

Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Victorian Government

December 2017

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Foreword

The Victorian Government welcomes the report of the *Parliamentary Inquiry into services for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*.

We also acknowledge the commitment and dedication of members of the autism community, who have come together to support the report's recommendations and have agreed to work with the Victorian Government as we move forward to create better lives for people with ASD.

We want to make sure Victoria has a place for everyone, and that people with ASD have the opportunities they deserve.

This report puts a spotlight on the challenges faced by people with ASD and provides the impetus for the Victorian Government to strengthen its commitment of inclusion for all Victorians.

The importance of the report is testament to the many Victorians with ASD and their families and advocates who took the time to make valuable contributions to the Inquiry. We now have a solid foundation on which to respond to the needs and wishes of people with ASD.

Every person with ASD in Victoria is unique, with different needs and goals for the future. The report describes the breadth and diversity of need, including the significant issues faced by people with ASD who have multiple and complex needs.

The Victorian Government is committed to improving supports, services and inclusion for *all* people with ASD. That is why we will develop a comprehensive Autism Plan to assist us to achieve the change that is needed in Victoria.

To get started, the Victorian Government will provide an initial one-off investment of \$22.43 million this year so we can start making a difference while the Autism Plan is being developed. The ground work is done and it is time to work with the ASD community, those that know what we need to do, to develop an Autism Plan that puts the report's recommendations into action.

People with ASD, their families and advocates have told us that they must be involved in the development of any policies, services and supports that affect them, and we intend to work closely with them to develop the Autism Plan.

We are pleased that this engagement with the ASD community has already begun and we look forward to working together to build a more inclusive Victoria.

Martin Foley MP

Minister for Housing, Disability and Ageing

Working together

The Victorian Government realises that people with ASD, their families and advocates are the experts in what is best for them. We intend to form strong working relationships with the ASD community to respond to the recommendations of the report.

Our first step was to create a time-limited stakeholder advisory group to help shape our response to the recommendations of the Inquiry, with representatives from:

- Victorian Disability Advisory Council
- Amaze
- Association for Children with a Disability
- Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with a Disability (VALID)
- I CAN
- Autism Families Support Association
- Aspergers Victoria
- Yellow Ladybugs
- National Disability Services (Vic)

As we address the report's recommendations and plan effective strategies, there will be more engagement with people with ASD and their families and advocates through various channels. We recognise that different forms of communication suit different people and we will take advice from the ASD community about the best ways to work together.

Language

The Victorian Government recognises the power of language in changing community attitudes and driving inclusive outcomes for Victorians with a disability. We understand there is a mix of views about the best way to describe autism with an emerging preference to identity first language. People with a lived experience of autism have a right to choose their preferred description, including people with autism, people on the autism spectrum, autistic people and people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

For the purpose of consistency with the Inquiry report, the term people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been used throughout this response.

Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry

On 22 June 2017, the Family and Community Development Committee of the Victorian Parliament (the Committee) tabled its *Parliamentary Inquiry into services for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder final report*. The Inquiry was held over a two year period and included 154 submissions and 89 witnesses.

The Victorian Government accepts the need for change. The report tells us there are serious shortcomings in existing services and people with ASD and their families lack access to the supports they need to lead an everyday life.

Government welcomes the report and supports the majority of the recommendations, noting that a small number are still under review. We will rise to the challenge to create new and innovative ways to solve the problems identified in the report.

The report provides a clear path for Government to take action on many of the recommendations. Other recommendations will require deeper analysis or further work with people with ASD and their families to explore options for implementation.

All of this work will occur within the development of an Autism Plan.

A comprehensive Autism Plan

The Victorian Government, together with stakeholders, will develop an Autism Plan that responds to the recommendations of the Inquiry. The Autism Plan will drive the inclusion, support and well-being of Victorians with ASD, within our neighbourhoods, schools, health services, work places, recreation settings and all life experiences.

