



Government of  
South Australia



# SA Autism Strategy

## 2024-2029

*Building knowledge,  
understanding and belonging*





## Acknowledgement of Country

### Kurna

Ngadlu tampinhi yalaka ngadlu Kurna yartangka inparrinhi. Ngadludlu tampinhi, parnaku tuwila yartangka.

Kurna Miyurna yaitya yarta-mathanya Wama Tarntanyaku, parnaku yailtya, parnaku tapa puru purruna. Kurna Miyurna ithu yailtya purruna, yarta kuma puru martinhi, puru warri-apinhi, puru tangka martulayinhi.

Kuma kumartarna Yaitya Miyurna ngadludlu tampinhi iyangka yalaka. Parnaku yarta kumartarna yarta Kanthi Partu-arra kuma Warrunangu.

### English

We, the Government of South Australia, acknowledge and respect Aboriginal people as the State's first people and recognise Aboriginal people as traditional owners and occupants of lands and waters in South Australia.

We acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural, and economic practices of Aboriginal people come from their traditional lands and waters, and that the cultural and heritage beliefs, languages, and laws are still of importance today.

# Contents

Our shared vision for South Australia .....	2
Why have a State Autism Strategy? .....	4
What has informed the Strategy? .....	6
Intersection with other initiatives .....	7
Facts at a glance .....	8
Why language is important .....	9
Understanding autism .....	10
Building knowledge .....	11
Common misconceptions .....	12
Focus Areas at a glance .....	13
<b>FOCUS AREA 1:</b> Pathways to diagnosis .....	16
<b>FOCUS AREA 2:</b> Positive educational experiences.....	18
<b>FOCUS AREA 3:</b> Thriving in the workplace .....	20
<b>FOCUS AREA 4:</b> Access to supports and services.....	22
<b>FOCUS AREA 5:</b> Participation in the community.....	24
<b>FOCUS AREA 6:</b> Access to health and mental health services .....	26
<b>FOCUS AREA 7:</b> Interactions with the justice system.....	28
Summary of commitments .....	30
Actions in Progress .....	32
How will we take action?.....	34
Responsibilities and governance .....	35
Acknowledgments .....	36
Glossary of terms .....	37

## Note:

We acknowledge the lands that we, the Government of South Australia, work on and respect the preference of the Aboriginal community to use 'Aboriginal peoples' in written and spoken language. For this reason, we assert a preference to use the term 'Aboriginal peoples' in communications when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We have included the voice of the South Australian Autistic and autism communities throughout this document. These quotes are presented **verbatim**, capturing the exact words of the original source.

# Our shared vision for South Australia

## The Autistic and autism communities have long been campaigning for change.

The Government of South Australia has not only listened to these calls but is acting to make South Australia a world leader in autism inclusion.

Together we have reached another significant milestone for South Australia as we implement the State's first Autism Strategy 2024-2029 (the Strategy) – a Strategy which supports a dedicated whole-of-government approach to create a fairer and more inclusive society.

South Australia has been dedicated to improving disability access and inclusion for some time and yet Autistic people and their families continue to face so many barriers in our community.

As a government, we have already begun to enact nation leading change and as a start, committed to:

- appointing the world's first Assistant Minister for Autism
- investing \$28.79 million over four years to fund access to an Autism Inclusion Teacher in every public primary school from the beginning of Term 1, 2023
- an increase to the number of preschool staff with qualifications and training in autism
- access to support services in children's centres
- investing \$50 million to fund 100 additional speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and counsellors in the public school system
- establishing and investing over \$4 million in the Office for Autism, led by an Autistic Director
- creating an Autism Inclusion Charter which is being rolled out across the government
- working with all South Australian universities that offer a teaching degree to update their courses to include more disability and inclusive studies
- creating and releasing 'Autism Works' - a campaign shining a light on autism-inclusion in the workplace.

Building upon this work, the launch of this Strategy is another major step forward as we continue to realise our goal of becoming a truly accessible and inclusive South Australia.

**Knowledge. Understanding. Belonging. These vital concepts are at the core of this Strategy.**

This Strategy is our commitment to addressing the specific barriers experienced by the Autistic and autism communities and will align closely to work underway across Australia, and within our own state context, with the development and implementation of our second State Disability Inclusion Plan (the State Plan).

Change starts with respectful curiosity and challenging out-dated perceptions. It is time we move beyond just talking about creating autism awareness. It is time we build knowledge and create lasting, and long overdue, cultural change across our community.

We thank South Australia's Autistic and autism communities for sharing your voices, your personal stories and your considered feedback to co-design the State's first Autism Strategy – a Strategy that will provide our state with a roadmap to help guide and continue our journey to making South Australia the autism inclusive state.



**Hon Peter Malinauskas MP**  
Premier for South Australia



**Hon Nat Cook MP**  
Minister for Human  
Services



**Hon Emily Bourke MLC**  
Assistant Minister  
for Autism

# Why have a State Autism Strategy?

The Autistic and autism communities have long advocated for improved community knowledge, understanding, support, and acceptance for Autistic people.

Since the *Disability Inclusion Act 2018* (SA) (the Act) came into operation on 1 July 2018, Government of South Australia agencies have made a coordinated and consistent effort to:

- improve access to mainstream supports and services
- consider the built environment and constraints to access for people with disability
- improve community attitudes and disability inclusion
- increase workforce participation of people with disability within the public sector
- improve educational outcomes and experiences for young people with disability
- consider pathways for people with disability from education to employment.

In response to the growing call for inclusion from the Autistic and autism communities, the Government of South Australia committed to the development and implementation of South Australia's first Autism Strategy (the Strategy) and Autism Inclusion Charter (the Charter).

**There must be no limit to the ambitions of South Australia's Autistic people; they have the same fundamental human rights and opportunities as everyone else in our society.**

Reports from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) show that autism remains the largest disability group in South Australia (on average 40%), followed by intellectual disability (on average 16%). South Australia also consistently sits above the national average for participants with autism as a primary diagnosis (on average 35%).<sup>1</sup>

1. National Disability Insurance Agency, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Quarterly reports 2022–2023.

There is a significant gap between the life outcomes experienced by Autistic people and the rest of the population. In addition, the gap between Autistic people and people with other disability(ies) continues to increase. With the rates of autism diagnosis increasing each year, the gap will only continue to grow unless meaningful change is created.

Data shows Autistic people do not enjoy the same levels of prosperity or outcomes in health, education, employment and community participation.

The Government of South Australia is committed to making autism inclusion a priority.

**Genuine autism inclusion is more than just a recognition that autism exists. We must challenge perceptions, build knowledge, improve service delivery and recognise the valuable contribution the Autistic and autism communities make to our society.**

This Strategy, led by the Department of Human Services, is the first of its kind to be delivered and implemented in South Australia. The Strategy sets out a 5 year roadmap for the Government of South Australia to help improve the lives of Autistic people of all ages and their families.

