

# AMAZE SUBMISSION

## Building autism friendly environments

Promoting meaningful access and participation for all.

### Submission

Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Delivery of Outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020, to build inclusive and accessible communities.

28 April 2017



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# Executive Summary

People on the autism spectrum can face a range of environmental barriers when seeking to participate in, and make a valued contribution to Australian society. These barriers can relate to the structural or physical features of a built environment (i.e. lighting and noise), as well as cognitive and/or social differences experienced by many people on the autism spectrum (including a need for routine or predictability).

When measuring the delivery of outcomes to date under the *National Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020*, to build inclusive and accessible communities, we encourage the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs to consider whether progress has been made towards reducing the barriers faced by many people on the autism spectrum.

There is robust evidence that a building's design or modification can improve access and participation for people on the autism spectrum. In particular, sensory regulation can be supported through design/modifications relating to spatial configuration, acoustics, lighting, thermal comfort, materials, air quality and safety. There is also emerging evidence of tools that can be effective to support cognitive differences. For example, social scripts can support understanding of what to expect when visiting a place or event and sensory maps can support identification of high sensory (i.e. loud, busy, lots of visual stimuli) and low sensory (i.e. quieter) areas.

Amaze has collaborated with a number of innovative Victorian organisations who have recognised the high number of people on the autism spectrum in their community and demonstrated leadership by modifying their environments and/or provided tools to better support them. For example, with support from Amaze, Northland Shopping Centre has established a world first quiet room for people on the autism spectrum that may need time out from the noise, crowds and other sensory stimuli of a shopping centre. Amaze has also collaborated with Museums Victoria and Parks Victoria on their development of social scripts and sensory maps to support visitors on the autism spectrum.

These initiatives (together with similar initiatives led by Sovereign Hill and Campaspe Regional Libraries) have proven highly successful in reducing barriers to access and participation in a cost-effective and sustainable way, particularly where a comprehensive approach has been taken (combining resources such as social scripts and sensory maps with structural modifications and staff training) and where the initiatives have been developed and continue to be evaluated in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum and autism organisations. These examples also demonstrate the vast audiences that can benefit (i.e. across age groups, people with and without disabilities and people with mental health conditions), as well as the diverse locations in which access and participation can be supported.

However, if meaningful progress is to be made towards reducing environmental barriers across Australia, isolated initiatives by individual organisations will not be enough. Government leadership is required. While encouraging progress has been made by Australian governments towards improving access for people with physical disabilities under universal design standards and building codes, these instruments do very little to support people on the autism spectrum or with intellectual disabilities or mental health conditions. We recommend that the Commonwealth take the following action to reduce the environmental barriers people on the autism spectrum continue to experience:

1. Through this inquiry, review the extent to which environmental barriers continue to restrict access and participation for people on the autism spectrum (in ongoing consultation with people on the autism spectrum).
2. Develop guidelines for people involved in planning phases (of building new or modifying existing environments) on how to incorporate design/modifications that may support people on the autism spectrum and the broader community. Planners should also be encouraged to consult with people on the autism spectrum that will be using a specific environment.
3. Review the extent to which the *Commonwealth Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010* are effective in supporting people on the autism spectrum, and how they may be amended to require universal design approaches that reduce the barriers that continue to be experienced.
4. Through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, build awareness and understanding across the community of the benefits of inclusive environments, the barriers people on the autism spectrum face and how the community (including individuals, governments, public organisations and the private sector) may support people on the autism spectrum.
5. Provide funding and/or grants for business and community organisations to develop resources such as social scripts and sensory maps to support access to their venues and events (in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum and autism organisations).
6. Encourage state and territory governments to consider how they can lead universal design approaches that support people on the autism spectrum, particularly in schools, public transport and in other public places.



# 1. Introduction

Amaze welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee (SCARC) Inquiry into the Delivery of Outcomes under the *National Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020*, to build inclusive and accessible communities.

As the peak body for people on the autism spectrum and their families in Victoria, we encourage the SCARC to assess whether progress has been made towards reducing the environmental barriers faced by people on the autism spectrum when seeking to access and participate in public life.

The large gap in outcomes for people on the autism spectrum and those without disability remains stark across Australia. The gap is across the lifespan and supported by current available data, be it in education, employment, wellbeing, community participation. Recent international research indicates a gap in average lifespan of 16 years.

Specific and targeted, government led responses are urgently needed to address this disparity that support not only people on the autism spectrum directly, but that build the capacity of the broader community (including individuals, governments, public organisations and the private sector) to understand the needs of people on the autism spectrum and provide better support. This will benefit not only people on the autism spectrum their families and carers, but all Australians through resulting economic gains.

There is evidence that structural modifications and resources to support sensory needs and cognitive differences in people on the autism spectrum can significantly improve their ability to access and participate in public life, including in school, employment and recreational activities. While innovative steps have been taken by some organisations across Australia to improve access and participation at their venues and events, a government led approach is urgently required to remove environmental barriers, meaningfully support access and participation and improve outcomes for people on the autism spectrum at a national level.

## 2. Who is Amaze?

Amaze is the peak body in Victoria for people on the autism spectrum and their supporters. Amaze is a member-based not-for-profit organisation established in 1967 that represents around 55,000 Victorians living on the autism spectrum.

Amaze's vision is for a society that respects the dignity of every person on the autism spectrum and offers every person on the autism spectrum real opportunities to participate and contribute.

Amaze's purpose is to work towards every person on the autism spectrum having the opportunity to exercise their own choice to participate meaningfully in, and make a valued contribution to, our society.

To achieve this we:

- Build awareness and understanding of autism;
- Develop community capacity by working with others to help them value and support people on the autism spectrum and their families; and
- Increase the number of opportunities for participation and valued contributions for people on the autism spectrum.

We regularly engage and consult with people on the autism spectrum to ensure that their voices, and the voices of those who support them, are central to our decision making processes and advocacy.



Of particular relevance to this submission, in 2016 Amaze conducted a survey ('Amaze Survey, 2016') asking participants a number of questions relating to diagnosis, education, employment, support services, the National Disability Insurance Scheme and an open ended section to share anything further. We had a significant response to the survey, with over 500 responses, representing a mix of people on the autism spectrum, family members of a person/s on the autism spectrum, carers of a person/s on the autism spectrum; educators, service providers, employers and members of community organisations. In their responses, many respondents identified the personal impacts of environmental barriers that restrict their access to, and participation in, public life. Many of these responses are included throughout this submission.

