

Victorian autism plan

2023 refresh



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Image Credit: page 1 (cover) – Jonathon, from the 2023 Change your Reactions campaign, is a young autistic man working in hospitality and trained in retail baking.

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Language

In this plan, we use the words 'autistic people' because most people in the autism community told us they prefer this term. This is in keeping with a broader trend towards using identity-first language. We acknowledge that many people still value person-first language such as 'person with autism'.

We use the words 'autism spectrum disorder' when talking about the recommendations of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, we know that many autistic people and advocacy organisations do not use this term.

We also use the term 'autism community' to mean autistic people, their families, carers and supporters, and autism-related organisations.

We use the word 'Aboriginal' to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge the terms 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'Koori(e)' do not capture the diversity and complexity of Victoria's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. Our intent is always to use terms that are respectful, inclusive and accurate.

Briony Farrell and students. Blast off! project, Niddrie Autistic School.



Minister's foreword

Since it was released in December 2019, the Victorian autism plan has guided work across government to improve the lives of autistic people, including during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The refreshed plan will continue to help us make our community more inclusive for autistic Victorians.

The *Victorian autism plan* aligns with *Inclusive Victoria: state disability plan 2022–2026*, which is driving the broader disability inclusion agenda by transforming the way government works across six systemic reform areas. It builds on, and contributes to that transformation, with the goal of achieving better outcomes for all Victorians with disability, including autistic Victorians.

The first systemic reform in *Inclusive Victoria* is co-design with people with disability. This is with good reason. It honours the disability community's call for 'nothing about us without us'. For the Victorian autism plan, this means recognising and supporting the central role of the voice of autistic Victorians to drive change through autism advocacy and peer support.

The Autism Plan Advisory Group, who worked with the Victorian Government to develop this plan, told us about their key priorities for the refreshed plan. These are:

- recognising the significant difference that access to early identification, intervention, and connection to the right supports makes to people's lives
- ensuring autistic Victorians do not miss out on health and mental health supports because of barriers to accessing them
- the critical role of inclusive education and open employment opportunities
- the need for better data and research.

The refreshed plan responds to these priorities, as well as renewing the other priorities that sit under the four pillars of *Inclusive Victoria*.

My thanks to all members of the Autism Plan Advisory Group, including the autistic members and leaders, for sharing their insight and experience and guiding this refresh.



The Hon Lizzie Blandthorn
Minister for Disability
Minister for Children

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waterways on which we live.

We honour and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise all Aboriginal peoples and their strength and resilience despite the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession.

Aboriginal peoples represent the world's oldest living culture. We celebrate and respect this continuing culture.

We recognise that we have a long way to go in understanding and addressing the intersections of ableism, racism and the ongoing effects of dispossession and colonisation. We are committed to working in partnership with Aboriginal communities to see what additional actions the Victorian Government needs to take to address inequality for Aboriginal people with disability.

We also acknowledge the significant role that Aboriginal families and communities play as carers for people with disability in Victoria.

Note: We recognise the diversity of Aboriginal people living throughout Victoria. While the terms 'Koorie' or 'Koori' are commonly used by Aboriginal people to describe Aboriginal people in south-east Australia, we use the term 'Aboriginal' to include all people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who are living in Victoria.

Treaty and Truth in Victoria

We acknowledge the impact of colonisation to this day and seek ways to rectify past wrongs, including through Truth-telling and the development of Treaty.

We are deeply committed to Aboriginal self-determination and to supporting Victoria's Treaty and Truth-telling processes. We acknowledge that Treaty will have wide-ranging effects on our work with Aboriginal Victorians and we are committed to acting on the findings from the Truth-telling process through the *Victorian autism plan*. We seek to create respectful and collaborative partnerships and develop policies and programs that respect Aboriginal self-determination and align with Treaty aspirations.

We acknowledge that Victoria's Treaty process will provide a framework for the transfer of decision-making power and resources to support self-determining Aboriginal communities to take control of matters that affect their lives. We commit to working proactively to support this work in line with the aspirations of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.

Key terms

Term	Explanation
<i>Absolutely everyone</i>	The previous state disability plan covering years 2017 to 2020
ADS	Aboriginal data sovereignty (ADS) is the right of Aboriginal people to govern the collection, ownership and use of data about their own communities, people, land and resources. It also includes a distinct right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expression.
DLOs	Disability Liaison Officers work in Victorian health services to support people with disability to access appropriate care and treatment.
<i>Inclusive Victoria</i>	The current state disability plan covering years 2022 to 2026. It seeks to increase inclusion and participation of people with disability.
Inquiry	Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder 2017
MARAM	The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management framework
NDIA	The National Disability Insurance Agency is the government agency responsible for the NDIS.
NDIS	Jointly funded by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, the National Disability Insurance Scheme provides access to disability supports for eligible people with disability.
Systemic reforms	These are areas of focus that are identified in <i>Inclusive Victoria: state disability plan 2022–2026</i> . They are part of this plan and help the Victorian Government to work differently.
Treaty	The use of a capitalised 'Treaty' refers to the many possible outcomes of current negotiations and may refer to multiple treaties.
Truth	The use of a capitalised 'Truth' refers to the truth-telling emerging from the Yoorrook Justice Commission.
VDAP	The Victorian Government funds a number of disability advocacy and self-advocacy organisations as part of the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program, which seeks to promote the participation of people with disability.
Universal design	Making spaces, policies and programs that are inclusive, accessible and can be used independently by all people.

Executive summary

The *Victorian autism plan* (the plan) was launched in December 2019. It sets out actions to create a more inclusive, accessible and safer Victoria where autistic people have greater opportunities to participate and contribute to our community.

This refresh is part of a commitment to review the plan. It aims to ensure the plan continues to reflect and respond to emerging policy challenges and opportunities.

The refresh is not a second, new plan. It is a systematic examination of the original plan. We assessed the progress made, currency of actions and areas of opportunity. The refresh is a strengthened plan to improve outcomes for autistic Victorians.

The objective and vision of the refreshed plan are the same as in the original plan:

An inclusive Victoria where autistic people enjoy lives with real opportunities for choice, participation and contribution within our community.

The plan has four pillars, aligned with the pillars of *Inclusive Victoria*:

inclusive communities

health, housing and wellbeing

fairness and safety

opportunity and pride
(previously 'contributing lives').

The Autism Plan Advisory Group (Advisory Group) is an external group of experts who have been central to the refresh process. The Advisory Group comprises people from autism-led organisations and other relevant autism and disability organisations.

The Advisory Group also helped us develop the original plan. They understand the context of the plan and have a contemporary understanding of autistic inclusion and participation.

We heard about how the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) affected autistic people. The Advisory Group emphasised the importance of accountability and measurement, as well as:

- early identification, intervention, and connection to supports
- timely and improved access to health and mental health supports
- inclusive education and open employment pathways
- research, data and evaluation.

The Advisory Group also raised the centrality of peer-to-peer support, providing autistic people with opportunities to draw resilience, wellbeing, connection and capacity from each other. Related to this is the need for increased autism advocacy support.

These areas of focus were important touch points through the refresh process, informing the Advisory Group's discussions with government departments.

The refreshed plan aligns with *Inclusive Victoria*. In particular, the plan uses the systemic reforms set out in *Inclusive Victoria* as key areas of focus.

The refreshed plan also looks at progress against the original plan. We have completed some actions. We have replaced, reframed or reinforced others and introduced new actions in order to capture investment, effect policy reform or develop service systems.

Consistent with the original plan, the refreshed plan focuses on inclusion. In relation to access and participation, actions include:

- changing community attitudes and promoting the value of social and economic inclusion of autistic people
- increasing the safety and wellbeing of autistic people using public transport
- ensuring sport and recreation programs and spaces are inclusive and appropriate for autistic people
- improving autistic people's participation and employment in the creative industries.

In relation to health, housing and wellbeing, actions include:

- increasing access to autism assessment, diagnosis and early intervention
- supporting autistic Victorians to access COVID-19 assessment, treatment, testing and vaccines
- improving mental health outcomes for people with disability
- the need for national research that explores current assessment biases of assessment tools used by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

In relation to fairness and safety, actions build on lessons learned from the pandemic, such as:

- involving autistic people in emergency management planning
- taking a proactive approach to providing accessible communications during emergencies
- supporting frontline correctional staff through training, information and access to specialist staff for advice
- the need to work more closely with the NDIA to better support people, including autistic people, in the justice system.

In relation to opportunity and pride, actions include:

- improving the learning and wellbeing outcomes of autistic students through the Autism Education Strategy
- strengthening individualised support for autistic students participating in Vocational Education and Training
- continuing to increase employment of autistic Victorians.

