



NSW Inquiry into improving
access to early childhood
health and development
checks. **Submission**

About this submission

National Disability Services (NDS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks.

We advocate for a wide range of policy priorities on behalf of the sector, across NDIS services, pricing and payment reform, workforce development, employment of people with disability, regulatory reform, improved planning, and support pathways, supports for people with disability outside the NDIS, home and living supports and supports for children, young people, and families.

This submission identifies barriers and potential opportunities for NSW government can take now to improve the access to early childhood health and development checks.

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About National Disability Services

National Disability Services (NDS) is the peak body in NSW and Australia for non-government disability service providers. NDS has more than 300 members in NSW and over 1,100 members nationally. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability. Our members employ around 100,000 people and provide a full range of disability services to some 500,000 people with disability. The NDS platform of National Disability Practitioners has over 15,000 individual members across all aspects of the disability workforce.

Our **vision** is for an inclusive Australia where all people with disability live safely and equitably. To achieve this, people with disability need to access the right supports, at the right time, from the right people, services, and systems.

NDS acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands, seas, skies, and waterways throughout NSW. We pay respect to elders past and present and recognise their deep and continuing connections with our shared country, culture, and community.

The Disability Sector context

Over 18% of the New South Wales (NSW) community [live with disabilities](#). This equates to 1.37 million people living with disability in NSW. People experience a range of impacts due to disability, with [over 6% of the population experiencing profound or severe disability](#). The NDIS scheme supports 192,668 NSW participants in the Scheme as of December 2023. The NDIA reports that there were 646,449 participants of which there were 155,677 children younger than 9 with an NDIS plan, and a further 15,135 accessing early connections.

In late 2023 two major reports were published in relation to disability in Australia. As context setting for this inquiry [The Royal Commission into violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of people with disability](#) published its final report in 2023 after 4.5 years of hearings. The final report contained 222 recommendations. The Royal Commission recommended that the Government responds to the Royal Commission recommendations by March 2024. The Royal Commission stated that '*mainstream schools need major reforms to overcome the barriers that prevent students with disability accessing safe, equal and inclusive education*'. To ensure that children with disability are assessed and supported this rights-based approach must begin as early as possible in the life of a child – early childhood development and health checks.

The second major report was published following a review of the 10-year-old NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme). This report outlined 26 recommendations with 139 actions to change the system - [NDIS Review recommendations and actions](#). This report recommendations included:

- *Recommendation 2.5 All Australian governments should take steps to protect the right to inclusive education for children with disability and developmental concerns in early childhood education and care and schools.*

In [December 2023 National Cabinet agreed](#) to a reform agenda to support people with disability in and outside the NDIS scheme. These important reforms will include additional foundational supports at state level to address educational barriers.

Early childhood assessment and intervention has been specifically noted as of key importance to the reform agenda. The NDIS review found that *'children with disability and developmental concerns are not being consistently identified early in life'*.

Children can miss out on supports during the unique period of rapid brain development that plays a critical role in shaping a person's life trajectory. It should be noted that children and their families in regional and remote areas will have compounded barriers relating to and not limited to, health workforce shortages and disability service provider workforce shortages. Children with emerging developmental concerns need to be identified early in life so that they can access the appropriate assessment and support.

Change can be achieved through mainstream services having a more consistent approach to identifying need and inclusively supporting children with developmental concerns and disability. Additionally, an increase in foundational supports outside the NDIS for children and families who have higher needs than mainstream supports can effectively respond to, and a best-practice approach in the NDIS to support children with developmental delay and disability and their families.

In January 2024 Ministers Rishworth and Shorten announced funding for a [Foundational Support Strategy](#) to support people with disability. The strategy will specifically look at early intervention supports.

NDS's vision is for an inclusive Australia where all people with disability live safely and equitably. To achieve this people with disability of all ages need access to the right supports, at the right time, in the right place, from the right people, services and systems. As a peak body, NDS has the expertise and provider engagement to support NSW Government with the disability reform agenda.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

NDS provides the following responses to the Terms of Reference based on the experience of disability providers providing services in NSW.

1. Changes needed to address gaps in outcomes for vulnerable children, including those in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

- Strengthen the first connection for childhood checks during the maternity and hospital period. This will enable early establishment of key relationships with families and identify any specific needs for example families experiencing vulnerability, or of CALD status, or Indigenous families.

- Proactive approach with home visits and/or transport to community health centres for health and development checks
- Address the barriers for Indigenous communities. Often developmental checks are undertaken by people who are not “trusted” in the communities which results in parents not attending clinics. Indigenous families can be reluctant to attend appointments at large institutional settings e.g. hospitals.
- Rural and remote barriers are significant. The tyranny of distance and isolation for families. Families often have barriers of access to transport whether it is personal or public transport. Additionally, the digital divide compounds the difficulties with often limited access to technology e.g. no funds on phone, no access to internet, lack of mobile reception. Service providers are challenged with these barriers in arranging meetings with families. General workforce shortages are compounded in rural and remote settings with lack of appropriate staff to undertake checks and large distances to travel to service need face-to-face appointments.
- Proactive approach to track child and families so that they don’t fall through the gaps and miss critical health and development checks.

2. Barriers that affect parents’ access to routine health and development checks that track their progress against developmental milestones.

- Lack of appropriate information for parents regarding the reasons for and the value of attending for health and developmental checks.
- Location of services. Many LHDs locate services at community health centres. This can be a barrier for several reasons including difficulties with transport options, health challenges post pregnancy. Opportunities to expand telehealth services and home visits would greatly assist.
- Hours of service can be a barrier for working parents. Evening and weekend appointments should be available.
- Trust of the professional can be a significant barrier when there is no established relationship. There can be a fear of judgment resulting in a lack of sharing of relevant information. This aspect is compounded for First nations people and for CALD communities.
- Some LHDs do not send reminders for appointments and may not follow up visits. A consistent quality approach through system improvements is needed.

3. Recruitment and retention of health professionals to address workforce shortages

Workforce shortages are challenging for the disability sector and particularly acute for allied health professionals. There is an opportunity to offer universal training in best practice early childhood intervention as per the Best practice in early childhood intervention [national guidelines](#). This would provide capacity building to benefit the sector.

4. Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models.

The foundational supports and mainstream improvements identified in the NDIS review provide a once in a lifetime opportunity to improve the early childhood assessment and intervention approach and practice.

5. Any other related matters.

- Review of developmental check protocols to ensure there is consistent and high-quality assessment of family members health and well-being.
- Changes should integrate/align with the NDIS Review Foundational Supports which were proposed and endorsed by National Cabinet.

Concluding comments

This inquiry provides an important opportunity to identify changes needed to enable children and their families to have timely access to quality development and health checks early in life in NSW. There is a once in a lifetime opportunity to align the recommendations with the relevant recommendations from the NDIS Review and Disability Royal Commission and the announcement from National Cabinet.

As a peak body, NDS has the expertise and provider engagement to support NSW Government with the disability reform agenda.