It's important to note that under the HCP, providers remain responsible for ensuring services are delivered in a way that meets the requirements of the *Act* and the Aged Care Quality Standards. This includes meeting the Quality of Care Principles, whereby providers must maintain an adequate number of appropriately skilled staff to ensure that the care needs of care recipients are met. Providers must also ensure services are delivered in line with the agreed care plan. The care plan will need to be revised periodically to ensure that any sub-contracted services continue to meet the care recipient's assessed care needs.

With regards to staff scheduling, providers are encouraged to manage these requirements without impacting care recipients. Furthermore, when a care recipient enters into a Home Care Agreement, a care plan must be prepared. A care plan is a document that outlines:

- a person's home care needs
- the services they will receive to meet those needs
- who will provide the services and when.

Before a provider can make a change to the Home Care Agreement or care plan, both the provider and care recipient must discuss, understand, and agree to the change. Should a care recipient not be satisfied with their care plan, including when services are being delivered, I encourage them to first raise their concerns with the provider.

Should they remain unsatisfied they may wish to raise a complaint with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission. The Commission provides a free service to raise concerns that relate to the quality of Commonwealth-funded home care services. There are strict confidentiality and anonymity provisions within aged care legislation that ensure people who request confidentiality are protected from having their identity disclosed. The Commission can be contacted on 1800 951 822 or online at: www.agedcarequality.gov.au.

Tender Process

The Commonwealth conducted an open tender process for the provision of aged care assessment services over 2024. This process is almost complete and new arrangements will commence in December 2024.

State and territory governments will retain a central role in delivering aged care assessments as part of a broader Single Assessment System workforce in the new system. As the department is in the negotiation stage of the tender process, probity arrangements are still in place.

Thank you for writing on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Adam', written in a cursive style.

Ian Adam
Director
Assessment Delivery Section
Aged Care Assessments Branch
2 December 2024