The refresh has reinforced a recognition of the diversity of autistic people, evolving understandings of autism and the importance of using an intersectional approach in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, programs and services.

The input of autistic people will continue to be invaluable as the refreshed autism plan is implemented. A focus will be on ensuring the plan remains relevant and responsive to emerging evidence and advice from people with lived experience about strategies to achieve the plan's vision.



About the refreshed autism plan

Vision and guiding principles

The vision for the *Victorian autism plan* has not changed during the refresh. It is grounded in the same advice from autistic people and the Advisory Group that informed the original plan.

The vision for the plan is:

An inclusive Victoria where autistic people enjoy lives with real opportunities for choice, participation and contribution within our community.

The vision aligns 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 guiding principles of the *Victorian autism plan* also remain in place. They reflect advice received in consultations on the original plan, as well as the standing principles of recent Victorian Government state disability plans. The guiding principles are as follows:

Autonomy	Autonomy means having the capacity and support to make your own decisions. It is the freedom to decide your own beliefs and relationships.
Opportunity	Opportunity means being able to control and improve your circumstances through access to education, employment and positions of leadership and influence.
Human rights	The <i>Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006</i> protects human rights and upholds the rule of law, human dignity, equality and freedom.
Diversity	Human rights belong to all people without discrimination. The diversity of the people of Victoria enhances our community.
Accountability	We expect autistic communities to hold us to account over the life of this plan. This plan is a framework for delivering actions on intended outcomes.

These guiding principles inform our actions and the ways we will go about delivering them.

What has happened since 2019

The *Victorian autism plan* was launched before the COVID-19 pandemic. The unequal effects of the pandemic have made it starkly clear that we must continue to improve inclusion and accessibility for marginalised communities.

This will require innovative and human-centred policy and a commitment to meeting the needs of diverse communities. This refresh of the autism plan is an opportunity for us to reflect on our progress since 2019 and outline ways to drive greater inclusion for autistic people.

The pandemic had profound and wide-ranging effects on autistic people. These include:

- reduced and changed access to education
- varied experiences of re-engaging with on-site schooling after periods of remote learning
- changed opportunities to enjoy social connection and community
- reduced physical and mental wellbeing
- changes in access to employment opportunities.

At the same time, some autistic people and their families have benefited from more flexible approaches to employment, education and social connection. New Victorian Government initiatives such as the Disability Liaison Officers program have increased access to health services. This includes COVID-19 assessment, treatment, testing and vaccination.

We need to make sure we capitalise on opportunities and new ways of working as the community returns to pre-pandemic life.

While the refresh includes many of the lessons of the pandemic, it also seeks to address current and future issues. These include:

- unhelpful attitudes about autism in contexts such as NDIS usage
- upholding rights and supports in justice, corrections and policing
- greater representation of autistic voices to inform service and policy design.

The pandemic delayed the implementation of some actions in the original autism plan and the work to refresh the plan. The refreshed plan was due to end in December 2024. However, due to the delay, it is being extended by 12 months, taking its lifespan to the end of 2025.

This refresh shows how we will take steps to progress those actions.

We have used internal reporting and engagement with portfolio areas to understand progress against actions to date and opportunities for progressing work.

We have reviewed every element of the plan. Any actions that remain unchanged have been examined and reconfirmed as appropriate.

The refreshed plan aligns with key reforms occurring at a state and national level, including:

- the release of *Inclusive Victoria* in March 2022
- ongoing, phased implementation of the Inclusive education reforms
- the review of the NDIS
- a Commonwealth Senate Select Committee on Autism and ongoing work towards a national autism strategy
- the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission).

The 2017 *Final report of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* remains a touchstone for autism policy. The Victorian Government accepted most recommendations from the inquiry in its initial response. We continue to consider the recommendations in the actions and proposed new directions in this refreshed plan.

Rise participant collaborating with colleague.



Autism Plan Advisory Group

The Advisory Group met with portfolio areas across government to share insights into current priorities and inform thinking about refreshed actions.

The Advisory Group also affirmed the value of drawing on new actions and reform approaches set out in *Inclusive Victoria*.

While many business-as-usual activities of government were suspended in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Advisory Group continued to play a critical role, providing advice to inform the Victorian Government's pandemic response, including:



- **identifying emerging issues**, such as mental health and hardship impacts



- **calling out barriers** to living safely and well that were presented by restrictions to movement, mask use, testing and isolation requirements



- **advocating for accessible communication**



- **shaping key messages for the public**, particularly to help the community understand why many autistic people were exempt from particular public health directions.

The Advisory Group provided much advice for this refresh, drawing on members' organisational and personal expertise.

Members' observations highlight the pandemic's complex and interdependent effects, which cut across personal, organisational and community domains. These effects are profound and ongoing. Disruption to essential supports and services during the pandemic and lessons learned from the experiences of autistic people have reinforced a strong commitment to co-design and addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing, health, education and employment of autistic people.

The Advisory Group's key priorities include the following:



- **Early identification and support** – early identification, specialist interventions and connection to appropriate support can make a significant difference to people's lives. For autistic people, this means timely access to assessment, referral pathways from identification to supports, and maximised opportunity to access NDIS or other services.



- **Health and wellbeing** – autistic Victorians continue to miss out on access to appropriate health and mental health supports when they need them most. Health professionals often overlook or misunderstand autistic people's wellbeing and mental health needs. Health services are difficult environments for autistic people to negotiate.



- **Education and employment pathways** – autistic Victorians face significant barriers to the full participation in education and employment pathways. Autistic students may be left further behind as schools returned to face-to-face schooling. More needs to be done to support students transition from school to further education and training. In the employment sphere, negative attitudes around disability are an enduring barrier to employment and the value of inclusive and neurodiverse workforces is not widely understood.



- **Data and research** – there is minimal data available about autistic Victorians. This limits opportunities to understand, identify and address issues. Data is often designed and controlled by non-autistic people, limiting or undermining its validity.



Peer-to-peer support

Autistic people and their families and support networks see peer-to-peer support as increasingly important. This key theme emerged during the work on the refreshed plan.

Many autistic people receive services and supports that aim to build their skills and behaviours in more normative interactions. Peer support provides a space for autistic people to enjoy and celebrate their shared but diverse experience outside of a therapeutic frame. They help autistic people build networks in which they can experience pride and wellbeing. Advisory Group members noted the importance of establishing an evidence base for how these peer-to-peer activities assist in promoting good mental health and better long-term outcomes.

Through commitments under *Inclusive Victoria*, we will continue to work to ensure all Victorians have equal rights. We will challenge discrimination through a thriving disability advocacy sector led by and for people with disability. This includes strengthening peer-support groups and establishing and expanding peer mentoring and support programs for young people with disability in rural and regional and outer suburban areas.

Group members shared these and many more insights in meetings with portfolio leads during the second half of 2022. They have been a primary resource for portfolio leads in refreshing or adding to actions under the plan.

Highlight: Thomas, Chair, Autism Success Network

Thomas is employed at the Department of Health, where he supports a range of activities to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. In 2023, Thomas undertook a secondment with the Victorian Public Sector Commission, working on a project focused on improving economic participation in the public sector for autistic people.

Prior to obtaining work with the Victorian public service, Thomas experienced a lengthy period of unemployment and described this experience as feeling as though his life was 'on pause'. Thomas says he had significant difficulty in finding work and that one of the biggest barriers for him was the job interview process.

Traditional job interviews can be problematic for many autistic people as interviews typically assess a candidate's 'soft' skills, with interview performance relying heavily on a candidate's communication skills and relationship building with unfamiliar people. For many people, traditional job interviews do not allow them to demonstrate their capabilities and strengths.

At 31 years of age, Thomas was diagnosed and shortly after this, he found work through the Rise program, an autism employment initiative at the Department of Health, which provides an alternate pathway to common recruitment practices. This gave him the start that he needed and enabled Thomas to contribute his knowledge, skills, and insights to his role and also to his broader advocacy work focused on improving inclusive work practices across the public sector. Thomas says that finding work has given him a sense of purpose and the financial autonomy to 'un-pause and start living my life'.

An important aspect to Thomas' career is his work in autism advocacy through the Autism Success Network (ASN). The ASN is one of several disability employee networks within the Victorian public sector and provides opportunities for collaboration, support and sharing of resources across Victorian government departments. However, without having had the initial employment opportunity, Thomas' critically important work in making workplaces better for autistic people, would not have been possible.

As the Chair of the ASN, Thomas says a key focus of his role is supporting public sector leaders in creating inclusive and respectful workplaces. He says public sector leaders are driving change and demonstrating their commitment to increased employment outcomes for autistic people by consulting with autism advocates when making decisions that affect autistic people.



Progress since the original plan

Despite the challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have progressed key commitments and actions from the original plan.