To achieve South Australia's goal in being a world leader in autism inclusion, the Government of South Australia must set firm targets and be responsive to the needs of our Autistic and autism communities. It is incumbent on those who can effect positive change to do so and support the broader community along this journey.



# What has informed the Strategy?

**Meaningful cultural change and greater inclusion of the Autistic and autism communities in South Australia can only come about by consulting, listening, and creating open dialogue.**

In one of the largest public consultations held in South Australia on disability-related matters, the Autistic and autism communities shared their experiences to support co-designing the Strategy, with over 1,200 submissions received throughout the consultation process.

During the 12 week consultation period, the Government of South Australia actively engaged with the State's diverse community of Autistic people, families, carers, guardians, service providers, the disability sector, peak bodies, the public sector, and the broader community.

Consultation participants could provide their feedback through a variety of ways, including:

- completing a public YourSAy survey
- participating in public forums
- posting or emailing a written, visual, video, or audio submission.

As echoed throughout the consultation process, feedback made it clear that Autistic voices must be central to the decision-making process on matters concerning them.

This is why the Government of South Australia will continue to **collaborate, consult and engage** with the Autistic and autism communities to ensure our commitments are responsive.

The State Autism Strategy Advisory Committee (the Committee) has played a central role in providing advice to government to support the development of the Strategy.

The Committee is made up of 13 members from the Autistic and autism communities with various backgrounds, experiences and insights. They have drawn on their lived experience, as well as the experiences of communities they are connected to, to raise issues of importance and create open dialogue on matters concerning the Autistic and autism communities in South Australia.

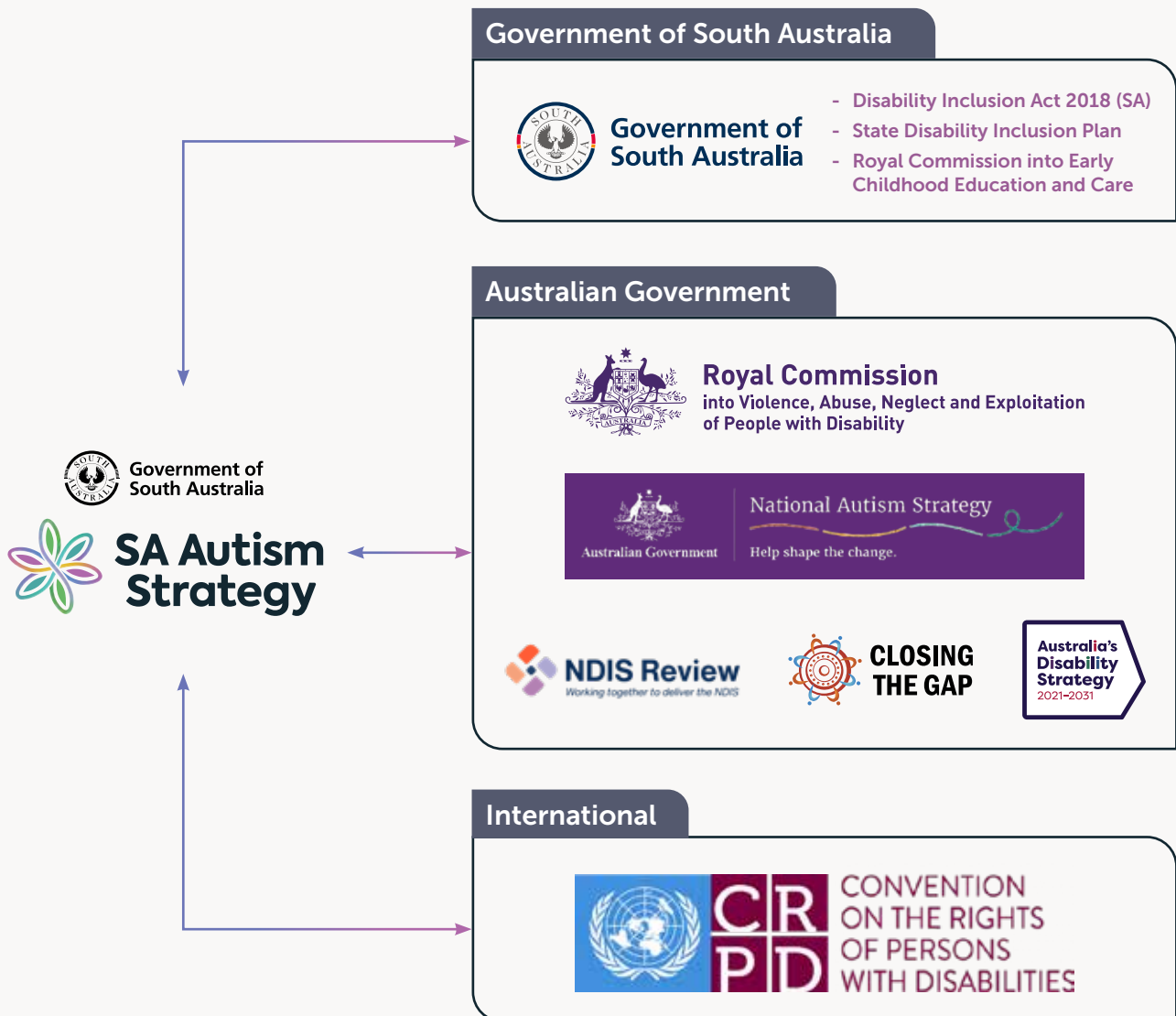




# Intersection with other initiatives

It is important to acknowledge the many inclusion-related initiatives already underway across various areas and levels of government, including local, State, National and International.

For meaningful change to occur, it is crucial the Strategy works alongside, and interacts effectively, with these existing and emerging initiatives, to reduce unnecessary duplication and ensure the needs of the diverse Autistic and autism communities are addressed.



## Facts at a glance

**One in four** Australians has an Autistic family member.<sup>2</sup>

Autism remains the **most common disability** for NDIS Participants nationally.<sup>3</sup>

**South Australia** continues to sit **above the national average** for NDIS participants with autism as their primary diagnosis.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, there was over **205,200 Autistic people in Australia**, a rise of 25.1% since 2015.<sup>5</sup>

The **current ratio of Autistic boys and men, to Autistic girls and women, is 3:1**. However, girls and women are more likely to be misdiagnosed, or diagnosed later in life.<sup>6</sup>

Autistic students are **four times more likely to be bullied** than other students.<sup>7</sup>

In Australia, the **unemployment rate for Autistic people is 34.1%**, three times the rate of people with disability, and almost eight times the rate of people without disability.<sup>8</sup>

**77.7% of Autistic young people (5 to 20 years)** attending school (or another institution) reported experiencing **difficulties that impacted on their education**.<sup>9</sup>

Between June 2022 and June 2023, the number of NDIS Participants with autism who identify as **First Nations people has increased from 11,538 to 14,173 (23%)**.<sup>10</sup>

Between June 2022 and June 2023, there was a **16% increase in the number of NDIS Participants with autism who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse**.<sup>11</sup>

2. AMAZE, Australia's Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism, 2018.

3. NDIS, Autism Summary Dashboard, 2023.

4. National Disability Insurance Agency, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Quarterly reports 2022–2023.