The ground work is done thanks to the enormous contribution made by people with ASD to the Inquiry and the work of the Committee to tell us what is needed. The recommendations set the foundation for the design of the Autism Plan. The Autism Plan will include short, medium and long terms actions over a five year outlook.

We will listen to stakeholders' guidance on the best way to develop a plan.

We've been given a clear message that it is time to act.

Key findings

The Autism Plan will draw from the Committee's report including its key findings. The Committee's recommendations are grouped into key focus areas which provide a solid foundation on which to develop the Autism Plan.

The key findings include:

- the need to better engage people with ASD in the development of all ASD related policies and services
- the need to improve the availability, adequacy and integration of services for people with ASD
- a lack of timely access to, and information about, early diagnosis and interventions
- the need to update the 2009 State Autism Plan
- significant challenges facing people with ASD in the school system and in the transition from school to work or further education
- a lack of awareness and targeted intervention services for adults with ASD
- limited opportunities to engage in employment
- difficulties with the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)
- a lack of awareness and understanding of the presentation of ASD in girls and women
- challenges accessing mainstream health and mental health services
- limited access to training, inclusive educational options, diagnosis and intervention services in rural and regional Victoria
- barriers to social inclusion, community participation and access to sports and recreational activities.

The full report can be found on the Parliament of Victoria website:

www.parliament.vic.gov.au/fcdc/inquiries/article/2588.

Our priority actions

While we work with the community to develop an Autism Plan, there are some things we can start now.

The Victorian Government will provide \$22.43 million to take some immediate actions while the plan is being developed. These actions address a number of the recommendations of the report.

Develop a public education campaign

The Victorian Government has a role to play in educating and informing the broader community to achieve a society more inclusive of ASD.

People with ASD have diverse needs based on the nature of their ASD, their cultural identity, their age and gender, their geographic location and a range of other factors. For example, girls and women with ASD have particular needs as distinct from boys and men.

We commit to develop a public education strategy that informs the Victorian community about people with ASD and their needs.

Support the transition to the NDIS

According to the report, up to 30 per cent of people accessing support from the NDIS have a primary diagnosis of ASD. Based on early feedback from people with ASD and their families, experiences of the NDIS have been mixed, particularly for those with complex support needs.

We commit to work with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to improve ASD expertise, to develop more effective communication strategies, increase flexibility in plans, build capacity to meet growth in ASD demand, improve support for rural and regional areas and ensure effective quality and safeguards are in place.

More support for children in the early years

The Victorian Government is committed to supporting children in the early years, to ensure they are happy, healthy and resilient for life.

We know that early identification and diagnosis is the key to positive outcomes for children with ASD, and we will ensure that all Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses are better equipped to identify early signs of ASD and refer children for diagnosis earlier, to make sure children and families get the intervention and support they need.

We will invest in resources and training for early childhood educators to promote inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental delays, including ASD, so they can provide a more tailored learning experience for children with ASD to give them the best possible start in life.

Support children with ASD in the school system

There are multiple challenges facing people with ASD in the school system, including the understanding of ASD within the teaching profession and the transition from school to higher education or work.

The Autism Plan will include a comprehensive education strategy for students with ASD. To strengthen system capacity in the short term while this plan is being developed, the Victorian Government will:

- deliver additional professional development in ASD to supplement existing online autism professional learning for school staff
- appoint eight autism specialist coach roles across the state to provide outreach support, training and guidance around best practice in supporting students with ASD

- expand professional autism scholarships to build capability in more teaching staff in Victorian government schools across the state
- build the capacity of teachers and school staff to better understand and support girls with ASD through the release of resources to support staff in all Victorian schools
- expand I CAN Network Manager roles to support and sustain further rollout of the I CAN Schools program across Victorian government schools
- invest in the capacity of Victorian specialist schools to support students with ASD
- pilot and refine tools and processes for the development of a new school funding model for Victorian government schools to better meet the needs of students with disabilities, including ASD
- improve professional competency of Victorian government school teachers to teach students with disabilities, including ASD, through scholarships in *Masters of Education – Special Education Needs*
- provide pathways for Victorian government schools to learn leading and best-practice inclusive education approaches to support students with disabilities, including ASD, and provide resources to support inclusive education.