These actions include the following:

- **Change Your Reactions** – two waves of a public education campaign were run in February 2020 and April–May 2021, on television, social media and print advertisements. The campaign encouraged more helpful attitudes and behaviours from community members towards autistic people and their families. An evaluation of the first wave of the campaign showed highly positive responses from both the general population and from autistic people. One additional wave of the campaign is funded for 2023–24 that will highlight behaviour change in the workplace.
- **Autism Education Strategy and broader Inclusive Education reforms** – Victorian *Autism Education Strategy* aims to improve educational outcomes and supports for autistic students. It fosters inclusive school communities that welcome autistic people and their families, and value their contribution. The Strategy was launched in late 2020 and forms part of broader Inclusive Education reforms.
- **Autism assessment and diagnosis** – Increasing access to assessment is a key element of the Victorian autism plan. The *State Budget 2019–20* provided four years of demand funding (\$7.4 million). The third and fourth years of allocation are focusing on diversifying publicly funded assessments, which have typically been limited to Child and Adolescent/Youth Mental Health Services.
- **Autism supports** – many autism organisations, including those represented on the Advisory Group, moved quickly to deliver supports and services online during the pandemic. This was supported in part by one-off grants to allow more rapid redeployment of activity.
- **Supporting a high-quality NDIS** – working with people with disability to ensure the scheme is responsive, sustainable and delivers outcomes. Achievements include:
 - as of 30 June 2023, there were 163,241 Victorians who were active NDIS participants. This included 53,886 (33 per cent) participants who identified autism as their primary disability
 - establishing the Victorian NDIS Community Advisory Council (VCAC), which is made up of people with disability, NDIS participants, peak bodies, service providers and people holding statutory positions. VCAC provides advice on the implementation of the NDIS in Victoria.

Victoria also made advances in broader disability inclusion work that was particularly useful to and valued by autistic people and their families. This included the following:

- **Disability Liaison Officer program** – the program, introduced in 2020, supports people with disability to access health services and meet their health needs. It has received national recognition for increasing rates of testing and vaccination for people with disability. Section 2.1 in this plan provides more detail.
- **Responding to the pandemic** – measures put in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection and promoting the benefits of vaccination and how to access COVID-19 assessment, treatment, testing and vaccines. Initiatives included:
 - in 2021, a dedicated low-sensory vaccination site operated through the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre
 - at the same time, a newly funded ambassador role engaged Amaze to mobilise its networks and encourage people to have COVID-19 vaccinations.
- **Meeting increased advocacy demand during the pandemic** – the government provided time-limited demand funding for the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program which is a critical service for many autistic people and their families. Access and inclusion issues relating to schooling and the NDIS were key areas of demand. Autistic people continue to be a key cohort using advocacy services to restore and uphold their rights.
- **Family violence reforms** – family and sexual violence reforms strengthened access, inclusion and responsiveness of the family violence and sexual assault sectors in line with *Everybody matters: inclusion and equity statement (Everybody matters)*. *Everybody matters* is the first Victorian Government policy statement underpinned by the theory of intersectionality. It maps out how investment in systemic change, and building capabilities, knowledge and specialisation, can shape a system that helps all Victorians. It also commits to the release of three blueprints over its 10-year lifespan to drive action.
- **Family violence MARAM framework** – the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework provides guidance across the system for understanding family violence presentations across communities, identities and contexts, including where individuals have disability. It also supports professionals to understand how compounding barriers, discrimination and oppression can impact family violence risk and guidance for how to address this through risk management.

- **Workforce capability in justice** – workforce initiatives uplifted the capability of corrections and youth justice workforces to recognise, understand and respond to people with disability. This included specific structured training, consultations with dedicated disability portfolio holders (including autism), specialist disability clinicians, and piloting the Just Voices project.
- **Improved data collection** – data capture and analytics work using Victorian linked datasets across health, human services and justice systems is capturing the experience of people with disability in key parts of the justice and corrections system.
- **Disability workforce** – targeted and public campaigns supported the growth of a diverse and representative disability workforce. These built on the results of *Keeping our sector strong*, Victoria’s plan to support the workforce through transition to the NDIS. The Victorian Government allocated an additional \$2.4 million funding for a series of time-limited projects delivered during 2021–22 and 2022–23. These projects aimed to strengthen the disability workforce to provide services for people with disability, including autistic people, in thin markets such as rural and regional communities, and improve worker retention rates.

Completed actions from the original plan include actions to:

- implement the plan itself and guide its work through close consultation with autistic people and their communities
- drive change at a national level on matters such as:
 - initial work to make transition to the NDIS fair and helpful for autistic people
 - work towards a national autism strategy
- build capacity of the early years workforce, such as maternal and child health nurses, kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators
- build capacity of the health and mental health workforce to meet health and autism assessment needs
- build service capacity and expertise in autism assessment
- expand sport and recreation opportunities, including creating sensory rooms in sporting facilities using universal design principles
- develop a youth justice strategy to better support young people, including autistic young people, in the justice system
- develop and introduce new policies and tools to support autistic school students.

In some of these areas, the refreshed plan introduces new or next steps.

Some major strands of new activity under this refresh include:

- meeting health needs in the context of long-term, endemic COVID-19 infection
- strengthening NDIS access and equity, including:
 - advocating nationally on new and emerging issues
 - better meeting the needs of autistic Aboriginal people
 - building workforce capability
- introducing new actions to meet the needs of autistic people during and after emergencies and incidents
- better meeting the needs of autistic people when they have contact with the police, the justice system and corrections
- implementing long-term reforms in mental health, housing and education.

A sizeable proportion of these new actions focus on building workforces' understanding and capability in relation to autism. This is in line with *Inclusive Victoria's* systemic reform: 'Disability confident and inclusive workforces'.



Highlight: Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program is a rapidly growing initiative spanning dozens of countries, dedicated to raising awareness and providing support for people with non-visible disabilities and conditions like autism, chronic pain, anxiety and dementia. The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is an internationally recognised symbol and a simple way to make an invisible disability or condition visible. It allows people to discreetly indicate that they may require additional assistance or understanding.

The Sunflower products, including lanyards, badges and wrist bands, are available for people with hidden disabilities, as well as their carers and loved ones. Wearing the Sunflower lanyard serves as a signal to staff in participating organisations that a person may need extra support and understanding as they go about their day.

In recognition of the importance of creating inclusive environments, Victorian public transport operators are implementing the Sunflower program to provide extra support to wearers, such as support during disruptions and travel changes and help finding quiet spaces as needed. Public transport staff, including drivers and other frontline personnel, wear Sunflower supporter badges to signify their completion of the training, indicating their commitment to providing assistance and understanding to those wearing the Sunflower lanyard.

Inclusive Victoria's policy framework

'Autistic people need a seat at the table in decisions that affect them. Since 2017, Victoria has been on a journey to implement co-design principles with autistic people. We still have a long way to go but what we have done is paving the way for co-design approaches nationally.'

– Autism Plan Advisory Group member

The refreshed plan has a strong and deliberate connection with *Inclusive Victoria*.

Inclusive Victoria sets out Victoria's broader disability inclusion policy and reforms and provides a framework that supports the autism plan.

It sets out six systemic reforms to the way government works with and for people with disability. These reforms highlight the need to build capacity across government to operate accessibly and inclusively.

The *Victorian autism plan: 2023 refresh* reflects these six reform areas:

6

reforms

Co-design with people with disability

Aboriginal self-determination

Intersectional approaches

Accessible communications and universal design

Disability confident and inclusive workforces

Effective data and outcomes reporting

- **Co-design with people with disability**

We will continue to identify opportunities for autistic people to co-design government policies, programs and services. We will work with autistic people to develop guidance and tools for co-design, and to co-design and deliver the autism public education campaign.

- **Aboriginal self-determination**

We will work in partnership with Aboriginal communities to drive action and improve outcomes for autistic Aboriginal people, noting that Aboriginal people are underrepresented in autism diagnosis and NDIS participation. This will be underpinned by principles of Aboriginal-led collective action, Aboriginal self-determination and systemic change. We will support Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to become NDIS providers and deliver culturally sensitive autism assessment and diagnosis for children and young people. We will also work with Aboriginal services and communities to support improvements in cultural competency across all organisations supporting autistic Aboriginal people, drawing on recommendations from the Yoorrook Justice Commission.

- **Intersectional approaches**

We will consider the diversity of the autistic community in our work. We will seek to address the intersection of ableism with other forms of structural discrimination and disadvantage across all our policies, programs and services. We will build the capacity of the health workforce to identify and address the compounding barriers to health care experienced by autistic people.