5. ABS, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2019.

6. Amaze, Talking About Autism: Guidelines for respectful and accurate reporting on autism and autistic people, 2019.

7. Amaze, Talking About Autism: Guidelines for respectful and accurate reporting on autism and autistic people, 2019.

8. ABS, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2019.

9. ABS, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2019.

10. NDIS, Autism Summary Dashboard, 2023.

11. NDIS, Autism Summary Dashboard, 2023.

# Why language is important

Every Autistic person is an individual with unique qualities, strengths, weaknesses, and support needs.

For the purposes of the Strategy, it is important to understand how best to refer to autism, and to those who have lived experience of autism.

During consultation, feedback showed we must move away from using the medical term “autism spectrum disorder” or terms such as “low functioning” or “high functioning.” Many shared how these terms do not recognise the nuance and variability of functioning for an Autistic person and are out of date with emerging research.

As new information and research becomes available, the community must respond accordingly.

We acknowledge that language is an important factor in identity. We recognise there are those who prefer person-first language (e.g., person with autism or person on the autism spectrum), people who prefer identity-first language (e.g., Autistic person) and people who use these terms interchangeably.

Feedback throughout the consultation process to develop the Strategy indicated that many Autistic people prefer identity-first language. Based on this feedback, we will continue to use identity-first language.

**The importance of using an individual’s preferred language and terminology and understanding the additional and sometimes overlapping challenges when working with them directly is crucial.**

## **Autistic community**

The community of Autistic people themselves. You must be Autistic to be a member of the Autistic community.

## **Autism community**

Includes people who are not Autistic themselves, but who provide support to an Autistic person (parent, carer, family-member, professional).

## **Autistic and autism communities**

Includes members of both the Autistic and autism communities, who share a common interest.

See [page 37](#) for a glossary of terms used throughout the Strategy.

# Understanding autism

Understanding and defining autism for the purposes of the Strategy has been a complex conversation but was fundamental in the consultation process to support improved community knowledge, understanding, appreciation and attitudes over time.

Many views were shared on how best to define autism, what should be included and which active definitions within the sector best reflect and recognise the diversity of Autistic experiences.

It is important to note that many people are still unable to articulate what a diagnosis of autism means, especially amongst people from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities who may have a vastly different understanding or concept of what it means to live with a disability and/or neurodivergence.

Cultural perceptions of disability and/or neurodivergence can influence understanding and attitudes. Culture, language, and other differences can also create additional barriers to obtaining supports and services.

For some Autistic people, their perceived differences are attributed to their culture, and not their autism (and vice-versa).

For the purpose of this Strategy, the following **definition** has been developed to provide a basis upon which knowledge, understanding and acceptance can grow.

**Autism is a neurological developmental difference that impacts the way an Autistic person sees, experiences, understands and responds to the world.**

**Every person's lived experience of autism is different.**

## Building knowledge

A member survey conducted by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network of Australia and New Zealand found 92% of Autistic people would find communicating about autism easier if there was broad community understanding and acceptance and increased community knowledge.

Understanding the needs of, and challenges faced by, Autistic people is critical to ensuring that all government departments adopt appropriate inclusive policies and practices. In addition, the community has a role to play in shifting the narrative on what it truly means to be Autistic. This includes disproving myths and misconceptions about autism.

Fundamental to delivering real inclusion for the Autistic and autism communities depends not only on transforming our services, but also a change in **culture, attitudes and behaviours** and improved **knowledge** across the public sector and the wider community.

**Building knowledge is a journey and change is a long-term process.**

**This Strategy accelerates progress already made and lays strong foundations for the change we seek.**



## Common misconceptions



Autistic people are geniuses and have special talents and abilities.

Autistic people display violent behaviours.

Only boys can be Autistic.

Autistic people don't speak.

Autistic people can't show emotion.



Autistic people have a variety of skills, just like non-Autistic people. Similarly, they may face challenges in certain areas that require support.

Statistics show that Autistic people are more likely to be victims of crime, than offenders themselves. However, a lack of knowledge of Autistic-qualities can escalate situations and this can be misinterpreted.

Girls and women are commonly misdiagnosed or diagnosed later in life, or indeed, never able to access diagnostic services. Autism may present differently in girls and women and therefore often goes unrecognised. Many Autistic girls and women are better at 'masking' or 'camouflaging' in order to fit in.

Every Autistic child and adult is different in the way they communicate, and some may require additional supports, such as Alternative Augmentative Communication (AAC) technologies.

Autistic people have a full range of feelings and emotions, just like non-Autistic people. How each person expresses emotions and the level of their ability to express emotions varies.

## Focus Areas at a glance

### An inclusive and knowledgeable South Australia where every Autistic person can thrive.

All people, including Autistic people, have the same fundamental rights – to enjoy their community and experience the highest levels of physical, emotional, and mental health.

It is not the responsibility of Autistic people to adapt to the world around them. Instead, the community requires greater understanding, and knowledge around autism, recognising it is a natural and ordinary part of human diversity.

Despite the many achievements to date in broad disability inclusion, we know there is more needed to truly realise our vision.

This Strategy is a positive step forward and provides the Government of South Australia with a roadmap that will complement existing efforts, while also seeking new and innovative opportunities for service, support and program/policy reform to improve outcomes for the South Australian Autistic and autism communities.

### The Strategy will be a 5 year plan, to support Autistic South Australians across all stages of life.

The emerging themes identified during the consultation process have set the basis upon which the Strategy's priority areas have been designed. We call these **Focus Areas**. Some Focus Areas will need to be prioritised as they require immediate action, whilst others will be undertaken in a staged effort and/or across the life of the Strategy as existing work continues, new initiatives emerge, and other reforms mature.



## Focus Areas at a glance - continued



### **FOCUS AREA 1: Pathways to diagnosis**

Improving the accessibility of diagnosis and awareness of diagnostic services for Autistic people. Actions within this Focus Area address key barriers in accessing a diagnostic assessment, including availability and affordability and the continued misconceptions of autism that increase the prevalence of misdiagnosis and under-diagnosis.



### **FOCUS AREA 2: Positive educational experiences**

Improving school community and staff understanding of autism and improving school environments and supports for Autistic children and students. This Focus Area addresses the lack of knowledge, understanding and awareness of autism in education and care settings and the need for improved neuro-diversity affirming strategies and transitional supports for Autistic children and students in preschool, primary, and secondary school environments.



### **FOCUS AREA 3: Thriving in the workplace**

Improving inclusivity of recruitment practices and creating a meaningful and inclusive workplace for Autistic people to thrive in. Actions within this Focus Area address the barriers experienced by Autistic people in the workplace, including the need for more inclusive recruitment processes and workplace supports, which enable Autistic people to enter and actively participate in the workforce.



### **FOCUS AREA 4: Access to supports and services**

Improving access to information on services and supports for Autistic people and their families. This Focus Area addresses the barriers faced by Autistic people and their families and carers in accessing appropriate and timely supports and services that meet their needs.