### 3. What is autism?

*"If you've only met one person with autism, you've only met one person with autism".*  
Dr Stephen Shore

Autism Spectrum Disorder (or ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition with symptoms that may appear early in life. Amaze uses the terms "the autism spectrum" and "autism" to refer to this group of conditions. The term "spectrum" is used to describe the range of characteristics and abilities found in people with autism, as well as developmental changes, such as improvement in language ability, which might occur over time in a person with autism.

Autism is not a disease. People are born on the autism spectrum. It is a lifelong condition and there is no cure, but the way it affects people may change over time as a person grows and matures. Approximately 1% of the population is on the autism spectrum. Currently, four times as many males are diagnosed than females, but the number of females on the autism spectrum is increasing.<sup>1</sup>

Autism has directly touched the lives of the majority of Australians. An online poll of 1,012 Australians, conducted by Essential Research (commissioned by Amaze) in July 2016, to measure the public's awareness and understanding of autism found that 52% of respondents knew someone with autism (including 15% that had a family member with autism and 35% of people knew someone who has a family member with autism). People on the autism spectrum also comprise the largest diagnostic group of National Disability Insurance Scheme participants, with 28.3% identifying autism as their primary disability.<sup>2</sup>

Every individual on the autism spectrum is different, but these features are present in some form: challenges in communication and interaction; sharing interests and emotions; using and understanding non-verbal communication; making friends and adjusting behaviour to different social situation; repetitive speech and behaviour; interests that are very intense or narrow in focus; and a need for predictability and routine.

In addition to these features, people on the autism spectrum often experience hyper-sensitivity (over sensitive) and/or hypo-sensitivity (under sensitive) to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment. Sensory inputs or aspects may include visual stimuli (e.g. lights, movement, patterns, colours, sound and loud noise, smell, taste, touch, temperature, pain, sense of balance, movement and position in space). Sensory sensitivities are now recognised as a core

<sup>1</sup> ABS (2017). *Autism in Australia*. Catalogue No. 4430 – Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings 2015. Available at <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4430.0Main%20Features752015?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4430.0&issue=2015&num=&view=>.

<sup>2</sup> NDIA 2nd Quarterly Report to COAG 2016-17.

Available at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/information-publications-and-reports/quarterly-reports>.



symptom of autism and in 2013 they were included in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) for autism.<sup>3</sup>

Autism may be present with other conditions and it is important to understand the implications of this for each person. For example people on the autism spectrum may also be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, language delay, epilepsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, anxiety and/or depression. Furthermore, no two people on the autism spectrum are alike. In practical terms this translates into each person having diverse needs for support in different areas of daily life to enable them to participate and contribute meaningfully to their community.

## 4. What are the barriers to accessing built and natural environments?

*“There are lots of places and activities we avoid due to inappropriate conditions and lack of support for kids on the spectrum. This has impacted our quality of life. Lack of understanding and compassion in the community reduces the social experiences and friendships my children can have”*

*(Amaze survey, 2016)*

An “autism friendly environment<sup>4</sup>” attracts, actively seeks and supports participation by people on the autism spectrum (and their families and carers), including through adjustments to support communication, sensory regulation and cognitive needs.

While some positive steps have been taken across Victoria, people on the autism spectrum continue to face significant barriers to accessing and participating in a vast range of environments. These environments include public venues and events, public transport, commercial premises/employment, education facilities, parks, libraries, sports and recreation facilities, shopping centers, movie theatres and more. For many people on the autism spectrum, these barriers grossly limit their full inclusion and participation, compromising their ability to live an ordinary life.

For people on the autism spectrum, access issues can relate to:

1. Structure or physical features of the built environment: including lighting, acoustics, smells, colors, spatial features, flooring and other design elements. They may also include the way information is conveyed, for example a lack of non-verbal communication or signs.<sup>5</sup>
2. Cognitive or social differences: including a need for routine/predictability and delayed or single channel processing (may not hear/see/feel at the same time).<sup>6</sup>

Each person on the autism spectrum will experience these issues differently. Some people with hyper – sensitivity may experience mild to moderate anxiety and distress, while others will experience a high level of sensory overload and anxiety. In turn, some people may be able remain in the environment but be unable to interact or participate in a meaningful way, while others will simply be unable to stay. A person that is hypo-sensitive may not be able to remain in an environment if it does not meet their sensory needs, i.e. relating to touch or visual stimuli. Furthermore, a person that needs predictability or routine may seek to control the environment and the people around them if they are experiencing an absence of predictability or routine. If the person is unable, or is not supported, to regulate their senses or emotions they may experience anxiety and related behaviors.

<sup>3</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). US.

<sup>4</sup> “Environment” refers to anything from a space or room to a whole building.

<sup>5</sup> Shell, S (2016). *Why buildings for autistic people are better for everyone*. Forte Building Science. Available at <https://network.aia.org/HigherLogic/.../DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileK...>

<sup>6</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). US



If a person on the autism spectrum does not feel supported to access their community or places where they work, learn, socialize or play, they are likely to avoid or withdraw from these environments, leading to social isolation for both people on the autism spectrum and their families. It is well known that social isolation leads to poor mental health, education, social and economic outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Designing environments with the characteristics of autism in mind can not only reduce anxiety and increase participation and independence of people on the autism spectrum, it can also be cost saving and benefit the wider community. There is a significant commercial advantage to creating autism friendly environments if they support and attract people on the autism spectrum and their families.<sup>8</sup>

While there is robust evidence relating to the design features and tools that may best support people on the autism spectrum (discussed in detail below), there is also a need for ongoing engagement and consultation with people on the autism spectrum about the barriers faced and how these may be reduced. Significant learnings should also be taken from businesses and organisations that have already taken steps to make their environment more accessible (see case studies below).

## 5. Public awareness

*“There is a fundamental lack of awareness of what autism is & as a result all too often people aren't aware of what modifications they can make to an environment/situation to make it more accommodating for someone on the spectrum. There needs to be greater awareness & education”.*  
(Amaze survey, 2016)

While community awareness of autism and the needs of people on the autism spectrum is increasing, there is an ongoing lack of understanding among Australians of what they can do to actually support autistic people.

The online poll of 1,012 Australians, conducted by Essential Research (commissioned by Amaze) in July 2016 found that:

- 64% of respondents were aware that people on the autism spectrum can be over or under sensitive to stimuli like light and noise; and
- 72% of respondents agreed that schools, workplaces and the wider community (retail, recreation, hospitals etc.) need to have a better understanding of how to support people on the autism spectrum.

Yet only 29% of respondents reported having a good understanding of how to support people on the autism spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

The polling demonstrates the urgent need to build the broader community's capacity to understand how it may support people on the autism spectrum – whether as family members, friends, students, colleagues or visitors to public places or events. This capacity building should be prioritised under the National Disability Insurance Scheme through its Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) work.