- **Accessible communications and universal design**

We will build capacity across government in effective communication with autistic people. We will work with autistic people to develop accessible communications strategies and guidance. We will work with autistic people to develop universal design practice guidance and we will apply universal design principles to school infrastructure projects and to sport and recreation initiatives for autistic young people.

- **Disability confident and inclusive workforces**

We will build the diversity and inclusion of the public sector workforce and its capacity to deliver effective services for autistic people. We will attract, retain and develop autistic people as public sector employees and leaders and, building on the autism workforce capability framework, we will develop good practice guidelines for health care professionals.

- **Effective data and outcomes**

We will improve the collection and use of data about autistic people to better inform evidence-based policy and programs and strengthened outcomes reporting. We will undertake data development to report on all indicators and measures under the state disability outcomes framework. This will support reporting against the Victorian autism plan.

Each of the systemic reforms will help drive action in the refreshed plan.

The next section sets out the specific actions we will undertake to make Victoria a better place for autistic people.



Rise participant, Timothy.

Personal stories from the Rise program

People on the spectrum are consistently underrepresented in the workforce due to stigma and the barriers provided by traditional recruitment systems.

The Rise program aims to:

- remove barriers to recruitment
- evaluate the impact of participation in the program on the health and wellbeing of people with autism
- identify organisational factors that contribute to the perceived effectiveness of the program
- identify barriers and enablers informing future implementation.

Rise participant Timothy says:

‘Working for the Rise program was quite a shift for me compared with other places I have worked, where I struggled to fit in or learn the work that was required of me.

At Rise, my supervisors are far more accommodating and patient with my ability to learn.

This is not to say that there are no expectations or that there is no work being done.

In fact, because my work is closely monitored and even analysed, I can know almost objectively where I can improve.

This, alongside the very precise procedures, helps me get into a steady rhythm, which helps me understand my work expectations.

The supervisors and delegators are very friendly and usually tell me about my errors without putting me down and I feel there is a genuine effort to improve my work rather than put me down.

However, I also feel that they will inform me of my errors rather than letting me do the wrong thing without correcting it.

I also feel much more comfortable asking questions, something that I did not feel when working at other places.

All in all, the result is a comfortable working environment, where I feel able to learn at a steady pace and where I feel accomplished in my work.’



Rise participant, Mathew.

Mathew, who is also a Rise participant, said:

'I was underemployed and in insecure work for several years before I started at the Rise program.

As an autistic person, I found feeling and appearing confident in traditional job interviews very challenging, where I felt judged on how I appeared socially.

The Rise program's Discovery Day recruiting was great because we could show our skills in a more practical way.

I feel valued, supported and understood in my new role.

The Rise Program has allowed me to envision further opportunities and career pathways in the public service.'

Actions

These new and refreshed actions reflect and more closely and align with the priorities outlined in *Inclusive Victoria*. The actions below address the priority areas identified by the Advisory Group and what we have heard from the autistic community in recent times.

1

1 Inclusive communities

'As members of the autistic community we want to replace isolation, prejudice and misunderstanding with inclusion, citizenship and connection. We applaud the plan's commitment to listen to our voices. We support the plan's focus of working in partnership to celebrate our community and removing barriers that disable us.'

– Autism Plan Advisory Group member



1.1 Community attitudes

Action areas

We will improve wider community understanding and acceptance of autism. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 1.1.1 Continue to partner with autistic people and the autistic community to design and implement public education campaigns to:
- inform the Victorian community about the experiences and needs of autistic people, applying an intersectional lens
 - promote the value of social and economic inclusion of autistic people.

1.2 Transport

Action areas

We will increase safety and wellbeing for autistic people using public transport. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 1.2.1 Encourage public transport operators to:
- continue taking part in Try Before You Ride events so community members can practise using different types of accessible transport such as stationary trains, trams, commercial passenger vehicles, coaches and buses
 - report on activities under their accessibility action plans to demonstrate how the actions make Victoria's public transport system easier to use, including for people with non-apparent or non-evident disability
 - maintain accreditation with the Communication Access Symbol
 - include fair and equitable customer service outcomes for all people with disability in Customer Service Charters
 - provide transparent and inclusive protocols to inform people with disability about emergency procedures
 - ensure connecting pathways and wayfinding between bus interchanges and railway stations are direct and easily accessible.

We will improve disability inclusion in partnership with autistic people. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 1.2.2 Continue to support public transport operators to deliver programs developed in partnership with community organisations. These include:
- authorised officer training to improve passenger experiences for autistic people
 - displaying the Communication Access Symbol and maintaining materials for staff to assist customers with different communication needs
 - providing online resources to support journey planning, including route familiarisation
 - disability awareness education and training so that operator staff are disability confident.
- 1.2.3 Continue to work with the Accessible Transport Advisory Committee. This committee advises the Minister for Public Transport and the department on providing public transport that is inclusive and accessible for all Victorians, including the needs of autistic people. An inaugural Chief Accessibility Advocate has also been appointed to support the Victorian transport network to improve accessibility.

1.3 Sport and recreation

Action areas

We will ensure all Victorians can participate in sport and active recreation initiatives that are high quality, inclusive and appropriate for autistic people. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 1.3.1 Support sport and active recreation outcomes for autistic people through continuing collaborations, programs, and inclusive participation opportunities and sustainable policies and business practices.
- 1.3.2 Apply universal design principles throughout sport and recreation infrastructure and program design and delivery to meet the needs for autistic people, such as providing sensory rooms or other initiatives.

1.4 Arts and cultural life

Action areas

Through the Creative State 2025 strategy, the *Victorian autism plan* and commitments under *Inclusive Victoria*, we will improve access to employment opportunities and the inclusion and participation of autistic Victorians in the cultural and creative life of the state. These are the actions we will undertake:

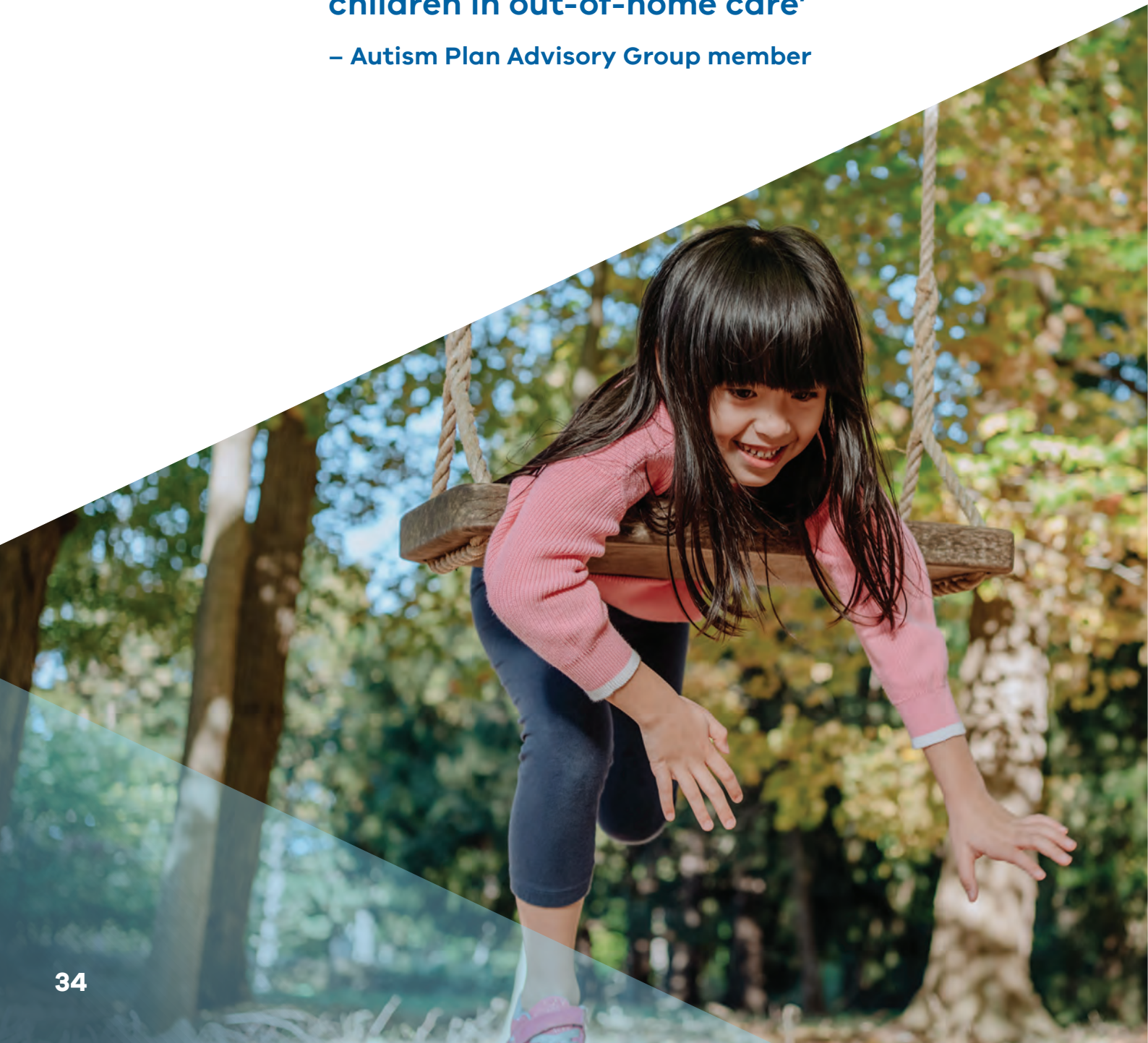
- 1.4.1 Review accessibility and inclusiveness across Creative Victoria's business processes and encourage inclusive and accessible practices across funded creative industries organisations.
- 1.4.2 Offer dedicated funding streams, eligible to autistic Victorians, that provide funding for access requirements and are assessed by peers with lived experience of disability.
- 1.4.3 Improve access to cultural experiences through programs delivered by state-owned creative organisations such as autism-friendly cultural experiences and other accessible experiences.
- 1.4.4 Champion the content of autistic Victorians, through programs and events held by state-owned creative organisations and activity supported by Creative Victoria.

