

26 September 2025_updated

Fast Facts – NDIS Needs Assessment & Australian Autism Alliance Response

- **Major NDIS change:** The I-CAN Support Needs Assessment will become the primary way to determine participant support budgets aged 16+.
- **Alliance welcomes** the partnership with the University of Melbourne and Centre for Disability Studies, the tool uses the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) domains, the tool is not standalone with a broader assessment involved including personal and environmental factors, and staged implementation.
- **Alliance stance:** We welcome the Government's move to trial a single tool across disabilities but have not endorsed I-CAN for Autistic participants 16 plus until we know we have a tool that can reliably capture the diversity of autistic support needs.
- **Alliance calls for 10 key steps as minimum standards:** independent systems validation approach and co-design. This includes independent clinical verification at the start and end of the full process, accredited assessors, participant choice and safety, guarantee clear links between assessment results and budgets and codesign with Autistic people and supports. Any tool must be **fit for person, as well as fit for purpose.**

Australian Autism Alliance welcomes new needs assessment tool announcement but there must be a systems validation approach and safeguards before rollout for fit for person outcomes.

The Australian Autism Alliance (Alliance) welcomes the Government's announcement of the partnership with the University of Melbourne and Centre for Disability Studies, to trial the I-CAN Support Needs Assessment tool as the tool to measure NDIS participant support needs aged 16 and over. Particularly as the tool uses the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) domains, and the **tool is not standalone** with a broader needs assessment process including personal and environmental factors.

The Alliance values several important assurances provided in the announcement. This includes the assurances that the selection through a **competitive procurement process involved lived experience** and expects that this included suitable Autistic representation. We welcome now that the selection has been made that there will be more extensive involvement, with NDIA and the I-CAN team, of relevant Autistic and autism community stakeholders.

We are pleased that the tool is intended to create a **simpler, fairer, easier pathway**, will be used by **trained, accredited assessors** and will be modified to be **fit for purpose**. We also strongly welcome that the new framework will be **introduced in stages** and allow participants to provide real-time feedback. This we interpret to mean that the tool will also be rolled out in stages to particular cohorts after design, development, and testing. We were particularly thrilled to hear that an **assessment process grounded in evidence and lived experience** that uphold values of **validity, fairness and transparency** will be developed. We certainly welcome that this will be done **with the disability community**.

We acknowledge that the Government is starting with one common tool to improve consistency across disabilities and stated intention to tailor the tool or develop additional modules for specific disability groups. We also recognise that I-CAN has been used with people who have complex and mixed disabilities and has undergone multiple versions.

While the Alliance recognises the potential of the tool to deliver greater consistency and fairness, we stress that the validation of its application must be careful - we cannot endorse the tool until there is rigorous validation we have a tool that can reliably capture the diversity of autistic support needs. That is, it needs to be **validated with a systems approach** to design, testing, and implementation, a need for **transparency**, and **co-designed** with Autistic people, their families and representative organisations to ensure it is not only fit for purpose but also **fit for person**.

We are cautious as there is no single validated tool in the world that can yet capture the diversity of Autistic support needs.

“This is an important opportunity to get it right,” **said Jenny Karavolos**, Co-Chair of the [Australian Autism Alliance](#). “A person-centred, rights-based approach to needs assessment could help many Autistic people access the supports they need. But that will only happen if the NDIA takes a genuine systems approach – one that independently verifies the tool and validates the entire process, not just the tool itself to ensure it is not only fit for purpose but fit for person. There must also be clear traceability from assessment outcomes through to budgets, so participants have transparency and there is an opportunity as needed for professional reports to hold weight.”

“Consistency must never come at the expense of individual needs. Any tool must be **fit for person as well as fit for purpose**” **continued Ms Karavolos**.

We note I-CAN is time-intensive, heavily dependent on assessor skill, and primarily a self-report tool. **Clinical verification** must happen at the **start and end of the process** to ensure accuracy and fairness. Without strong safeguards, it risks disadvantaging Autistic people, particularly those who cannot complete a three-hour interview or whose support needs are subtle but significant.

“We know from experience that tools like this can work, but only when they are applied with care, transparency and the right expertise,” **Ms Karavolos said**. “If the Government gets this right, the new assessment process can be fairer, simpler, and more consistent. If not, it risks undermining trust and leaving people worse off.”

The Alliance is calling for these **key steps as a minimum standard** to validate that this tool is appropriate for autism and for a safe, fair rollout:

- **Co-design from the outset** with Autistic people, their families and representative organisations.
- **Independent clinical verification of both the tool and the broader process** to ensure accuracy, fairness, and clinical validity. This is both before rollout and after implementation.
- **No mandatory application** of the tool until the combined system – including personal and environmental questionnaires and targeted assessments – has had a **phased pilot and validation** so it is **fit for person**, as well as fit for purpose.

- **Dry runs using diverse personas** to test the process, with a large, diverse Autistic sample (including those with complex communication needs, high masking, high support/dependent needs, co-occurring conditions and intersectional priorities) before any mandatory use.
- **Accredited assessors** with appropriate skills and expertise – trauma-informed, culturally aware, and with a deep understanding of autism and other disabilities.
- **Professional reports** are able to be incorporated from trusted clinicians, if needed, and to have these be given genuine weight **in decisions**.
- **Final assessment reports verified by participants** and/or their supporters before budgets are set.
- **Accessible processes** including for supported decision-making and complex communication needs, participant right to choose/change assessor, bring a trusted person to assessments and safe environment options and protocols with alternative arrangements to home visits offered.
- **Transparency and traceability** between assessment findings and the budget allocated, with safeguards and independent oversight.
- **Ongoing public updates** on lessons from early implementation.

We will continue to engage with government and will provide further comment as the tool and process evolve.

“This is about people’s lives and that’s why we are insisting on safeguards now, so we can move forward together and get it right, which we know is important to government also” **Ms Karavolos** said. “We stand ready to work with government and our community to ensure the new process safeguards Autistic people’s rights, genuinely delivers better outcomes and Autistic people are not left worse off.”

About the Australian Autism Alliance: We are the national peak body furthering the rights and interests of Autistic people across the life span, their parents and carers, and the autism community in Australia. The members represent a cohesive national network of key organisations with a diverse focus on autism. For more information about Australian Autism Alliance go to: australianautismalliance.org.au and connect with us on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

Media enquiries: For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Jenny Karavolos

Australian Autism Alliance, Co-Chair jenkaravolos@outlook.com | chair@australianautismalliance.org.au

What is I-CAN?

- Name: Instrument for Classification and Assessment of Support Needs (I-CAN) Version 6
- Developer: University of Melbourne and the Centre for Disability Studies
- Purpose: Measures the type, frequency, and intensity of support a person with disability needs across twelve life domains
- Domains include: Mobility, communication, self-care, interpersonal relationships, mental and physical health, behaviours of concern, learning, and community life
- Format: Structured, three-hour interview with an accredited assessor
- Rollout: Planned for NDIS participants aged 16+ from mid-2026, with targeted assessments for people with complex needs
- Goal: Replace line-by-line planning with a single, more consistent way to calculate participant budgets