

BUILDING ON LEADERSHIP DRIVING LASTING CHANGE FOR AUTISTIC VICTORIANS

AMAZE SUBMISSION VICTORIAN AUTISM PLAN REVIEW

AUGUST 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

Amaze respectfully acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work.

We pay respect to their Elders past and present and reflect on the continuing connection with Country and community.

Recognising our work provides services to the Autistic community in all corners of the land now referred to as Australia, we extend this acknowledgement to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across this continent.



Contents

Contents	3
About Amaze	4
Key statistics to inform the next Victorian Autism Plan.	5
Executive Summary	6
Amaze's priority recommendations.	8
Our comprehensive package of recommendations.	10
Submission	
1. Introduction	16
2. Secure an Autistic-led Victorian Autism Plan for the future, embedded in legislation	17
3. Set a vision for better outcomes and systems that deliver for all Autistic people	19
4. Update Guiding Principles to achieve the plans vision and drive whole-of-government accountability	21
5. Prioritise targeted actions to deliver on the VAP's vision and guiding principles	23
A. Promote understanding, respect and positive Autistic identity	23
B. Strengthen lived experience leadership and community engagement across govt	25
C. Build autism-capable systems and services	27
D. Create accessible and inclusive systems, places and events	28
E. Strengthen system coordination and navigation support	31
F. Improve access to timely assessment and diagnosis	33
G. Ensure Thriving Kids and early years services deliver for Autistic children	35
H. Improve access to inclusive health and mental healthcare	37
I. Drive an autism accessible and inclusive education system	41
J. Build inclusive workplace systems and culture	45
K. Address housing inaccessibility and homelessness among Autistic Victorians	49
L. Strengthen safety and system responses to violence and harm	51
M. Embed accountability, data and outcomes that reflect lived experience	54

About Amaze

Amaze was established in 1967 by a group of parents who faced challenges in accessing resources for autism. For nearly 60 years, Amaze has provided support to Autistic people and their families. While based in Victoria, its services extend across Australia. Amaze is dedicated to increasing autism awareness within the community, influencing policy change, and delivering independent, credible information and resources.

In 2021, Autism Connect successfully expanded from a small, Victoria-based autism information service to a national autism information service, maintaining high quality and satisfaction levels among individuals, families, and caregivers throughout Australia. To date, more than 50,000 cases have been managed through this service.

Amaze also partners with various organizations to create inclusive environments that support Autistic people. The organisation helps workplaces move beyond mere awareness to meaningful action by offering practical training, professional development programs, and advisory services that promote cultural safety, accessibility, and inclusion.

Its professional development and training offerings cater to participants at any stage of learning and are delivered flexibly across Australia. The programs are designed in partnership with individuals with lived experience, including opportunities for meaningful discussion, ongoing reflection, and real-world application. Additionally, Amaze provides advisory and consulting services to people leaders, HR professionals, and Diversity & Inclusion teams, assisting them in embedding inclusive practices throughout the employee lifecycle. These services support organizations in creating sustainable change and building more inclusive workplaces for Autistic employees.

Amaze vision: An Australia that embraces Autistic people and their families living their best lives.

Amaze mission: To create positive change for Autistic people and their families at all life stages by advocating, influencing, innovating, mobilising efforts, and opening doors. This mission is realised through being a trusted source of information, advice, and support, as well as a committed partner in the development of new practices and approaches.

Amaze values: Achievement of the mission and vision depends on collaboration and community involvement. Amaze operates with a strengths-based approach, maintains independence, and supports the work of all partners. The organisation is held accountable to the following standards.

- **Community-centric:** The Board and staff are representative of and dedicated to the community. Lived experience is valued and prioritised, ensuring the voices of Autistic people and families inform all efforts.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** A strong commitment to working with partners and stakeholders to achieve shared objectives.
- **Constructive and Solutions Focused:** Embracing a change-maker mindset with a constructive and solution-oriented attitude.
- **Determination and Independence:** Maintaining independence while offering a unique contribution to the field.
- **Evidence Informed and Outcomes Driven:** Decisions and work are guided by the best available research, community insights, and practical evidence.
- **Strengths Based:** Adopting a strengths-based rather than deficit-based perspective, highlighting the contributions Autistic people make and the societal benefits of their participation and inclusion.

Key statistics to inform the next Victorian Autism Plan.¹

Autism in Victoria

At least 75,000 Victorians are Autistic, according to the 2022 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers.

- With many Autistic people undiagnosed, the actual prevalence is expected to be much higher.
- All Autistic people are different, with a diversity of strengths and support needs. Some Autistic people require 24/7 support. Many experience intersecting forms of disadvantage and co-occurring conditions.

Education

- Only 39% of Autistic Victorian adults have completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared to 49% of all Victorian adults with disability and 77% of Victorians without disability.
- Only 23.5% of Autistic Victorian adults have completed post-secondary education, compared to 51% of all people with disability and 52% of people without disability.
- School Can't is most commonly experienced by neurodivergent students.

Employment

- The unemployment rate among Autistic Australians aged 15 years and over is 18% – more than double the rate for all people with disability (7.5%) and almost 6 times the rate of people without disability.
- Autistic people are more likely than people without disability to be under-employed, or work part time or on reduced hours.
- Recruitment processes and workplace practices commonly exclude Autistic candidates, with significant barriers to accessing necessary adjustments and low employer capability in autism inclusion.

Health and mental health

- 1) Around 70% of Autistic Australians have at least one co-occurring mental health or psychiatric condition, compared with around 43% of all Australians.
- 2) Autistic people have a higher risk of premature death, and are up to 7 times more likely to die prematurely from suicide than non-autistic people.
- 3) Autistic people may delay or avoid healthcare due to inaccessible systems, sensory stressors, and inconsistent autism-affirming practices.

Disability supports and services.

- 56% of Autistic Victorians report having at least one unmet need for assistance, including communication and cognitive or emotional support.
- Autistic people who are not eligible for the NDIS face major service gaps, with national inquiries finding a clear lack of disability support for Autistic people outside the scheme.
- Thin markets (especially in regional and remote areas) mean that many Autistic people cannot access essential, culturally appropriate supports.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2024. Autism in Australia: Summary results from the 2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/autism-australia-2022>

Executive Summary

Amaze welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Autism Plan (VAP) review and help shape the next phase of autism policy reform across Victoria.

The VAP reflects a strong commitment by the Victorian Government to improving outcomes for Autistic people and their families. This significant and nation-leading reform has demonstrated the value of a dedicated autism policy approach, providing a framework for initiatives and policy change that has helped strengthen autism inclusion, accessibility and understanding. Victoria's leadership in developing and implementing an autism-specific VAP has also informed and contributed to broader autism reform across Australia, including the development of the National Autism Strategy 2025–2031 and the National Roadmap for Improving the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People 2025–2035.

This review of the VAP is very timely. It provides an important opportunity to reflect on progress, consider what is working well and identify where further action is needed to improve outcomes for Autistic people and their families. It also provides an opportunity to ensure that broader reforms impacting Autistic people, such as Thriving Kids, are shaped by the experiences and priorities of Autistic people, aligned to a shared vision for inclusion and wellbeing, and supported by strong accountability, clear measures of success and a focus on delivering meaningful outcomes.

We welcome the Government's commitment to placing lived experience at the centre of this review and were pleased to partner with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to deliver a targeted survey of Autistic people and their families and carers. This submission draws on the findings of our survey, two Amaze-led focus groups, and insights from Autism Connect, Australia's national autism helpline. In 2025-26, Autism Connect received more than 3,260 contacts from Victorians, providing a unique lens into the issues that matter most to our community.

Our community engagement, frontline insights and the broader evidence base point to a clear conclusion: while important progress has been made, many Autistic people and their families and carers continue to encounter systems that are fragmented, difficult to navigate, and inconsistent in their understanding of autism. The following themes emerged:

- **Many Autistic people continue to experience poor outcomes across the life course.** Despite important progress and strong policy ambition, significant barriers remain across education, health, employment, housing, safety and community participation, with autism capability, accessibility and inclusion continuing to vary significantly across services and settings. These challenges are often interconnected, with difficulties in one area of life often contributing to poorer outcomes in others, highlighting the need for coordinated, whole-of-government action focused on improving outcomes.
- **Systems remain fragmented and difficult to navigate.** Health, education, disability and community services frequently operate in isolation, placing the burden of coordination on Autistic people and their families and carers. Long waits, unclear pathways and inconsistent access to support continue to create unnecessary barriers.
- **The autism community is diverse, and people's experiences and support needs are not uniform.** Experiences are shaped by factors including age, culture, geography, gender, support needs and intersecting disadvantage. A one-size-fits-all approach cannot deliver meaningful outcomes across the autism community, highlighting the need for policy and services that recognise this diversity and are accountable for improving outcomes for all Autistic Victorians.

- **Lived experience leadership and expertise are critical to better policy and outcomes.** Meaningful co-design and genuine influence over the policies, services and systems that affect people's lives are essential to effective policy, service and systems reform. This includes ensuring all community engagement is accessible for all Autistic people and their families, including those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and/or high and complex support needs.
- **Major reforms present a significant opportunity.** The rollout of Thriving Kids and Foundational Supports has the potential to improve outcomes for Autistic people and families but will only do so if these initiatives are designed and delivered in ways that are autism-informed, neuro-affirming, accessible and capable of meeting the diverse needs of our autism community.
- **The next VAP must deliver measurable improvements in the things that matter most.** Stronger accountability, clear outcome measures, lived experience-informed reporting and greater transparency will be critical to ensuring future reform translates into meaningful change.

The next Victorian Autism Plan must be ambitious, accountable and driven by lived experience. It should provide a clear framework for coordinating reform across government, aligning major system reforms and improving outcomes for all Autistic Victorians.

This submission outlines a comprehensive package of recommendations.

The following priority recommendations summarise and represent the most important actions for the next phase of VAP reform.

- 1) Secure an Autistic-led VAP for the future, embedded in legislation, with a vision for better outcomes and systems that deliver for all Autistic people.
- 2) Strengthen lived experience leadership across government, including through a whole-of-government autism co-design and engagement framework.
- 3) Build more accessible and inclusive communities, including through a whole-of-government autism accessibility framework.
- 4) Ensure Thriving Kids and Foundational Supports deliver for Autistic people and are aligned to the vision and guiding principles of the VAP.
- 5) Improve access to diagnosis, navigation and coordinated support.
- 6) Renew Victoria's commitment to autism-inclusive education, including through a renewed Autism Education Strategy.
- 7) Deliver a Victorian Autism Health and Mental Health Roadmap, and pilot integrated one-stop autism healthcare clinics for people with high and complex support needs.
- 8) Create more inclusive employment pathways and drive workplace systems change.
- 9) Improve housing outcomes, including through an autism and housing action plan.
- 10) Measure what matters.

We are ready to assist

We welcome any further opportunity to discuss our submission and share our expertise, learnings and insights from community. Please contact me on (03) 96571600 or david.tonge@amaze.org.au.

Yours sincerely,



David Tonge

Chief Executive Officer

Amaze's Priority Recommendations.

1) Secure the future of autism reform in Victoria, with a vision for better outcomes and systems that deliver for all Autistic people.

Renew the VAP as a long-term, Autistic-led framework for action across government. Strengthen leadership, accountability and coordination through mechanisms such as a Victorian Autism Act, an Office for Autism, and governance arrangements capable of driving sustained reform across government over time.

2) Strengthen lived experience leadership across government, including through a whole-of-government autism co-design and engagement framework.

Embed lived experience leadership across the design, delivery and evaluation of policies, programs and services. Establish consistent approaches to co-design and engagement that ensure Autistic people, families and carers have genuine influence over decisions and reforms that affect their lives. Ensure policy, service and systems reform is informed by a diversity of experiences and perspectives, including Autistic people experiencing intersectional disadvantage and/or with high and complex support needs, and their families and carers. Partner with the autism sector to strengthen lived experience participation and leadership.

3) Build more accessible and inclusive communities, including through a whole-of-government autism accessibility framework.

Strengthen accessibility and autism capability across public spaces, transport, recreation, arts, culture and community services, while investing in inclusive participation opportunities that support connection, belonging and community participation for Autistic people.

4) Ensure Thriving Kids and Foundational Supports deliver for Autistic people.

Position the VAP as a key driver of implementation for Thriving Kids and broader Foundational Supports reforms. The VAP should play an active role in shaping these reforms to ensure they are co-designed with Autistic people and families, delivered through autism-informed and neuro-affirming approaches, and aligned with the vision, guiding principles and outcomes measures of the Victorian Autism Plan.

5) Improve access to diagnosis, navigation and coordinated support.

Reduce the burden of navigating fragmented systems by improving access to timely assessment and diagnosis, strengthening pathways to support, investing in navigation and peer support initiatives, and improving coordination across health, education, disability and community services.

6. Renew Victoria's commitment to autism-inclusive education.

Build on Victoria's leadership in autism-inclusive education through a renewed Autism Education Strategy spanning early childhood, school and post-school education. This Strategy should be linked to Thriving Kids, include shared meaningful outcome measures, strengthen inclusion and accessibility, improve access to out of school hours care and include a dedicated School Can't Action Plan.

7. Deliver a Victorian Autism Health and Mental Health Roadmap

Drive coordinated improvements in healthcare accessibility, workforce capability, service integration and health outcomes across the lifespan. This should include piloting integrated one-stop autism healthcare clinics for people with high and complex support needs (commencing in rural and regional areas).

