

DROs cautiously welcome Thriving Kids delay; warn national consistency and demonstrable readiness are critical across all reforms

Joint Statement by Disability Representative Organisations

Tuesday 3 February



Australia's Disability Representative Organisations (DROs) acknowledge an agreement has been reached between the Federal, State and Territory Governments regarding hospital funding and disability supports, including the Thriving Kids initiative, that will have implications for the supports people with disability have access to across their lifespan and across Australia.

While Government announcements have focused on Thriving Kids, the bigger issue is whether governments are prepared to deliver a functional, nationally consistent Foundational Supports system (including Thriving Kids) that works alongside the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Thriving Kids. These reforms are required in parallel so people with disability can access support outside the NDIS and avoid growing service gaps and inequity in different jurisdictions.

While the short delay to the commencement of the Thriving Kids rollout to October 2026 is cautiously welcomed, we emphasise the critical need for all levels of Government to use this time wisely. The disability sector has consistently called for sufficient time to enable genuine co-design across all jurisdictions, development of

strong safeguards, workforce planning, and appropriate piloting and testing prior to large-scale implementation. This delay-must be used to strengthen readiness and address known gaps in the program.

This is consistent with feedback from families, educators and health professionals, including responses gathered through national surveys conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia and the Australian Autism Alliance, which indicate that key parts of the system are not yet ready for transition at scale. This concern has also been reflected in prior inquiry and reform processes, where people with disability and their families have consistently called for greater safeguards, clarity and accountability in system reform.

National Cabinet has agreed to Thriving Kids being fully operational by 1 January 2028, with \$2bn being contributed by the Commonwealth, matched by states and territories. DROs understand the importance of ensuring states and territories can operationalise supports according to local contexts, but are concerned that without any details on whether governments will publish an implementation plan, national standards or undertake public reporting on progress over the next two years, families will continue to experience the same uncertainty about what supports will be available and when.

Disability Representative Organisations emphasise that last week's agreement sits in the context of ongoing negotiations and reforms that are not just about Thriving Kids. They will determine how broader Foundational Supports and the NDIS work together to deliver disability supports across the lifespan. There remains significant uncertainty about how General and Targeted Supports will be funded, delivered and governed across jurisdictions. With responsibilities split between the Commonwealth and states and territories, clear and transparent intergovernmental agreements are essential, alongside public clarity about how these systems will interact and what pathways will exist as people's needs change over time.

Disability Representative Organisations are calling on all governments to commit to a nationally consistent Foundational Supports framework, underpinned by minimum service standards, transparent intergovernmental agreements, robust oversight and accountability mechanisms and clear public implementation plans and reporting. Without these commitments, people with disability and families risk facing fragmented systems, inconsistent access and widening service gaps.

Governments must also commit to national safeguarding mechanisms that interact with all Foundational Supports, including Thriving Kids. These mechanisms must embed crisis-response and escalation pathways, including clear referral mechanisms, rapid review processes and coordination with health, mental health and community services, so those experiencing acute stress or system breakdown can access timely, wraparound support without falling between programs or jurisdictions.

These reforms extend well beyond a single program. They will shape how children, families and people with disability access supports across health, education and community systems nationally, and how Foundational Supports interact with the

NDIS over time. The decisions made about Thriving Kids now will have long-term consequences for equity, access and outcomes.

At the same time, NDIS planning reforms are progressing under the New Framework Planning. This makes sequencing critical. Foundational Supports must be operational, accessible and adequately resourced before any changes shift support boundaries between systems. No person with disability should lose access to support or be redirected into community systems that are not yet ready to meet demand. This is particularly important for children, who may experience changes to NDIS eligibility criteria from mid-2027 onwards.

Communities experiencing intersecting disadvantage are particularly vulnerable during system transitions. Families who already face barriers navigating current systems due to language, cultural background, disability type, geographic location, or other intersecting factors will be most at risk when support boundaries shift. Redirecting these families to community systems without addressing existing access barriers will compound inequity and risk leaving children and families without essential supports.

If these reforms are not properly designed and funded, the impacts will not be contained within the disability sector. Pressure will shift to hospitals and emergency departments, schools managing unmet support needs, and health and aged care systems responding to issues that should be addressed earlier through appropriate community-based disability supports.

Call to action

Disability Representative Organisations call on all governments to urgently commit to the following actions:

- **Provide public clarity and transparency** on how Foundational and Targeted Supports will be funded, delivered and governed, including how Thriving Kids as a Commonwealth program will align with State and Territory delivery, how these supports will interact with the NDIS, and what pathways will exist as people's needs change over time.
- **Guarantee national consistency and equity** by establishing a nationally coordinated Foundational Supports framework with minimum service guarantees, a requirement for supports to be best practice and disability affirming, confirming whether funding models, eligibility settings and access pathways will differ across jurisdictions, and preventing postcode-based inequity and fragmented service pathways.
- **Ensure workforce readiness before large-scale rollout of any reforms, including Thriving Kids**, through targeted investment, training, role clarity and workforce support mechanisms, particularly in regional, remote and culturally diverse communities where service shortages already exist.

Workforce training must build capability to work effectively across diversity, including cultural competency, gender-responsive practice, disability-affirming approaches for all disability types, and understanding how intersecting identities shape support needs.

- **Deliver operational safeguards and continuity of support** by publishing clear transition arrangements, defined responsibilities across systems, transparent escalation and review processes, and accessible public information, ensuring no child or person with disability experiences a loss, delay or reduction of support during reform implementation.
- **Reframe reform communications** to be accessible, strengths-based, disability and neuro-affirming, aligned with the National Autism Strategy, and grounded in lived experience, while actively challenging deficit-based narratives.

Disability Representative Organisations have reached out to the government to get further direct clarity and remain ready to work constructively with governments to ensure reforms are co-designed with people with disability, children and families, strengthen coordination across systems, and deliver real, lasting improvements in access to disability supports across the lifespan and across Australia.

The following organisations have contributed to and/or expressed their support for this joint position statement:

- The Australian Autism Alliance
- AFDO - Australian Federation Of Disability Organisations
- Inclusion Australia
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia
- Community Mental Health Australia
- Physical Disability Australia – PDA
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia – DANA
- Down Syndrome Australia
- Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA)
- National Ethnic Disability Alliance
- People with Disability Australia