Develop a responsive workforce

Victoria needs a workforce that is educated and trained to meet the diverse needs of people with ASD.

The Victorian Government commits to develop a strategy for building ASD competency across mainstream workforces – that is, health, mental health, education, justice and public transport, and community support - to better equip them to respond positively to people with ASD.

We will also develop a set of tools for the ASD specific workforce to broaden their capabilities in responding to the diversity of people with ASD, including those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities.

Create inclusive sport and recreation opportunities

Children with ASD need more sport and recreation opportunities.

In 2018, we will replicate the successful AFL Auskick for children with ASD program which has successfully engaged children with ASD in regular, locally based Auskick programs resulting in great outcomes for all children involved and their families.

We will expand this program in 2018 for other sports such as cricket, netball, basketball, tenpin bowling, horse riding, and dancing.

More support for rural and regional communities

People with ASD in regional and rural communities face unique challenges and there is much work ahead to ensure their wellbeing.

As a start, we will develop a peer support model and explore other tools to help people with ASD living in regional and rural areas to share information, identify existing opportunities for community inclusion, and feel more connected to their community.

Supporting girls and women with ASD

Victoria needs to build a greater understanding about presentation, diagnosis and support for girls and women with ASD to ensure that they can access supports and services that meet their needs.

The Victorian Government will work with the ASD community to develop mentoring, peer support, advocacy and social opportunities for girls with ASD and their families.

Our reform environment

Victoria is well placed to address the recommendations of this Inquiry. The Government's response to the Inquiry sits alongside a number of large scale reforms and initiatives already underway which will have a significant impact on people with ASD in Victoria.

This creates a healthy reform environment within which we can develop an Autism Plan to address the recommendations of the Inquiry.

Absolutely everyone: state disability plan 2017-2020

Absolutely everyone outlines how the Government is ensuring every Victorian with a disability can lead a satisfying everyday life, including people with ASD. The plan tackles the negative attitudes and barriers that more than one million Victorians with a disability deal with on a daily basis.

It sets out our priorities and actions for achieving inclusion under four key pillars:

- inclusive communities
- health, housing and wellbeing
- fairness and safety
- contributing lives

The plan provides a range of immediate priority actions, a focus for further initiatives, and a framework for measuring progress. A number of the key priorities and actions under *Absolutely everyone* link directly to recommendations of the Parliamentary Inquiry. The plan includes the development of a comprehensive economic participation plan, including a strong focus on increasing access to jobs in the public and other sectors. Inclusive education is another key priority of *Absolutely everyone*, including reforms for practice, workforce development and funding.

Education State

The Victorian Government, through the Department of Education and Training, has a number of reforms and initiatives underway to better support pre-school and school-aged children with ASD. These include:

- investing in kindergarten, Maternal and Child Health, and parenting supports, to help get children ready for kindergarten, ready for school and ready for happy and successful lives
- enabling more children, including those with ASD, to benefit from Early Childhood Intervention Services while they wait to transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme
- meeting growing demand for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program by providing additional staff in the kindergarten setting to support children with a disability and provide specialist consultancy and training for kindergarten educators.

The Victorian Government has committed to an inclusive education reform agenda to ensure school-aged children with disabilities and additional needs can learn in safe, positive and supportive classroom environments. This includes funding boost to provide targeted resources to schools to support students with learning challenges, including ASD.

The inclusive education agenda is providing schools with additional resources, support and guidance on how they can better respond to the learning needs of students with disabilities, and builds on the Special Needs Plan for Victorian Schools.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The NDIS is a national program that is providing a new way of delivering services and support to people with permanent and significant disability in Australia, including people with ASD.