<sup>7</sup> National People with Disabilities and Carer Council (2009). *Shut out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*. National Disability Strategy Consultation Report. Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Boyle C (2016). *Autism and the built environment – using design to improve outcomes*. Autism Housing Pathways. Available at <http://autismhousingpathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Autism-and-the-built-environment-%E2%80%93-using-design-1.pdf>; Shell, S (2016). *Why buildings for autistic people are better for everyone*. Forte Building Science. Available at <https://network.aia.org/HigherLogic/.../DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileK...>

<sup>9</sup> Essential Research (2016). *The Essential Report – Autism questions*, 19 July 2016.



## 6. The evidence and initiatives of organisations across Victoria.

### (a) Modifications to structural or built elements of environments

*“I’ve had increasing trouble over the past few years with sensitivity to light. Partly because of the new bright LED downlights, of which there are several in each room, and partly because of increased responsibilities equal less down time. I would love it if the government and builders considered light sensitivity when building new spaces...Same with open plan areas - large open plan area at work.....is huge, so it doesn’t take much to make it too noisy to concentrate.”*

*“The school does not have sensory room for kids with ASD to calm or self sooth themselves down during recess or lunch time. The school needs to do more to help support kids with ASD”.*

*“... Better sensory management in classrooms. More quiet places in the playground...”*

*“The most difficult thing about finding employment is “having time & space for autism, as well as understanding. Adapting sensory environment to individual needs”.*

*“Anxiety and Social Anxiety are the biggest barrier to finding employment. There needs to be employers that encourage special needs to apply and have a quiet environment to work in”.*

*(Amaze survey, 2016)*

#### (i) Design guidelines

Across Australia, welcome progress has been made towards improving access for people with physical disabilities under Commonwealth and state/territory universal design standards and building codes, such as the *Commonwealth Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010*, however these instruments do very little to support people on the autism spectrum or with intellectual disabilities or mental health conditions.

Drawing on recent studies, physical elements that may be managed through a universal design approach to building design or modification – to support sensory regulation in particular - may relate to spatial configuration, acoustics, lighting, thermal comfort, materials, air quality and safety.<sup>10</sup> See Table 1 for examples of the types of adjustments that may be considered.<sup>11</sup> Planning with these design recommendations in mind will almost always be cheaper than attempting to retrofit in future years (see for example **Case Study 5: Shire of Campaspe’s regional libraries** , regarding the Campaspe Regional Libraries’ challenges in replacing a stripy floor that can be overwhelming for visitors on the autism spectrum).

<sup>10</sup> Shell, S (2016). *Why buildings for autistic people are better for everyone*. Forte Building Science. Available at <https://network.aia.org/HigherLogic/.../DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileK...>

<sup>11</sup> For further guidance regarding physical design to support people on the autism spectrum see: Boyle C (2016). *Autism and the built environment – using design to improve outcomes*. Autism Housing Pathways. Available at <http://autismhousingpathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Autism-and-the-built-environment-%E2%80%93-using-design-1.pdf>; Beaver C (2006). *Designing environments for children and adults with ASD*. World Autism Conference and Exhibition, Cape Town, 22 August 2006, available at <http://www.autism-architects.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Cape-Town-Conference-Paper-2006-pdf.pdf>; Simpson S (2016). *Checklist for autism friendly environments*. South-west Yorkshire Partnership, NHS Foundation Trust. Available at <http://www.hirstwood.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Checklist-for-Autism-Friendly-Environments-September-2016.pdf>; Brand A (2010). *Living in the Community – Housing Design for Adults with Autism*. Helen Hamlyn Centre. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265843984\\_Living\\_in\\_the\\_Community\\_Housing\\_Design\\_for\\_Adults\\_with\\_Autism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265843984_Living_in_the_Community_Housing_Design_for_Adults_with_Autism); Vogel C (2008). *Classroom Design for Living and Learning with Autism*. Autism Asperger’s Digest. May/June 2008. Available at [http://www.designshare.com/index.php/articles/classroom\\_autism/](http://www.designshare.com/index.php/articles/classroom_autism/).





**Table 1: Design Guidelines<sup>12</sup>**

Dimension	Recommendation
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use multiple methods to understand group needs (ethnography)</li> <li>Involve occupants in initial design discussions</li> <li>Focus on flexibility over 'getting it right'</li> <li>Provide ornamentation in select locations</li> </ul>
Spatial configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide more floor area than typical</li> <li>Do not create large spaces for small group or individual work</li> <li>Anticipate layout of furnishings to reinforce the intended occupation</li> <li>Create a strategy for wayfinding that uses landmarks</li> </ul>
Acoustics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and validate best practice for background noise level and reverberation time</li> <li>Limit sound transmission from outdoors and adjacent spaces</li> <li>Provide biophilic soundscapes (i.e. nature sounds) in selected spaces</li> <li>Identify and remove noise sources, especially those with tonal dominance or intermittent occurrence</li> </ul>
Lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide sufficient daylight and artificial light for health benefits</li> <li>Provide lighting controls</li> <li>Use natural, low-saturation colors and avoid large areas of intense color</li> <li>Adjust lighting at night to minimize interference with circadian rhythm</li> <li>Provide dimmers for each lighting area, based on task</li> <li>Conceal lamps from direct view and set limits for luminance contrast</li> </ul>
Thermal comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide ceiling fans and operable windows</li> <li>Vary temperature set points for transient and collaborative spaces</li> <li>Limit expansive areas of glass</li> <li>Provide thermostats for occupant control</li> </ul>
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify materials to be avoided in the space, such as heavy metals and halo-generated flame retardants</li> <li>Avoid PVC, especially in flooring materials</li> </ul>
Air quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide 40 cubic feet per minute of ventilation air to each occupant</li> <li>Monitor outdoor ozone and PM2.5, especially in urban settings</li> <li>Provide UVGI and activated carbon filters. Use MERV-13 filters</li> <li>Isolate contaminant sources, such as copy machines</li> <li>Avoid air fresheners, toxic cleaners and fragrant hygiene products</li> <li>Provide separated spaces for food preparation and consumption</li> </ul>
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design appropriate risk and eliminate hazards</li> <li>Anchor large, unstable items and avoid sharp corners</li> <li>Limit hot water temperatures</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> Shell, S (2016). *Why buildings for autistic people are better for everyone*. Forte Building Science. Available at <https://network.aia.org/HigherLogic/.../DownloadDocumentFile.aspx?DocumentFileK...>