8. Create more inclusive employment pathways and drive workplace systems change

Invest in coordinated Autism Employment Pathways, including navigation and peer support, while strengthening employer capability and workplace systems to improve recruitment, retention and career progression for Autistic people.

9. Improve housing outcomes for Autistic people, incl. through an autism and housing action plan.

Improve access to affordable, appropriate and autism-inclusive housing, strengthen understanding of housing need, and ensure housing and homelessness reforms better respond to the experiences of Autistic people.

10. Measure what matters

Establish a Victorian Autism Evidence, Evaluation and Reporting Framework that measures progress against the outcomes that matter most to Autistic people and families, supported by stronger accountability, transparent reporting and continuous improvement.

Our comprehensive package of recommendations.

Secure an Autistic-led Victorian Autism Plan for the future, embedded in legislation

1. **Legislate the VAP through a Victorian Autism Act.** Embed long-term accountability, establish clear responsibilities across government, and provide a durable framework for implementation, monitoring and reporting.
2. **Consider establishing an Office for Autism and Minister for Autism.** Provide clear leadership for the VAP and drive coordinated whole-of-government action to improve outcomes for Autistic people.

Set a vision for better outcomes and systems that deliver for all Autistic people

3. **Update the Plan's vision to focus on the outcomes it seeks to achieve for Autistic people and the systems required to deliver them.** Amaze recommends the following vision:

"An inclusive Victoria where all Autistic people are valued, respected and empowered to live the lives they choose, supported by connected and accountable systems that enable participation, wellbeing, belonging and opportunity across the life course."

Update Guiding Principles to achieve the Plan's vision and drive whole-of-government accountability

4. **Strengthen the guiding principles to shape all aspects of the Plan's design, delivery and accountability.** The guiding principles should embed co-design, evidence, lived experience, accessibility and choice and control, alongside a strong focus on intersectionality, equity and human rights. They must ensure the VAP delivers for all Autistic people, including those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and/or high and complex support needs, through well-targeted, coordinated and accountable actions.

Promote understanding, respect and positive Autistic identity

5. **Develop and adopt a Victorian Autism Language and Communications Statement.** Co-design guidance with Autistic people, families and the autism sector that promotes respectful, strengths based, inclusive and evidence-informed language, recognises differing language preferences, and reflects the diversity of Autistic people.
6. **Lead a sustained public education and community awareness initiative.** Building on *Change Your Reactions*, promote greater understanding of autism, respect for differing experiences and support needs, and awareness of the diversity of the autism community.
7. **Promote respectful and inclusive dialogue across policy, community and service settings.** Embed an evidence-informed whole-of-government narrative about autism and support needs that encourages constructive engagement, recognises diverse perspectives, and discourages stigma, misinformation and exclusionary behaviours.
8. **Promote positive Autistic identity, self-advocacy and community connection.** Build on existing initiatives and resources that improve autism understanding and acceptance, reduce stigma and support Autistic people to develop positive identity, self-understanding and confidence in communicating their strengths, support needs and aspirations.

Strengthen lived experience leadership and community engagement across government

9. Co-design and implement a whole-of-government Autism Co-design and Engagement Framework.

The Framework should set clear standards for when and how Autistic people are engaged across all policy and reform processes. It should promote consistency, transparency and accountability, including requirements for early engagement, accessible approaches, feedback loops and public reporting.

10. Partner with the autism sector to strengthen lived experience participation and leadership. Build on existing community infrastructure and networks (such as Amaze's Lived Experience Network) to provide transparent, targeted and ongoing opportunities for a diversity of lived experience to inform policy, service design and reform. This should include increasing opportunities for Autistic people to contribute to, advise on and help deliver policy development, implementation and evaluation across government, including within departments responsible for disability and autism policy.

11. Establish a clear, accessible, direct and always-available pathway for community input.

Complementing formal community engagement processes, it should enable Autistic people and their families and carers to share day-to-day experiences of accessibility and inclusion, identify priorities for change, and raise issues for advocacy across sectors and governments, including on the NDIS.

Build autism-capable systems and services

12. Co-design and implement a whole-of-government Autism Capability Framework. Establish clear expectations for autism knowledge, neuro-affirming practice and accessibility across frontline systems, supported by Autistic-led training, sector-specific guidance, practical resources and consistent evaluation of workforce capability and outcomes.

13. Embed and expand Disability Liaison Officer roles and specialist autism expertise across frontline systems. Strengthen and extend dedicated disability liaison functions across health, mental health, police, emergency services, child protection, family violence and justice settings to improve accessibility, coordination and service responses.

14. Strengthen autism capability in police and emergency service responses. Build on existing reforms through ongoing capability development, evaluation of training effectiveness, practical tools for frontline staff, and accessible information to support Autistic people and families when engaging with police and emergency services.

Create accessible and inclusive systems, places and events

15. Develop and implement a whole-of-government Autism Accessibility Framework. Co-design and embed consistent accessibility standards across government services, public places, events, transport and digital systems. The Framework should apply universal design principles and address sensory, communication, cognitive and social accessibility, including the consistent use of accessible information, social stories, sensory maps, visual supports, AAC resources and clear wayfinding.

16. Invest in accessible and inclusive community participation opportunities. Support Autistic-led and universally designed initiatives for all that promote connection, belonging and participation through community hubs, recreation, sport, arts and cultural settings. Ensure opportunities are accessible to all Autistic people, including those with high and complex support needs, and

strengthen partnerships with multicultural, multifaith and community organisations to improve inclusion across diverse communities.

17. **Strengthen autism accessibility capability, accountability and evaluation.** Support consistent, Autistic-led training across publicly funded services, venues and events, including organisations participating in accessibility initiatives such as the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program. Establish mechanisms to evaluate accessibility outcomes and lived experience impacts, identify effective approaches and support their expansion across Victoria.

Strengthen system coordination and navigation support

18. **Fund and scale Autistic-led system navigation.** Invest in peer-led and lived experience-based models to support Autistic people and families to access, coordinate and sustain engagement with services across health, education and social supports.

19. **Strengthen integration across service systems.** Establish clear referral pathways, shared protocols and coordinated entry points across agencies to reduce duplication, gaps and administrative burden.

20. **Align major reforms to deliver seamless navigation.** Ensure initiatives such as Thriving Kids and future Foundational Supports are integrated with existing systems, with clear, consistent and easy-to-navigate Autistic led pathways.

21. **Improve coordinated responses for families in crisis.** Establish clear, accessible pathways that enable early intervention, reduce escalation, and avoid inappropriate involvement with acute health, child protection or justice systems.

Improve access to timely assessment and diagnosis

22. **Expand access to timely, publicly funded autism assessment and diagnosis across the lifespan.** Increase the availability of public assessment services, reduce wait times, and establish clear and consistent statewide pathways to assessment and diagnosis, including a coordinated pathway to adult diagnosis.

23. **Strengthen early identification and diagnostic practice.** Embed evidence-informed screening and identification across universal services and alongside Thriving Kids implementation, embed the National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism as a minimum practice standard, and build workforce capability to support timely, neuro-affirming and consistent assessment, referral and diagnosis.

24. **Create clearer, more equitable and person-centred pathways to diagnosis.** Improve visibility of available services, referral pathways, wait times and assessment options, and reduce barriers for priority cohorts through safe, clearer, more accessible and coordinated pathways.

Ensure Thriving Kids and early years services deliver for Autistic children

25. **Align Thriving Kids implementation with the VAP.** Ensure Thriving Kids is co-designed, delivered and evaluated in accordance with the VAP's vision and guiding principles (including accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, lived experience leadership, accountability, workforce capability and equitable outcomes for all Autistic children).

26. **Build an autism-informed and neuro-affirming Thriving Kids workforce.** Establish minimum autism capability expectations for all professionals delivering Thriving Kids supports, supported by training, guidance and ongoing professional development.

27. **Continue to build autism capability across universal early childhood services.** Strengthen autism-informed practice across kindergarten, maternal and child health, allied health and broader child and family services to support inclusion, participation and early identification of support needs.

28. **Embed autism-informed navigation and family support within Thriving Kids.** Ensure navigation services include autism expertise, Autistic and parent peer support, trusted information, workshops, and coordinated pathways that connect families with appropriate supports and community-based services.

Improve access to inclusive health and mental healthcare

29. **Develop and implement a Victorian Autism Health and Mental Health Roadmap.** Align with the National Roadmap to drive coordinated improvements in accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, workforce capability, service integration and health outcomes across the lifespan for Autistic Victorians. The Roadmap should provide a framework for improving coordination across services, embedding autism-inclusive practice, evaluating outcomes for Autistic people, and scaling successful initiatives across the health system.

30. **Build on existing autism-responsive health initiatives to improve healthcare access and outcomes for Autistic people.** Expand autism capability building across the health workforce, improve healthcare navigation and service integration, ensure autism is considered in triage and care planning, and improve healthcare responses across the lifespan, including during perimenopause and menopause. Evaluate and scale initiatives such as Disability Liaison Officers, Ambulance Victoria's Disability Inclusion Program and the Emergency Healthcare Communication Book developed in partnership with Scope, where they are demonstrating improved outcomes for Autistic people.

31. **Pilot and evaluate integrated models of autism healthcare.** Pilot one-stop autism healthcare clinics to provide coordinated, accessible and multidisciplinary care for Autistic people with high and complex support needs in one location, while supporting broader capability building and system improvement across Victorian healthcare services. Pilots should commence in regional and remote hospitals where service need is highest.

Drive an autism-accessible and inclusive education system

32. **Renew and expand Victoria's Autism Education Strategy across the full education lifecycle.** Build on the achievements of the current Strategy to improve outcomes for Autistic learners from early childhood through to tertiary and vocational education. The Strategy should strengthen inclusive practice, improve access to AAC and other supports, support autism-inclusive learning environments, link to Thriving Kids and include transparent outcome measures linked to participation, attendance, retention and post-school outcomes.

33. **Embed a dedicated School Can't Action Plan within the Autism Education Strategy.** Drive a coordinated response to School Can't through earlier identification and intervention, stronger autism capability across schools, neuro-inclusive learning environments, flexible educational responses, and improved support for students, families and educators.

34. **Improve access to inclusive supports beyond the classroom.** Expand access to autism-accessible out of school hours care and holiday programs that meet the needs of all Autistic students, including those with high and complex support needs, strengthen engagement with families and carers, and improve transitions through education and into further education, training and employment through coordinated, strengths-based planning and support.

Build inclusive workplace systems and culture

35. **Invest in a coordinated Autism Employment Pathways Pilot.** Invest in a pilot program to align Autistic talent with employers, incorporating a Navigator model and peer support, to provide coordinated support from secondary school through to further education, training and employment.

36. **Fund lived experience-led initiatives that drive workplace systems change.** Invest in a package of initiatives that build employer capability and support autism-inclusive workplace design, including practical resources, consultancy, multi-modal training, communities of practice, workplace standards and other implementation supports that help organisations embed inclusive systems and culture. The Victorian Government should also lead by example by transparently reporting on the representation and experiences of Autistic employees in the Victorian Public Sector.

37. **Establish a centralised Autism Employment Hub.** Improve access to evidence-informed resources, tools and guidance by creating a centralised hub that translates existing research and employment resources into practical, accessible supports for employers, managers, employees and jobseekers.

38. **Lead a statewide initiative to improve access to workplace adjustments.** Partner with employers, Jobs Victoria and people with lived experience to improve understanding of autism-related workplace adjustments, develop practical guidance and tools, streamline adjustment processes, and promote consistent approaches across workplaces.

Address housing inaccessibility and homelessness among Autistic Victorians

39. **Codesign and implement an Autism and Housing Action Plan for Victoria.** Embed autism-specific considerations across housing, homelessness, social housing and disability reforms, and strengthen understanding of the housing needs, preferences and aspirations of Autistic Victorians.

40. **Improve access to affordable, appropriate and autism-inclusive housing.** Ensure social housing policy, allocation processes and housing investment respond to the needs of Autistic people, including through appropriate priority access pathways, autism-inclusive housing design, and greater consideration of sensory, communication and cognitive accessibility in social and affordable housing developments.

41. **Partner with Autistic Victorians to shape housing policy and investment.** Evaluate the impact of major housing, homelessness and social housing initiatives on Autistic people, strengthen understanding of barriers to securing and sustaining housing, and use this evidence to guide future planning, investment and reform.

Strengthen safety and system responses to violence and harm

42. Build on Disability Royal Commission and existing disability safeguarding reforms to strengthen autism-informed prevention and responses to violence, abuse, exploitation and harm. Translate relevant Disability Royal Commission recommendations into targeted action through the Victorian Autism Plan, improve autism capability across frontline systems, and support initiatives that strengthen rights awareness, personal safety, help-seeking and access to appropriate supports for Autistic people.

43. Improve the accessibility and responsiveness of family violence systems for Autistic people. Strengthen autism capability across family violence, child protection, justice and crisis services, ensure MARAM and related guidance are meeting the needs of Autistic people, improve accessibility of service environments and risk assessment processes, build parent capacity and establish clear referral pathways and alternatives to police and justice responses.

44. Progress autism-informed responses to adolescent violence in the home and carer-directed violence. Build a comprehensive AVITH model of care that ensures therapeutic responses meet the needs of Autistic young people and their families, including through autism-informed practice guidance, workforce capability building and multidisciplinary supports. It must establish a “no wrong door” approach that enables families to access timely, appropriate and coordinated support regardless of how they enter the system, while prioritising safety, early intervention and family wellbeing and reducing reliance on police and justice responses.

