

South Australia's First Autism Strategy – Discussion Paper

LGA Submission

February 2023

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Introduction

About the Local Government Association of South Australia

The Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA) is the voice of local government in South Australia, representing all 68 councils across the state and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara.

The *South Australian Local Government Act 1999* recognises the LGA as a public authority for the purpose of promoting and advancing the interests of local government. The LGA is also recognised in and has prescribed functions in 29 other South Australian Acts of Parliament. The LGA provides leadership, support, representation, and advocacy relevant to the needs of our member councils.

The LGA is a strong advocate for policies that achieve better outcomes for councils and the communities they represent. Councils are a partner in government and part of the solution. Working together we can make positive contributions to the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Our submission

The LGA welcomes the opportunity to provide the following feedback to the State Government in response to the *South Australia's First Autism Strategy – Discussion Paper (the Strategy)*.

As the tier of government closest to the community, responsible for community services and interventions in the public realm, local government will have an important role in the implementation of the Strategy at the local level.

This submission has been prepared with feedback from the local government sector and should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from individual councils. This submission addresses key areas relevant to local government.

The LGA secretariat look forward to working with the Department as the development of the Strategy progresses. If you have any questions relating to this submission, please don't hesitate to contact Senior Policy Officer Belinda Tassone at belinda.tassone@lga.sa.gov.au or 82242051.

LGA policy

Local government recognises the imperative in ensuring all individuals can access community services and facilities to tackle issues contributing to social exclusion. Councils shall continue to explore and implement strategies through planning and community functions that promote access and inclusion for all individuals.

The LGA also acknowledges that councils, through their Disability Access and Inclusion Plans are pivotal in supporting the needs of autistic people and the autism communities in their local areas.

General comments

The LGA supports and congratulates the Malinauskas Government on their nation-first appointment of an Assistant Minister for Autism, Hon Emily Bourke MLC to drive the strategy and their commitment to creating a more inclusive and fairer society for all.

The LGA also acknowledges and commends the efforts of the Department for Human Services to ensure that the strategy is co-designed with and for autistic people and autism communities.

The LGA noted in the submission into the review of the *Disability Inclusion Act 2018 (SA)*, that councils reported that most were working with existing or limited budgets ranging from \$50,000 to \$5,000 – some negligible – depending on the size and location of the council to implement initiatives under their DAIPs.

Councils are an ideal partner for local delivery of State Government programs and can efficiently leverage state monies. The LGA calls for DHS to work with the LGA to explore additional grant opportunities/funding from State and Federal governments to enable councils to support the implementation of the Strategy and to deliver access and inclusion initiatives in local communities that support autistic and autism communities.

Topic 1: State Autism Strategy

The State Autism Charter

The LGA consider the following principles as important to lead the work of the State Government:

1. Increased workplace knowledge, understanding and appreciation of autism through informed training provided or endorsed by autistic people, including, but not limited to, best practise communication.
2. Maintaining collaboration, consultation and conversation with the autistic and autism communities.
3. Increased autism knowledge and understanding for the built environment of workplaces and organisations.
4. Maintaining a safe, supportive and inclusive social environment.
5. Respect the needs and rights of children as they develop.
6. A whole co-ordinated Government approach towards autism inclusion.

In addition to those above, it is suggested that additional principles relating to learning from best practices and creating an environment that allows for innovation and the use of best practice in the development of policies and actions.

It is important that underpinning the Charter is information and resources for government departments to make practical, long term and meaningful cultural changes. It is suggested that the State Government in consultation with the LGA develop guidelines, resources and training in universal design including the diversity of the community among which are the autistic and autism communities.

Topic 2: Defining Autism

Definition of autism

The LGA does not have any preference of one over the other. It is suggested that any definition uses plain English, and any 'medical' terms are sufficiently explained.

Language

The LGA supports using 'interchangeable language' in recognition that the language preference of autistic people and the autism community is mixed.

Topic 3: Rights, autonomy and diversity

The LGA recognises that autism presents itself differently and no two people share the same strengths and challenges. It is suggested that an awareness campaign to build the collective knowledge and

understanding, highlighting that autism cuts across different cultural groups, including LGBTQI+, First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities would assist to support the fundamental human rights of autistic people.

Topic 4: Community Attitudes

It is important to provide support to local government for the development of resources and the delivery of programs that build staff and community knowledge of autism and the impact that inadequately designed programs, services, spaces and places can have on those in the autistic and autism communities.

Councils have a wide reach into local communities and could play a role in supporting and amplifying State Government-led awareness campaigns to help create a stronger sense of belonging. As noted in the Discussion Paper, reducing stigma and increasing the community's collective knowledge and understanding is important to disproving myths and misconceptions about autism.

Topic 5: Access to Government Services

The LGA notes that like the state government, access to services run by local government is important in the social, cultural and economic life of autistic people and the autism community.

The LGA would seek to have any resources, policies or procedures developed through the strategy shared with the local government sector, as a partner in government to ensure there is a cumulative impact of the efforts in improving the experiences and accessibility for autistic people and the autism community.

Physical locations where government services are located should seek to become "autistic friendly spaces". There is plenty of good literature on how these spaces should be designed.

