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NDIS misses checks on children with autism

EXCLUSIVE
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UPDATED 6:26AM FEBRUARY 15, 2024,
FIRST PUBLISHED AT 9:30PM FEBRUARY 14, 2024
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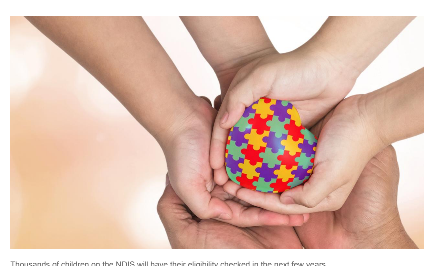

Thousands of children on the NDIS will have their eligibility checked in the next few years.

Thousands of children with autism or developmental delay who should not be on the $42bn National Disability Insurance Scheme are still getting taxpayer support because public servants are failing to reassess their cases.

The NDIS caseload of young children surged last year, as the number of 0 to 6-year-olds who joined the scheme skyrocketed 400 per cent more than expected.

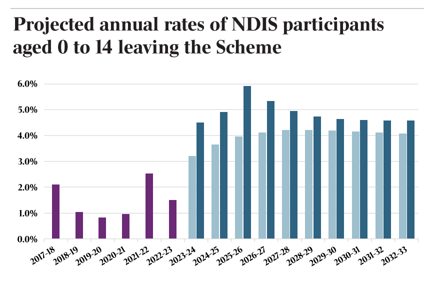
In the latest NDIS annual financial sustainability report, scheme actuary David Gifford notes greater numbers of children with developmental delay joining the scheme in 2022-23 pushed numbers significantly higher than anticipated.

More than 16,500 0 to 6-year-olds joined the NDIS last financial year, 415 per cent greater than the 3211 expected. An additional 23,766 people across all age groups joined the scheme in 2022-23 with developmental delay as their primary disability, when just 5440 were anticipated.

Despite the National Disability Insurance Agency's inability to predict the recent massive increases, the scheme actuary still projects between five and six per cent of the 300,000 children aged 0-14 on the NDIS are likely to be removed each year for the next three years as staffing resources ramp up. The revelations came as NDIS executives fronted parliament on Wednesday and conceded $60bn in projected savings would likely disappear altogether if Labor's efficiency measures fail. Former NDIS minister Linda Reynolds led a united front of Coalition and Greens senators attacking the Albanese Government's secrecy over its plans to contain the scheme's growth over the next decade.

Senator Reynolds grilled officials on whether the scheme was still running "above expectations", to which she was told the cost of the NDIS was 0.9 per cent above expectations as of last September.

Projected annual rates of NDIS participants aged 0 to 14 leaving the Scheme



Source: NDIS Annual Financial Sustainability Report 2022-23

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The WA senator also asked the NDIS executives what would happen if Labor's $720m in budgeted "efficiency measures" – which the government says will get the scheme's growth down to 8 per cent a year – was not successful.

"It will result in $60bn in savings not being realised? In us being $60bn … in the black?" Senator Reynolds said.

Mr Gifford replied "based on quick calculations, yes, it would be something like that".

Despite admitting that the NDIS's third quarter report was available and in the hands of commonwealth and state governments, the officials refused to table the documents or provide budget data over the past four months.

Greens senator Jordon Steele-John criticised the agency for setting a "dangerous precedent" while Senator Reynolds blasted what she called an "unprecedented" lack of transparency.

"It is outrageous and unprecedented for any agency or department to come to Senate estimates and refuse to provide current budget estimates data," she said.

The boom in child and adolescent cases saw an overall increase in NDIS participant numbers in 2022-23 of 75,847, 32 per cent more than the 57,639 the actuary had expected.

"New entrants with developmental delay and autism accounted for 70 per cent of total new entrants in 2022-23," the actuary's paper says.

About 12 per cent of all boys aged 5-7 are on the NDIS.