Embed accountability, data and outcomes that reflect lived experience

45. Co-design and implement a Victorian Autism Evidence, Evaluation and Reporting Framework. Establish clear, measurable outcomes aligned with what matters to Autistic Victorians and their families and carers, including wellbeing, participation, quality of life, social connection, safety, education, employment and workforce sustainability. The Framework should include time-bound actions, implementation milestones, consistent evaluation, public reporting and accountability mechanisms across the Plan, and track long-term outcomes across the life course.

46. Strengthen lived experience data and evaluation across government systems. Complement activity and participation measures with data that captures Autistic people’s experiences of accessibility, inclusion, safety and service quality, and continue to build and expand mechanisms such as the Inclusion Monitor to track community experiences and systemic change over time.

47. Strengthen data collection, reporting and evaluation across diverse cohorts. Collect and report disaggregated data where appropriate, including for Autistic people experiencing intersectional disadvantage and those with high and complex support needs, and ensure all actions under the VAP include evaluation and continuous improvement mechanisms to understand impact and improve outcomes over time.

1. Introduction

Amaze welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of the VAP. The review represents an important opportunity to build on the strong foundations established under the current VAP and to ensure the next phase is informed by the experiences, priorities and aspirations of Autistic people and their families and carers.

We acknowledge and welcome the approach taken by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to centre lived experience in this review, including through surveys and focus groups undertaken in partnership with the sector. This approach is critical to ensuring the next VAP reflects what matters most to Autistic people and delivers meaningful improvements in outcomes.

Amaze was pleased to partner with DFFH to support the review through a targeted qualitative survey of Autistic people and their families and carers, which received 30 responses. The proportion of respondents who identified as an Autistic person and those who identified as a parent or carer of an Autistic person were very similar ($n = 23$ and $n = 21$ respectively). Of these respondents, 14 identified as both an Autistic person and a parent or carer of an Autistic person. Additionally, there were 10 respondents who identified as a professional who supports Autistic people in their family, and all these professionals had a personal connection to autism; they all identified as an Autistic adult and/or a parent or carer of an Autistic person. Respondents reflected a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, including LGBTQIA+ people, First Nations people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse and multicultural communities, people living in regional and remote areas, and people with co-occurring conditions.

Findings from this survey have informed this submission and will be provided to the Department in a separate report. To further inform our submission, Amaze also facilitated focus groups with parents and carers. These discussions highlighted the ongoing challenges experienced by families of Autistic children with high and complex support needs, including those requiring intensive or 24/7 lifelong care, and reinforced the need for more coordinated, targeted and accessible supports.

Amaze also brings a unique, real-time insight into the experiences of Autistic people through Autism Connect, our ILC funded, free national Autism helpline that provides independent and expert information by phone, email and webchat. Autism Connect provides a direct lens into the needs, priorities and challenges experienced by Autistic people, and the people around them, as they navigate systems and services across Victoria.

In the 2025–26 financial year, Autism Connect received 3,260 contacts from Victorians, with primary queries most commonly relating to:

- Diagnosis (806).
- Autistic person-centred supports (518)
- Family and community information and supports (350).
- Therapy and supports (268),
- Education (256).
- Employment (203).

Collectively, these insights paint a clear picture of both the progress made under the current Victorian Autism Plan and the challenges that continue to shape the lives of Autistic Victorians. They highlight the need for a renewed Plan that builds on existing strengths, responds to emerging reforms, and remains firmly focused on improving the outcomes that matter most to Autistic people and their families and carers.

2. Secure an Autistic-led Victorian Autism Plan for the future, embedded in legislation.

We applaud the Government on its achievements under the current VAP and have been pleased to work in partnership on a range of initiatives to support its delivery. The VAP has delivered important progress in advancing key actions, strengthening inclusion and service responses, and supporting more lived experience informed approaches across government and the community. It has also provided a strong example for other jurisdictions, influencing and helping to inform the development of the National Autism Strategy and South Australia's Autism Strategy.

These achievements represent important progress and demonstrate Victoria's commitment to improving outcomes for Autistic people. However, the ongoing experiences of Autistic people and their families and carers show that this progress is only the beginning. Significant barriers to inclusion, participation and wellbeing persist, with many Autistic people and their families and carers continuing to encounter systems that are difficult to access, navigate and rely upon. Systems remain fragmented, long wait times persist and many services remain inaccessible, particularly during periods of crisis.

A new rigorous, co-designed VAP is needed to build on current achievements, strengthen community participation, and embed more lived experience led, coordinated, accountable and outcomes driven actions for Autistic people and their families across Victoria. The next VAP must place Autistic people and lived experience leadership at its centre, reflect a diversity of experiences and aspirations and ensure that to the extent possible, Autistic people are supported to have genuine influence over the decisions and systems that shape their lives.

The importance of a VAP to achieve this progress and meaningfully improve outcomes cannot be understated. As recognised by the Senate and Victorian Parliamentary inquiries into autism services, broader generic disability policy often fails to meet the specific needs of Autistic people and their families and carers.² Outcomes across multiple domains remain poorer for Autistic people compared to people with disability generally, and people without disability.³ Poor outcomes and experiences are deeply interconnected. Barriers to employment, housing, healthcare and support frequently interact and compound over time, highlighting the need for a coordinated autism-specific strategy capable of driving reform across systems.⁴ Tailored, evidence-informed and lived experience-led solutions are essential.

Community feedback broadly supported a new VAP. While some respondents emphasised the importance of embedding autism within broader disability policy and reform, many highlighted the distinct barriers Autistic people continue to face across education, employment, healthcare, diagnosis and community inclusion. Respondents emphasised the importance of ensuring autism-specific experiences, barriers and support needs remain visible within policy reform, and expressed

² Australian Senate Select Committee on Autism, 2022. Services, Support and Life Outcomes for Autistic Australians. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Autism/autis; Victorian Parliament Family and Community Development Committee, 2017. Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Final Report. Melbourne: Parliament of Victoria. Available at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-services-for-people-with-autism-spectrum-disorder/reports/>.

³ ABS, 2024. Autism in Australia: Summary results from the 2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/autism-australia-2022>

⁴ Opcit, Australian Senate Select Committee on Autism, 2022; Osborn, E and R Young, 2026. 'Why Am I Homeless? The Contribution of Autistic Characteristics, System-Related and Environmental Factors to the Risk of Homelessness' Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2026.2662020>

concern that these issues can be overlooked within broader policy frameworks. Many highlighted the value of targeted, accountable and lived experience-informed action while significant disparities in outcomes and community understanding persist.

The development of a new VAP is particularly timely given the roll out of Thriving Kids and broader Foundational Supports reforms. These reforms have the potential to significantly improve outcomes for Autistic people and their families, but their success will depend on whether they are designed and delivered in ways that are autism-informed, accessible and responsive to the diversity of support needs within our autistic community. The next VAP should play an active role in shaping these reforms, ensuring they share the Plan's vision, guiding principles and commitment to meaningful outcomes for Autistic people.

To ensure a sustained commitment, accountability and delivery of long-term outcomes, we strongly urge that consideration be given to embedding the VAP in legislation. A **Victorian Autism Act** could help safeguard progress for the longer term, establish clear responsibilities across government, and provide a durable framework for accountability, implementation and reporting. Drawing on the approach taken in South Australia, consideration should also be given to establishing an **Office for Autism** and **Minister for Autism** to provide clear leadership and accountability for implementation of the Victorian Autism Plan, and to drive coordinated, whole-of-government action to improve outcomes for Autistic people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **Legislate the VAP through a Victorian Autism Act.** Embed long-term accountability, establish clear responsibilities across government, and provide a durable framework for implementation, monitoring and reporting.
- 2) **Consider establishing an Office for Autism and Minister for Autism.** Provide clear leadership for the VAP and drive coordinated whole-of-government action to improve outcomes for Autistic people.

3. Set a vision for better outcomes and systems that deliver for all Autistic people.

The current vision for the VAP is: An inclusive Victoria where autistic people enjoy lives with real opportunities for choice, participation and contribution within our community.

The vision is intended to align with that of Inclusive Victoria: An inclusive, accessible and safe Victoria that upholds the rights of people with disability, celebrates our diversity and pride, and expands our opportunities to belong and control our lives.

The current VAP's vision provides a strong foundation, with a clear focus on inclusion and opportunity. **The development of the next VAP presents an opportunity to evolve and strengthen this vision by more clearly articulating the outcomes it seeks to achieve for Autistic people, alongside the system changes needed to realise them.** The vision should also be supported by clear measures of progress, enabling government and the community to assess whether meaningful change is being achieved.

The vision should strive to achieve:

- **Autistic people at the centre**
To the fullest extent possible, Autistic people have genuine influence over decisions that affect their lives and the systems that shape them. This includes recognising diverse support and decision-making needs, with access to supported decision-making, and the meaningful involvement of families, carers and trusted supporters where needed. Lived experience must be embedded in governance, design, delivery and evaluation.
- **Rights, respect and safety**
Autistic people live in a community where their rights are upheld, they are safe from harm, discrimination and exclusion, and their identity and diversity are respected and valued, including through culturally safe and trauma-informed approaches.
- **Understanding and acceptance**
Autism is understood and accepted across the community, and across all areas of government and service systems, enabling full inclusion in everyday life.
- **Meaningful participation across the life course**
Autistic people have real opportunities to participate, contribute and belong in ways that are meaningful to them, across education, employment, community and civic life at all stages of life.
- **Autonomy, choice and control**
Autistic people exercise autonomy, and choice and control over decisions that affect their lives and the supports they access, recognising that people will engage and make decisions in different ways and with different levels of support.
- **A system that works and is accountable**
Services are reliable, consistent, connected and neuro-affirming, with clear accountability for outcomes across the life course, meeting the needs of all Autistic people, including those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and those with high and complex support needs.
- **Measurable progress**
Progress toward the vision is demonstrated through clear, transparent and publicly reported outcomes, aligned with what matters to Autistic people and their families.

Taken together, these elements strengthen the vision by clearly linking the outcomes sought for Autistic people with the responsibility of systems to deliver them. This alignment is critical to ensure the next VAP supports broader reform, including the roll-out of co-designed, neuro-affirming Foundational Supports.

RECOMMENDATION

- 3) **Update the Plan's vision to focus on the outcomes it seeks to achieve for Autistic people and the systems required to deliver them.** Amaze recommends the following vision:

"An inclusive Victoria where all Autistic people are valued, respected and empowered to live the lives they choose, supported by connected and accountable systems that enable participation, wellbeing, belonging and opportunity across the life course."

4. Update Guiding Principles to achieve the plan's vision and drive whole-of-government accountability.

The guiding principles of the VAP should set out how government will work to deliver the vision, shaping both the design, implementation and evaluation of all actions under the Plan. While the current guiding principles provide an important foundation, the next VAP should strengthen and expand these principles to more clearly embed co-design, equity, accountability and whole-of-government coordination. They must ensure that all actions under the Plan, across sectors, are informed by evidence, including a diversity of lived experience and perspectives, and that they are inclusive and outcomes focussed.

Feedback from our community on the current guiding principles include that:

- **Autonomy and opportunity** fail to recognise that not all Autistic people can make their own decisions or exercise choice and control, and that decision supporters (including family members) must be recognised and supported.
- **Diversity** fails to adequately capture intersectionality and ensure that the VAP is delivered through an intersectional lens.
- **The current principles** fail to:
 - ensure all actions under the plan, and relevant policy reform across government is undertaken in partnership with Autistic people and their families and carers;
 - support aligned and connected, autism informed systems across government;
 - require that all actions delivered under the VAP are accessible and neuro-affirming.

The following guiding principles are recommended:

- **In partnership — nothing about us without us**
The VAP is co-designed, implemented and evaluated with Autistic people, with meaningful involvement at all stages of decision making across sectors. Engagement reflects the diversity of the Autistic community, including Autistic people experiencing intersectional disadvantage and with high and complex support needs.
- **Evidence informed**
Policy and implementation are guided by a strong evidence base, including lived experience, data, research and evaluation, with continuous learning embedded over time.
- **Accessible**
All aspects of the Plan, including programs, services and communication, are designed to be accessible to Autistic people, supported by clear and enforceable accessibility standards.
- **Self-determination and autonomy**
To the extent possible, Autistic people are supported to make decisions about their own lives, with systems that enable choice, control and independence. Within a supported decision-making framework (see, for example, the Office of the Public Advocate's [Supported Decision Making](#)) decision supporters are recognised and enabled to assist or make decisions where necessary, in line with a person's will and preferences.

- **Safety and human rights**
The rights of Autistic people are upheld in line with the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, with proactive action to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination.
- **Equal opportunity**
Autistic people have equitable access to education, employment, housing, healthcare and leadership opportunities, with targeted actions to address barriers experienced by intersectional cohorts and Autistic people with high and complex support needs.
- **Autistic identity and diversity**
Autistic identity and diversity are recognised, respected and valued, including across gender, culture, communication styles and support needs.
- **Neuro-affirming, individualised and holistic**
Supports and services are neuro-affirming, strengths-based and tailored to the individual, recognising the whole person and their family and community context.
- **Aligned and connected systems**
Actions are coordinated across government and aligned with major reforms, reducing fragmentation and improving access, navigation and outcomes.
- **A VAP for all**
The VAP delivers for all Autistic people, including those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and those with high and complex support needs, ensuring no one is left behind.
- **Accountable and outcomes focused**
Implementation is driven by clear, time-bound actions and measurable outcomes, with transparent reporting (including for priority cohorts) and a strong focus on what matters to Autistic people and their families.