### **FOCUS AREA 5: Participation in the community**

Improving sensory consideration in the built environment and opportunities for Autistic people to participate in the world around them. Actions within this Focus Area address the inclusion and participation of Autistic people of all ages, by considering strategies to address sensory and accessibility challenges.





## **FOCUS AREA 6: Access to health and mental health services**

Improving the accessibility of health and mental health services for the Autistic and autism communities. This Focus Area addresses the barriers Autistic people and their families continue to face when accessing health and mental health services and supports.



## **FOCUS AREA 7: Interactions with the justice system**

Improving understanding of autism and enabling access to support services within the criminal justice system (both youth and adult systems). This Focus Area aims to improve the experiences of Autistic people who come into contact with the criminal justice system (including victims, suspects, defendants and offenders) and ensure they are able to access necessary supports and services.

**These Focus Areas underpin the wider process of building knowledge, understanding and acceptance, which is essential to realising our vision: An inclusive and knowledgeable South Australia where every Autistic person can thrive.**

## **AUTISM INCLUSION CHARTER**

In addition to the Strategy, the Autism Inclusion Charter has been launched by the Government of South Australia and is now being implemented across all government departments. The Charter, coordinated by the Office for Autism, demonstrates the ongoing commitment by government agencies to improve outcomes for Autistic people.

The Charter identifies four key principles for all agencies to commit to and supports the identified Focus Areas within the Strategy. Whilst the Strategy will drive long-term change, the Charter has been developed to complement and enhance activities, maximise opportunity for innovation and progress, and champion genuine engagement and inclusion.





## FOCUS AREA 1:

### Pathways to diagnosis

#### **We want to create a clear and equitable approach to diagnosis in South Australia.**

For many Autistic South Australians, receiving a diagnosis is an important step towards a fulfilling life. As with any neurological developmental difference or condition, early identification is an essential first step to accessing effective supports and to finding a sense of belonging and identity.

A growing number of children and young people are being diagnosed with autism.<sup>12</sup> For NDIS participants aged 18 or under, the most prevalent disability type is autism. Autism continues to be the largest primary disability category of all NDIS participants and the rates, specifically in South Australia, continue to sit above the national average.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulties experienced by Autistic people and their families in navigating the diagnostic process can be significant. The process can be long, confusing, and deficit-based and there is a lack of professionals who have adequate knowledge and understanding about autism and Autistic qualities.

Diagnosis can also be particularly important for adults who have not previously had their autism recognised. In addition, the significant levels of misdiagnosis or under-diagnosis of Autistic girls and women remain high. This is due, in part, to belief amongst some professionals only boys and men can be Autistic.

The continued misconceptions of autism can also increase the prevalence of misdiagnosis or under-diagnosis within Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, due to a lack of culturally appropriate diagnostic tools and general understanding.

For Autistic people to be afforded the supports and services they need, we must ensure the pathway to diagnosis (and beyond) is clear and equitable.

12. Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, South Australia, 2023, p 85.

13. National Disability Insurance Scheme, NDIS Quarterly report to disability ministers Q3 2022–23, p 17.





“Diagnosis is currently so inconsistent, so expensive and so confusing for parents and Autistic people looking to be diagnosed. It needs to be simplified, easier to access and more affordable.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » The barriers and challenges they face when attempting to obtain a diagnosis.
- » The significant cost and length of current waitlists lead to further delays in accessing services and supports.
- » The benefit that is provided by receiving a diagnosis in enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and identity.

## Our commitments:

-  Create clearer and more consistent pathways to diagnosis for Autistic people of all ages.
-  Improve the availability and access of diagnosis, especially in regional and/or remote areas.
-  Consider ways to reduce the occurrence of undiagnosed autism amongst girls and women and within the Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
-  Improve the post-diagnostic referral process and accessibility of accurate information and resources.



## FOCUS AREA 2:

### Positive educational experiences

**We want the South Australian public education system to champion Autistic children and students to thrive in the educational environment, to receive the right supports for them, and feel empowered to succeed.**

The Government of South Australia believes in the power of education as the greatest equaliser. Learning happens in many ways, not just in formal education and care environments. Autistic people must be supported in all learning settings, throughout their lives.

In a 2018 report, it was estimated more than 1 in 100 Australians are Autistic, making it likely there is an Autistic student in almost every classroom in Australia.<sup>14</sup>

For Autistic children and students to reach their full potential, better supports and services must be available – both for the student and for the educators.

Many Autistic children and students can find the school environment overwhelming, and they often feel misunderstood or judged by their peers because of their behaviours, which can impact their ability to engage and succeed in their educational studies.

Too often, Autistic children and students are seen as simply misbehaving or being disruptive in the classroom, due to the misunderstandings and/or limited knowledge and awareness of autism-specific qualities by educators. This is evidenced by the high rates associated with take-homes, suspensions, and exclusions of Autistic children and students.

When children and students are not afforded the appropriate supports and services, the result is missed opportunities to help them reach their full potential.

For Autistic children and students to be successful during their educational years, supports and strategies that guide them through the transition from day to day and from one year to the next must be prioritised. This also includes the transitions from and to the next stage of their educational milestones (care, preschool, primary, secondary and tertiary).

In addition, our educational environments should promote and support choice in their futures, whether they want to attend university, start a trade apprenticeship or enter the workforce. Where university is chosen, it is important that Autistic students receive guidance and support to improve their confidence in successfully transitioning from education to employment.

14. Amaze, Community Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism and Experiences of Autistic People and their Families, 2018.







“ The implementation of Autism Inclusion Teachers in primary schools is a step in the right direction, now there needs to be coordinated information for these teachers so they have accurate, up to date, useful information to share within their schools.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » Experiences of trauma associated with the school environment, which has led to some parents and carers moving their child to a home-school environment.
- » Ongoing discrimination and bullying, exclusion and stigma caused by a general lack of understanding.
- » The need for flexibility in learning environments, individualised and neuro-diversity affirming supports.
- » Opportunities to develop lifelong skills to self-regulate their sensory needs are necessary in educational environments.

## Our commitments:

-  Improve environments to support the inclusion of Autistic children and young people in our preschools, primary and secondary school settings.
-  Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism amongst our educators, support staff and those connected to our education and care settings.
-  Identify ways to improve transition pathways between educational settings and beyond school.
-  Implement neuro-diversity affirming supports and strategies, tailored to the individual, to ensure Autistic children and students receive the right supports for them.



## FOCUS AREA 3:

### Thriving in the workplace

**We want a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming South Australian workforce where the strengths and skills of Autistic people flourish.**

Employment and financial security play a significant role in improving outcomes for Autistic people.

Participating in the workforce is important for social inclusion, financial stability, economic independence and autonomy. Employment also contributes to improved mental and physical health and wellbeing, and increased opportunities for meaningful engagement in society.