2

2 Health, housing and wellbeing

**'The plan needs to address
the specific needs of autistic
children in out-of-home care'**

– Autism Plan Advisory Group member



2.1 Health

Action areas

We will improve access to autism assessment, diagnosis and early intervention in community-based health settings. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.1.1 Diversify how we offer public autism assessments, through:
- new provision of services through Community Health program and Aboriginal community-controlled providers to improve access to community-based, culturally sensitive autism assessment and diagnosis for children and young people
 - new provision of service through the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, providing assessments for children three years and younger.

Action areas

We will ensure healthcare professionals, including hospital staff, general practitioners and primary and community healthcare staff, undertake professional development to better support autistic Victorians. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.1.2 Develop a new Department of Health website resource with practical information for healthcare workers about working with autistic people, including information about autism in women and girls.
- 2.1.3 Develop good practice guidelines for health services about working with autistic people.
- 2.1.4 Implement a two-year initiative as capped grant funding for training organisations to refresh and develop training modules for healthcare workforces to assist them to better understand the needs of autistic people when providing healthcare services and supports.

We will continue to support people with disability, their support networks and disability service providers to put in place measures to reduce their risk of COVID-19 infection and address the broader social and economic disruptions the pandemic has had, recognising the specific needs and concerns of autistic Victorian. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.1.5 Engage with people with disability and their support networks and families to promote the benefits of vaccination and how to access to COVID-19 assessment, treatment, testing and vaccines, including supports available for autistic Victorians to access the health services they need.

- 2.1.6 Work with autistic advocates to raise community awareness about the latest advice on immunisation, antivirals and other COVID-19 services from relevant health authorities and identify opportunities to raise issues and matters of interest through consultative forums and processes.
- 2.1.7 Partner with disability service providers and organisations to better understand their challenges and needs relating to COVID-19, including the impact on their everyday operations and workforce, and distribute critical COVID-19 supplies including rapid antigen tests and masks.

Highlight: Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) program

Autistic people need access to timely, culturally safe, high-quality health services to support them to manage their health.

Services should be made available in settings that actively accommodate neurodiversity to respond to people's health and wellbeing needs.

The DLO program in key health services supports autistic people to navigate the service system and access the healthcare they need. Initiatives and actions, such as the development of quiet and low-sensory environments and appointment readiness (for example, using social stories), support autistic people to access the services they need.

The DLO program has assisted 23,340 people in total and supported 16,650 people with disability to access appropriate COVID-19 vaccination that meets their needs (data from December 2020 to June 2022). Approximately one-quarter of all users are autistic people and their families.

We will leverage DLOs in health services to improve access to healthcare for autistic people. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.1.8 Support autistic people to access healthcare, including providing tailored support related to booking services, communication needs and psychosocial and sensory support.
- 2.1.9 Champion and support delivery of service improvements that address the needs of autistic people, aligned with *Inclusive Victoria* systemic reforms and health commitments.

2.2 Mental health

Action areas

We will improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes for autistic people and other people with disability. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.2.1 Ensure that engagement and evidence to shape the *Diverse communities mental health and wellbeing framework* (the framework) considers the needs of autistic people and neurodiversity broadly. The framework is due for release in 2023. It will provide a 10-year strategy and two-year action plan for improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for people with disability including autistic people, and other cohorts who typically experience barriers to managing their mental health.
- 2.2.2 Ensure the approach to implementing the framework prioritises co-design and the expertise of people with lived experience, including autistic Victorians.

We will continue to increase understanding of health and wellbeing needs, including mental health needs for autistic Victorians. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.2.3 Support child, youth and adolescent, adult and older adult mental health services to develop capacity in assessment, diagnosis and early intervention through the Mindful Centre's autism spectrum disorder training.
- 2.2.4 Support the Victorian mental health workforce to better respond to the needs of people with disability, including autistic people. This will be done by implementing the Mental Health Workforce Disability Capability Uplift program.

2.3 Housing

Action areas

We will improve access to appropriate and affordable housing for autistic Victorians and their families. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.3.1 Undertake a review of the Victorian Housing Register and public housing operational guidelines to ensure they align with, and adhere to, the principles of the Victorian autism plan including guidelines outlining application methods, eligibility for social housing and home modifications.
- 2.3.2 Ensure that housing design guidelines for new and upgraded public housing capture the needs of autistic people.
- 2.3.3 Undertake a review of public materials and access points on social housing to ensure they align with and adhere to the principles of the *Victorian autism plan*, including accessibility of information and appropriateness of assessment.
- 2.3.4 Increase the availability and accessibility of social housing for all people with disability, including autistic people, through the Big Housing Build initiatives. These initiatives are commitments in *Inclusive Victoria*.

2.4 Access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Action areas

We will undertake broad-ranging advocacy to get the most out of the NDIS for autistic Victorians. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.4.1 Advocate for innovative models under the NDIS to support more autistic people to stay at home and develop more appropriate Specialist Disability Accommodation.
- 2.4.2 Continue to advocate for the diverse needs of autistic people and their families through appropriate governance and review mechanisms. This includes advocating for appropriate levels of behavioural support and for an improved experience of the scheme by participants with complex needs.

We will support service providers and autistic Victorians to connect and engage with the NDIS. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.4.3 Improve the capacity and capability of behaviour-support practitioners in partnership with the University of Melbourne to deliver training that ensures high-quality behaviour-support plans for autistic people.

We will monitor the experiences and outcomes of autistic people accessing the NDIS. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.4.4 Work with the Commonwealth, Australian Bureau of Statistics, and internal state government departments to monitor and share data about the experiences and outcomes of autistic people and their families. We acknowledge that Aboriginal data sovereignty (ADS) is a key enabler of self-determination. We are committed to implementing ADS. This work will involve analysing the data received from the NDIA through Victoria's NDIS data sharing agreement, to better understand the experiences and outcomes for Victorian autistic people accessing the NDIS .
- 2.4.5 Work with the Commonwealth, including the Independent NDIS Review Panel, for greater consistency in access to the NDIS, planning of support needs and budget setting to reduce the current assessment biases for Victorians diagnosed with autism.

2.5 Children and families

Action areas

We will continue to strengthen the capacity of families with children with disability, including autism and parents with disability to improve the health, safety and development of their children through targeted and coordinated whole-of-family support. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 2.5.1 Build the capacity of parents and families to help prevent children with disability support needs from requiring care outside of their family home through Victoria's Family Services disability programs including Children with Complex Disability Support Needs Program and the Family Services Specialist Disability Program. The types of support may include advocacy and advice, practical support and/or material aid, counselling, parent-child interaction and community connection and social inclusion. This includes providing culturally safe support to Aboriginal families and children.
- 2.5.2 Help families to navigate the NDIS. We will help parents develop skills to advocate for NDIS plans that contain parenting and disability support that help maintain and improve family functioning and the sustainability of family-based care.
- 2.5.3 Build on the knowledge gained from the funding of 34 specialist disability practitioner roles across 17 departmental areas to support vulnerable families with disability in order to build disability inclusion and NDIS capacity across the sector in future.
- 2.5.4 Build on the learnings from the Steps to Confident Parenting Program pilot. This program provides flexible and tailored support to parents with disability, including autism, or cognitive impairment with a child or children at risk of requiring care. The types of support included intensive home-based and case management responses through a multidisciplinary team of dedicated family services, early parenting, and disability practitioners. This includes providing culturally safe support to Aboriginal parents with disability, including autism, or cognitive impairment.
- 2.5.5 Improve outcomes for children with disability, including autistic children who are involved with child protection. Disability practice advice teams in each operational division will support the capacity of child protection practitioners to engage with the NDIA and provide consultation support to ensure that children with disability receive the disability supports they need through their NDIS plans.