Embedding these principles at the core of the VAP will ensure they shape not only individual initiatives, but the overall approach to policy, service design and system reform across government. While some of these principles are reflected in the existing VAP's systemic reforms, explicitly including them as guiding principles will support consistent, whole-of-government implementation, strengthen accountability for outcomes, and better align the VAP with the National Autism Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION:

- 4) **Strengthen the guiding principles to shape all aspects of the Plan's design, delivery and accountability.**

The guiding principles should embed co-design, evidence, lived experience, accessibility and choice and control, alongside a strong focus on intersectionality, equity and human rights. They must ensure the VAP delivers for all Autistic people, including those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and/or high and complex support needs, through well-targeted, coordinated and accountable actions.

5. Prioritise targeted actions to deliver on the VAP's vision and guiding principles

To deliver on the vision and guiding principles, the next VAP must prioritise targeted, cross-cutting, system-level actions that address persistent barriers and drive meaningful, whole-of-life outcomes. The following themes set out key priorities for coordinated and accountable, autism specific action across government, grounded in the experiences of Autistic people and their families and carers.

A. Promote understanding, respect and positive Autistic identity.

"Autism needs its own public relations campaign." Focus group member.

The current VAP has made an important contribution to improving community understanding of autism, including through initiatives such as *Change Your Reactions*, which have helped promote **greater understanding, acceptance and inclusion**. The next VAP provides an important opportunity to build on this progress by establishing a clear and inclusive approach to how autism is understood and discussed across government, services and the broader community. Language matters. It shapes public understanding, influences policy and service design, and affects whether Autistic people and their families feel seen, respected and included.

"As a Mum I've turned over every stone possible to get him the support he needs. I'll go to the ends of the earth for him - but I also need society to understand what it is like, so the judgement and stigmas subside". Amaze survey respondent.

The next VAP should include a clear statement on language and respectful communication, informed by contemporary practice and approaches reflected in the **National Autism Strategy**. Such a statement should recognise that language preferences differ across the autism community and that no single terminology will reflect all experiences or identities. It should promote respectful, strengths based, inclusive and evidence-informed communication while ensuring the diversity of Autistic experiences, identities and support needs are represented in all policy, service design and public discussion. For example, this may include recognising and respecting the preference of some Autistic people and families to use the term **"profound autism"** to describe a cohort of Autistic people with very high and complex communication and/or behaviour support needs, generally requiring intensive, lifelong support and targeted service responses. It is vital that this cohort and their families and supporters are meaningfully included in policy reform, community engagement and public conversations about autism.

Recent debates relating to NDIS reforms have highlighted the importance of promoting a **balanced, evidence-informed and respectful narrative about autism and support needs**. Many of our survey respondents expressed concern about the way autism and Autistic people have been discussed during NDIS reform debates, describing the language and commentary as **"dismissive", "hurtful", "dangerous" and "utterly unfair"**. Some felt autism had been **"demonised"** and positioned as a burden on government systems, while others described the public discourse as a **"gut-punch"** that fuelled stigma and negative attitudes towards Autistic people. Respondents reported seeing narratives that portrayed Autistic people as **"bludgers" or "rip-off merchants"**, leaving some feeling less safe disclosing their autism and more concerned about community attitudes towards support needs.

These discussions have also exposed tensions within the autism community on how differing support needs are understood, discussed and prioritised. While diversity of perspectives is a strength, there is a need to foster greater understanding and respect across the autism community, recognising that Autistic people can have different experiences, aspirations and support requirements. The next VAP should help create space for respectful conversations that acknowledge these differences while maintaining a shared commitment to inclusion, dignity and human rights.

"As a late identified autistic woman it was almost a relief to receive a diagnosis. It made me understand my history and self better. I am trying to ensure my children have a far better understanding of themselves than I did at their age. I hope that understanding themselves will allow them to grow up with much less mental health distress than I did." Amaze survey respondent.

The current VAP has recognised the importance of strengthening positive Autistic identity and self-understanding. Some survey respondents highlighted the significant impact that understanding and embracing an Autistic identity can have on wellbeing, confidence, safety and self-advocacy. Several respondents described receiving a diagnosis as an important turning point that helped them better understand themselves, access appropriate supports/adjustments, and challenge years of stigma, misunderstanding and self-blame. At the same time, respondents highlighted the ongoing impact of negative public narratives, stereotypes and misconceptions about autism, which can make it difficult for people to disclose their diagnosis, seek support or develop a positive sense of identity. One respondent observed that **"telling people I'm autistic feels the same as coming out in many ways, I can only do it if it's safe"**, while another described diagnosis as **"almost a relief"** because it helped them understand their history and sense of self. To support positive Autistic identity, respondents pointed to the importance of greater community understanding, inclusion and acceptance, stronger government leadership and accountability, positive media representation, and a greater focus on strengths, alongside support needs. In the 2025-26 financial year, **Autism Connect** received at least one call every week from Victorians (80 calls) seeking positive identity resources or information.

The next VAP provides an opportunity to build on existing efforts to promote understanding and acceptance of autism while supporting Autistic people to develop positive identity, self-advocacy and connection with the broader autism community.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 5) **Develop and adopt a Victorian Autism Language and Communications Statement.** Co-design guidance with Autistic people, families and the autism sector that promotes respectful, strengths based, inclusive and evidence-informed language, recognises differing language preferences, and reflects the diversity of Autistic people.
- 6) **Lead a sustained public education and community awareness initiative.** Building on *Change Your Reactions*, promote greater understanding of autism, respect for differing experiences and support needs, and awareness of the diversity of the autism community.
- 7) **Promote respectful and inclusive dialogue across policy, community and service settings.** Embed an evidence-informed whole-of-government narrative about autism and support needs that encourages constructive engagement, recognises diverse perspectives, and discourages stigma, misinformation and exclusionary behaviours.
- 8) **Promote positive Autistic identity, self-advocacy and community connection.** Build on existing initiatives and resources that improve autism understanding and acceptance, reduce stigma and support Autistic people to develop positive identity, self-understanding and confidence in communicating their strengths, support needs and aspirations.

B. Strengthen lived experience leadership and community engagement across government.

“People with ASD should be listened to and heard without judgement. They should have say over what happens to their person.” Amaze survey respondent.

Significant steps have been taken under the current VAP to strengthen co-design and elevate Autistic voices in policy development, including through the establishment of the VAP Advisory Group. However, important work remains to embed more consistent approaches to engaging Autistic people (and, where appropriate, their families, carers and supporters) across all areas of policy and government decision-making. Engagement is still often concentrated within disability-specific initiatives rather than systematically applied across broader systems such as health, education, housing, justice and employment. Strengthening a whole-of-government engagement with Autistic people and their families and carers to help ensure all policies and reforms that affect Autistic people are informed by lived experience, better anticipate impacts, and deliver more inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

“Including the profoundly autistic in planning and government grants. Autism planning needs to be inclusive of all autistics. Right now the profoundly autistic are at best treated as an after thought; just one more intersectionality. As too hard...” Amaze survey respondent

New approaches are also needed to ensure policy development is informed by a diversity of experiences and perspectives. Autistic people, families and carers (particularly those experiencing intersectional disadvantage and/or with high and complex support needs) continue to report feeling unheard by government.

Community members have also expressed frustration that opportunities to provide input are often time-limited, linked to specific consultations, or occur only after key decisions have been made, with few avenues to proactively raise emerging issues or identify priorities for reform. Targeted actions are needed to ensure community engagement is accessible, inclusive, culturally safe and appropriately resourced. There is an opportunity to strengthen pathways for lived experience participation and better connect policy development and reform processes with diverse community voices. Established community infrastructure, such as **Amaze’s Lived Experience Network**, can support transparent and targeted engagement by connecting government with people from specific cohorts, communities and areas of interest when lived experience input is needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 9) **Codesign and implement a whole-of-government *Autism Co-design and Engagement Framework*.** The Framework should set clear standards for when and how Autistic people are engaged across all policy and reform processes. It should promote consistency, transparency and accountability, including requirements for early engagement, accessible approaches, feedback loops and public reporting.
- 10) **Partner with the autism sector to strengthen lived experience participation and leadership.** Build on existing community infrastructure and networks (such as Amaze’s Lived Experience Network) to provide transparent, targeted and ongoing opportunities for a diversity of lived experience to inform policy, service design and reform. This should include increasing opportunities for Autistic people to contribute to, advise on and help deliver policy development, implementation and evaluation across government, including within departments responsible for disability and autism policy.

11) Establish a clear, accessible, direct and always-available pathway for community input.

Complementing formal community engagement processes, it should enable Autistic people and their families and carers to share day-to-day experiences of accessibility and inclusion, identify priorities for change, and raise issues for advocacy across sectors and governments, including on the NDIS.

C. Build autism-capable systems and services.

Autism capability is a recurring theme throughout this submission. It is fundamental to improving outcomes for Autistic people across all areas of life. The ability of services, systems and workforces to understand autism, provide appropriate adjustments and deliver neuro-affirming responses influences experiences and outcomes across health, education, employment, family violence, housing, justice and community participation. Many of the recommendations in our submission therefore include sector-specific actions to strengthen autism capability and improve accessibility.

Of note, significant progress has been made under the VAP to strengthen autism capability across a range of sectors, including through initiatives such as the Diverse Learners Hub and the introduction of Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) across health and police services. These initiatives demonstrate the value of specialist roles and targeted capability-building in improving accessibility, workforce understanding and service responses. **However, their reach remains limited.** DLOs are not consistently embedded across all health, mental health and police settings, and they are generally not performing standalone disability liaison roles, with professionals most commonly appointed as DLOs in addition to their existing duties. Furthermore, autism capability building and disability liaison roles are not consistently embedded across other frontline systems, including family violence, emergency services, child protection and courts, meaning Autistic people and their families continue to experience inconsistent, and at times inaccessible, service responses.

Autistic people and their families continue to report variable experiences when interacting with police and emergency services, reflecting inconsistencies in autism capability, service responses and workforce practice across settings. While police training has been delivered under the current Plan, there is limited visibility of its impact on practice, highlighting the need for clearer evaluation and baseline measures of workforce capability. **Practical resources** are also needed to support police in real-time (in the station and out in the community), alongside accessible guidance for Autistic people and families on what to expect when engaging with police services.

The current VAP has delivered important progress in supporting Autistic people to prepare for and respond to emergencies. Building on this foundation, the next VAP should strengthen autism capability across emergency services to ensure neuro-affirming, safe and accessible responses, including appropriate protections, environments and system responses for Autistic people and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 12) Co-design and implement a whole-of-government Autism Capability Framework.** Establish clear expectations for autism knowledge, neuro-affirming practice and accessibility across frontline systems, supported by Autistic-led training, sector-specific guidance, practical resources and consistent evaluation of workforce capability and outcomes.
- 13) Embed and expand Disability Liaison Officer roles and specialist autism expertise across frontline systems.** Strengthen and extend dedicated disability liaison functions across health, mental health, police, emergency services, child protection, family violence and justice settings to improve accessibility, coordination and service responses.
- 14) Strengthen autism capability in police and emergency service responses.** Build on existing reforms through ongoing capability development, evaluation of training effectiveness, practical tools for frontline staff, and accessible information to support Autistic people and families when engaging with police and emergency services.

D. Create accessible and inclusive systems, places and events.

"We need universal design from the get go, rather than always retrofitting." Amaze focus group participant

Important steps have been taken under the current VAP to improve the accessibility of places, programs and services across sport, recreation, arts, culture and public spaces. Respondents to our survey highlighted the positive impact of initiatives such as sensory sessions, quiet spaces and the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program. While these initiatives demonstrate the value of targeted accessibility measures, the next VAP provides an opportunity to build on this progress by embedding accessibility more consistently across places, events and services from the outset. This will help ensure more Autistic people can participate confidently and fully in community and public life.

Community feedback highlighted several priorities for reform:

- **Accessibility must extend beyond physical access.** Our survey respondents described ongoing challenges associated with noisy, crowded and unpredictable environments, including loud music, public announcements, bright lighting and limited opportunities to regulate when overwhelmed. They called for more sensory-friendly environments, quiet spaces, sensory maps, social stories, clear signage and accessible information that helps people understand what to expect before attending a venue or event, and how to plan. Priorities for accessibility were also identified as including communication supports such as visual information, AAC boards and staff who are confident and proactive in supporting Autistic people. A lack of fencing in public places (eg playgrounds) was also identified as a safety issue for families.
- **Accessibility must be embedded across public systems and infrastructure.** Respondents highlighted ongoing barriers when using public transport and other public services, including sensory overload, uncertainty navigating service disruptions and changes, and inconsistent understanding of autism-related accessibility needs. Accessibility challenges can also be compounded by limited visibility and consistency in priority access arrangements. For example, signage on public transport often implies that priority access is intended for people with visible disability only, contributing to misunderstanding and, at times, conflict when Autistic people use these spaces. These experiences can reduce confidence, independence and participation in everyday activities.
- **Autistic people should help shape community initiatives and environments from the outset.** Community feedback highlighted the importance of involving Autistic people early in the design and delivery of services, programs and community environments to ensure accessibility is embedded from the start. Focus group participants emphasised the value of universal design approaches that create opportunities for connection, participation and belonging for people with and without disability. This included supporting Autistic-led, universally designed groups and activities for all (including people without disability) centred on shared interests such as gaming, sport, recreation and the arts through accessible settings (including libraries, neighbourhood houses and community hubs). These spaces can reduce social isolation and strengthen community connection, particularly for young people and those living in regional and remote communities. For some Autistic people and their families, finding a welcoming and inclusive community can be life changing. Demand for connection within community is strong in Victoria, with **Autism Connect** receiving 205 queries from Victorians in the 2025-26 financial year regarding Autistic peer support groups.