Victoria is supporting the transition to the NDIS, with the full rollout of the NDIS to be complete by 2019. Once full transition is complete it is expected that the number of Victorians receiving disability supports will increase from 78,000 to 105,000 and the amount of funding for supports will double to \$5.1 billion.

The NDIS intends to provide greater flexibility and choice regarding the supports and services that people with a disability receive to meet their individual needs.

Disability quality and safeguards reforms

The *Parliamentary Inquiry into abuse in disability services* examined some of the systemic issues impacting on the reporting and prevention of abuse of people with a disability. The final report highlighted the need to build a more responsive system supported by a skilled workforce to address the issues of abuse.

The introduction of the Disability Act Amendment Bill supports the Government's zero tolerance approach to abuse of people with a disability. The powers of the Disability Services Commissioner have been strengthened to support the principle of zero tolerance of abuse of people with a disability.

The Government is also expanding the Disability Worker Exclusion Scheme, developing a registration and accreditation scheme for disability workers and providing additional training for Community Visitors to identify and report abuse.

Victoria's 10-year mental health plan

Victoria's 10-year mental health plan, released in November 2015, outlines the Government's long-term aim to achieve better outcomes for Victorians with mental illness, their families and carers. The plan is implemented under the guidance of the Mental Health Expert Taskforce which advises the Minister for Mental Health on reform priorities and effective monitoring of the plan's outcomes.

Initiatives under the 10-year mental health plan to date include:

- a Victorian suicide prevention framework 2016–25, released in July 2016
- major reforms in forensic mental health
- expanded support for children and young people
- a new Mental Health Workforce Strategy.

Corrections Victoria Disability Framework 2016-2019

The Victorian Government is committed to promoting the rights of prisoners and offenders with a disability. The Corrections Victoria Disability Framework 2016-19 *Expanding the opportunities* supports a consistent approach to the management of prisoners and offenders with a disability and aims to strengthen and streamline services and supports for this cohort in the areas of identification, assessment, intervention and support.

Part of this framework is the Disability Pathways Program, which integrates case management alongside clinical, custodial, and educational programs to support offenders and prisoners with cognitive impairments as they navigate the criminal justice system and transition to the community.

Corrections Victoria is working with the NDIA to develop the opportunities that the NDIS provides for offenders with a disability, including ASD. Victoria will also continue to deliver disability justice services and supports which are not the responsibility of the NDIS.

Victoria Police Accessibility Action Plan 2017-2020

Victoria Police has identified people with disability as a priority community and has undertaken initiatives within the *Accessibility Action Plan 2014-2017* to improve outcomes for people with disability. The Accessibility Action Plan does not focus on specific disabilities – it emphasises the importance of a human rights and person centred approach focussed on identifying and meeting the needs of individuals. This will continue to be the focus moving forward however there are opportunities to build specific knowledge around key areas relevant to policing and ASD has been identified as one of those areas.

The next version of the *Accessibility Action Plan (2017-2020)* is currently being developed and will continue to emphasise the need for a person centred approach and consider initiatives to build police capability in this area.

Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-2027

Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-27 provides an overarching framework for action to realise the vision for 'Self-determining, healthy and safe Aboriginal people and communities' in Victoria'.

Korin Korin Balit-Djak is informed by an extensive consultation process with Aboriginal communities across Victoria, as well as a strong evidence base, including Koolin Balit evaluation findings.

The plan embraces a cultural determinants approach to Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety, which aligns with the Aboriginal community's holistic understanding of health and wellbeing.

Korin Korin Balit-Djak details how the department will work with Aboriginal communities, community organisations, other government departments and mainstream service providers - now and into the future - to support Aboriginal community leadership and provide culturally safe and responsive health and human services.

The plan includes strategic directions for improving outcomes for Aboriginal people with a disability to ensure they have access to the culturally safe supports they require to live healthy self-determined lives.