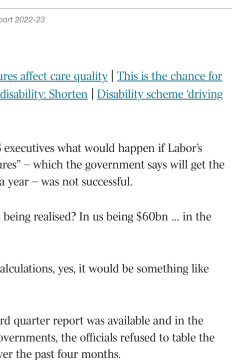
Total scheme numbers sat at 610,500 at the end of 2022-23 and are projected to increase to over a million by 2033, with scheme costs anticipated to run to $92bn.

A critical factor in overall scheme numbers being higher than expected was that fewer children than anticipated left.

"(This) reflects a short-term shift in focus of the National Access and Reassessment Branch in 2022-23, with priority given to initial access decisions which limited activity in regard to eligibility reassessments for people in the scheme," the financial sustainability report says.

"Recruitment of new staff and a recommencement of reassessments in 2023-24 is expected to increase future rates of participants leaving the scheme."

Those additional staffing numbers, part of a $730m commitment in the 2023 federal budget to "support participant outcomes and the effective and sustainable operation of the scheme", are expected to rapidly bolster the exit of children from the NDIS.


Sam Bennett, Director of the Grattan Institute's Disability Program.

After about 1.5 per cent participants aged 0-14 left the scheme in 2022-23, the actuary projects significantly higher exits in the next four years as the number of scheme participants in that age bracket approaches 300,000.

"The rate of children leaving the scheme is expected to increase from 4.5 per cent in 2023-24 to a peak of almost 6.0 per cent over the three years ending 30 June 2026, driven by the impact of initiatives related to early childhood," the report says.

Mr Gifford's report said the unexpectedly high developmental delay numbers were due to "waiting times to obtain an autism diagnosis for children, increased awareness of developmental delay, lack of capacity within mainstream services to support children with developmental delay and Covid-19 related impacts."

Grattan Institute disability director Sam Bennett agreed Mr Gifford's reasons were part of the story, but said a factor not mentioned was "just how low the bar for access under the developmental delay criteria actually is".

Dr Bennett said the NDIS defined developmental delay as a mental or physical impairment that substantially reduces functional capacity and requires specialist services for an extended duration.

"But it is subjective and open to wide interpretation, particularly the lack of definition around what constitutes substantially reduced functional capacity," he said.

Work commenced by the NDIA in 2021 which would have clarified assessment thresholds for developmental delay was abandoned by the previous government, Dr Bennett said.

"It seems that access under the developmental delay criteria has actually become easier as a result," he said. "In practice, there is virtually no barrier at all to entry, it all hinges on a clinician's Judgement which the NDIA has no objective means of interpreting."

While the actuarial report takes into account 2023 NDIS budget measures, it doesn't consider any of the recommendations of the NDIS review, which reported to federal and state governments in December.

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Stephen Lunn is The Australian's Social Affairs Editor, covering social policy issues including ageing, disability, welfare, immigration and population policy. He has previously been the paper's environment writer… Read more

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Peter 17 MINUTES AGO
When I went to school, it was just accepted that some kids were better at learning than others were.
Report | Like 10 | Reply

Jacko 19 MINUTES AGO
In a time before smart devices children would be at friends, at the local oval, riding bikes in the street. It taught resilience, not being reliant on parents for companionship and how to make friends.

Is it any wonder between addiction to devices and helicopter parenting we're creating a generation with developmental issues.
Report | Like 9 | Reply

Pamela 18 MINUTES AGO
A number of children have this issue and some are very high needs. The number quoted here is ridiculous . In a couple of years it seems most children will be diagnosed with developmental delay Why? Most children seem to attend childcare at government expense so there is an opportunity to use that space to address these issues. Is it diet? Is it a lifestyle thing? Is it lack of family structure where parents are working most of the time and so are reliant on others to do their parenting.It seems to be a modern thing and is disproportionate to what should be a normal childhood
Report | Like 6 | Reply