- **Mainstream participation opportunities must be accessible for all Autistic people, including those with high and complex support needs.** While inclusion has improved in some settings, respondents and focus group participants reported that many sporting clubs, recreational activities and community events continue to lack the understanding, capability and resourcing required to meaningfully include people with high and complex communication and behaviour support needs. Focus group members advised that accessibility improves when activities are delivered in familiar settings, such as schools or trusted community hubs, in partnership with families.

“There are no activities in the community that are inclusive of people with profound autism. They are treated as an afterthought in autism planning or not at all.” Amaze survey respondent.

- **Practical barriers can limit the effectiveness of accessibility initiatives.** Our survey respondents noted that sensory-friendly sessions are often scheduled during business hours or early in the day, making them difficult to access for working adults and some families. Sensory spaces can also be difficult to locate, and accessibility information is not always easy to find before attending venues and events. Greater consistency in the design, promotion and delivery of accessibility supports would improve participation and inclusion.
- **Successful accessibility initiatives should be strengthened and expanded.** The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program was consistently identified as a positive initiative that helps improve awareness and confidence when accessing public spaces and services. As the program continues to expand, there is an opportunity to strengthen its impact through consistent, high quality, Autistic led training for all staff (including casual staff) at places displaying the symbol, and ongoing public awareness efforts. This will help ensure that people can confidently expect meaningful support when accessing businesses and organisations displaying the symbol.
- **Multicultural and faith-based settings are an underutilised access point.** Many people from culturally and linguistically diverse and multicultural communities rely on trusted community and faith settings for connection, information and support. Partnering with multicultural disability organisations and trusted community organisations can help build culturally safe, trauma-informed and accessible environments while extending the reach of autism inclusion initiatives across Victoria. Learnings may be taken, and partnerships explored with organisations like **AMES** who are already engaged in supporting culturally safe and trauma informed learning in their **City of Melbourne Multicultural Hub**.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 15) **Develop and implement a whole-of-government Autism Accessibility Framework.** Co-design and embed consistent accessibility standards across government services, public places, events, transport and digital systems. The Framework should apply universal design principles and address sensory, communication, cognitive and social accessibility, including the consistent use of accessible information, social stories, sensory maps, visual supports, AAC resources and clear wayfinding.
- 16) **Invest in accessible and inclusive community participation opportunities.** Support Autistic-led and universally designed initiatives for all (including people without disability) that promote connection, belonging and participation through community hubs, recreation, sport, arts and cultural settings. Ensure opportunities are accessible to all Autistic people, including those with high and complex support needs, and strengthen partnerships with multicultural, multifaith and community organisations to improve inclusion across diverse communities.
- 17) **Strengthen autism accessibility capability, accountability and evaluation.** Support consistent, Autistic-led training across publicly funded services, venues and events, including organisations participating in accessibility initiatives such as the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program. Establish mechanisms to evaluate accessibility outcomes and lived experience impacts, identify effective approaches and support their expansion across Victoria.

E. Strengthen system coordination and navigation support

“Fix the cracks between services and get agencies to take accountability for their own department and communicate effectively with other departments.” Amaze survey respondent.

Autistic people and their families continue to navigate complex and poorly connected systems, often bearing responsibility for coordinating their own supports across health, education and social services. This challenge is especially acute for families of children, people with high and complex support needs, and during key life transitions or periods of crisis. Without clear pathways and accessible navigation support, people can experience delays, duplication and gaps in care and support, alongside significant administrative burden and overwhelm. This can lead to preventable escalation, including interaction with crisis, acute health or justice systems.

In the 2025-26 FY, **Autism Connect** received 562 queries from Victorians seeking to navigate family and community supports (316) and therapy and supports (246). These enquiries most commonly related to carer supports and funding, information about autism, peer support, and finding appropriate therapists.

“At the beginning of the journey it's a minefield to work out how to get support – specifically psychologist, OT, paediatrician. We are so privileged financially and cognitively and it's really, really hard searching and keeping the threads”. Amaze Survey respondent

While reforms such as the Thriving Kids initiative and the introduction of Foundational Supports provide an opportunity to strengthen navigation and coordination, their effectiveness will depend on how accessible and connected they are in practice. Navigation supports must reflect how Autistic people and families actually move through systems, including the need to engage with multiple services at once. This requires clearer referral pathways, shared protocols between agencies, and more consistent approaches to information sharing. It must also respond to the needs of intersectional cohorts, including Autistic people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and those with high and complex support needs.

Autistic-led navigation and peer support models are critical to improving system access and experience.

“The only way to find reliable service providers and other help is through other Mums.”
Focus group participant.

Community feedback consistently highlights the value of connecting with others who share lived experience to better understand options, identify appropriate providers and build confidence in navigating services. These approaches can complement formal systems by providing trusted, practical support and reducing isolation for families. Embedding Autistic-led and peer-based navigation within broader reforms will be key to ensuring systems are not only more connected, but also more responsive and easier to navigate.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 18) **Fund and scale Autistic-led system navigation.** Invest in peer-led and lived experience-based models to support Autistic people and families to access, coordinate and sustain engagement with services across health, education and social supports.
- 19) **Strengthen integration across service systems.** Establish clear referral pathways, shared protocols and coordinated entry points across agencies to reduce duplication, gaps and administrative burden.
- 20) **Align major reforms to deliver seamless navigation.** Ensure initiatives such as Thriving Kids and future Foundational Supports are co-designed with Autistic people and their families, accessible and integrated with existing systems to provide clear, consistent and easy to navigate pathways.
- 21) **Improve coordinated responses for families in crisis.** Establish clear, accessible pathways that enable early intervention, reduce escalation, and avoid inappropriate involvement with acute health, child protection or justice systems.

F. Improve access to timely assessment and diagnosis

"I wasn't diagnosed with autism until I was actively suicidal. The autistic population is at increased risk of self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, substance use issues, and trauma. We need to do better to identify autistic individuals before their mental health deteriorates to the point of wanting to end their lives." Amaze survey respondent

While NDIS reforms and Foundational Supports shift the focus away from diagnosis and towards functional capacity, **an autism diagnosis remains a critical entry point for understanding a person's autistic characteristics, building a positive autistic identity, accessing appropriate supports, and navigating systems with confidence.** Evidence consistently shows that timely and high-quality diagnosis improves access to supports that meet individual needs and contributes to better long-term outcomes.⁵

Community feedback highlighted:

- **Access to diagnosis remains too difficult, costly and inconsistent.** Amaze survey respondents described long wait times, high out-of-pocket costs and limited access to publicly funded assessment pathways, particularly for adults. Many reported spending thousands of dollars to secure a diagnosis or being unable to pursue assessment due to cost. One respondent described paying more than \$5,000 for assessments for themselves and their child while receiving no Medicare rebate.
- **Autism is still frequently missed in people with diverse presentations.** Respondents highlighted ongoing gaps in recognition of autism in people assigned female at birth (AFAB), people with co-occurring conditions and those who mask their autistic characteristics. Several described receiving a diagnosis only in adulthood after years of misdiagnosis and missed opportunities for identification and support. A survey respondent stated:

"I was not diagnosed until age 26 because there was a lack of understanding around how autism presents in AFAB people. It was also incredibly expensive to obtain, and I could not afford it now that I cannot work full time. There are very few clinicians who work with high masking AFAB adults."

- **Referral pathways are often unclear and difficult to navigate.** Respondents reported confusion about where to seek assessment, what services were available and how to access referrals. Some described difficulties obtaining referrals from GPs, while others highlighted the need for clearer information about available assessment pathways, wait times and service options. Respondents also emphasised the importance of having choice and control over who undertakes an assessment.

The current VAP has taken important steps to improve access to diagnosis for priority cohorts, including First Nations communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, through more culturally responsive and community-based approaches. It has also expanded access to public assessment clinics for young children and commenced the delivery of adult assessment

⁵ Clark, M. L. E., J. Barbaro and C. Dissanayake, 2017. "Continuity and Change in Cognition and Autism Severity from Toddlerhood to School Age." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2954-7>; Clark, Megan Louise Erin, Josephine Barbaro and Cheryl Dissanayake, 2018. "School Age Outcomes of Children Diagnosed Early and Later with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 48, no. 1 (January 2018): 92–102. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3279-x>

services through Mindful adult mental health services. While these initiatives provide an important foundation, significant work remains to improve access to timely, publicly funded assessment and diagnosis across the lifespan. Families seeking access to a public assessment service for their children continue to face long wait times to access existing services.⁶ For adults, while the Mindful partnership provides an important starting point, access remains limited and does not yet establish a clear, accessible and consistent pathway to publicly funded autism assessment across the state. Existing pathways through the Mindful partnership are largely focused on people already engaged with public mental health services. While this provides an important pathway for a cohort at high risk of poor mental health outcomes, many adults who are ineligible for these services and unable to afford private assessment continue to face significant barriers to accessing a diagnosis.

The next VAP should build on these foundations by strengthening early identification, improving the quality and consistency of diagnosis, and reducing barriers to access. As Thriving Kids and broader Foundational Supports reforms are implemented, there is an opportunity to embed early identification and screening more consistently across universal services, strengthen workforce capability to support timely referral, assessment and diagnosis, and provide more visible pathways that reduce the burden on Autistic people and families. The *National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism* should be embedded as a minimum practice standard and building clinician capability to recognise autism in the context of masking, co-occurring conditions and diverse presentations should be prioritised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 22) Expand access to timely, publicly funded autism assessment and diagnosis across the lifespan.** Increase the availability of public assessment services, reduce wait times, and establish clear and consistent statewide pathways to assessment for both children and adults, including a coordinated pathway to adult diagnosis.
- 23) Strengthen early identification and diagnostic practice.** Embed evidence-informed screening and identification across universal services and alongside Thriving Kids implementation, embed the National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism as a minimum practice standard, and build workforce capability to support timely, neuro-affirming and consistent assessment, referral and diagnosis.
- 24) Create clearer, more equitable and person-centred pathways to diagnosis.** Improve visibility of available services, referral pathways, wait times and assessment options, and reduce barriers for priority cohorts through safe, clearer, more accessible and coordinated pathways.

⁶ Adams, D. et al., 2023. *Research evidence and policy landscape mapping to inform the National Autism Strategy*. Brisbane: Autism CRC. Available at: [Research evidence and policy landscape mapping to inform the National Autism Strategy](#).

G.Ensure Thriving Kids and early years services deliver for Autistic children.

The current VAP has taken positive steps to support inclusion in the early years. These have included commitments to building the capability of kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators, and improving access to information for families and professionals. While these initiatives provide an important foundation, there is an opportunity to better understand their impact on Autistic children and families and build on emerging learnings. Community feedback highlighted that many families continue to encounter inconsistencies in autism knowledge and inclusive practice across early childhood settings, resulting in missed opportunities for early identification, delayed access to support, and significant advocacy burden on families (particularly for children assigned female at birth and those with more diverse or less recognised presentations of autism).

As Victoria rolls out **Thriving Kids** and broader **Foundational Supports**, the next VAP will be critical in ensuring these reforms are delivered through an autism-informed framework that embeds neuro-affirming practice, builds an autism-capable workforce, and connects families to trusted navigation, peer support and community-based services.

The introduction of Thriving Kids presents a significant opportunity to improve outcomes for Autistic children and their families through earlier access to support, and as discussed above, stronger coordination across services and improved navigation. The next VAP should play an active role in shaping and aligning implementation to ensure Thriving Kids reflects the Plan's vision and guiding principles, including co-design, accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, equitable outcomes, accountability and a commitment to building an autism-capable workforce. This is particularly important as Thriving Kids becomes a key source of support for many children and families who may not be eligible for the NDIS. To deliver on its promise, Thriving Kids must be designed and implemented in partnership with Autistic people and families and be capable of meeting the diverse needs of all Autistic children, including those in regional and remote areas, and/or experiencing other forms of intersectional disadvantage. Implementation should also build on existing community strengths, expertise and trusted community infrastructure wherever possible, rather than creating parallel systems that add further complexity for families.

The success of Thriving Kids will depend heavily on workforce capability and system navigation, including peer support. Families consistently report challenges identifying appropriate supports, navigating services and accessing professionals with a strong understanding of autism. The next VAP should therefore prioritise building autism capability across the early years workforce, including kindergarten, maternal and child health, allied health and broader child and family services. All professionals delivering Thriving Kids supports should be equipped to provide neuro-affirming, evidence-informed and autism-informed support, supported by clear capability expectations and ongoing professional development. Navigation supports delivered through Thriving Kids should also include access to autism-specific expertise, Autistic and parent peer support, and coordinated pathways that help families understand options and connect with the right supports at the right time. Alongside clinical and therapeutic supports, families should have access to trusted information, workshops, peer connection and other supports that build confidence, knowledge and capability. All systems navigation information must be accessible to Autistic parents. Partnerships with community-based organisations will be critical to building capability and ensuring services are responsive to local needs, particularly in regional and remote areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 25) **Align Thriving Kids implementation with the VAP.** Ensure Thriving Kids is co-designed, delivered and evaluated in accordance with the VAP's guiding principles, including accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, lived experience leadership, accountability, workforce capability and equitable outcomes for all Autistic children.
- 26) **Build an autism-informed and neuro-affirming Thriving Kids workforce.** Establish minimum autism capability expectations for all professionals delivering Thriving Kids supports, supported by training, guidance and ongoing professional development.
- 27) **Continue to build autism capability across universal early childhood services.** Strengthen autism-informed practice across kindergarten, maternal and child health, allied health and broader child and family services to support inclusion, participation and early identification of support needs.
- 28) **Embed autism-informed navigation and family support within Thriving Kids.** Ensure navigation services include autism expertise, Autistic and parent peer support, trusted information, workshops, and coordinated pathways that connect families with appropriate supports and community-based services.

