

AUSTRALIAN AUTISM ALLIANCE WELCOMES THE NATIONAL AUTISM STRATEGY RELEASE TO SHIFT THE DIAL ON AUTISM

14 JANUARY 2025: The Australian Autism Alliance strongly welcomes today's history-making release of Australia's first National Autism Strategy 2025 – 2031 (the Strategy) and First Action Plan 2025-26. This release of the first National disability-specific strategy is monumental with a Vision for a safe and inclusive society where all Autistic people are supported and empowered to thrive in all aspects of life, in line with international human rights.

With 1 in 4 having an Autistic family member, the need to shift the dial is long overdue to improve the life outcomes of an estimated autistic population of at least 650,000 Australians.

The Senate Select Committee on Autism rightly pointed out in March 2022 that the life outcomes for Autistic Australians are unacceptably poor and that the personal, social and economic costs of this are enormous to all of us in society. It recognised that generic disability strategies have simply not worked to improve outcomes for Autistic people.

With now more than 50% unlikely to finish Year 10, 8 times the rate of unemployment, a 20-36 year life expectancy gap, 70% report feeling socially isolated, 2½ times more likely to experience depression, and have a high instance of suicidal ideation Autistic people needed urgent action.

Co-chair of the Australian Autism Alliance, Jenny Karavolos, said, "We strongly welcome the release of the National Autism Strategy and first year action plan. We believe it can lead to life-changing benefits for the hundreds of thousands of Autistic Australians currently being left behind. "While every issue raised is not covered in the Strategy and every person or organisation will not agree with every aspect of this Strategy and the action plan, we finally have in front of us a National Autism Strategy and action plan that is desperately needed that lays the strong foundation for current and future generations to continue to improve and address gaps. The Strategy provides a framework with a vision, goal, and guiding principles which will inform all actions taken as part of this Strategy.

"We commend the Strategy for also recognising the diversity of autism, and that supports need to be individualised and consider the whole person, and that support needs may change. The Strategy also recognises that all Autistic people should have choice over the communication device(s) and method(s) they use to suit their preferences and needs. Furthermore, it recognises Autistic people with very high support and dependency as a priority cohort whose needs are often overlooked.

The Strategy also contains important commitments to address intersectional issues. “As an Autistic person and carer of an older Autistic person, I am personally pleased to see that the complexities of care and support are captured within this first National Autism Strategy,” said AW Shim, who contributed to the autism policy landscape as the CALD/CARM member of the National Autism Strategy Oversight Council. “As a person from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (‘CALD’), Culturally and Racially Marginalised (‘CARM’) background, I am particularly pleased to see commitments around multiculturalism in the National Autism Strategy. “Seeing how the National Autism Strategy and the Multicultural Framework Review can progress in tandem will benefit Autistic and other Neurodivergent Australians access culturally-responsive healthcare that is also autism-friendly.”

“It is commendable that this was a pre-election commitment made by the Australian Government, and here we are within 3 years, and we have a Strategy, Plan and commitment of \$42 million to kick off the Strategy”, said Jenny Karavolos. This is a testament to the Government’s resolve to make systemic changes that will benefit all Autistic Australians.

The strategy has 22 commitments, with the first-year actions including further review and evaluation to ensure the strategy addresses the right problem to solve.

“I encourage everyone to take the time to read the Strategy and First Action Plan as several actions are broader in scope than reflected in the commitments. For instance, there are some wonderful actions to baseline what has been grappled with for years, such as building a better understanding of the needs of Autistic people and their carers who are not in the workforce to inform future actions, an epidemiological study of autism in Australia to identify the true prevalence of autism in Australia, develop definitions and terminology for Autistic people to reflect the full diversity of the Autistic community, identify additional challenges the priority cohorts face and more timely and affordable identification of diagnosis and support pathways for all ages” said Jenny Karavolos

Autistic Co-Chair of the Alliance, AW Shim declared “I am particularly pleased that the foundation for the Strategy’s Guiding Principles and form the basis for the Strategy are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), the Human Rights Model of Disability, and a strengths-based and neurodiversity-affirming approach”.

“Rather than looking for ways to help Autistic people “fit in” in a neurotypical world, the need for change lies with society as a whole. This Strategy seeks to promote safety, understanding, acceptance and appreciation of neurodiversity so as to value and respect all Neurodivergent people and all Neurotypes”, said AW Shim.

Central to success is that the Government has committed to establishing co-governance with the Autistic and autism communities over the life of the Strategy. Future actions will be co-designed with Autistic people and their families and carers, researchers, policymakers, and the broader Autistic and autism community. These stakeholders will also be involved in implementation, monitoring, and reporting on the Strategy.

The Australian Autism Alliance looks forward to continuing to work with the Australian Government and the Autistic and autism community so that the intent of the National Autism strategy is realised. The National Autism Strategy also references

“What is still needed as a call to action is to ensure there is bipartisan support and all States and Territories to make commitments to Autistic Australians in some form to enable an integrated and co-ordinated whole of government ecosystem at all government levels, noting the Victorian Government commitment since 2017, the South Australian Government commitment since 2022 and ACT Government commitment in 2024. The connection to other relevant strategies and policies in the Strategy is a first step of significant importance. This will allow the Federal and State governments to work together to optimise outcomes” said Jenny Karavolos. “There is also a need for the Strategy’s Governance Framework to ensure that the measures developed mean something to Autistic people and that there is accountability and consequences for failures to uphold the Strategy. Finally, for this Strategy to ultimately be successful, we need to ensure that there is strong carriage at a Ministerial level for its delivery”.

We are deeply grateful to all those Autistic people, their families, carers, support networks, representative organisations and all other supporters for their courage and tenacity in advocating for many years so we can realise this momentous occasion today.

For more information about Australian Autism Alliance go to: australianautismalliance.org.au

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