Despite the varied and diverse skillset of Autistic people, which could prove invaluable to employers, data shows the unemployment rate for Autistic people is still more than three times the rate for people with other disabilities and almost eight times the rate of people without disability.

In a 2023 study, it was found that despite many Autistic people reporting a desire to work, compounding issues relating to the elevated risk of experiencing mental and physical health issues, along with fatigue and burnout, substantially impacted their ability to obtain and sustain meaningful employment.

As a result, Autistic adults continue to face challenges in experiencing good financial wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

Data also shows that 20% of Autistic Australians have reported that they have lost their job due to their autism and more than half of all unemployed Autistic people who had previously held a paid job have been out of employment for three or more years.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, carers of Autistic people may also find it difficult to maintain meaningful employment when also caring for their loved ones.

Greater inclusion and acceptance in the workplace must start before the recruitment process commences. Barriers associated with recruitment processes, along with inaccessibility and the unwillingness of employers to adapt their recruitment processes and workplace practices are often a result of stigma, discrimination, and a lack of general understanding of autism.

Better preparing children and young people for employment can have long-term benefits for their employment prospects and careers. Therefore, the transition from education to employment must also be considered to ensure Autistic people can experience greater choice and control over their lives.

15. Pellicano, E., Hall, G., & Ying Cai, R. (2023). Autistic adults' experiences of financial wellbeing: Part II. Autism.

16. Amaze, Community Attitudes & Behaviours towards Autism and Experiences of Autistic People and their Families, 2018.



“ Encouraging employers to be flexible in their working conditions would be a great step toward being more inclusive to Autistic people.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » The difficulties they experienced with gaining and retaining meaningful employment.
- » The impact of masking and the resulting fatigue that impacted on their work and wellbeing.
- » The lack of understanding and awareness by employers results in Autistic people choosing not to disclose their autism.
- » Inadequate workplace adjustments to ensure success in their roles.

## Our commitments:



Improve knowledge, understanding and awareness of autism across the workforce.



Create an accessible, inclusive and welcoming public sector where Autistic people can thrive.



Increase opportunities for Autistic people to gain meaningful and lasting employment.



Consider alternative employment initiatives when transitioning from education to employment.



## FOCUS AREA 4:

### Access to supports and services

**We want a clearer, more consistent and accessible service system where Autistic people and their families/carers can access the support they need, when they need it.**

Navigating mainstream government services can be challenging, especially for the Autistic and autism communities. Too often, Autistic people and their families/carers are not able to access the services and supports they need and are often left to navigate the system with little assistance.

Information about autism is often difficult to find and to understand, with information available often varied and contradictory. This lack of access to clear information can also make it challenging for individuals to recognise Autistic qualities in themselves or others. For someone newly diagnosed, essential information on their diagnosis, ways to engage with supports and services and other useful information must be available as early as possible, in a range of accessible formats.

The support provided by parents and carers of Autistic people must also be considered, with many reporting the significant pressure they feel assuming the role of advocate and the fears they have for when they are no longer

physically or mentally able to care for their loved ones with high support needs. The impact this has on their own health and mental health, working lives and careers, and the long-term financial implications, can be overwhelming.

Access to services and supports is also often reliant on diagnostic confirmation of autism, however access to some services, including through the Department for Education, are not strictly dependent on having a diagnosis. Barriers in accessing diagnostic assessments can often result in additional delays in accessing relevant and necessary services.

A lack of knowledge and understanding within the public sector providing these supports and services creates additional unnecessary barriers to post-diagnostic supports and highlights the ongoing need for education, training, and autism-specific knowledge.

Services must also consider Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and complex communication needs, as well as the experiences of non-speaking Autistic people. To ensure services are accessible for people with these complex communication needs, alternative communication modes must be factored into the supports provided.









“ As a recently diagnosed person, I have been very overwhelmed, affecting my personal and professional life because I can’t even find information to help my own understanding and support options to inform others.”

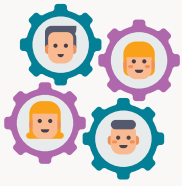
- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » The challenges with navigating services and understanding the complex environments both pre and post diagnosis.
- » Difficulties faced with accessing relevant information, lack of communication options and lack of understanding and knowledge within the service system.
- » Concerns of parents and carers for the future of their Autistic children.

## Our commitments:

-  Develop a centralised state information system to support access and navigation of available supports and services.
-  Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism amongst professional staff.
-  Work with organisations to ensure evidence and research on autism can be effectively and efficiently translated into practice.
-  Ensure neuro-diversity affirming and culturally appropriate services and supports are available.



## FOCUS AREA 5:

### Participation in the community

**We want a truly inclusive South Australia where Autistic people can meaningfully participate, without restriction, in the community.**

Although general community awareness of autism is very high, community understanding, and attitudes can be significant barriers to Autistic people's inclusion in social and economic life.

The broader community must be challenged in their understanding of autism – how it is a natural and ordinary part of human diversity, and how Autistic people can (and do) live full lives with interests, desires and dreams just like any other person. This also includes a recognition of the diverse communication styles of Autistic people and to building community knowledge and understanding of Autistic qualities.

Understanding the needs of, and challenges faced by, Autistic people is critical to ensuring appropriate inclusive policies and practices that support an autism-inclusive society. This includes Autistic LGBTIQ+ people and Autistic Aboriginal people who often experience significant overlapping disadvantage and discrimination.

In addition, the opportunity for Autistic people to independently interact with the built environment relies on greater community understanding and awareness about autism, and the negative effect

overwhelming environments can have on Autistic experiences.

The implementation of sensory rooms and quiet spaces, for both young Autistic people and Autistic adults, can go far to reducing sensory overload, de-escalate and regulate sensory input and support greater accessibility.

Research has emphasised how the altered perception of sensory stimuli and processing of information coming from the environment can be a significant issue experienced by Autistic people. This includes adverse responses to specific sounds or textures, temperatures, smells or lighting, and distress at changes to routine, locations, travel and interior design of the built environment.

Meaningful community, leisure and recreational participation can also have significant benefits to the physical and mental health of Autistic people of all ages. This is especially important to ensure reduced social and physical isolation and to foster a greater sense of belonging and self-worth.

The Autistic and autism communities must have greater choice and control in our community. This includes a stronger understanding of what a 'safe space' or 'safe environment' means and how our built and open environments and the public transport system can either support or inhibit Autistic people from actively participating in our community.



“ We want to be part of the community. We want to be allowed to go to any cinema sessions, any restaurants, not need our own dinners or nights or sessions. That’s not inclusive, full acceptance is freedom.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » The importance of recognising the diversity of Autistic experiences, including strengths and support needs.
- » Supports and services that promote participation are critical to ensuring Autistic people can live their lives to the fullest.
- » The need for sensory-friendly spaces and quiet spaces, as well as the overall accessibility of community venues.

## Our commitments:



Consider how the built environment may impact Autistic people and identify opportunities for improvement across current and future infrastructure projects.



Identify ways to improve accessible transport options and the accessibility of public spaces and venues, including signage and wayfinding tools.