There is also specific and robust evidence on the specific design considerations that should apply in schools, public housing and healthcare settings to better support people on the autism spectrum. For example:

- **Housing:** Design principles and standards are available that could be applied to housing design, not only to promote sensory regulation but also to support social interaction, familiarity, stability, privacy needs and access to the community.<sup>13</sup> Simple steps may include no fluorescent lights, quiet spaces, sound proofed walls and doors etc.<sup>14</sup> In supported housing, staff should also be trained in these matters and be given the tools to deliver people centered care and support.<sup>15</sup> People on the autism spectrum could also be supported to rent accommodation through clearly understood versions of leases or other guidance on what it means to be a housemate or tenant, appropriate use of property, resolving disputes etc. Management of the needs of people on the autism spectrum in housing will not only enhance the lives of occupants, it will also reduce the costs of property damage, minimize harm, reduce the cost of supports and protect leasing arrangements.<sup>16</sup>
- **Schools and other educational facilities:** A range of design principles are available to schools and other education facilities to promote sensory regulation, communication, transition, learning and other needs.<sup>17</sup> For example, Mostafa (2014) recommends that school design for students with ASD incorporate seven principles: acoustics, spatial sequencing; escape; compartmentalisation; transition spaces; sensory zoning; and safety. Each of these principles provides general information to designers for consideration without listing prescriptive criteria.
- **Healthcare environments:** People on the autism spectrum may find the signs, sounds, smells and touch sensations of healthcare environments particularly distressing. Modifications to the environment can reduce this distress, through healthcare staff finding out what affects a person and nurses being trained to make simple changes (such as altering lighting and closing doors quietly).<sup>18</sup>
- **Workplace:** There is emerging evidence on how workplaces may be better designed to support participation by people on the autism spectrum, including through supporting sensory regulation (i.e. managing visual stimuli, sound, space), as well as supporting social, communication and cognitive needs.<sup>19</sup> Autism CRC is currently developing an Integrated Employment Success Tool to guide employers on how they can best facilitate successful employment outcomes for people on the autism spectrum.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ahrentzen and Stelle (2009). *Advancing Full spectrum Housing: Designing for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Phoenix, Arizona. Brand A (2010). *Living in the Community – Housing Design for Adults with Autism*. Helen Hamlyn Centre.

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Ahrentzen and Stelle (2009). *Advancing Full spectrum Housing: Designing for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Phoenix, Arizona; Brand A (2010). *Living in the Community – Housing Design for Adults with Autism*. Helen Hamlyn Centre; Braddock and Rowell (2011), *Making Houses that work: A resource Guide for families living with ASD and Co-occurring behaviours*. Creative Housing Solutions and Rowell Brokaw Architects. Available at [http://parenttoparentnys.org/images/uploads/pdfs/Making\\_Homes\\_That\\_Work\\_A\\_Resource\\_Guide\\_\(2\).pdf](http://parenttoparentnys.org/images/uploads/pdfs/Making_Homes_That_Work_A_Resource_Guide_(2).pdf).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Mostafa M (2014). *Architecture for autism: autism ASOECTSS in school design*, International Journal of Architectural Research, 8(1), 143 – 158.

<sup>18</sup> Hahn S (2012). *Environments and autistic spectrum conditions*. Nursing Times, 29 November 2012. Available at <https://www.nursingtimes.net/environments-and-autistic-spectrum-conditions/5052413.article>.

<sup>19</sup> Booth J (2016) *Autism Equality in the Workplace – Removing Barriers and Challenging Discrimination*. Jessica Kinglsey Publishing. E-book available at [https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=LTqzCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=accessible+workplace+autism&ots=ulXdWjkeCh&sig=yLZUT\\_PmxGu\\_Yuf7aMvLpr6xGJE#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=LTqzCwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=accessible+workplace+autism&ots=ulXdWjkeCh&sig=yLZUT_PmxGu_Yuf7aMvLpr6xGJE#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>20</sup> See Autism CRC, *Development of Vocation and Employment Success Tools* at <https://www.autismcrc.com.au/development-vocational-and-employment-success-tools>.



In assessing the NDS outcomes we would encourage the SSCCA to review the extent to which universal design approaches have taken design guidelines of this nature into account, particularly in schools and other public places.

We are aware of, and have collaborated with, a small number of organisations in Victoria that have made structural modifications to support people on the autism spectrum (see discussion and case studies below). However it must be emphasized that these are initiatives of individual organizations only. There remains a lack of overarching guidance, policy support or incentivisation from government on how to build or modify environments (built or natural) to better support people on the autism spectrum.

## *(ii) Sensory and quiet rooms*

*“Having a child with extra needs can be isolating for them- other kids not playing with because they are too physical or non-verbal - and also the carer as you think is it worth taking them to a noisy shop where I have to control all the stimulations, deal with melt downs and others judgements of my naughty child”. (Amaze survey, 2016)*

The provision of sensory rooms (to support sensory seeking behaviors) and quiet areas or rooms (to avoid sensory stimuli such as noise and crowds) can support people on the autism spectrum to regulate their senses and recalibrate in otherwise overwhelming environments (such as in shopping centers and schools).

The first quiet room to be built in a shopping centre in Australia (and as far as we are aware, the world) is the ‘Northland Quiet Room’, at Northland Shopping Centre in Preston, Victoria (built with advice from Amaze). This quiet room has been well received with 250 people now registered to use it and at least one person using the room every two days. Northland has reported positive feedback from people on the autism spectrum and their families, as well as the broader community. Northland staff have also received training about how to support people on the autism spectrum. See **Case Study 1: Northland Quiet Room**.

We were also pleased to include a quiet room at the Victorian Autism Conference in 2016, see **Case Study 6: Amaze events**. The room’s location and fit out was determined in close collaboration with a conference committee member on the autism spectrum. We received positive feedback about the quiet room in our post conference survey, including “The quiet room set up was the best I’ve seen..”. This event also demonstrated the importance of ongoing audits of quiet rooms to ensure their continued suitability.

We have welcomed the Victorian Government’s Inclusive Schools Fund, enabling Victorian Schools to apply for funding grants to create innovative school environments based on inclusive best practice and universal design (including for outdoor sensory spaces and quiet and supportive re-engagement spaces).<sup>21</sup> This funding has led to sensory spaces being developed across a number of Victorian schools, including for example Gladesville Primary School, which received a grant of \$117,300 to create a calm room and attached outdoor space, featuring a garden and therapy swings.<sup>22</sup> However to support the creation of these spaces statewide, and indeed nationwide, greater government guidance and funding to support their creation and maintenance will be needed.