2.5.6 The care services system will continue to respond to the needs of children with autism with an approach that draws on partnerships with the NDIA. This includes processes for identifying children with autism coming into care and models of care that provide appropriate environments and support for children with autism in residential care. Crisis and escalation pathways with the NDIA are in place to ensure urgent responses to break down of care or critical disability supports.



3

3 Fairness and safety

'We want this plan to continue to close the gap between the needs of an evolving autistic community and the design and delivery of government and community services.'

– Autism Plan Advisory Group member



3.1 Safety in emergencies

Action areas

Key actions are connecting emergency services to expert advice of people with disability and increasing the use of accessible communications. We are continuing to improve accessible communications during emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 3.1.1 Work with people with disability, including autistic advocates, to develop inclusive processes in emergency management planning within the emergency management sector.
- 3.1.2 Build the capacity of emergency management agencies to understand and respond to the needs of people with disability before, during and after emergencies. This includes the diversity of people's communication needs and engagement approaches.

3.2 Disability advocacy

Highlight: Victorian Disability Advocacy Program

The Victorian Disability Advocacy Program draws on base funding of more than \$3.3 million a year, plus demand funding provided through the 2023–24 State Budget. It delivers services through 23 funded agencies that support the rights of people with disability and their families.

Action areas

We will increase value of the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program to autistic people. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 3.2.1 Draw on insights from new outcomes and output reporting approaches.
- 3.2.2 Work with relevant service providers to understand demand, key and emerging issues for autistic people and strategies to ensure safeguarding and fairness for autistic people.
- 3.2.3 Consult with the Autism Plan Advisory Group in relation to future reform directions to be progressed by Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in response to the findings of the Disability Royal Commission and recommendations from the NDIS Review.

3.3 Justice

Action areas

We will increase access to support services for autistic people in contact with the justice system. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 3.3.1 Continue to support the Children's Court Clinic to undertake comprehensive assessments that may identify autistic children and their parents. This may lead to referral to appropriate support services by child protection or youth justice.
- 3.3.2 Reconvene the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal disability reference group to help develop reforms to service delivery.
- 3.3.3 Ensure that people with signs of autism in the justice system, including Community Correctional Services and young people in youth justice, are appropriately identified so that opportunities offered by the NDIS are maximised, ensuring access to and continuity of services and supports both in prison and community.
- 3.3.4 Continue to drive improved coordination and service integration with the NDIS to increase NDIS uptake and ensure continuity of services and supports for offenders in corrections and young people in youth justice.
- 3.3.5 Continue to ensure that:
 - initial assessment and planning workers in prison will continue to provide appropriate housing information and advice for vulnerable people, including those with autism, transitioning from prison to release in the community
 - people in prison with autism have their housing needs assessed as part of a reintegration assessment that drives transition planning and supports. In particular, service users accommodated in prison continue to be informed about housing and homelessness services, including through post-release supports.
- 3.3.6 Continue to develop workforce capabilities through the delivery of formal and informal training on understanding disability, including supporting autistic people, to justice staff and other stakeholders.
- 3.3.7 Pilot the Rise recruitment program to provide work for autistic people.

3.3.8 Partner with the NDIA to develop:

- an information-sharing schedule in relation to sharing data on NDIS participants, including autistic people, who are involved with the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety
- a Victorian NDIS justice handbook to guide NDIA staff and staff of the Victorian justice system to work together to support people with disability, including autistic people, who are involved in the Victorian justice system.

3.3.9 Continue to deliver the Prison Disability Support Initiative (PDSI), including workforce disability training, dissemination of dedicated written information and support from specialist clinicians for autistic people across all prisons.

3.3.10 Seek opportunities to co-design policy and programs with autistic people.

3.3.11 Senior/Specialist Disability Advisers deliver Youth Justice face-to-face training. This includes induction programs for new staff that contains training related to disability and use of effective strategies to support children and young people with disability in the justice system, including autistic people.

3.4 Personal safety

Action areas

We will increase police workforce capability to better serve autistic Victorians and increase their personal safety.

These are the actions we will undertake:

- 3.4.1 Establish a network of police employees with knowledge and understanding of disability to champion good practice and services that respond to the needs of people with disability, including autistic people.
- 3.4.2 Work with people with lived experience and autism organisations to co-design initiatives under the Victoria Police disability action plan. This includes promoting access to training resources and developing factsheets to support autistic people in their interactions with police and building the capability of frontline police.

3.5 Family and sexual violence reforms

Action areas

We will continue to implement the family and sexual violence reforms to strengthen access, inclusion and responsiveness of the family violence and sexual assault sectors. This will ensure all autistic adults, young people and children have equal access to services by breaking down systemic barriers in line with the *Everybody matters*. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 3.5.1 Continue to address access to, and remove barriers that people with disability, including autism, face when seeking safety and support through the implementation of the Disability Family Violence Crisis Initiative; the Disability Practice Lead project; and the case management program requirements for specialist family violence services which support victim survivors.
- 3.5.2 Continue to build professionals' understanding of different risk factors for people with disability including autistic people experiencing or at risk of family violence as part of the MARAM framework.
- 3.5.3 Support best practice where autistic young people are identified within the system as using violence against family members. Victoria is committed to ensuring holistic, therapeutic-focused support is provided, that accommodates autistic people's needs while addressing risk and harm.

Highlight: Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative

The Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI) provided immediate practical assistance to more than 302 victim survivors with disability who experienced a family violence crisis in 2022–23.

Victim survivors accessed more than \$150,000 of disability-related supports to remain safe or escape family violence. This included funding for personal support workers and carers, disability aids, assistive technologies and accessible transport options.

Additional funding helped to administer brokerage funds and contributed to building the sector's capacity. It also raised awareness through information sessions and presentations on disability and disability-based family violence to various organisations who have contact with or support victim survivors living with disability.

This initiative also supported family violence practitioners and other mainstream professionals to provide more tailored and effective support to victim survivors with disability. It did this through a secondary consultation service. This service provides advice on safety planning, disability specific needs and referrals to other specialist disability support services.

For example, DFVCRI provided the statewide family violence service provider, Safe Steps, with specialist and flexible support.

Safe Steps assisted a 32-year-old client and her two young children who had fled the family home due to ongoing family violence. The client's 6-year-old son, who is autistic, received daily living supports through the NDIS and attended a specialist school.

Safe Steps supported the client with accommodation and assisted her to set up new disability supports for her son. When she first entered Safe Steps accommodation, all existing supports ended because it was unsafe for her children to attend school and childcare. All communication with existing support workers also ceased in order to stop information being shared with the person using violence, who was listed as the child representative on the child's NDIS plan.

Safe Steps sought a full review of the NDIS plan to remove the person using violence from being the child representative. This would prevent them from receiving information regarding the whereabouts of the family. During the interim period, while new supports were established, Safe Steps brokered support workers and purchased sensory items to support the child. This included the replacement of an iPad with support aids that was smashed when they fled the family home. Safe Steps also supported the client to make arrangements for her autistic son to attend a specialist school in the new year.

4

4 Opportunity and pride

'Every government school in Victoria has the potential to be safe for diverse autistic students. We can give every autistic student access to a mentor to build up their pride and sense of belonging. In doing so, we signal to autistic young people that they are an asset, not a problem. They are to be valued, not managed.'

**– Autism Plan Advisory
Group member**

Youth Gamers Group,
Northern Autism
Network.



4.1 Inclusive education

The 'Fighting for Students with Disability and their Families' package provides \$203 million to better support students living with disability, their carers and families. This package ensures that students and children with disability continue to get the support they need to access their learning on the same basis as their peers, while also setting them up for the best possible future.

Elements of this package include:

- an extension of high intensity **outside school hours care** to an additional 25 specialist schools so that more families can access quality after school and vacation care for children with disability.
- funding for specialist schools to employ **an NDIS Navigator**, a dedicated staff member to provide direct support to families and carers to help them to navigate and understand the National Disability Insurance Scheme, enabling them to get the most out of the supports available.
- the **Specialist School Activity Boost**, which provides additional funding to help specialist schools to provide a greater range of inclusive, safe and accessible activities to their students, so they can participate in valuable arts, sports, cultural and social programs or experiences.
- a **review into current eligibility processes for specialist schools**, to review whether current eligibility criteria and processes for specialist schools and settings are practical and based on contemporary best practice.
- greater access for schools to **alternative or augmentative communications software**, including Proloquo2Go, to assist students with complex communication needs.