Partner with organisations, sporting clubs, local councils and community services to support inclusive initiatives for Autistic people of all ages.



## FOCUS AREA 6:

### Access to health and mental health services

**We want to address the barriers Autistic people and their families continue to face in accessing health and mental health services.**

Data continues to show Autistic people experience barriers to accessing adequate health and mental health care, despite Autistic people having an increased rate of co-occurring health and mental health conditions and diagnoses.

The healthcare and mental health needs of Autistic people can often be complex and require a range of integrated services, including health promotion, care and rehabilitation.

Many Autistic people have also experienced issues with their health symptoms being misattributed to their autism due to this limited understanding by staff. Difficulties in finding appropriate medical support that understands autism can often lead to misdiagnosis, delays in treatment or referrals, or emergency mental health interventions.

The experience of attending a hospital emergency department, and the interaction with hospital staff can often exacerbate an already sensitive and highly emotional situation.

In addition, the challenges associated with booking healthcare appointments and the inflexible ways to manage

their appointments, including the copious amount of paperwork, limited communication options and overwhelming environments, can create further barriers for Autistic people in accessing the support they need.

The lack of knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of autism among first responders (ambulance staff and police) can also result in a misinterpretation of the communication styles and diversity of Autistic qualities.

Social exclusion can be attributed to poor mental, emotional and physical health outcomes for Autistic people. It can often restrict Autistic individuals' opportunities and access to programs, support and spaces that may significantly improve their overall health and wellbeing. These challenges are often greatly increased in regional and remote communities.

Access to appropriate health and mental health services is crucial to ensure Autistic people of all ages can receive the right support for them. This includes the provision of both child-friendly and adult-friendly supports.

Without increased understanding and knowledge about autism amongst professionals in the health and mental health fields, the poor wellbeing of Autistic people will continue to be overrepresented in health statistics.






**“** GPs are often the first port of call so I would really welcome measures to improve their knowledge and acceptance of autism.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » Additional training for health services staff is needed, including Autistic communication and behaviour, sensory needs, and experiences of trauma.
- » Greater awareness of the frequent occurrence of co-existing medical conditions for Autistic people.
- » The need for greater flexibility in booking and attending appointments and a reduction in the copious amounts of paperwork, which can be overwhelming.
- » First responders and emergency services must increase their understanding of Autistic-qualities to avoid misinterpretation of communication styles.

## Our commitments:

-  Improve the knowledge, understanding and acceptance of autism amongst health practitioners, medical staff and first responders.
-  Improve the experiences of Autistic people of all ages navigating and engaging in health and mental health services.
-  Improve the accessibility of health and mental health services, especially in regional and remote communities.



## FOCUS AREA 7:

# Interactions with the justice system

**We want to improve the experiences of Autistic people coming into contact with the criminal and youth justice systems.**

Evidence indicates that Autistic people continue to be over-represented in the criminal and youth justice systems, as victims, witnesses, suspects or defendants, in addition to offenders in custodial or community settings. Although Autistic people are more likely to be victims of crime than offenders, any interaction with the justice system should be equitable.

Engaging with the justice system, which includes SA Police, the courts system and correctional services (e.g. prisons, community corrections and the Parole Board) can be complex and confusing. This is especially the case for Autistic people.

To ensure Autistic people have the right supports around them, a clearer understanding of why Autistic people are coming into contact with the criminal and youth justice system is required. This includes consideration of how certain Autistic qualities, such as communication style, can be misinterpreted by criminal and youth justice system staff.

Autistic qualities, such as avoidance of eye contact, lack of affect in verbal communication and not recognising subtleties of figurative language, can potentially be perceived as being non-compliant and aggressive and result in unfavourable interpretation by justice staff.

All aspects of our criminal and youth justice system must provide equal access to care and support for Autistic people, when needed. For example, when accessing the courts system (including as a witness), reasonable adjustments and supports are crucial to ensure Autistic people can engage fairly with the process and have confidence they can do so safely.

This can include providing supports that seek to reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation and communication, and comfort in new spaces and situations.

Autistic people in custodial settings have a right to receive diagnostic assessments during their custodial sentences. However, more must be done to divert Autistic people from the criminal and youth justice systems, and this includes building the capacity of police and correctional officers to better understand autism.

“ Fundamental human rights and opportunities also extend to those within the criminal justice system.”

- Consultation participant

## The Autistic and autism communities highlighted:

- » Further autism-specific training of those working in the criminal justice system to address the misconceptions and misunderstandings of Autistic-qualities.
- » The importance of written information at police stations and courts to ensure Autistic people can understand the process.
- » Overrepresentation of undiagnosed Autistic people in criminal justice detention settings.

## Our commitments:



Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism across the criminal and youth justice systems.



Ensure services and supports provided in community and custodial justice settings are responsive to the needs of Autistic people.



Create autism-inclusive environments within criminal justice settings.

# Summary of commitments



## Pathways to diagnosis

- Create clearer and more consistent pathways to diagnosis for Autistic people of all ages.
- Improve the availability and access of diagnosis, especially in regional and/or remote areas.
- Consider ways to reduce the occurrence of undiagnosed autism amongst girls and women and within the Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- Improve the post-diagnostic referral process and accessibility of accurate information and resources.



## Thriving in the workplace

- Improve knowledge, understanding and awareness of autism across the workforce.
- Create an accessible, inclusive and welcoming public sector where Autistic people can thrive.
- Increase opportunities for Autistic people to gain meaningful and lasting employment.
- Consider alternative employment initiatives for transition from education to employment.



## Positive educational experiences

- Improve environments to support the inclusion of Autistic children and young people in our preschools, and primary and secondary school settings.
- Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism amongst our educators, support staff and those connected to our education and care settings.
- Identify ways to improve transition pathways between educational settings and beyond school.
- Implement neuro-diversity affirming supports and strategies, tailored to the individual, to ensure Autistic children and students receive the right supports for them.



## Access to supports and services

- Develop a centralised state information system to support access and navigation of available supports and services.
- Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism amongst professional staff.
- Work with organisations to ensure evidence and research on autism can be effectively and efficiently translated into practice.
- Ensure neuro-diversity affirming and culturally appropriate services and supports are available.





## Participation in the community

- Consider how the built environment may impact Autistic people and identify opportunities for improvement across current and future infrastructure projects.
- Identify ways to improve accessible transport options and the accessibility of public spaces and venues, including signage and wayfinding tools.
- Partner with organisations, sporting clubs, local councils and community services to support inclusive initiatives for Autistic people of all ages.



## Interactions with the justice system

- Improve the knowledge and understanding of autism across the criminal and youth justice systems.
- Ensure services and supports provided in community and custodial justice settings are responsive to the needs of Autistic people.
- Create autism-inclusive environments within criminal justice settings.



## Access to health and mental health services

- Improve the knowledge, understanding and acceptance of autism amongst health practitioners, medical staff and first responders.
- Improve the experiences of Autistic people of all ages navigating and engaging in health and mental health services.
- Improve the accessibility of health and mental health services, especially in regional and remote communities.