<sup>21</sup> See Victorian Department of Education and Training’s Inclusive Schools Fund website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/Pages/inclusiveschoolsfund.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> Minister for Education (2016). *Press Release: Supporting students with disabilities and special needs*. Victorian Government, 16 December 2016. Available at <http://www.premier.vic.gov.au/supporting-students-with-disabilities-and-special-needs/>



### *(iii) Signage*

Appropriately adapted signage and information resources, designed to meet the communication and information processing needs of many people on the autism spectrum, can also enhance understanding. For example, many children and adults on the autism spectrum will be supported by picture based signage, where appropriate, that extends beyond sanitary facilities and exits (as currently required in the *Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010*) to cover behavior expectations, broader safety issues and how a space may or should be used. For example, Parks Victoria has included a range of signs at its park to guide usage of picnic and play areas. See **Case Study 3: Autism Friendly Visits. Parks Victoria and Maroondah City Council**. Training in the use of alternative communication devices or system may also facilitate meaningful communication.

## **(b) Tools to support cognitive and/or social differences**

A range of tools may be used to support the cognitive and social difficulties people on the autism spectrum may experience when accessing public places (including outdoor spaces), venues and events. The appropriate tools will depend on the circumstances of each case and should always, to the extent possible, be developed, implemented and evaluated by people on the autism spectrum.

As discussed below, we are aware of a number of organisations in Victoria that have developed and implemented social scripts and/or sensory maps to support people on the autism spectrum. Consideration also needs to be given to how people on the autism spectrum may be supported when seeking to access public transport, as well as sporting and recreation venues and events.

### *(i) Social scripts and sensory maps*

Tools to support the cognitive and social difficulties people on the autism spectrum may experience include, social scripts, and/or sensory maps, supported by staff trained in how they may support people on the autism spectrum (including visitors and colleagues).

- **Social scripts** provide pictures and short descriptions of a particular place, event or activity and include specific information about what to expect and why, the agenda for the day and behavioral expectations.
- **Sensory maps** are color coded maps identifying high and low sensory spaces at particular locations. Sensory maps aim to support support people on the autism spectrum (as well as people with other disabilities and mental health needs) to be able to seek out, avoid or otherwise manage their needs in those spaces as required. For example, low sensory spaces may include quiet areas with few people. High sensory spaces may include loud, busy places with a lot of visual and other stimuli.

In Victoria, social scripts and/or sensory maps have been developed by:

- Museums Victoria (see **Case Study 2: Autism Friendly Museum Project, Museums Victoria**);
- Parks Victoria and Maroondah City Council (see **Case Study 3: Autism Friendly Visits. Parks Victoria and Maroondah City Council** )
- Sovereign Hill (see **Case Study 4: Sensory Friendly Access, Sovereign Hill**); and
- Campaspe Regional Library (see **Case Study 5: Shire of Campaspe’s regional libraries**).



Please refer to these detailed case studies below.

In summary, evaluations and feedback received through these case studies demonstrates:

- The importance of government leading organizations to develop disability plans/policies capable of supporting the development of these resources.
- The necessity of these resources being developed in collaboration with, and trialed by, people on the autism spectrum (including via autism organizations with expertise in the development of these resources).
- The value of a comprehensive approach that combines the availability of these resources with: (1) structural modifications, including appropriate signage; and (2) prioritized, well-tailored and ongoing training by autism experts across all levels of staff.
- The range of audiences and locations these resources can support. The case studies show that these resources can be used across a range of environments, for all age groups and to benefit a range of people, including young children with and without disabilities and people with anxiety or fear of unfamiliar places.
- The importance of these resources being provided across a range of mediums, including via the location or event website (to enable people to become familiar with the social script and/or sensory map prior to the visit) and in hard copy at the relevant location or event.
- The importance of ongoing evaluation, including by people on the autism spectrum and organisations with expertise in evaluation, to measure their utility, benefits and ongoing improvement.
- The high usage of these resources by people on the autism spectrum, their families and carers and schools when easily accessible online and at venues.

Amaze also prioritizes the development of social scripts and/or sensory maps for its events, in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum. See **Case Study 6: Amaze events**, regarding the social scripts and sensory maps developed to support attendees at the Victorian Autism Conference 2016 and the Autism and Employment Forum. At the very least, we would encourage government, private business and community organisations to develop these low cost resources for any event that is aimed at attracting people on the autism spectrum to maximize their attendance, engagement and participation. A sensory audit of a location is not time consuming and should always, to the extent possible, be undertaken by or with a person on the autism spectrum.

Furthermore, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, with advice and support from Amaze, is currently in the process of developing a social script for patients on the autism spectrum coming into hospital. This social script has been developed in consultation with families of children on the autism spectrum who have had a hospital experience. Once the social script is complete, it will be available on the St Vincent's Hospital website and St Vincent's will be offering education to staff and service providers to support the use of the social script and assist the hospital experience for patients and their families. To ensure its effectiveness, the hospital will also be giving the script to families to trial and provide feedback.



Some organisations may require small funding grants from government to develop these resources in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum and autism organizations. The social and economic benefits of people on the autism spectrum being able to access and engage in their community, combined with the benefits of more people on the autism spectrum and their families being likely to visit and spend money at these venues and events, is likely to far outweigh the costs in developing and maintaining these resources.

## *(ii) Public transport*

*“Public transport is anxiety and sensory overload inducing” (Amaze survey, 2016).*

Specific consideration should be given to how people on the autism spectrum may be better supported to use public transport. Without access to transport, independence is limited and participation in such critical activities as education, employment and health care is difficult, if not impossible.<sup>23</sup>

We welcome the steps taken by Public Transport Victoria to support people with a disability (particularly physical disabilities) via its *Accessible Public Transport Action Plan 2013 – 2017*. We look forward to the opportunity to engage in the development of the next plan to encourage a focus on how accessibility may be improved for people on the autism spectrum, including through journey planning, information provision and the management of sensory needs when waiting for and travelling on public transport.