Roadrunner 20 MINUTES AGO
Time to admit that the way the NDIS is designed was a bad idea from the get go, just another one of former PM Gillard's uncosted, unfunded thought bubbles. Labor will do nothing about the NDIS because it is not in their DNA to ever reduce spending. Besides, there's an election coming in just about a year.
Report | Like 7 | Reply

Tony W 30 MINUTES AGO
The problem with the scheme is that, politically, it is impossible to control costs. If either party reigns in the costs then the other party will score cheap political points. We need an electorate and media that discusses issues in a more mature and rational manner than we now have.
Report | Like 16 | Reply

●JD● 31 MINUTES AGO
It's fortunate that the new Airbus government didn't pledge greater transparency when immediately elected otherwise it would now be shown to be YET ANOTHER LIE.

The Australian Liars Party.
Report | Like 9 | Reply

David 39 MINUTES AGO
The NDIS should only be for those with major disabilities who require significant care which would otherwise be unaffordable.
Report | Like 32 | Reply

Caz 28 MINUTES AGO
I think we need to find alternative solutions for the individuals with unaffordable needs as well. We are a country with zero defence abilities, one of the most awful education standards in the Western world, and an observedly weakening healthcare system. We do not have the working population to provide specific individuals with 1M a year.
Report | Like 7 | Reply

Robert 40 MINUTES AGO
The real question to be answered, is why is there such an explosion in young children even needing to be on the system. As I have always wonder why those that don't need it, still get accepted, making those that do struggle even more in trying get enough. By the way I got had to learn at school to read while the rest of the class learnt did learn a little more, I found out from a blood test when I was 40 that I was xxy, instead of xy. At no stage today do I believe that I should have ever been on a NDIS program if it existed then. Mind you I am on it do to the unforseen back injury that has severly affected my wage by 70%, don't worry, as I really enjoy being in absolute financial stress for the last 4 years as I'm only able to thankfully get NDIS for my ongoing rehab, just be able to move. At the moment NDIS has said they will rollover my plan for 12 months, so no CPI increase, so basically the rollover isn't for the hours, only half of my budget from 2 years ago, so I guess another year of financial stress to work through, as all bills and fees go up, but none of the support to use them. Enjoy your good health, for it seems the government will give some a tax break, yet no money for support when you really need it. Kindly the question of how much is spent on the government department of NDIS to provide the okay to getting a plan is never mentioned, only the amount spent by the patient.
Report | Like 6 | Reply

Pete3051 48 MINUTES AGO (Edited)
"Neurodiversity" has been fashionable for a few years now, and a growing number of psychiatrists are increasingly wary about the broadening of diagnostic criteria.

Dr Laurent Mottron, professor of psychiatry and renowned autism researcher at Université de Montréal, shares these concerns, stating in 2019 that:

> **"The objective difference between people with autism and the general population will disappear in less than 10 years. The definition of autism may get too vague to be meaningful"**

I would argue that it's meaningless now, in a world where highly functioning adults who are academically and financial successful are considered to be on the same "spectrum" as adults wearing crash-helmets and nappies living fully dependent lives in care facilities.

Something has to give. The NDIS is not a bottomless pit of money.
Report | Like 6 | Reply

Puissance 45 MINUTES AGO
Just putting it out there that perhaps it is time to rethink the NDIS and who is eligible and what conditions are covered. As it stands funding for the NDIS is unsustainable and will surpass what is spent on Medicare which covers more Australians. There are NDIS recipients who are receiving not tens of thousands of dollars but hundreds of thousands and several individuals are receiving over one million dollars per year is funding support. Back in my day disability funding and associated support was limited to those with severe intellectual disabilities and physical disabilities who could not work. So perhaps we should relook at eligibility requirements and place a cap on what can be funded and the amount of funding. At the same time we should revisit group and institutional housing for some NDIS recipients, like what was done in the past and is currently done through My Aged Care and Aged Care Homes. I know some will think this is harsh but the poor old taxpayer can only fund so much.
Report | Like 19 | Reply

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