Action areas

Through the **Autism Education Strategy** <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/Autism-Education-Strategy.aspx>> (the strategy), launched in December 2020, we will promote and celebrate autism inclusion and diversity at the whole-school level. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.1 Help school leaders and teachers create inclusive and welcoming environments for autistic students.
- 4.1.2 Support school staff and students to increase knowledge of, and appreciation for, autism. Programs to support this include:
 - **Disability Inclusion** <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/disability-inclusion?Redirect=1>> – schools will get more school-level funding to help them create more inclusive schools and classrooms, and better support students with disability and additional learning needs. Schools may choose to use the funding for staff professional learning, employing staff to support students in the classroom or to purchase learning programs and equipment
 - **increased access for schools to expert advice and support** – Regional Implementation Teams and extra operational disability roles in regions will give schools and area teams direct support and advice to help them introduce Disability Inclusion and build skills in the school
 - **Disability Friendly Schools** <<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/disability-friendly-schools.aspx>> – will help make schools safer and more inclusive. This includes an additional \$5.6 million over 4 years and \$1.8 million per year thereafter to continue and expand the I CAN Schools in-person and online mentoring program to make it available to all Victorian Government schools. The I CAN Schools program connects autistic young people with I CAN Network mentors to empower autistic students with optimism, belonging, self-acceptance, pride and confidence. It also includes guidance for schools on running lunchtime clubs <<https://www.vic.gov.au/lunchtime-clubs>>, an evidence-based way of providing activities during recess and lunch.

We will build the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the educational needs of autistic students.

These are the actions we will undertake:

4.1.3 Build the skills of school leaders and staff in inclusive education, autism inclusion and legal obligations related to autistic students in a coordinated way. Programs to support this include:

- **area workforce capability building** – professional learning resources and on-the-job support for school improvement workforces, including regional workshops and online modules. It also includes Education Improvement Leaders – Diverse Learners, which provides professional learning on learning diversity and autism <<https://www.vic.gov.au/diverse-learners-hub/professional-learning>> at statewide and regional capability-building events
- **professional learning communities (PLCs)** – these support teachers to collaboratively work through cycles of inquiry to evaluate teacher practice against student learning growth. The Diverse Learners Hub will support teachers in PLCs to strengthen their knowledge and skills to better meet the needs of autistic students
- **inclusion outreach coaching** – this will enable coaches from specialist schools to work with staff in mainstream schools to develop their capacity to better work with autistic students
- **professional learning resources** – these include the Inclusive Classrooms <<https://www.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/professional-learning/inclusive-classrooms>> program, which offers courses for school staff that focus on practical teaching strategies, adjustments and supports for students at the school, classroom, and individual levels. Resources also include AllPlay Learn <<https://allplaylearn.org.au/>>, an evidence-based resource for students, parents, and schools to understand inclusive education.
- **the Master of Inclusive Education** <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/master-inclusive-education-program>> **and Graduate Certificate Initiative** <<https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/graduate-certificate-education-learning-difficulties-program?Redirect=1>> – postgraduate course placements for teachers in mainstream and specialist schools to strengthen teachers' knowledge and capacity to support diverse learners in Victorian government schools by focusing on their strengths, interests, and aspirations.

We will involve the student, families and experts in collaboratively planning for students' education.

These are the actions we will undertake:

4.1.4 Supporting schools, students, their families and professionals to plan for autistic students' education. Programs to support this include:

- **student voice toolkit** – developed with students with disability, the toolkit will give schools flexible and accessible tools to make sure that all students with disability can participate in decisions about their education. The tools can be tailored to suit a student's age, interests, communication, and participation needs
- **partnerships with autistic community and advocacy organisations** – these will be strengthened and will lead to better advice and resources for schools to further support autistic students, their families and the school community
- **Strengthening Inclusive School Communities program** – extends partnerships with key disability organisations to provide information and resources for schools and families that encourage positive partnerships and promote the benefits of inclusion to the whole school community
- **Senior Secondary Pathways Reform** – offers the Victorian Pathways Certificate and the VCE Vocational Major which focus on vocational and applied learning. The reform includes a range of supports to assist students to access work-related learning opportunities and will introduce inclusive pathway supports to early school leavers with disability, including autistic students, to promote re-engagement and successful transitions.

We will support autistic students' health and wellbeing.

These are the actions we will undertake:

4.1.5 Providing specialist programs and resources to support autistic students' social and emotional development, positive behaviour and mental health. Programs to support this include:

- **School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS)** – a program to help schools improve the social, emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes for all students, including autistic students
- **autism-friendly Navigator program** <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/navigator-program/policy>> – service providers are trained in understanding some of the barriers autistic students face in engaging with school, and how they can engage and support these students through the program

- **Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu** <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/mental-health-fund-menu/policy>> – supports schools to select programs, staff and other support relating to mental health, bullying prevention, early intervention and targeted support
- **Mental Health in Primary Schools** – a partnership with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and the Melbourne Graduate School of Education to provide more mental health support in primary schools using a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. Consultation with specialist schools to maximise inclusion of students with disability, including autistic students, informs part of this work
- **Mental Health Practitioners (MHP)** – all secondary and specialist schools are funded to employ a suitably qualified school-based MHP to provide direct support to students, coordinate external supports, and contribute to whole-school approaches to mental health. All MHPs have access to specific professional learning and guidance to providing mental health and wellbeing support to autistic students.

We will support autistic students’ individual education needs. These are the actions we will undertake:

4.1.6 Use a strengths-based approach to identify and meet autistic students’ needs and support their transitions. Programs to support this include:

- **Tutor Learning Initiative** <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/tutor-learning-initiative/policy>> – allows schools to employ a tutor to deliver targeted small group learning support to students who need it most. Since 2021, the Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI) has supported students whose learning was disrupted during remote and flexible learning, and those below, or at risk of falling below, the National Minimum Standards in National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) or equivalent. From 2024, TLI will support every student identified as ‘Needing Additional Support’ in the 2023 and 2024 NAPLAN assessments at government schools. Tutors have access to targeted professional learning to build their capacity in specialised areas, such as inclusive education and catering to students with different needs such as autism

- **Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy Support** <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/mylNs-initiative/policy>> – schools receive funding to build teacher capacity and capability to provide direct, differentiated numeracy and literacy support to prioritised students, including autistic students. Professional learning is also provided to Improvement Teachers to further support capacity and capability building
- **Complex Communication Needs** – specific policy advice and guidance will be developed for these students, including the use of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) systems. Students will also have greater access to AAC through a \$0.1 million (capped) fund in 2023–24 from which schools can apply for funding for a student to access ACC software, including Proloquo2Go, where the student is not funded for it by the NDIS.

We will strengthen accountability and transparency for students with disability. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.7 Improve data collection and information management to better understand the outcomes of students with disability, including autistic students. Programs to support this include:
- **Disability data improvement strategy** – improves the quality of data the department collects on students with disability to enhance decision making and practice to improve outcomes for students with disability. This includes better understanding the learning and wellbeing outcomes for autistic students
 - **Individual Education Plan tools, guidance and processes** <<https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/individual-education-plans-ieps/policy>> – including strengthened tools, resources, guidance and professional learning. This will provide higher-quality individual education plans for autistic students, and track their progress
 - **Autism Education Strategy Advisory Group** – this group guides the implementation of the disability data improvement strategy. It includes representatives from autism and disability advocacy organisations, including autistic-led organisations, a student representative, school leaders and regional staff, and autism researchers.

We will monitor the delivery of the *Autism education strategy* to ensure it continues to meet the learning and wellbeing needs and aspirations of autistic students and continually evolves to include new initiatives to support its strategic pillars.

These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.8 Build and track key datasets to measure progress for students with disability.
- 4.1.9 Regularly review the impact of the supporting initiatives, including how the Diverse Learners Hub is delivering against the objectives of the strategy.
- 4.1.10 Stay up-to-date with the latest research and best practice.
- 4.1.11 Listen to autistic students and their families to ensure the strategy implementation meets their needs.

We will continue to provide support and professional assistance to government-funded kindergarten teachers and early childhood professionals to support the inclusion of children with additional needs. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.12 Continue to deliver the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program, which provides additional support and professional assistance to facilitate the inclusion of children with additional needs, including autistic children.
- 4.1.13 Deliver online training designed to help early childhood educators develop a greater understanding of autistic young children and plan inclusive programs that support their learning and development.
- 4.1.14 Develop and maintain an inclusive early education web portal that gives parents and early childhood educators a single source of information about inclusion for young people with developmental delays including autism.
- 4.1.15 Enhance supports for funded kindergarten services to include children with additional needs, including children with autism. This involves provision to strengthen existing supports and to design and pilot new tools and processes that will build teaching teams' capabilities to understand and respond to varying needs.