We also look forward to the outcomes of Autism CRC’s project aimed at supporting individuals on the spectrum to independently plan, navigate and use public transport in Australia. In particular, this project aims to address the mobility challenges young adults on the autism spectrum experience by developing a technology solution and other resources to improve their access and use.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> National People with Disabilities and Carer Council (2009). *Shut out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*. National Disability Strategy Consultation Report. Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>24</sup> Autism CRC (2017). Enhancing the capacity for individuals on the spectrum to use public transport. Available at <http://www.autismcrc.com.au/project/enhancing-capacity-individuals-spectrum-use-public-transport>





### *(iii) Sporting events and facilities*

*My only problem is the bright lights at (.cycling club). I suspect that my regular headaches after training or racing or even watching competition there, was due to my light sensitivity. So I have avoided (this cycling club) for a couple of years,”*

*“Swimming is hard. It's loud and muggy and sounds bounce around in the change rooms so much that I struggle with it and I don't have sensory issues. Allowing my daughter to use the Family Change Room has improved this but does require me to attend swimming so I can accompany and assist her. She loves swimming but the rest of the school day is a write off due to the sensory overload”.*

*“We had to change swim schools until we found one (Aquastyle, Mill Park) that operated in: (a) small groups (2); (b) same cost (no premium cost); (c) quiet times of day to minimise noise; (d) used visual supports; (e) used play based strategies to teach swimming; (f) used more frequent and specific praise on certificates. Since we changed over we have not looked back. Unfortunately this place has a waiting list, so other families I have recommended have not been able to get a spot.”*

*“My daughter was doing swimming through the local swim center, we had to discontinue due to sensory overload and large class sized.*

*“There are sport and recreation options that I have read about, however my experience is that these options are for young people who are able to participate with less intervention and support. My son with autism hates noise and crowds and has difficulty understanding directions. He can get aggressive if he does not understand what is going on and could hit other innocent bystanders - this makes participation in any sport or recreational activity very difficult.”*

*“There should be an easy to access training/info pack community clubs could use with coaches and volunteers. It should cover what ASD is, how kids behave, sensory issues and how to create a great environment for them and how to support parents”.*

*(Amaze survey, 2016)*

The autism community would welcome consultation on how sport and recreation facilities may be more inclusive for people on the autism spectrum. While some positive feedback was received in Amaze's 2016 survey regarding the inclusiveness of some sport and recreational facilities, there were also a large number of pleas (as extracted above) for these environments to be more inclusive, particularly swimming pools which can be very noisy, crowded and overwhelming (in the pool and changing areas).

We would encourage the Commonwealth, through the ILC framework, to explore how these environments may be more inclusive (in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum) and drive the necessary changes.

## 7. Recommendations

A government led approach is urgently needed to reduce the environmental barriers people on the autism spectrum continue to experience. We recommend that the Commonwealth government:

1. Through this inquiry, review the extent to which environmental barriers continue to restrict access and participation for people on the autism spectrum (in ongoing consultation with people on the autism spectrum).
2. Develop guidelines for people involved in planning phases (of building new or modifying existing environments) on how to incorporate design/modifications that may support people on the autism spectrum and the broader community. Planners should also be encouraged to consult with people on the autism spectrum that will be using a specific environment.
3. Review the extent to which the *Commonwealth Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010* are effective in supporting people on the autism spectrum, and how they may be amended to require universal design approaches that reduce the barriers that continue to be experienced.
4. Through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, build awareness and understanding across the community of the benefits of inclusive environments, the barriers people on the autism spectrum face and how the community (including individuals, governments, public organisations and the private sector) may support people on the autism spectrum.
5. Provide funding and/or grants for business and community organisations to develop resources such as social scripts and sensory maps to support access to their venues and events (in collaboration with people on the autism spectrum and autism organisations).
6. Encourage state and territory governments to consider how they can lead universal design approaches that support people on the autism spectrum, particularly in schools, on public transport and in or around other state/territory owned public places.

## Case Study 1: Northland Quiet Room

In 2014, Northland Shopping Centre in Preston (in partnership with Amaze) opened Australia's first Shopping Centre 'Quiet Room'.



The quiet room was developed following:

- Feedback from a mother of a child on the autism spectrum regarding her difficulties with public spaces, including comments on how she would greatly benefit from a quiet area at her local shopping centre.
- Determination by Northland that one of its key business priorities should be identifying ways to be more in tune and responsive to the needs of the community as well as driving increased visitation and shopping time by providing space, support and services for those who require special consideration.
- Northland partnering with Amaze to identify innovative ways to improve the shopping experience for current customers, as well as attracting new shoppers by better people on the autism spectrum and their families.

The 'Quiet Room' initiative was led by a Northland staff member, who herself has a child on the autism spectrum. No formal funds were allocated for the project. It was designed, built and launched by volunteers (from Northland staff, the Novion Property Group Retail Design team, Northland's key suppliers and contractors, and Amaze) who provided almost \$40,000 in gratis support.

Northland reports that a key challenge was finding a free space in an appropriate location. Upon identifying a space, the room was custom designed by Amaze, together with the Novion Property Group Retail Design team, to ensure it met the guidelines for supporting people on the autism spectrum. The room build was led by Northland's Operations Manager who called upon the centre's key contractors and suppliers to donate expertise, labour and materials.

Each member of the center management and customer service team attended an autism awareness training program conducted by Amaze. Ongoing autism awareness training is also being provided.

The Quiet Room has been a great success for Northland, with 250 people on the autism spectrum now registered as users. At least one person uses the room every two days, with Northland reporting positive feedback from people with autism and their families, as well as the broader community.

*"More centres need to take this on board. Having two children affected by autism in our family this would be so beneficial and make shopping a happy experience"* Belinda, via Northland's Facebook page, 10 January 2015

*"(The Quiet Room)" means that he'll be able to take some time out, regulate the senses and go out shopping for a bit longer, and experience what typical kids experience".* Nicole, mother of child on the autism spectrum, Northcote leader, 13 June 2013.

## Case Study 2: Autism Friendly Museum Project, Museums Victoria

The Autism Friendly Museum Project (AFMP) is a Museums Victoria wide project which includes all three of its museums: Melbourne Museum, Scienceworks and Immigration Museum.



The AFMP was developed by Museums Victoria, in collaboration with the autism community through Amaze.

It aims to provide children on the autism spectrum (and their families and schools) with the online tools to be able to plan a visit to the museum and feel confident that the museum understands and welcomes them.

The AFMP is a key initiative by Museums Victoria to deliver on aims within its Disability Action Plan. Since its inception in 2014, the AFMP has:

- Established online resources for visitors on the Autism spectrum including social scripts for families with young children, families with older children and schools with students on the autism spectrum, and sensory maps for all three venues. The Museums Victoria website also provides information about quiet times at the Museum and how to avoid queues. See all online resources at [www.museumvictoria.com.au/melbournemuseum/visiting/access/the-autism-friendly-museum/](http://www.museumvictoria.com.au/melbournemuseum/visiting/access/the-autism-friendly-museum/)
- Collaborated with the autism community through Amaze to evaluate the resources to ensure they are meaningful and useful.
- Extensively trained more than 70 staff at the three museums, and incorporated autism into the mandatory disability training for all museum staff.
- Through engagement with stakeholders, exhibition development at Museums Victoria's venues has now integrated design principles which reflect the needs of visitors on the autism spectrum.

