

EXCLUSIVE NATIONAL NSW DISABILITY

Ministers accuse federal government of prioritising budget surplus over NDIS

By [Alexandra Smith](#)

February 21, 2020 – 12.15am



22 [View all comments](#)

NSW and Victoria have accused the federal government of prioritising a budget surplus over people with a disability by refusing to release \$1.6 billion in critical unspent NDIS funding.

In a bipartisan attack on the federal government, NSW Disability Minister Gareth Ward and his Victorian Labor counterpart Luke Donnellan are demanding the funds be released immediately.



NSW Disability Minister Gareth Ward says the federal government is prioritising its budget surplus over the NDIS. AAP

NSW and the federal government agreed in May 2018 to establish the reserve fund, which is an accumulation of money allocated to the NDIS but not yet spent.

In a letter co-signed by the ministers to the federal minister responsible for the NDIS, Stuart Robert, Mr Ward and Mr Donnellan say it is "unacceptable" that reserve NDIS funding is not being released.

The letter says the states have been trying to work collaboratively with the Commonwealth to access the funds, which includes \$554 million for NSW, but have been told it would be withheld until after the May budget.

The Berejiklian government says it needs the money because there are people in NSW with a disability who are underfunded and others who are missing out on funding altogether.

“Short-changing people with disability in NSW cannot be used to balance the federal budget.”

NSW Disability Minister Gareth Ward

The letter, sent to Mr Robert on Thursday, says despite repeated attempts to engage with the minister and his officials since before October, there is still no "formal proposal for agreement".

"Money that is unspent at present is offsetting the Commonwealth's budget position and the NDIS should never be used as a budget measure- whilst we aren't sure this is the intention, it is a fact," the letter says.

"Money that has been committed by our respective governments to improve the lives of people with a disability must be spent to support people with disabilities in both our jurisdictions."

The federal government's promised budget surplus is under serious threat due to the economic fallout from the nation's bushfire emergency as well as the coronavirus.

Mr Ward, the first minister with a disability to hold the portfolio in NSW, said it was critical that the money "meant for NSW goes to NSW and addresses the needs of people with disability in our state".

"There is so much work to do in regional and remote areas of NSW, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities," Mr Ward said.

"We want as many people as possible to be benefiting from the NDIS, but the reality is right now there are significant barriers to accessing and utilising the scheme.

“Short-changing people with disability in NSW cannot be used to balance the federal budget.”

Mr Robert denied the reserve fund was being used "to ensure a surplus".

"The NDIS is a demand-driven scheme and all funds needed for it from the Commonwealth are available now," Mr Robert said in a statement.

"The NDIS reserve fund is not being used to ensure a surplus.

"[It] requires agreement from all states and territories – not just NSW and Victoria. I'll continue to have discussions in good faith with all states and territories to ensure we get the NDIS reserve fund right for Australians with disability."

But the NSW government says money in the reserve fund was needed now.

Mr Ward said "every time the NDIS fails a person with disability in NSW, they are robbed of the opportunity to be independent, to get the supports they need, and contribute to society".

"Everywhere I go these issues are raised, and these funds need to be released immediately, so that the money meant for NSW goes to NSW and addresses the needs of people with disability in our state," Mr Ward said.

"Does the minister really believe that the cost of services in Bronte are the same as they are in Bourke. They are not."



Alexandra Smith



Alexandra Smith is the State Political Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald.