Topic 6: Health, mental health and wellbeing

Our members have noted that mental health and wellbeing is a significant factor in autistic people's ability to access and participate in community. The LGA supports action taken to ensure that diagnostic processes, service coordination pathways, and referrals are made simpler and able to evolve with the needs and preferences of the person. Members have suggested that the crossover between the Department of Health, the National Disability Insurance Agency, and mental health services is one area that could be improved.

Councils work in the prevention space and provide many services through the vast networks of community centres and libraries and are well positioned to assist with the dissemination of information to better support autistic people and the autism community. Information relating to the lack of access to local disability advocates, particularly in regional areas has been raised by councils as problematic.

Additionally, social inclusion is paramount to the work of local government. Councils play an important role in promoting the health and wellbeing of communities and there is an opportunity to promote and participate in targeted interventions to support inclusion of autistic people and the autism community.

An example of a successful local government initiative was the Campbelltown City Council's piloted 'Speed Friending,' initiative. This initiative was a social event for people on the autism spectrum or who experience social difficulties. Four events were held in 2021 and in 2022 an ongoing social group was established with local residents and attendees of Speed Friending.

The Speed Friending initiative was created in partnership with skilled and experienced autism professionals and guided by a committee of people with lived experience; and was also a finalist in the 2022 Local Government Professional's *Leadership Excellence Awards* in the category of 'Leadership in Community Services & Development'.

Funding councils to run programs and services for autistic people and the autism community and modifying spaces to be 'autistic friendly' would be welcomed and is a way that councils can help to increase health and wellbeing outcomes for people with autism and the autism community.

Topic 7: Education, Employment and Workforce

Local government in South Australia employs around 8,825 FTE, people across a wide range of roles, skills and abilities, many of which are identified in the National Skills Commission, ranging from:

- manual labour in streets, parks and recreation services;
- professional roles such as accounting, planning, engineering and law;
- administrative and support roles such as executive support, library operations and meeting administration; and
- public administration roles in governance and policy development, and as elected members on council.

Councils also use volunteers for much of their work and many councils employ volunteer coordinators for this purpose. Volunteer roles include from library officers, community bus drivers and visitor information services.

There are opportunities to address the unconscious bias in employment and challenge perceptions of the work which people with disability can do. The LGA understands councils would benefit from a targeted coaching and mentoring program, to reduce unconscious bias and become more disability friendly.

The LGA would seek to have support provided to the local government sector to review and develop appropriate person-centred human resource practices – including recruitment, induction, on the job support, mentoring and career development strategies for autistic employees.

Members further suggest that funding to help to establish support groups for people with autism and their families for those diagnosed later in life, and those aged 18-30 years to assist with post-school pathways, and carer support groups would be beneficial.

Topic 8: Spaces and Places

The LGA seeks to see greater support from the State Government for the development of design standards and the identification/dissemination of best practice examples.

Councils currently face difficulties in managing public spaces to be suitable for people with a disability. The LGA recently wrote to the Minister for Planning, Hon Nick Champion MP, calling on the State Government to prepare Design Standards related to Universal Design, noting that there is the opportunity through Section 69 of the *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016 (SA)* for the State Planning Commission to prepare Design Standards, one of which could relate to universal design to improve public and private built environments.

These design standards could prescribe ways that the public realm or infrastructure should be designed to incorporate universal design principles supporting socially inclusive communities, including supporting autistic people and the autistic and autism communities.

A universal design standard would also contribute and align with the State Government's first *Disability Inclusion Plan 2019-2023* (DIP), Priority 7 – Universal design across South Australia which seeks to:

“Elevate the design quality of South Australia’s built environment and public realms through promoting design quality policy and the principles of Universal Design.”

The DIP further notes under Priority 7:

“Local council access and inclusion planning to consider consultation outcomes including:

- incorporating Universal Design principles in criteria for all new building and public projects and planning for programs, services and events
- developing Universal Design training plans for staff and contractors
- review of availability of accessible car parks.”

Currently there is no mechanism for councils to incorporate these design elements, except for the Design Overlay in the Code. However, this only applies to parts of metropolitan Adelaide which are of State-wide importance and where high-quality design outcomes are sought, such as the City of Adelaide, Urban Corridor zones and the Port Adelaide Centre Subzone.

Additionally, a grant or resourcing that supports councils to upgrade public spaces to be autistic friendly such as in libraries, community centres and parks and play spaces would assist councils in supporting the implementation of the Strategy. For example, Hendrie St Reserve Inclusive Playground located in the City of Marion incorporated communication boards to assist children with autism be independent. This type of initiative could be repeated across the South Australia.

Summary

As a level of government, councils are committed to promoting the wellbeing of all citizens, including autistic people and the autistic community. Through the development of DAIPs, there is a sense of optimism within local government in South Australia that issues relevant to people with disabilities are starting to attract attention and be heard. South Australian councils will continue to be part of the solution in supporting and promoting opportunities for people with disabilities, including autistic people and the autism community.

The LGA and our member councils looks forward to working with the State Government and the Department of Human Services in developing SA’s first Autism Strategy.



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