

MEDIA RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NDIS reform must design systems that work for Autistic people

The Australian Autism Alliance warns that without a clear focus on system readiness and safeguards, reforms risk leaving autistic people worse off and shifting pressure onto families and already stretched systems.

Minister Butler’s National Press Club announcement on 22 April 2026 included several positive acknowledgements:

- that people with disability are not the source of fraud;
- there have been acknowledged failures in NDIS system design, including policy and system settings that have contributed to current pressures; and
- that the rollout of the new framework planning requires delay, now expected from 1 April 2027

The Australian Autism Alliance continues to support the long-term sustainability of the NDIS and strongly supports action on fraud and system integrity. Concerns about system integrity risks were raised early in the scheme’s development, reinforcing the importance of getting system settings right.

Sustainability matters—for people with disability, for families, and for the economy.

However, the Alliance is concerned about the disproportionate impact of current reforms on Autistic people.

“Autistic people should not be the shock absorbers of systems governments have not yet fixed,” said Ms Jenny Karavolos, Independent Co-Chair, Australian Autism Alliance. **“We support reform—but it is conditional on getting it right. The risk is losing what’s working before something better is ready.”**

Why this matters

Autistic people did not move into the NDIS by accident.

Before the NDIS:

- while there were programs such as HCWA and Carer Allowance, the overall system for people with ‘mild to moderate’ needs remained fragmented, time-limited and inconsistent in access and outcomes
- access to support was inconsistent and often depended on family capacity to fight
- mainstream services were not designed to meet Autistic needs

- workforce capability and capacity for autism-specific support were—and remain—insufficient and have not yet been systematically addressed.

The Senate Inquiry into Autism confirmed that systems were **fragmented, complex and failing to deliver outcomes**.

As states and territories transferred funding into the NDIS and stepped back from direct service provision, the NDIS became the **only functioning access point for reliable support**.

The NDIS was also never just a diagnosis gate—it included early intervention pathways precisely because mainstream systems were not meeting children’s needs.

The evidence is clear

- Autistic people experience poorer outcomes across education, employment, health and inclusion.
- Generic systems have not delivered effective outcomes.
- The NDIS has delivered real benefits—enabling participation and independence.

At the same time, system failure remains evident:

“We know systems are not ready when Autistic preschoolers are significantly more likely to be permanently excluded from early childhood education” said Ms Karavolos, Co-chair, Australian Autism Alliance

What is changing

Reforms now introduced include:

- tighter access and new functional assessments
- diversion to foundational and mainstream systems
- budget resets and reassessments
- strengthened provider controls

These represent **major structural changes**.

It is also important to recognise that current system dynamics have been shaped by policy design. Early childhood access pathways based on functional delay, followed by diagnostic thresholds for supports in later years and education, create predictable inconsistencies that influence both access patterns and diagnostic trends. Addressing sustainability, therefore, requires addressing these structural settings—not just tightening access.

The key risk

If Autistic people—who make up a large proportion of the scheme—are shifted out of the NDIS:

“Government must show that the systems receiving them are ready—autism-capable, accountable, and measurably better—not just cheaper. The risk is not reform itself, but how it is implemented,” Ms Karavolos said.

“Changing access doesn’t change need—it shifts it into capped programs, into schools and health systems that aren’t yet ready, and ultimately onto families.”

With current proposals:

- replacement supports are capped while need is not
- system readiness has not been demonstrated
- workforce capability and capacity gaps persist
- accountability across systems remains unclear

“If this is not addressed, we risk shifting pressure rather than reducing it,” Ms Karavolos continued.

What must happen next

The Australian Autism Alliance is calling for:

- a clear 10-point **system readiness test** to be applied before any transition
- **no-gap protections** to ensure continuity of support
- **child-specific transition plans** with clear accountability
- transparent reporting on **savings, costs and outcomes**
- a clear and public **implementation roadmap**
- a fully funded **National Autism Strategy**, and **National Health and Mental Health Road map** for autism that has State and Territory commitment.
- support for the Alliance’s **Five-Stream Budget Framework** outlined in the 26/27 Pre-budget submission
- re-establishment of a cross-government Disability Royal Commission implementation mechanism, including independent oversight

In the interim, meaningful savings can be achieved through improvements in system settings largely within government control, including:

- stronger provider identification;
- better frontline decision-making to reduce appeals and rework;
- workforce capability and capacity, and cross-system planning; and
- reducing duplication across health, education and disability systems.

The principle for reform

Good reform is not just about what changes—it is about the order in which it is implemented, with system readiness, the right safeguards, no gaps and transition planning - so people are not worse off.

The Alliance has developed an evidence-based **10-point system readiness test** to ensure reforms are safe and effective.

“If a reform cannot meet these 10-point system readiness tests, it is not ready” said Ms Jenny Karavolos, Co-chair, Australian Autism Alliance.

Closing

So again we agree with Minister Mark Butler that there is much work to do. We stand ready and want to work constructively with government as a diverse network, alongside our Autistic and autism community, to get this right. Autistic people didn't create the problem—but they exposed it.

This gives us a choice: continue shifting pressure between systems, or work together to design systems that deliver for Autistic people.”

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.

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THE 10-POINT SYSTEM TEST

If a reform cannot meet these tests, it is not ready to be implemented.

1. OUTCOMES TEST

Does this improve real outcomes for people?

- safety
- wellbeing
- participation
- independence

Not just activity, compliance or cost reduction

2. NO HARM TEST

Will anyone be worse off as a result of this reform?

- loss of support
- reduced access
- increased risk

If yes then reform is not ready

3. SYSTEM READINESS TEST

Are the receiving systems actually ready?

- workforce capability
- service availability
- infrastructure

Not assumed — demonstrated

4. NO-GAP TEST

Is there guaranteed continuity of support?

- no service gaps
- no waiting periods
- no “falling between systems”

5. ACCOUNTABILITY TEST

Is responsibility clear across governments?

- who is responsible
- who is accountable
- what happens if it fails

6. CONTROL PLACEMENT TEST

Are controls placed where risk sits — not where need sits?

- provider-level controls
- system-level controls
- NOT participant-level restrictions

7. WORKFORCE CAPABILITY TEST

Do frontline workers have the skills to deliver this?

- autism capability
- decision-making ability
- not just compliance training

8. DECISION QUALITY TEST

Will decisions be consistent, fair and correct first time?

- clear criteria
- transparency
- review/correction pathways

9. VALUE & COST TEST

Does this reduce waste without reducing necessary support?

- targets leakage
- avoids cost shifting
- considers downstream costs

10. MEASUREMENT TEST

Will success be measured publicly and transparently?

- clear metrics
- regular reporting
- outcome-based

If you can't measure it, you can't claim it