

Senate Select Committee on Autism

ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Social Services

**Topic:** Senate Select Committee on Autism - Written Question from Senator Brown

**Question reference number:** SQ20-000541

**Senator:** Carol Brown

**Type of Question:** Written. Hansard Page/s:

**Date set by the Committee for the return of answer:** 21 August 2020

**Question:**

Many parents have raised the concern that COVID caused a major expansion of their role as carers, and removed any opportunity for respite. Increased social isolation is also real concern. Both of these experiences are putting enormous pressure on parents and impacting on their ability to cope and their physical and mental health.

- a. Has there been any modelling undertaken on the impact of COVID-19 on outcomes for children with autism?
- b. What measures have been put in place to support children with autism during COVID-19, where their usual supports have been reduced or cancelled?
- c. Has DSS done any modelling around the impact of COVID-19 on carers of children with autism?

**Answer:**

- a. Has there been any modelling undertaken on the impact of COVID-19 on outcomes for children with autism?**

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) is undertaking a study into the impact of COVID-19 on people with disability, including a survey of National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants on their experiences, and an evaluation. Outcomes of the survey will be available in coming weeks. Outcomes from the evaluation will be available in the coming months.

**b. What measures have been put in place to support children with autism during COVID-19, where their usual supports have been reduced or cancelled?**

Stakeholder engagement

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Social Services (the department) began holding regular meetings with autism and other key stakeholders in the early childhood intervention sector to understand and respond to the impacts of COVID-19 on families of children with disability. The meetings have been a vital source of information for the department and an opportunity for sector leaders to share knowledge and learnings.

Key outcomes of the meetings have been the ability to:

- provide families of children with disability, including autism, with advice and information;
- provide service providers with consistent, evidence-based information to continue to deliver services; and
- coordinate research efforts into the impact of COVID-19 on early intervention service delivery.

National Disability Insurance Scheme

On 6 August 2020, the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, announced funding and further support services during COVID-19. This includes the ability for NDIS participants, and families of children who are NDIS participants, to use NDIS plans flexibly to support access workers in homes, particularly in instances where children with a disability can no longer attend education or other day programs. This means if a family normally has a child attending a day program or special school and those facilities are not open, the family can use their existing plan flexibly to get disability support workers into their home to assist. Families can discuss their needs with their provider or contact the NDIA to seek assistance.

The NDIA is working closely with the wider disability sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, including families of children with autism, and has published specific information packs on its website to support them through the pandemic.

The NDIA have made changes to ensure NDIS participants continue to get the services and supports they need. Families of children with an NDIS plan can:

- use their existing funding to purchase low cost Assistive Technology like smart devices;
- choose to have scheduled plan review meetings over the phone; and
- request additional disability-related supports through a change of circumstances plan review if their child's needs have changed.

The NDIA is encouraging parents and carers to use their child's supports flexibly.

The NDIA have also taken steps to ensure that a child's plan will not expire if a plan review is not able to be completed, to ensure continued access to funds.

Additional measures to support NDIS participants include:

- a specific National Contact Centre hotline for COVID-19 related enquiries available by calling 1800 800 110, then pressing 5. Parents can also contact their Local Area Coordinator or Early Childhood Coordinator if they need to change their child's NDIS plan;
- a special team of NDIA planners to help further explain plan flexibility, make changes or discuss plan review options;
- changes to a plan review if a child's disability support needs to change, including where there is need for additional hours of support, or there is not enough NDIS funding in the child's plan to pay for changed supports;
- regular updates to the NDIS website with information for participants. Parents are encouraged to use the NDIS website as a resource for information relating to their child's NDIS supports during this time;
- temporary changes to funding arrangements to allow NDIS participants in Victoria and New South Wales to claim the cost of personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks for use when their support workers are with them, announced by the Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Hon Stuart Robert MP, on 29 July 2020; and
- provision for participants and providers to access additional cleaning supports if required to self-isolate or quarantine, and provider specific measures to ensure support workers have appropriate PPE when delivering NDIS services in Victoria or New South Wales.

### Helping Children with Autism

In response to COVID-19, the Government extended components of the Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) program, which were due to cease on 30 June 2020, until 31 March 2021. These components are:

- Individualised HCWA funding;
- Early Intervention Service Provider Panel (fee-for-service);
- Autism Advisors; and
- Early Intervention Indigenous Liaison Officers.

This extension ensures families continue to receive support through the challenges the pandemic has presented.

The department has been in regular contact with HCWA providers and can report that services have continued to be delivered. However, the ways in which some services have been delivered have changed. For example, there has been a stronger reliance on delivery services using telehealth and a focus on the creation of online resources, online forums and home packs for families.

Other components of the HCWA program were also extended prior to COVID-19 until 30 June 2021, including:

- Early Days Workshops;
- PlayConnect playgroups; and
- funding for the Raising Children Network.

The department has been in regular contact with these providers and can report that services and information continue to be delivered. However, providers have adapted their services as required during COVID-19. For example, although playgroups could not be delivered in group settings on some occasions, weekly contact with families was maintained via direct phone contact and through online forums.

#### Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres

Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres' (ASELCCs) service delivery components have also been extended until 31 March 2021 in response to COVID-19. This extension ensures families continue to receive support, especially for children who have experienced delays in their transition to the NDIS due to COVID-19.

The department has been in regular contact with the six ASELCC providers over recent months and can report the majority of children have been attending the service as usual, with the exception of the Victorian ASELCC. The ASELCCs have advised the department:

- a very low number of children have completely withdrawn from the program;
- some children have experienced time away from the centres. These children and their families have been provided with support and resources to be delivered in the home; and
- services in the centres have been delivered differently to adhere to social distancing rules. For example:
  - fewer group sessions and more one-on-one sessions have been delivered;
  - face-to-face workshops with parents have been delivered using teleconferencing facilities.

With the recent introduction of Stage 4 restrictions in Victoria, the Victorian centre has now had to close to families except to those who meet the definition of 'permitted worker' and 'vulnerable family'. All early intervention and autism specific support will be delivered via telehealth until restrictions are eased.

#### **c. Has DSS done any modelling around the impact of COVID-19 on carers of children with autism?**

The department has broadly considered the impact of COVID-19 on a range of vulnerable cohorts.