The AFMP has been welcomed by people on the autism spectrum, their families and carers, schools and the wider community. From the launch of the AFMP to the end of 2016:

- The AFMP homepage had been visited 14,202 times;
- The social scripts across all three museums had been downloaded 1,874 times.

Museums Victoria has advised Amaze that the only small barrier to developing and implementing the AFMP related to training attendance. While approximately 70 front of house staff attend training (which is a high proportion), there were some staff that were unable to attend due to time conflicts/priorities with their professional roles.

Feedback received by Museums Victoria has included:

*"Sophie asked to read the stories each night as a bed time story. She felt so special that there was a story written about her, what she was doing. She knew the words off by heart. For families that have children with special needs, the map was great. Our kids directed us around Scienceworks, for them it was like an explorer's map, adventure time. Without the social stories and map it would have been a lot harder to come today". Mother of three children, the eldest is 6 years old and on the autism spectrum"*

*"The sensory map helped us find high sensory places which our daughter liked and quiet places which I needed" Mother on the autism spectrum, with a daughter on the autism spectrum"*

## Case Study 3: Autism Friendly Visits. Parks Victoria and Maroondah City Council

Autism Friendly Visits, an initiative of Parks Victoria, is focussed on making parks more accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities. It aims to ensure that all Victorians have the opportunity to enjoy parks and receive health/wellbeing benefits from park visitation.



### ❖ Brimbank Park

In 2016, Parks Victoria engaged Amaze to support it in the development of a social script for visitors to Brimbank Park. The social script acknowledges there will be people at the park, uses photographs and simple text to introduce the park's attractions, provides guidance of play and activities and includes safety advice. It was developed to meet both website requirements and the format requirements of families/teachers taking children on the autism spectrum to the park. Visual signs to support play are displayed throughout the park. See the Autism Friendly Visits webpage at <http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/explore/parks/maribyrnong-valley-parklands/accessibility/autism-friendly-visits>.

Parks Victoria reports that the response by families with children on the autism spectrum, and the broader public, has been very positive. Within the first 4 months of its release, the social script was downloaded from the Parks Victoria website 269 times.

### ❖ Serndip Sanctuary

Following the success of Brimbank Park, Parks Victoria is working to replicate the resources in other parks, beginning with Serndip Sanctuary in Lara (a very popular destination for children). The social script has been developed in a similar format to the Brimbank Park Social Script and has been trialled by families. Amaze has provided professional consultancy advice on the content and format, and conducted a site visit. The resource is now available at [http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/693842/Serendip-Sanctuary-Social-Script.pdf](http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/693842/Serendip-Sanctuary-Social-Script.pdf). Parks Victoria will be monitoring the number of downloads of the resource from the Parks Victoria website. Serndip Sanctuary staff will also be encouraging visitor feedback on the resource.

Parks Victoria has advised Amaze that the only barriers to developing the resources have been: (a) a lack of financial resources to obtain consultancy advice from Amaze (resulting in the project work being undertaken most in-house by PV, with support from Amaze); and (b) learning to understand a park visit from the perspectives of children on the autism spectrum.

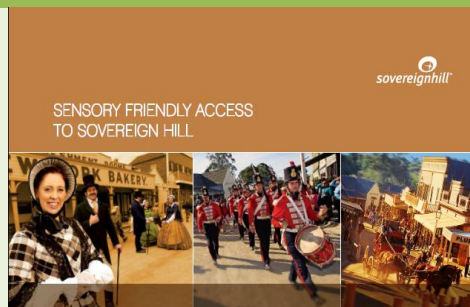
### ❖ Maroondah City Council, Warriën Reserve

Maroondah City Council has commenced development of a social script for its Warriën Reserve (in consultation with its Disability Advisory Committee and Irabina Autism Services). While the script has been aimed at preschool/early childhood children with a disability, or someone with an anxiety or fear of unfamiliar places, it is hoped that it will benefit wider audiences. The script is currently being trialled, with positive feedback to date. Once publically available, the script will be provided online via the Council website in a word format to enable it to be personalised if required. In conjunction with Amaze, training has been delivered to all areas of the Council, with the hope that the social script concept can be used in other areas of Council to encourage participation of children/people with a disability across Council activities.



## Case Study 4: Sensory Friendly Access, Sovereign Hill

In 2015, Sovereign Hill's Access and Inclusion committee led the development of social scripts and Sensory Friendly Access resources to support visitors on the autism spectrum. These initiatives were developed under Sovereign Hill's Access and Inclusion Policy.



With 700,000 visitors annually, including 100,000 school kids, Sovereign Hill developed a range of social scripts to assist students on the autism spectrum to become more familiar and comfortable with Sovereign Hill before and during their visit.

The social scripts, available online, support students to understand what they may expect across a range of experiences/locations at Sovereign Hill and can be easily adapted to suit individual needs. The social stores include People in Costume; Red Hill Mine Tour; Horses at Sovereign Hill; Blood on the Southern Cross; The Bowling Alley; The Inclined Rail (Paid mine tours); Where Can I Eat?; Where Can I Go to the Toilet?; Where Will I Sleep?; I See a Trooper; Here Come the Redcoats; Sounds of Sovereign Hill: Music and Guns; Sounds of Sovereign Hill: Machines; Sensory Friendly Access. Available at <http://www.sovereignhill.com.au/visit/what-s-on/accessibility-at-sovereign-hill/>

Sovereign Hill has also developed an information resource *Sensory Friendly Access to Sovereign Hill* to inform visitors of activities that may be noisy, soothing activities and generally access support from a sensory perspective. See [http://www.sovereignhill.com.au/media/uploads/SovHill\\_Sensory\\_Friendly\\_Access\\_2015.pdf](http://www.sovereignhill.com.au/media/uploads/SovHill_Sensory_Friendly_Access_2015.pdf)

To ensure its employees are able to enrich the visiting experience of people on the autism spectrum, they have also received autism awareness training from Amaze and other autism experts.