## Actions in progress

### FOCUS AREA 1:

#### Pathways to diagnosis

##### Breaking down barriers to accessing an autism diagnosis

Throughout 2024, two Autism Assessment and Diagnostic Services have commenced operation to improve access to an autism diagnosis for those most vulnerable. These services will:

- provide autism assessments with no out of pocket expenses to vulnerable clients of the Department of Human Services
- prioritise students in northern Adelaide most at risk of being disengaged from education, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those currently awaiting an autism assessment through the public system.

These services have been made available by the Department of Human Services, the Department for Education and the Office for Autism.

### FOCUS AREA 2:

#### Positive educational experiences

##### Building knowledge within our educational settings

From Term 1 2023, all government primary schools are receiving an allocation for an Autism Inclusion Teacher to support Autistic children and young people to have the best start to their schooling.

In addition, the Government of South Australia, in collaboration with the University of Adelaide, University of South Australia, Flinders University and Tabor College is boosting disability and inclusion studies in South Australian teaching degrees from Semester 1, 2024 and will also see preservice teachers undertake practical autism training developed by Positive Partnerships.

## FOCUS AREA 4:

### Access to supports and services

#### Achieving positive change for Autistic South Australians

In a nation-first, the Office for Autism, led by an Autistic Director, has been established to:

- collaborate with government agencies to support the implementation of the Autism Inclusion Charter
- partner with the private sector and the broader community to improve employment, wellbeing and community connection
- provide a centralised hub of information through a dedicated website ([officeforautism.sa.gov.au/get-involved](https://officeforautism.sa.gov.au/get-involved))
- promote 'Autism Works' public awareness campaign ([officeforautism.sa.gov.au/autism-works](https://officeforautism.sa.gov.au/autism-works))
- address barriers to assessment and diagnostic services in South Australia.

## FOCUS AREA 5:

### Participation in the community

#### Autism inclusion in our major events

The 2023 VAILO Adelaide 500 was the most inclusive Supercars race in the state's history with the introduction of a dedicated sensory space and shining a light on the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower initiative. The event featured a dedicated Hidden Disabilities Sunflower entrance and exit located at Gate 9, and a sensory space featuring the MFS Sunflower Fire Truck on display.



## How will we take action?

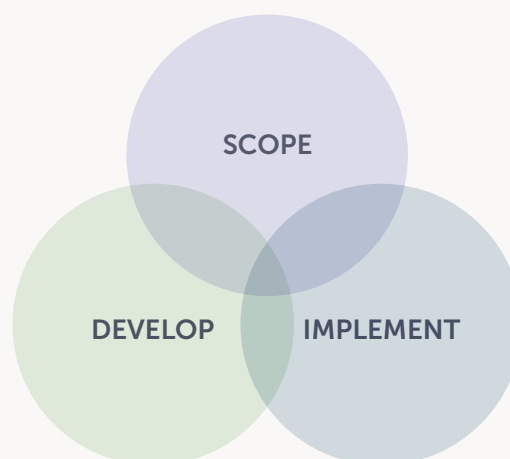
The Government of South Australia commits to addressing each of the identified Focus Areas across the life of the Strategy. Actions to address each of these Focus Areas will be identified across three reporting domains:

**Scope > Develop > Implement.**

An action plan for each Focus Area will be developed in ongoing consultation with the Autistic and autism communities to drive initiatives that support our commitments. These action plans will be **living documents** that can respond, as required, to the shifting priorities of the Autistic and autism communities and be responsive to other State and National reform work underway, including the new National Autism Strategy.

Whilst there will be 'lead' agencies responsible for each initiative, achieving these initiatives must involve everyone. All government departments will work towards improving outcomes for the Autistic and autism communities.

The Government of South Australia reaffirms its commitment to ongoing collaboration, consultation and engagement with the Autistic and autism communities for both the Strategy itself and the supporting action plans.



**SCOPE:** The responsible agency(ies) will scope opportunities to develop new initiatives that can respond to the identified commitment and Focus Area where there is no existing initiative or gaps in existing initiatives.

**DEVELOP:** Once identified, they will develop strategies, policies and/or undertake relevant reform work to commence new initiatives that respond to the identified commitment and Focus Area.

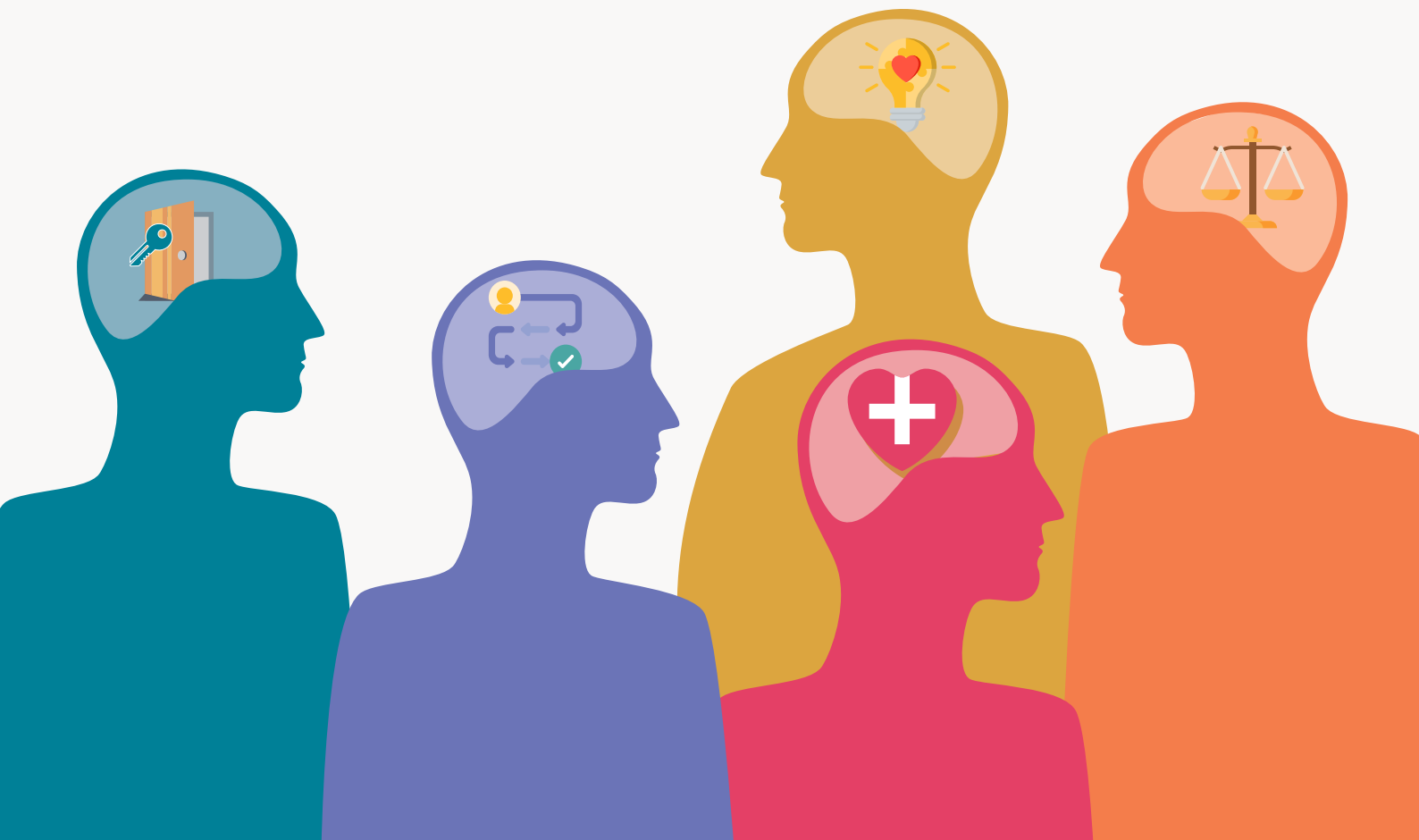
**IMPLEMENT:** Once developed, they will drive implementation across relevant sectors for the new (or improved) initiatives that respond to the identified commitment and Focus Area.