H. Improve access to inclusive health and mental healthcare.

“Our son recently was an outpatient of ICYMHS at The Austin Hospital due to attempts of suicide. There was no barrier to this, other than a delay in getting to finally see someone. The support from the ICYMHS team was good. Beyond this team, it continues to be entirely misunderstood the anxiety, overwhelm, depression that many Autistic people experience. It’s invisible, so people choose to ignore it.” Amaze survey respondent

Significant steps have been taken to improve healthcare accessibility, communication and autism capability across Victoria’s health and mental health system. These include initiatives to improve accessibility and communication across Ambulance Victoria and in emergency healthcare settings, strengthen Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) programs, and build autism capability across the health and mental health workforce, including in partnership with the Mindful Centre. Development of the *Diverse Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework* has been as an important step towards improving the disability accessibility, inclusivity and responsiveness of Victoria’s mental health system. We welcomed its recognition of the poorer mental health outcomes experienced by Autistic people. However, our community consistently tells us that significant barriers to accessing inclusive, coordinated and autism-accessible healthcare remain. While important progress has been made, respondents continue to experience fragmented and siloed systems, inconsistent service responses, and poor coordination across health and mental health services, often leaving Autistic people and families to navigate complex pathways without adequate support.

In the 2025-26 financial year, Autism Connect received 241 queries from Victorians regarding health (156) and mental health (85). Community feedback and available evidence highlight several barriers experienced by Autistic people and their families and carers:

- **Health and mental health systems are not consistently autism accessible.** Our survey respondents described healthcare settings that do not adequately meet sensory, communication and support needs. Many reported delaying or avoiding healthcare due to inaccessible systems, sensory stressors and difficulties identifying services able to meet their needs. One respondent reported that she had been unable to access dental care due to the distress associated with attending appointments.
- **Autism capability remains inconsistent across the health workforce.** Workforce capability in neuro-affirming practice remains inconsistent, particularly in rural and regional areas and where Disability Liaison Officer roles are not available across all hospitals and health settings, resulting in variable experiences and outcomes for Autistic people and their families. Our survey respondents reported highly variable experiences depending on the practitioner or service involved. While some professionals demonstrated strong understanding of autism and provided effective adjustments, others lacked understanding of autistic presentations, communication needs and the reasonable adjustments required to support access. Survey respondents and focus group participants emphasised the importance of being able to access neuro-affirming and autism-informed practice across physical and mental healthcare settings.

- **Emergency, crisis and mental health responses remain particularly challenging.** While respondents identified examples of good practice, many reported ongoing difficulties accessing timely and appropriate support during periods of acute distress or mental health crisis. Respondents described overstimulating environments, long waits, poor communication and limited understanding of autism as significant barriers to safe and effective care. Some highlighted the need for greater understanding of how Autistic people may experience, communicate or express pain and illness differently. Families also highlighted persistent gaps in child and youth mental health services, with many unable to access support until a situation reaches crisis point.
- **Healthcare navigation places a significant burden on Autistic people and families.** Respondents described challenges identifying appropriate services, understanding available options and coordinating support across multiple providers and systems. Many reported being left to undertake extensive research and advocacy themselves to determine what supports were available and where they could access them. These challenges are particularly acute for people with high and complex support needs and those living in regional and rural communities.
- **Healthcare responses can fail to reflect the needs of Autistic people across the life course.** Focus group members highlighted the need for greater recognition of how health and support needs change over time. For example, there is emerging evidence that perimenopause and menopause can interact with autism in ways that intensify sensory differences, increase support needs, reduce the ability to mask autistic characteristics, and exacerbate co-occurring physical and mental health conditions. Despite growing recognition of these issues, autism-informed menopause care remains poorly understood and inconsistently available.⁷ Victoria has an opportunity to improve understanding of autism across the lifespan and ensure healthcare systems are equipped to respond appropriately to changing needs and life stage transitions.

The Australian Government's *National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People 2025-2035* provides an important national framework for reform. To complement this, **a dedicated Victorian roadmap is needed to support implementation across Victoria's community health and mental health services**, translating national priorities into coordinated local action that improves accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, workforce capability, service integration and outcomes for Autistic people. Recent initiatives, including the *Diverse Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework*, autism capability building across the mental health workforce, Ambulance Victoria's Disability Inclusion Program, and the Emergency Healthcare Communication Book developed in partnership with Scope, provide a strong foundation to build upon. A Victorian roadmap would help bring these initiatives together through a coordinated approach to implementation, evaluation and continuous improvement.

⁷ Moseley, R et al, 2021. "When My Autism Broke": A Qualitative Study Exploring Autistic Women's Experiences of Menopause. *Autism*, 25(6), 1694–1707. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7376624/>; Brady, S et al, 2024. "A Perfect Storm: Autistic Experiences of Menopause and Midlife." *Autism in Adulthood*, 6(3), 310–323. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38622794/>; Badgett, N et al, 2026. Experiences of autistic women in menopause: *brief review and recommendations for practice and research*. *Frontiers in Reproductive Health*, Vol. 8. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/reproductive-health/articles/10.3389/frph.2026.1762773/full>.

Focus group members and survey respondents also highlighted the need for dedicated autism expertise within hospitals for people with high and complex support needs. As one survey respondent noted, we need:

“Training of staff in profound autism and non verbal autism. A dedicated team in each public hospital for those with complex/profound autism.”

To meet this need, Victoria should consider piloting **one-stop autism healthcare clinics and dedicated autism expertise within hospitals** to provide coordinated, accessible and multidisciplinary care for Autistic people with complex support needs. These models could improve healthcare access while also supporting broader capability building across the health system. For more information, see **Box 1** below.

Box 1. One-stop autism healthcare clinics: a model for integrated, autism-accessible care

One-stop healthcare clinics provide a practical and evidence-informed model for addressing longstanding barriers to healthcare access for Autistic people, particularly those with high and complex support needs. By bringing multiple health and allied health services together in a coordinated, autism-informed setting, these clinics can reduce fragmentation, improve continuity of care and support more timely access to services.

Traditional healthcare pathways often require Autistic people to navigate multiple appointments, providers and environments, placing a significant burden on individuals and families. Sensory stressors, communication barriers, inconsistent practice and fragmented service delivery can contribute to delayed or avoided healthcare, poorer health outcomes and greater reliance on crisis services. Integrated models reduce these barriers by providing coordinated care, streamlined pathways and a more accessible healthcare experience.

Evidence from Australia and overseas demonstrates that integrated service models can improve healthcare access, experiences and outcomes, while reducing system fragmentation and supporting earlier intervention. Westmead Hospital's one-stop clinic for adults with complex disability support needs provides a promising Australian example of how coordinated multidisciplinary care can be delivered within existing health infrastructure and improve access to services.

Victoria is well placed to build on these learnings through the pilot of one-stop healthcare clinics, particularly in regional and rural communities where thin markets, workforce shortages and distance create additional barriers to care. Clinics could provide coordinated access to health services while also supporting families and carers, reducing the need to navigate multiple disconnected systems.

Importantly, these clinics should not only be viewed as service delivery models. They provide an opportunity to establish centres of excellence that drive system-wide improvement. By embedding neuro-affirming practice, lived experience leadership, workforce development and evidence-based care, one-stop clinics could support broader reform across Victoria's health and mental health systems, helping to build a more accessible, coordinated and inclusive healthcare system for all Autistic Victorians.⁸

⁸ **References:** Arnold S et al, 2024. 'Barriers to healthcare for Australian autistic adults' 28(2) Autism 301, 308–309; NSW Government, 2025, Case Study: One-Stop Shop Clinic, Westmead Hospital. Available at [Case study: One-Stop Shop clinic, Westmead Hospital | Rehabilitation model of care |](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 29) **Develop and implement a Victorian Autism Health and Mental Health Roadmap.** Align with the National Roadmap to drive coordinated improvements in accessibility, neuro-affirming practice, workforce capability, service integration and health outcomes across the lifespan for Autistic Victorians. The Roadmap should provide a framework for improving coordination across services, embedding autism-inclusive practice, evaluating outcomes for Autistic people, and scaling successful initiatives across the health system.
- 30) **Build on existing autism-responsive health initiatives to improve healthcare access and outcomes for Autistic people.** Expand autism capability building across the health workforce, improve healthcare navigation and service integration, ensure autism is considered in triage and care planning, and improve healthcare responses across the lifespan, including during perimenopause and menopause. Evaluate and scale initiatives such as Disability Liaison Officers, Ambulance Victoria's Disability Inclusion Program and the Emergency Healthcare Communication Book developed in partnership with Scope, where they are demonstrating improved outcomes for Autistic people.
- 31) **Pilot and evaluate integrated models of autism healthcare.** Pilot one stop autism healthcare clinics to provide coordinated, accessible and multidisciplinary care for Autistic people with high and complex support needs in one location, while supporting broader capability building and system improvement across Victorian healthcare services. Pilots should commence in regional and remote hospitals where service need is highest.

[Agency for Clinical Innovation](#); Darisi R et al, 2024. Patient receptivity to receiving vaccinations in the dental clinic at a rural federally qualified health center' 155(1) The Journal of the American Dental Association 17; Hamdan S et al, 2024. Autism-Friendly Healthcare: A Narrative Review of Literature. (2024) 16(7) Cureus 1; Jack J et al, 2024, Feasibility of an innovative medical dental integration program to provide overdue adolescent vaccinations in a federally qualified health center. J Public Health Dent. 2024. Available at [Feasibility of an innovative medical dental integration program to provide overdue adolescent vaccinations in a federally qualified health center](#) | Resource Library for the Integration of Oral Health and Medicine;

I. Drive an autism accessible and inclusive education system

"I can't emphasise how important getting the right support in educational settings is. Our experience over the past 5 years has been truly awful. More funding, training and support personnel is needed.

The predominant cause of our family's mental health decline is due to how wrong the school system has implemented disability support." Amaze survey respondent

The Autism Education Strategy has delivered important progress towards a more inclusive education system for Autistic students. This includes investments in school workforce capability, inclusive education reforms, and innovative initiatives such as the I CAN Network's autistic-led peer mentoring programs, which have helped build confidence, connection, self-advocacy and belonging for Autistic students in schools.

Victoria has demonstrated national leadership in autism-inclusive education. However, our community continues to report significant barriers including inconsistent access to reasonable adjustments and supports, autism-accessible learning environments, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and other assistive technologies, and limited accountability for educational outcomes.

In the 2025-26 financial year, Autism Connect received 226 queries regarding education. These queries most commonly related to barriers in education (including inadequate supports, school refusal, bullying), choosing a school, inclusion at school (including reasonable adjustments and positive behaviour support), post school planning, rights information and transitions.

Our survey respondents highlighted the importance of flexibility, individualised support, improved autism understanding and better resourcing, together with environments that are designed for inclusion from the outset rather than relying on adjustments after barriers arise.

"The Government should ensure inclusion is built into the design of schools, rather than added as an adjustment." Amaze survey respondent.

Accordingly, a renewed Autism Education Strategy must build on the progress of the Disability Inclusion reform package and current Strategy. It must address ongoing barriers to access and inclusion and operate as a school-facing strategy capable of improving educational outcomes for all Autistic students.

"Some universities do not offer courses part-time which is not accessible to me. I needed to choose a slightly different career path than I had originally intended... I am now navigating post graduate studies with a diagnosis, but I'm having difficulty getting accommodations and strategies to help me with my study from the university."

Amaze survey respondent.

Given ongoing barriers to accessible and inclusive education across the life course, including early years settings and post-school education such as university, TAFE and vocational learning, the Autism Education Strategy should be expanded to apply across all stages of education. Our survey respondents described ongoing barriers within tertiary settings, including difficulties accessing adjustments, inflexible course structures and limited understanding of autism. Expanding the Strategy would enable a more coordinated approach across all stages of education and better support transitions from early childhood through to further education, training and employment.

The Strategy must also be linked to Thriving Kids and broader Foundational Supports reforms to ensure supports delivered through education settings are accessible, inclusive, neuro-affirming and improving outcomes for Autistic learners.

Access to out of school hours care (OSHC) remains limited for many Autistic children and families. While there have been positive steps to expand OSHC in some specialist settings, access remains inconsistent and many families continue to face barriers to participation. Focus group participants, particularly parents of children with high and complex support needs, described repeated difficulties accessing OSHC programs that could adequately support their child, with many reporting that available programs are not inclusive, accessible or equipped to meet their needs. To be effective, our focus group participants agreed that OSHC programs must be capable of supporting all Autistic students and developed in close partnership with schools to promote familiarity, continuity and trust for children and families. This should include consistent staffing, early engagement with families, and flexible approaches that respond to individual support needs.

Community feedback also reinforced the significant impact **School Can't** can have on Autistic students and their families.

"Daughter can't access school as she is situationally mute, who knows if she'll find a job one day. I'm in burnout caring for her 24/7 as no funding for support workers and no informal supports. Husband works part time to help care for all of us, living in poverty". Amaze survey respondent.