We will continue to improve information about education and education support systems for parents and autistic students. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.16 Review and expand the existing online resources to guide parents when choosing schools for their children with disability.
- 4.1.17 Review and update the *Guide to home schooling in Victoria* to include additional resources as they become available.

We will continue to apply universal design principles in education settings. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.1.18 Apply universal design principles to school and early childhood infrastructure projects as outlined in the Department of Education's Building quality standards handbook and the *Whole-of-government universal design policy*.

4.2 Skills and training

We will continue to strengthen individualised support for autistic students in Vocational Education and Training. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.2.1 Examine relevant areas of vocational education and training (VET) policies and programs in Victoria to ensure the specific issues autistic Victorians face are appropriately addressed in professional development delivered to VET practitioners through such entities as the VET Development Centre.
- 4.2.2 Ensure government-funded support programs offered by Learn Locals and TAFEs, such as Reconnect, can respond to these issues through targeted and appropriate supports to improve participation in VET.
- 4.2.3 Improve data collection on the number of learners with disability across all VET programs.
- 4.2.4 Make high-quality training and support available across the state for more people with disability and their carers to access skills, training and jobs.
- 4.2.5 Ensure the Victorian training system can meet demand for high-quality training for an expanding NDIS workforce by promoting new course opportunities in disability (for example, Certificate IV Introduction to NDIS) via existing programs and networks.
- 4.2.6 Continue implementation of the Disability Transition Officers in TAFEs. This initiative sees the employment of 16 transition officers across the TAFE Network to support students with disability transition from secondary school environments into TAFEs.

Highlight: *Marcella's interview*

Marcella's interview is a short film about employing someone with disability. The film is a collaboration between students from mainstream and specialist schools in the Brimbank–Melton area.

The film is aimed at supervisors and employers. It includes messages about inclusive recruitment practices and simple adjustments employers can make in the workplace to welcome and respect people with disability and enable their strengths and skills to shine through.

The film also highlights the challenge of deciding whether to disclose disability to a potential employer. This is a profoundly personal decision.

The film gives an insight into the steps an employer can take to create supportive work environments for all.

Watch *Marcella's interview*

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FdJCYNf004>>.

The team also produced

The making of Marcella's interview

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmJSA2CQ53E>>.

This film showcases the young people who worked behind the scenes on the film. It highlights the technical skills the crew developed during the project, as well as the benefits everyone involved experienced.



4.3 Employment and economic participation

We will continue to increase employment of autistic Victorians. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.3.1 Ensure Jobs Victoria’s mentors support autistic people into work, particularly those who are long-term unemployed.
- 4.3.2 Continue implementation of *Getting to work: Victorian public sector disability employment action plan 2018–2025*. This plan focuses on making attraction, recruitment, retention and career progression strategies inclusive of all people with disability, including autistic people. This includes supporting autistic public sector employees through the following key initiatives:
- **neurodiverse-confident services** – these services aim to help the public sector develop neurodiverse-confident managers and assist neurodiverse employees to have a positive experience at work. The services are provided through a state purchase contract
 - **Rise program** – a recruitment and support program that aims to provide people on the autism spectrum with sustainable and meaningful employment options. Since 2019, the program has expanded beyond the former Department of Health and Human Services (now Department of Health) and Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (now Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action) into the Department of Education and the Department of Justice and Community Safety.
- 4.3.3 Seek to create inclusive employment opportunities and deliver economic and social value to the Victorian community by:
- opening doors for social enterprises and increasing recognition of Work Integration Social Enterprises across the government’s service system
 - promoting employment opportunities in social enterprises, including for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and streamline referral pathways
 - delivering commitments under the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and *Yuma Yirramboi: Victorian Aboriginal employment and economic strategy*.

4.3.4 Support an increase in government spending under the *Social procurement framework* to benefit people with disability by:

- working with government purchasers to better support their understanding and awareness of the *Social procurement framework* and its objectives
- providing advice to departments and agencies to include the 'Opportunities for Victorians with disability' objectives as part of their procurement
- supporting a clearer understanding of how to meet the *Social procurement framework's* 'Opportunities for Victorians with disability' objective by developing materials for suppliers to promote and replicate examples of good practice, case studies and resources.

Highlight: Aspergers Victoria

In 2022, Aspergers Victoria (AV) was appointed to the Victorian Government neurodiverse-confident services panel.

As one of the neurodiverse specialist organisations on the panel, AV delivers support to neurodivergent employees, their teams and managers.

With 80 per cent of its staff autistic, AV is a peer-led organisation that aims to improve autistic social and employment inclusion. Its lived experience team includes job coaches and advisors who use codesigned and strengths-based approaches when providing neurodivergent support services.

The neurodivergent-confident services <<https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/workforceprograms/disability-employment/neurodiverse-confident-services/>> was established by the Victorian Government to build a more inclusive and safer public sector in line with the *Victorian autism plan*. Neurodivergent employees can support that includes job coaching, career development and strategies to manage challenges at work. The service can also provide support, coaching or resources to teams and hiring managers to build neurodiversity confidence across the public sector.

President of AV, Tamsin said:

'It is exciting to witness the positive impact of this service. The panel continues to receive an increasing number of inquiries from a wide variety of public sector organisations seeking support with their strategies towards growing neurodiverse employment inclusion.'



Christina, from the 2023 Change your Reactions campaign, has a background in teaching, consultancy and public speaking. She is an autistic parent of two neurodivergent children.

4.4 Voice and leadership

We will promote the voice and leadership of autistic people. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.4.1 Build opportunities for autistic advocates to engage with Victorian Government policy leads in ways that support a range of communication styles and are fully accessible.
- 4.4.2 Establish a mechanism for the Autism Plan Advisory Group and autistic advocates to provide a regular channel of advice to be shared across the Victorian Government.
- 4.4.3 Continue to increase opportunities for autistic people to be represented on Victorian public sector boards and committees.

4.5 Pride and recognition

We will develop opportunities for people with disability to celebrate their identity and achievements. These are the actions we will undertake:

- 4.5.1 Connect autistic people with opportunities led or supported by the Victorian Government for showcasing the achievements of neurodiverse Victorians.
- 4.5.2 Work with autistic people to inform ongoing Victorian Government messaging that promotes autism pride and recognition.

Evaluating outcomes

We have created an outcomes framework to evaluate the refreshed plan. It is based on *Inclusive Victoria's* framework of four pillars, 14 outcome areas and 22 priorities.

The framework reflects the things that people with disability have told us are important to them. They also include areas of growing focus and interest for people with disability such as supporting disability pride and removing barriers to free expression of sexual identity and gender.

The pillars and outcome areas in the *Victorian autism plan: 2023 refresh* are:

Pillar 1: Inclusive communities

Outcome areas

- Connection
- Inclusion
- Accessibility
- Mobility

Pillar 2: Health, housing and wellbeing

Outcome areas

- Housing
- Health
- Wellbeing

Pillar 3: Fairness and safety

Outcome areas

- Respect
- Safety

Pillar 4: Opportunity and pride

Outcome areas

- Education and skills
- Employment
- Economic independence
- Influence and recognition
- Opportunity

Policy context

As part of the refreshed plan, we will evaluate our progress and publish a report on what we have done. This work will consider *Inclusive Victoria's* outcomes framework, and a forthcoming national autism strategy.

Our work to report on outcomes will be assisted by national efforts to build a National Disability Data Asset. The data asset will connect data in better ways, so we have a more complete picture of the life experiences of people with disability.

We will also draw on the outcomes measurement approach set out in *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031*.

Governance

There are three main bodies that oversee the refreshed *Victorian autism plan*:

- the Interdepartmental Committee on Disability – a whole-of-Victorian Government committee representing all portfolios that have made commitments under the *Victorian autism plan* and *Inclusive Victoria*
- the Autism Plan Advisory Group – an external reference group of organisations with a focus on autism, including autistic-led support and service organisations
- the Victorian Disability Advisory Council – the ministerial advisory body appointed to three-year terms as set out under the *Disability Act 2006*. There is shared membership between the Council and the Autism Plan Advisory Group.

We will make sure these three bodies work together to help us put the plan into action and evaluate its outcomes.

Reporting

The refreshed plan will use the same approach to reporting as *Inclusive Victoria*. This means we will:

- report progress against actions, including furthering systemic reforms
- report against outcomes.

We will provide a progress report at the end of 2024 for the three governance bodies and the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers.

A final report will be produced at end of term of the refreshed plan, in December 2025, due for release in early 2026.