## Responsibilities and governance

The Department of Human Services (DHS) will lead the implementation of the Strategy, in partnership with relevant Government of South Australia agencies who will be responsible for delivering actions under the Strategy. DHS will ensure alignment with the activities of the State Disability Inclusion Plan and State authority Disability Access and Inclusion Plans (DAIPs) to support a holistic response to access and inclusion in the state.

Measuring the effectiveness of the Strategy also requires a coordinated whole-of-government effort. Lead agencies will be identified to drive the implementation of agreed initiatives through the Strategy's action plans. Lead agencies will report on their progress through their individual DAIPs.

An annual report, prepared by DHS, will be published to provide an update on progress against the Strategy's Commitments.



# Acknowledgments

**This Strategy has been endorsed by the State Autism Strategy Advisory Committee.**

This Strategy has been developed in consultation and collaboration with the South Australian Autistic and autism communities.

In developing our commitments, we have listened to the voices of the Autistic and autism communities. With over 1,200 responses submitted to the Government of South Australia during the consultation process, this Strategy reflects the calls made by them to take action.

In particular, we acknowledge the input and broad expertise of the Department of Human Services, the State Autism Strategy Advisory Committee, the Office for Autism, other government departments and our non-government organisation partners.

Most of all, we acknowledge and thank the Autistic and autism communities in South Australia for their valuable contribution.

“ We, the State Autism Strategy Advisory Committee, have been committed to highlighting the diverse experiences of South Australia’s Autistic and autism communities throughout the co-design process of the State Autism Strategy 2024-2029 and amplifying the voices of lived experience.

We are proud and honoured to represent our community and help shape the future for Autistic people in South Australia. It has been a pleasure for us to be on this Committee, learning new things and collaboratively working with the Government of South Australia.

We aspire for a South Australia that is inclusive of the Autistic and autism communities in all areas of life. Now is the time for action.

Although there is more work to be done, the Strategy is a strong step forward in our journey of building trust and connection between the Autistic and autism communities and the government. This partnership has and will continue to create meaningful change for South Australia.

# Glossary of terms

## Words are powerful.

In order to avoid ambiguity and confusion and to aid consistency in language, the following glossary of key words, terms and phrases has been developed to ensure the words we use are used correctly.

### **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**

Ways to communicate other than speech. These might be body movements or gestures, sign language, technology (computers or tablets) or communication books and/or printed materials.

### **Autistic qualities**

Personality and behavioural qualities that are commonly viewed as aspects of the diagnostic criteria for autism as per the diagnostic manuals.

### **Co-occurring conditions**

Co-occurring conditions are when someone has one or more disabilities at the same time. For example, Autistic people may also have a mental health condition and/or an intellectual disability that requires additional support.

### **Culturally appropriate**

Culturally appropriate means being respectful of everyone's backgrounds, beliefs, values, customs, knowledge, lifestyle and social behaviours and to developing supports and services that understand, are respectful of and are tailored to all cultures.

### **Deficit-based**

Deficit-based approaches focus on perceived weaknesses of individuals or groups and a view that those individuals or groups are a 'problem.' This is in contrast to 'strengths-based', which focuses on abilities, knowledge and capacity.

### **Diversity**

Any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another. It empowers people by respecting and appreciating what makes them different.

### **Figurative language**

Language that uses words or phrases in ways that deviate from their literal interpretation, with the assumption that this achieves a more complex or powerful effect. Figurative language can be difficult for a range of people to understand as it is culturally specific.

### **Inclusion**

The intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that all people can fully participate in all aspects of life.

## Glossary of terms - continued

### Intersectionality

How different aspects of a person's identity, such as their gender, race, class, sexuality, disability etc., can interact to create experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. Intersectionality helps us to understand how these experiences can overlap and intersect, and how they can be challenged and addressed.

### Lived experience

The personal knowledge that a person gains from direct, first-hand involvement with autism.

### Masking

Masking, camouflaging, or compensating is when someone suppresses or hides their natural Autistic responses or qualities in order to be accepted or fit in.

### Neuro-affirming

A strengths and rights-based approach to supporting individual developmental differences. Neuro-affirming supports respond to a natural variation in human neurology rather than any perception of a deficit that needs to be fixed.

### Neurodivergence / Neurodivergent

A non-medical term describing various neurological variations from the dominant societal norm and people with these variations in their neurological development. Neurodivergent, in contrast to 'neuro-typical', is used to describe people who may have one or more ways in which their brain functions differently to the "typical" way. Some Autistic people also refer to themselves as neurodivergent.

### Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the idea all human brains are different and function uniquely. The idea that there is no single right way of thinking, learning, or behaving, rather there is a range of naturally different ways of thinking, learning or behaving.

### Neuro-diversity affirming

Similar to 'neuro-affirming', neuro-diversity affirming refers to supports, policies and interaction that aim to facilitate the inclusion of and development of neurodivergent individuals in ways that enable authentic ways of thinking, learning and behaving.



## **Neuro-typical**

In contrast to 'neurodivergent', neuro-typical is a way to describe individuals with "typical" neurological development. A neurotypical person is someone who may think, perceive, and behave in ways that are considered to be "typical" by the community.

## **Sensory**

The senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight, as well as balance, sense of body in space and internal body awareness. In the context of autism, it can refer to the way an Autistic person processes information from their senses differently – some may have a range of sensory sensitivities, while others may seek out sensory experiences.

## **Strengths-based**

The opposite of 'deficit-based'. Strengths-based approaches focus on the abilities, knowledge and capacities of an individual or group and works to make them even better, rather than just trying to fix what is lacking.

## **Universal design**

The design of buildings, products, services and/or environments to make them accessible and inclusive for people, regardless of age, disability and/or neurodivergence or other factors. It is a design process that addresses common barriers to participation.



Government  
of South Australia



**SA Autism  
Strategy**  
2024-2029