School Can't disproportionately affects Autistic students, with an estimated 50% of absences linked to School Can't drivers such as sensory overwhelm, anxiety and unmet support needs. The Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters found that School Can't is most commonly experienced by neurodivergent students, particularly Autistic students, and recommended coordinated action by state and territory governments. In the 2025-26 financial year, **Autism Connect** received 51 queries from Victorians regarding school refusal.

The next VAP should commit to a dedicated School Can't Action Plan, embedded within a renewed Victorian Autism Education Strategy, to drive a coordinated and evidence-informed response across the Victorian education system.

For more information about School Can't and the need for a dedicated action plan, see **Box 2** below.

Box 2. School Can't: Evidence, impacts and opportunities for reform

School Can't occurs when the sensory, social, emotional or environmental demands of school exceed a student's capacity to cope, making attendance or engagement genuinely difficult or impossible from a wellbeing perspective. It is not school refusal, poor behaviour or a lack of motivation to attend.

School Can't can have profound impacts on Autistic students and their families. When school-based stressors are not recognised and addressed, students may experience escalating anxiety, depression, Autistic burnout and other significant mental health impacts. The effects often extend beyond the individual student, placing considerable pressure on parents, carers and siblings, contributing to social isolation, reduced workforce participation and educational disadvantage.

In 2025, Amaze undertook the largest ever Australian community survey on School Can't, hearing from more than 700 Autistic students, parents, carers and teachers. Participants described the significant impacts School Can't has on student wellbeing, mental health and educational participation, as well as the challenges families face accessing timely, informed and effective support. Families consistently reported difficulties securing appropriate adjustments, navigating inconsistent responses across schools, and accessing flexible educational options that meet their child's needs.

These findings align with those of the Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters, which highlighted the disproportionate impact of School Can't on neurodivergent students and identified the need for earlier identification, improved school capability, stronger supports, greater flexibility in education delivery, and better support for students and families. Together, they demonstrate the need for coordinated and sustained action to address School Can't across Victoria.

Victoria has taken positive steps, including through its partnership with Amaze to co-design School Can't resources for families and educators. These evidence- and community-informed resources are helping to build understanding of School Can't, strengthen communication between families and schools, and support more neuro-affirming and trauma-informed responses. However, a more coordinated and systemic response is required.

A dedicated Victorian School Can't Action VAP would provide leadership, accountability and a framework for action across the education system. It should support earlier identification and intervention, strengthen autism capability and neuro-affirming practice across schools, improve access to reasonable adjustments and flexible learning options, embed evidence- and lived experience-informed guidance, and ensure student wellbeing and long-term engagement in education are prioritised.⁹

Finally, outcomes under the Strategy and VAP must be linked. To ensure transparency, and to inform future reforms, they must meaningfully demonstrate their impact on educational outcomes over time through transparent indicators that include:

- Increased Year 12 completion rates, including increasing the numbers of Autistic students attaining a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or a Victoria Pathways Certificate (VPC).
- Increased proportions of Autistic students completing VCE, compared to a VPC.
- Increased uptake of further and higher education, including TAFE and university, by Autistic students.
- Increased proportions of Autistic students sustaining their enrolment in a mainstream school.
- Increased day-to-day attendance of Autistic students, including reducing practices of decreased hours for Autistic students.
- Decreased rates of disciplinary absences, suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary practices.

⁹ **References:** Australian Government, 2023. The national trend of school refusal and related matters. Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal; John, A et al, 2022. Association of school absence and exclusion with recorded neurodevelopmental disorders, mental disorders, or self harm: A nationwide retrospective cohort study of children and young people in Wales. The Lancet Psychiatry, 9(1), 23–34. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(21\)00367-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(21)00367-9/fulltext); Bowden N, 2025. School attendance among Autistic students in Aotearoa New Zealand. Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, 61(4), 609–616. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpc.16795>; Totsika, V et al., 2020. Types and correlates of school non-attendance in students with autism spectrum disorders. Autism, 24(7), 1639–1649. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7545649/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 32) Renew and expand Victoria's Autism Education Strategy across the full education lifecycle.** Build on the achievements of the current Strategy to improve outcomes for Autistic learners from early childhood through to tertiary and vocational education. The Strategy should strengthen inclusive practice, improve access to AAC and other supports, support autism-inclusive learning environments, link to Thriving Kids and include transparent outcome measures linked to participation, attendance, retention and post-school outcomes.
- 33) Embed a dedicated School Can't Action Plan within the Autism Education Strategy.** Drive a coordinated response to School Can't through earlier identification and intervention, stronger autism capability across schools, neuro-inclusive learning environments, flexible educational responses, and improved support for students, families and educators.
- 34) Improve access to inclusive supports beyond the classroom.** Expand access to autism-accessible out of school hours care and holiday programs that meet the needs of all Autistic students, including those with high and complex support needs, strengthen engagement with families and carers, and improve transitions through education and into further education, training and employment through coordinated, strengths-based planning and support.

J. Build inclusive workplace systems and culture

"I was a successful criminal lawyer for years, but experienced periods of burnout. I felt that I came across as unreliable and the workplace wasn't open to accommodations. It was unsustainable and the job was detrimental to my mental health. I felt that I had to quit my job or otherwise it would quite literally kill me through suicide, depression, anxiety, cycles of burnout." Amaze survey respondent.

The current VAP has helped build momentum for more inclusive employment, demonstrating what is possible when recruitment and workplace practices are intentionally designed with Autistic people in mind. Programs such as DFFH's Rise initiative, which replaces traditional interviews with autism-accessible discovery days and provides tailored training and in-work support, have shown strong outcomes for employee confidence, retention and performance. Similarly, evaluation and participant feedback from Amaze's A-Plus Program demonstrates that practical, co-designed professional development can rapidly strengthen organisational capability and improve workplace inclusion. Through Autism Connect, Amaze also provides access to **specialist employment peer support**, offering warm referrals to an employment advisor with Autistic lived experience who helps Autistic people identify their strengths, understand workplace adjustments and supports, build confidence, and navigate pathways to employment. Together, these initiatives provide a strong foundation and demonstrate that meaningful change is achievable when accessibility and inclusion are embedded from the outset.

However, much more is needed to be done and initiatives like this scaled to achieve meaningful workplace systems change across Victoria. Autistic people continue to experience some of the poorest employment outcomes in Australia, even though they are highly motivated to work and possess strengths that contribute significantly to workplace and organisational success. Inaccessible recruitment processes, limited understanding of autism in workplaces, and barriers to accessing timely adjustments continue to exclude many talented Autistic people. General disability employment programs often fail to meet the specific needs of Autistic jobseekers and employees.¹⁰

In the 2025-26 financial year, Autism Connect received 217 queries regarding employment. Queries most commonly related to issues at work (including access to reasonable adjustments, advocacy, rights, communication challenges) preparing for employment (including career exploration, rights, skill development, disclosure, interviews and recruitment), and supporting an Autistic person in the workplace. Our survey respondents described challenges accessing adjustments, navigating workplace expectations, managing sensory and social demands, and sustaining employment without experiencing burnout. They highlighted that workplace systems often rely on implicit communication, unwritten expectations and assumptions that create unnecessary barriers to participation. One respondent identified the need for:

"More awareness in educational and workplace settings. Normalising accommodations so that we don't feel scared to ask for them. Make things more explicit rather than relying on neurotypical communication which is often based on assumptions or 'reading between the lines'."

¹⁰ Department of Health and Aged Care, 2025. National Autism Strategy 2025–2031 and First Action VAP 2025–2026. Canberra: Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-autism-strategy-first-action-plan-2025-2026?language=en>; ABS, 2024. Autism in Australia: Summary results from the 2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/autism-australia-2022>

These experiences highlight that improving employment outcomes is not simply a matter of helping individual Autistic people adapt to their workplaces. Lasting change requires a shift towards workplace systems that are accessible and inclusive by design. Rather than relying primarily on individual adjustments after barriers arise, employers should embed universal design principles across recruitment, onboarding, communication, management practices, career development and workplace culture. This approach could reduce barriers before they occur, benefit all employees and create the conditions for sustainable inclusion. **For more information, see Box 3 below.**

Box 3. Driving workplace systems change

Victoria has made important progress towards more inclusive employment for Autistic people through investments in employer capability, workforce inclusion initiatives and employment supports. These efforts have demonstrated that when workplaces are intentionally designed to be autism-inclusive, outcomes improve for both employers and employees.

The next challenge is ensuring this progress can be sustained and achieved at scale. While many employment initiatives focus on supporting individual Autistic people to access and retain work, less attention has been given to building the organisational capability, systems and culture needed to create lasting change across workplaces. As a result, inclusion efforts can remain dependent on individual managers, workplace champions or adjustments for individual employees, rather than being embedded within workplace design and practice.

A more sustainable approach is to focus on workplace systems change. This involves embedding autism-informed universal design across recruitment, onboarding, communication, management practices, career progression and workplace culture. Rather than relying on individuals to identify barriers and continually advocate for adjustments, workplaces are designed to be accessible, predictable and inclusive from the outset. This not only benefits Autistic employees but can strengthen communication, engagement, retention and psychosocial safety across the workforce.

Evidence suggests that lasting systems change is most effectively achieved through a coordinated package of initiatives rather than standalone training or resources. International models demonstrate the value of combining practical resources with implementation support, employer capability building, consultancy, standards, accreditation and communities of practice. For example, the United Kingdom's National Autistic Society combines employer toolkits, consultancy and a Neuroinclusive Employer Award, Canada's *Inclusive Workplace* initiative supports organisations to build sustainable inclusive employment systems, and the United Kingdom's *Genius Within* provides tailored training and organisational support to embed neuroinclusive workplace practices. Importantly, these approaches are designed to support organisations to embed inclusion into workplace systems, leadership and culture, rather than focusing solely on individual adjustments.

The next VAP provides an opportunity to build on existing progress through lived experience-led initiatives capable of driving organisational change across Victoria. This could include workplace standards, practical employer resources, consultancy, multi-model training and communities of practice that support employers to learn from one another and embed sustainable change over time. Such investments would help create the conditions for autism-inclusive workplace systems and cultures to become the norm rather than the exception.¹¹

¹¹ **References:** OTARC, 2025. Neurodevelopmental Employment Toolkit. Melbourne: La Trobe University. Available at: <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc>; Autism CRC, 2024. Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST). Brisbane: Autism CRC. Available at:

Existing resources and employer capability-building programs, such as A-Plus provide a strong foundation for reform. Initiatives such as OTARC's [Supporting a neurodiverse workforce](#) resource and training package, and Autism CRC's [Integrated employment success tool](#) provide detailed evidence and guidance on inclusive employment practices. However, these resources are not always easy for employers, managers or employees to locate, understand or translate into action, and opportunities to scale successful approaches have been limited. The next VAP provides an opportunity to better connect, translate and scale these initiatives into practical and accessible resources and tools, ensuring evidence-informed approaches are embedded more consistently across workplaces and employment systems.

Transitions from school into further education, training and employment remain a particular point of risk, with pathways often fragmented and lacking the coordinated, strengths-based support needed to translate interests and capabilities into meaningful careers. Many Autistic young people miss out on tailored career guidance, accessible work experience opportunities, mentoring, employer connections and ongoing support needed to successfully navigate the journey from education to employment.¹²

"Peer support is what people want, they don't want another PDF". Amaze survey respondent.

The next VAP should focus on scaling the autism-focused approaches that are working while addressing the systemic barriers that continue to impact Autistic people transitioning to work. This includes investing in more connected employment pathways that bring together career planning, education, work experience, peer support and employer engagement. A coordinated pathway model, incorporating Navigator and peer support approaches, would help bridge current gaps and better support Autistic young people to move successfully from school into further education, training and employment.

The Victorian Government also has an opportunity to lead by example through the Victorian Public Sector. The Victorian Government has demonstrated leadership in monitoring workforce inclusion through initiatives such as the People Matter Survey, which provides important insights into the experiences of employees with disability across the Victorian Public Sector. As understanding of workforce diversity continues to evolve, there is an opportunity to build on this foundation by strengthening the collection and reporting of disability data, including by enabling it to be broken down by disability type, including autism. This may include enabling employees to identify specific disability types, such as autism, when completing the People Matter Survey. This would support a better understanding of the representation, inclusion, retention and progression of Autistic employees, help evaluate the effectiveness of employment initiatives, and further strengthen the Victorian Government's role as a leading autism-inclusive employer.

<https://www.autismcrc.com.au/best-practice/iest/integrated-employment-success-tool>; Department of Health and Aged Care, 2025. National Autism Strategy 2025–2031 and First Action VAP 2025–2026. Canberra: Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-autism-strategy-first-action-plan-2025-2026?language=en>; Deloitte Access Economics, 2016. Autism and Employment: Maximising the Potential of Employees on the Autism Spectrum. Perth: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre; National Autistic Society, 2026. Neuroinclusive Employer Award and Employment Toolkit. United Kingdom. Available at: <https://www.autism.org.uk/learn/what-we-do/autism-accreditation/neuroinclusive-employer-award>; Genius Within, 2026. Neurodiversity Training, Workplace Assessments and Organisational Capability Building Model. United Kingdom. Available at: <https://geniuswithin.org>; Autism Alliance of Canada & Inclusion Canada, 2026. The Inclusive Workplace: Building Sustainable Inclusive Employment Systems. Canada. Available at: <https://theinclusiveworkplace.ca>; Job Accommodation Network (JAN), 2026. Workplace Accessibility and Accommodation Resources for Employers. United States Department of Labor. Available at: <https://askjan.org>.