Sovereign Hill has advised Amaze that it has received a significant amount of positive feedback, including the following from a parent of a young boy on the autism spectrum:

*"...I had some reservations and was quite anxious of how he was going to cope in such an environment, but I wanted him to experience Sovereign Hill (my mission was just to walk him up the Main Street... and back).*

*(He) can't wait & waiting in queues will cause a meltdown, however, there were several ticket cashiers on and was processed immediately... Needs to constantly regulate himself due to sensory overload, so was thankful for the many seats and benches along the Main Street to sit him down.*

*(He) can't cope with crowds.....Was advised on arrival of noisy events and a map at ticket box, but unfortunately due to his non patience I placed it into my bag unseen. Was approached by Matthew (soldier in blue uniform) along Main Street, who bobbed down to the boys height and put his hand up to say hello and he responded by giving him a 'high five' which I hadn't seen him do to a stranger which was a huge achievement and a delight to see. Matthew was a wealth of information of how your organisation and staff can cater such special needs, gave me map from ticket box office which he went through with me (because he was seated and settled), which has given me the confidence to return back to Sovereign Hill with Luke to immerse him in more things Sovereign Hill can offer."*

*"I have always had to cater for Luke around a place, have never had a place cater around Luke before. I am so impressed and can't wait to share my experience with my Autistic social group I attend once a month and encourage them to go to Sovereign Hill. So many other organisations could learn from Sovereign Hill."*



## Case Study 5: Shire of Campaspe's regional libraries.

From 2014 – 2016, Campaspe Regional Library has led the “Being Connected: Libraries and Autism” project to improve library visits for adults and children on the autism spectrum.



For many years, Campaspe Regional Library has been committed to supporting the information and referral needs of people on the autism spectrum and their families, through its relationship with (and training from) Community Living and Respite Services (CLRS) and by housing a large collection of autism resources from Amaze and Supporting Parents of Children with Asperger's and Autism (SPOCAAS). This commitment encouraged more families of children on the autism spectrum to use the library, which in turn highlighted that one of the new features of the library - a very stripy floor - that was causing sensory overload for some children. This prompted the determination to undertake a sensory audit and make necessary modifications.

In 2014, the library received the the Pierre Gorman Award from the State Library of Victoria (\$25,000) to undertake the “Being Connected: Libraries and Autism” project, in partnership with CLRS, to improve the library experience for adults and children on the autism spectrum. This project was delivered from 2014 – 2016 and involved:

- A sensory audit of all library buildings across the Campaspe Shire by Think Access, in collaboration with parents/carers of children on the autism spectrum. The Think Access audit report<sup>25</sup> has been widely shared across the sector through presentations and conferences. While a number of the recommendations have been addressed, some require capital investment such as replacement of the stripy floor (this is a work in progress).
- Accreditation to use the Communication Access Symbol in the Echuca Library in 2016. This required support from Bendigo Health to prepare for an assessment to use the symbol, followed by assessment and accreditation by Scope Victoria. Remaining libraries in the shire are being encouraged to go through the accreditation process.
- The creation of a Social Story titled “Going to the Library” in collaboration with Echuca Special School, Murray Human Services and CLRS. The book was published and launched at a special event at the library and has been distributed to every student attending the Special School and to families coming into the library.
- An increase in programming and activities for children on the autism spectrum.
- The purchasing of appropriate technology, apps and games that could be used in programming and for communications purposes
- Provision of staff training and development, with all staff completing REAL (Resource for Equitable Access to Libraries) training, Creating Connections providing ‘creating a sensory friendly environment’ training, CLRS providing training on autism and Bendigo Health providing training on Communication Access.

Campaspe library has advised Amaze that it did not face any significant challenges implementing these initiatives, although some of the recommendations in the audit report continue to require funding to be addressed (such as the flooring, new signage and additional training for the service centre staff to achieve the Communication Access Symbol). The library has received a lot of anecdotal positive feedback, particularly from its project partners and the families engaged through the programs offered. It has seen an increase in families utilising the libraries and children attending the programs and activities for children on the spectrum. The SPOCAAS and Amaze collections are well used by students, teachers and carers.

<sup>25</sup> Think Access 2016. Shire of Campaspe's regional libraries at Echuca, Rochester, Tongala, Kyabram and Rushworth. For Shire of Campaspe. 27 May 2016.

## Case Study 6: Amaze events

### ❖ Victorian Autism Conference 2016

On the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2nd of September 2016, Amaze held its Victorian Autism Conference 2016 (VAC16). The theme for VAC16 was 'ALL IN', with a focus on being the most inclusive VAC ever for attendees and speakers on the autism spectrum. The conference was attended by 550 people, of whom 69 identified as being on the autism spectrum.



To support attendees on the autism spectrum, Amaze provided a social script, sensory map, quiet room, reserved seating in each session and catered with pre-ordered lunch boxes (to avoid queues and enable early pick up). These resources and supports were developed in close consultation with conference committee members on the autism spectrum.

The social script detailed the registration process and agenda, with pictures and advice about seating, the length of sessions and lunch/breaks. The sensory map identified high and low sensory areas, the quiet room, toilets and entry/exits. The dedicated quiet room was located away from the main conference activity. It featured low light, soft comfortable seating, and snacks. It also provided a calm and quiet space for people on the autism spectrum to pick up pre-ordered lunch boxes, enjoy morning/afternoon tea without queuing and relax/recharge. The hand dryers in the bathrooms were turned off. Amaze received positive feedback from its attendees about its resources, the quiet room and the inclusiveness of the conference:

*“The appreciation of dietary needs of many autistics and our need for a quiet space were addressed, creating a conformable environment and demonstrating a sincerity in actually embracing inclusion”*

*“Congratulations for making this event for autistic people and having autistic voices not only speak but have a say in how the event run”.*

*“The quiet room set up was the best I've seen and the room to eat lunch in was great”.*

However, Amaze received feedback that more visual cues were needed to help navigate the venue. Feedback relating to the lunchboxes was mixed and there was a lack of adequate seating and space for lunch and break times. It was also unfortunate that in the days prior to the conference, without consultation with Amaze, the dedicated quiet room was painted, leaving a paint smell that was overwhelming for some attendees.

### ❖ Autism and Employment Forum

On 17 November 2016, Amaze ran an Autism and Employment Forum. The purpose of the forum was to provide information and support to people on the autism spectrum to develop career objectives and employment skills. Fifty three people attended the forum, comprising career teachers, parents and young adults on the autism spectrum looking for employment.

Amaze developed a social script and sensory map to support people on the autism spectrum to attend and participate in the forum. The social script provided picture directions for how to find the forum room upon arrival, written advice on how to register and the agenda for the day, including lunch and breaks. The sensory map identified areas that may have been noisy throughout the day. There was a quiet room at the venue, however it was not used by any attendees on the day. This was likely due to the large function space with spacious sofas at the back of the room, along with a large outdoor balcony with seating, both of which provided quiet spaces. Amaze was aware of three attendees on the spectrum that used the social script on the day.