¹² Amaze, 2025. Amaze submission to Victorian Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries. July 2025. Available at: <https://amazevic.sharepoint.com/Shared/1.%20Amaze%20Departments/Policy/Employment/Amaze%20submission%20to%20inquiry%20into%20student%20pathways%20to%20in-demand%20industries%20July%202025.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 35) **Invest in a coordinated Autism Employment Pathways Pilot.** Invest in a Pilot program to align Autistic talent with employers, incorporating a Navigator model and peer support, to provide coordinated support from secondary school through to further education, training and employment.
- 36) **Fund lived experience-led initiatives that drive workplace systems change.** Invest in a package of initiatives that build employer capability and support autism-inclusive workplace design, including practical resources, consultancy, multi-model training, communities of practice, workplace standards and other implementation supports that help organisations embed inclusive systems and culture. The Victorian Government should also lead by example by transparently reporting on the representation and experiences of Autistic employees in the Victorian Public Sector. This could include building on the People Matter Survey to capture disability type, including autism, and setting measurable targets to increase representation within five years.
- 37) **Establish a centralised Autism Employment Hub.** Improve access to evidence-informed resources, tools and guidance by creating a centralised hub that translates existing research and employment resources into practical, accessible supports for employers, managers, employees and jobseekers.
- 38) **Lead a statewide initiative to improve access to workplace adjustments.** Partner with employers, Jobs Victoria and people with lived experience to improve understanding of autism-related workplace adjustments, develop practical guidance and tools, streamline adjustment processes, and promote consistent approaches across workplaces.

K. Address housing inaccessibility and homelessness among Autistic Victorians

"I have been refused housing due to disability and status as being on disability support payments. I have also been discriminated against for [sic] department of housing which has been raised and accepted as a current case by the human rights commission."

Amaze survey respondent

The current VAP included a welcome commitment to improve housing outcomes for Autistic Victorians, including actions to strengthen the accessibility of social housing systems, information and housing design. These commitments recognised the importance of ensuring housing systems are more responsive to the needs of Autistic people and their families. However, significant barriers to accessing housing that is affordable, appropriate and responsive to individual needs remain, and the impact of actions delivered under the current VAP are unclear.

Access to safe, secure and appropriate housing remains a significant challenge for many Autistic people. Evidence presented to the Senate Select Committee on Autism found that many Autistic people struggle to secure and maintain suitable housing, with many remaining in the family home well into adulthood due to a lack of suitable alternatives. More recent Australian research suggests that **Autistic people may be almost three times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population**.¹³ Community feedback and calls to **Autism Connect** similarly highlight difficulties navigating housing systems, securing affordable housing and finding housing that meets individual needs. In the 2025-26 financial year, **Autism Connect** received 100 queries from Victorians regarding housing or homelessness.

Our survey respondents highlighted experiences of discrimination when seeking and maintaining housing, including difficulties securing rental properties and obtaining reasonable disability-related modifications. Respondents reported using their own limited resources for specialist modifications and that they were reliant on partners, family or friends to afford basic housing. These experiences are consistent with Australian evidence that misunderstanding of autistic characteristics, discriminatory responses by landlords and service providers, and a failure to accommodate autism-related needs can contribute to housing exclusion and increase the risk of homelessness for Autistic people.¹⁴

The next VAP provides an important opportunity to strengthen Victoria's role in improving housing outcomes for Autistic people. While major investments in social and affordable housing represent important progress, it remains unclear whether these initiatives are meeting the needs of Autistic people. The next VAP should ensure housing and homelessness reforms are informed by the experiences of Autistic people and support access to housing that is affordable, appropriate and responsive to individual needs. This should include autism-inclusive housing design, appropriate priority access pathways, and action to address the barriers that can prevent Autistic people from securing and sustaining appropriate housing. Targeted engagement with Autistic people is also needed to better understand housing preferences, aspirations and barriers and to inform future policy and investment decisions.

¹³ Osborn, E and R Young, 2026. 'Why Am I Homeless? The Contribution of Autistic Characteristics, System-Related and Environmental Factors to the Risk of Homelessness.' Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2026.2662020>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 39) **Develop and implement an Autism and Housing Action Plan for Victoria.** Embed autism-specific considerations across housing, homelessness, social housing and disability reforms, and strengthen understanding of the housing needs, preferences and aspirations of Autistic Victorians.
- 40) **Improve access to affordable, appropriate and autism-inclusive housing.** Ensure social housing policy, allocation processes and housing investment respond to the needs of Autistic people, including through appropriate priority access pathways, autism-inclusive housing design, and greater consideration of sensory, communication and cognitive accessibility in social and affordable housing developments.
- 41) **Partner with Autistic Victorians to shape housing policy and investment.** Evaluate the impact of major housing, homelessness and social housing initiatives on Autistic people, strengthen understanding of barriers to securing and sustaining housing, and use this evidence to guide future planning, investment and reform.

L. Strengthen safety and system responses to violence and harm.

“I have experienced developmental trauma, harassment and bullying across many settings. I didn’t understand that this was not how people are meant to be treated, I thought it was my fault for being different. I have difficulty verbalising my needs or when things feel unsafe, so a lot of these situations were not shared with people who could help”. Amaze survey respondent.

Our survey respondents reported a range of experiences of discrimination, exploitation, bullying, violence and harm, including domestic and family violence, grooming, harassment and physical abuse across multiple settings, including the home, school, workplace and broader community. They highlighted:

- **Autistic people experience heightened vulnerability to violence, exploitation and abuse across multiple settings.** Respondents described experiences of bullying, harassment, coercion, exploitation and physical abuse, often occurring over many years and across different environments. Several reflected on not recognising unsafe situations, not understanding their rights, or struggling to communicate concerns and seek support.
- **Greater focus is needed on prevention, rights awareness and safe help-seeking.** Respondents highlighted the importance of supporting Autistic people to understand relationships, boundaries, personal safety, coercive behaviour and what fair treatment looks like. Some noted that differences in communication, interoception and social understanding can make it difficult to identify unsafe situations or know when and how to seek help.

In the 2025-26 financial year, **Autism Connect** received 62 contacts from Autistic people and their families and carers in crisis or at risk of breakdown. These queries most commonly related to family violence and relationship breakdown.

The current VAP has taken important steps to strengthen disability-inclusive responses to family violence and improve safety for people with disability. This includes investment in the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative, the Family Violence and Disability Practice Leader Initiative, improvements to disability-inclusive family violence case management, work to strengthen disability considerations within the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework, and work towards therapeutic responses to adolescent violence in the home (AVITH). These initiatives provide an important foundation for future reform.

The experiences shared by our community via the survey and Autism Connect are consistent with findings of the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) regarding the violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability, including Autistic people. The DRC highlighted the need to strengthen how systems recognise, prevent and respond to violence against people with disability, including improving accessibility, capability and coordination across service responses.¹⁵

All governments, including Victoria, have responded to the DRC’s recommendations and committed to progressing reforms, with many accepted in principle. While important progress has been made, implementation remains ongoing.

The next VAP provides a critical opportunity to build on these foundations and translate broader disability safeguarding reforms into targeted autism-informed action, particularly in areas of

¹⁵ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2023. Final Report. Available at: [Disability Royal Commission Final Report](#)

heightened risk such as family violence, justice and child protection systems. These systems are often ill-equipped to recognise and respond appropriately to the experiences of Autistic people. This can result in disclosures being misunderstood or dismissed, behaviours being misinterpreted, and responses that escalate risk rather than provide safety.¹⁶

Within family violence systems, there are persistent gaps in recognising and responding to the experiences of Autistic people. Reports of violence may be minimised, misunderstood or not acted upon and services may lack understanding of how autism can affect communication, help-seeking and disclosure, and whether a person is an alleged perpetrator, victim survivor or witness. Crisis accommodation and service environments are not always accessible or neuro-affirming, further limiting their safety and effectiveness.¹⁷

There is also a critical gap in responses to carer-targeted violence, including adolescent violence in the home. We welcome the development of the Adolescent Family Violence in the Home (AVITH) model of care and ongoing work to ensure it can respond to the needs of neurodivergent young people and their families. The model's therapeutic and family-centred approach provides an important foundation for improving responses to Autistic young people who use violence. Families continue to report significant gaps in access to autism-informed support. Through **Autism Connect**, we have received numerous calls from families experiencing AVITH where there are no appropriate referral pathways. Families report that neither family violence services nor police understand carer-targeted violence by Autistic children or adults. They often have no safe pathway to seek protection and do not want to engage police or justice responses due to concerns about criminalisation and long-term harm to their loved one. As a result, families may remain in unsafe situations or delay seeking help until crisis point.¹⁸ The new AVITH model of care must ensure a **"no wrong door"** approach is established, where people can safely seek help and be connected to appropriate support regardless of how they enter the system. Capacity building for parents experiencing or at risk of AVITH is also essential, giving them the tools and skills to help prevent or manage AVITH when it occurs, including the knowledge of where to seek help.

Addressing these issues requires both system-wide capability uplift and the development of specialist, therapeutic responses and resources that prioritise safety, reduce escalation and provide viable alternatives to punitive pathways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

42) Build on Disability Royal Commission and existing disability safeguarding reforms to strengthen autism-informed prevention and responses to violence, abuse, exploitation and harm. Translate relevant Disability Royal Commission recommendations into targeted action through the Victorian Autism Plan, improve autism capability across frontline systems, and support initiatives that strengthen rights awareness, personal safety, help-seeking and access to appropriate supports for Autistic people.

¹⁶ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2021, Police responses to people with disability. Available at: <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/police-responses-people-disability>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ANROWS, 2022. Building a framework to prevent and respond to young people with disability who use violence at home. Available at <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/building-a-framework-to-prevent-and-respond-to-young-people-with-disability-who-use-violence-at-home/>

43) Improve the accessibility and responsiveness of family violence systems for Autistic people.

Strengthen autism capability across family violence, child protection, justice and crisis services, ensure MARAM and related guidance are meeting the needs of Autistic people, improve accessibility of service environments and risk assessment processes, build parent capacity and establish clear referral pathways and alternatives to police and justice responses.

44) Progress autism-informed responses to adolescent violence in the home and carer-directed violence.

Build a comprehensive AVITH model of care that ensures therapeutic responses meet the needs of Autistic young people and their families, including through autism-informed practice guidance, workforce capability building and multidisciplinary supports. It must establish a “no wrong door” approach that enables families to access timely, appropriate and coordinated support regardless of how they enter the system, while prioritising safety, early intervention and family wellbeing and reducing reliance on police and justice responses.

M. Embed accountability, data and outcomes that reflect lived experience

Robust data, evaluation and accountability will be critical to ensuring the next VAP delivers meaningful and lasting outcomes for Autistic people and their families. Strong evaluation helps government, the autism community and the broader public understand what is working, where further action is needed, and where investments are having the greatest impact. It also provides an important foundation for continuous improvement and transparent reporting on progress against the Plan's vision, principles and priorities. To support accountability, actions under the VAP should also be supported by clear implementation timeframes and regular public reporting on progress. Reflecting the National Autism Strategy's commitment to an Evidence, Evaluation and Reporting Framework, the next VAP should be supported by a similar Victorian framework to strengthen accountability, measure outcomes and support continuous improvement over time.

Clear outcome measures are needed that reflect what matters to Autistic people and their families and carers, including wellbeing, participation, quality of life, social connection, workforce participation, workforce sustainability for families and carers, and safety. It should also reflect long-term outcomes across key areas of life, including education, employment, health, housing and community participation. While activity measures and participation data remain important, evaluation should also seek to understand day-to-day experiences and whether initiatives are delivering meaningful change. For example, the success of an accessibility initiative should not be measured solely by attendance at a program, service or community activity, but also by whether Autistic people felt welcome, safe, included and able to participate in ways that were meaningful to them. Longer-term evaluation should seek to understand whether these initiatives contribute to improved outcomes across the life course, including increased social connection, educational participation and attainment, employment outcomes, wellbeing and quality of life. Community experience measures, including initiatives such as the **Inclusion Monitor**, play an important role in tracking these outcomes and understanding whether inclusion and accessibility are improving over time.

The next VAP should also strengthen understanding of how outcomes differ across the autism community. Data collection, reporting and evaluation should be capable of identifying the experiences and outcomes of intersectional cohorts and Autistic people with high and complex support needs. This is important to understanding whether initiatives are delivering equitable outcomes, identifying where barriers remain, and ensuring the VAP delivers for all Autistic Victorians. A stronger evidence base will also help government identify effective approaches, target investment and continuously improve outcomes over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 45) Codesign and implement a Victorian Autism Evidence, Evaluation and Reporting Framework.** Establish clear, measurable outcomes aligned with what matters to Autistic Victorians and their families and carers, including wellbeing, participation, quality of life, social connection, safety, education, employment and workforce sustainability. The Framework should include time-bound actions, implementation milestones, consistent evaluation, public reporting and accountability mechanisms across the Plan, and track long-term outcomes across the life course.

- 46) Strengthen lived experience data and evaluation across government systems.** Complement activity and participation measures with data that captures Autistic people's experiences of accessibility, inclusion, safety and service quality, and continue to build and expand mechanisms such as the Inclusion Monitor to track community experiences and systemic change over time.
- 47) Strengthen data collection, reporting and evaluation across diverse cohorts.** Collect and report disaggregated data where appropriate, including for Autistic people experiencing intersectional disadvantage and those with high and complex support needs, and ensure all actions under the VAP include evaluation and continuous improvement mechanisms to understand impact and improve outcomes over time.



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