

This submission provides Life Without Barriers' response to the Australian Government's 'What we have heard: moving towards development of a National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper' (National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper), and to the National Autism Strategy (the Strategy).

The issues raised in the National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper reflect what Life without Barriers has heard from the people we support and from our employees, and we commend the Australian Government's commitment to prioritise the National Autism Strategy. Life Without Barriers is broadly supportive of the areas for action raised in the National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper and have highlighted some further areas of action as individual responses to questions below.

Please note that this response uses identity first language, as Autistic staff on Life Without Barriers' Disability Ability Wellness Network (DAWN) committee have advised identity first language is their preference.

Overarching key discussion questions

1. What does a National Autism Strategy need to achieve?

Many Autistic people may never have the supports they need due to their geographical location or their socioeconomic situation preventing them accessing a diagnosis or services. Life Without Barriers anticipates the Strategy will create a more equitable system for diagnosis and support of Autistic people.

2. How do you think the Strategy can support the rights, autonomy, and diversity of the Autistic community?

Life Without Barriers is committed to co-design and co-production. We strongly support the Strategy being created and implemented with Autistic people through a co-design process to ensure they are central to the design and implementation of the Strategy and are empowered to directly influence a strategy that will impact their rights, autonomy and diversity.

3. What needs to improve so Autistic people are better supported across their whole life?

Inequitable access to diagnosis, supports, or services limits an Autistic person's ability to be supported across their lifetime. It is imperative the Strategy provide approaches for improvement in equitable access to support across an Autistic person's whole life regardless of socioeconomic status, diagnosis, or the ability to qualify for NDIS supports.

5. What might help to improve people's understanding of Autism?

The Strategy should embed Autistic people's stories and experiences in the wider discourse around Autism in Australia. We suggest that:

- Increased visibility of Autistic people in the wider community, especially in areas of public discourse would allow Autistic people to be part of the narrative around the Autistic community's interests, and increased knowledge and learning of the wider community.
- Support of Autistic creatives in telling their stories through a variety of artistic media to ensure that Autistic centred dialogue becomes part of the national and cultural discourse.

6. Are there any areas missing from this discussion paper that should be a priority in the Strategy?

- The Strategy must express the understanding that an Autism diagnosis is not always a binary male/female neurotype due to the higher prevalence of Autistic people identifying as transgender, non-binary, or other identities different from those assigned at birth.
- The Strategy must also recognise the interconnectedness between social inclusion, economic inclusion, diagnosis, service provision, and supports, and how lack of access and inclusion in any one of these areas severely limits an Autistic individual's access and involvement in the others.

Discussion Questions – Social Inclusion

1. Are there any other issues experienced by Autistic people and their families and carers that prevent their inclusion in the community?

Some areas which create barriers to social inclusion are:

- Life Without Barriers agrees with the view in the National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper that there is a lack of understanding and acceptance in schools; training; work; family; health and community services; public events; and sport and recreation. However, overall, this lack of understanding would also apply to publicly accessible services and departments, and publicly funded organisations.
- Social supports are often dependent on an Autism diagnosis, so for individuals where there are socioeconomic or geographic barriers to diagnosis these supports are often unavailable.
- The prohibitive costs of obtaining a license or maintaining a vehicle for someone on a lower income impacts the Autistic community due to lower employment participation of Autistic people.
- The homeless rate and rates of housing insecurity are higher for Autistic people than the general population.
- Social exclusion can often create economic exclusion or the reverse, which can become a cyclical issue for many Autistic people.
- Further to issues in the Discussion Paper around misinterpretation of Autistic characteristics in detention settings raised, there is a higher representation of Autistic people in the criminal justice system overall.

2. How do you think we can better support the social inclusion of Autistic people?

The Strategy should facilitate policy and initiatives which greatly increase opportunities for Autistic people to experience ongoing equitable access to social and community environments and experiences, such as:

- Guidelines for noise and lighting in retail settings such as supermarkets and shopping centres which support Autistic individuals, but also other individuals who find less sensory stimulating spaces more accessible.
- Increased access to affordable housing for Autistic people, with publicly funded housing options made available specifically for them.
- Fee free or reduced rate driver education programs for Autistic people in recognition of the need for freedom of movement to assist in social inclusion.

3. How do you think we can improve community attitudes towards Autistic people?

Life Without Barriers recognises the narrative and discourse around disabilities is shifting towards the lived experience of those with a disability, but we also recognise this does not necessarily include all Autistic People. Some ways we could see improvement in community attitudes towards Autistic people are by:

- Openly Autistic representation in leadership, government, media and various other publicly visible roles.
- Funding and support for Autistic creatives to tell their stories through a variety of artistic media.

4. How would you describe better social inclusion for Autistic people?

Life Without Barriers recognises that better social inclusion for Autistic people would mean equitable opportunities to participate in and access the wider community, with accessibility for Autistic people being a default situation. We also strongly suggest that Autistic people should be involved in the co-design of that which affects them directly, including:

- Autistic people to be involved in all levels of design and implementation of aspects that impact their supports, services, including but not limited to the National Autism Strategy and all policy and initiatives which flow from it.
- Positive changes in social and community policy and standards through all levels of government to be driven by government and Autistic people in partnership, ensuring increased access to social participation by Autistic people.
- Community recognition of the broad representation of Autistic people as complex individuals where there is not a one size fits all answer for Autism support.
- Increased recognition of the intersectionality of transgender, gender fluid and other LGBTQI+ identities in the Autistic community as a higher representation than in the general population, and for this recognition to become part of the wider discourse around the Autism community.

Discussion Questions – Economic Inclusion

1. Are there any other issues experienced by Autistic people that affect their economic inclusion?

Life Without Barriers agrees that lower education outcomes for Autistic people result in limited employment opportunities and lowered financial security, which subsequently leads to poorer health outcomes, housing insecurity, all of which directly impacts an Autistic person's access to social and economic participation. We also understand that barriers in any one of these areas can impact on the economic inclusion of an Autistic person.

2. How do you think we can better support the economic inclusion of Autistic people?

For true economic inclusion to occur for Autistic people, there must be a shift towards spaces and services that are always set up as accessible for Autistic people (and people with disabilities in general) rather than an ad-hoc basis. We propose that the Strategy should ensure all factors of economic inclusion are tackled and that none are left unconsidered to enable Autistic people the best opportunity to overcome barriers which are commonplace for the Autistic community.

3. How do you think we can better support Autistic people in education, employment and the workforce?

- Support and services for better education outcomes for Autistic people should be extended from school age students to the entire lifetime of an Autistic person.
- Improved funding for education and employment programs aimed at increasing the educational outcomes for Autistic people through all levels of education.
- Initiatives and incentives for employers to recruit and retain Autistic people to open employment vacancies and not necessarily “Autism specific” roles, in recognition that many Autistic people are willing and able to apply for and be successful in the same roles as the general population.
- National guidelines for Autism centred recruitment practices and processes which would ensure potential Autistic employees can apply to any role with equality.
- Targeted training for educators, recruitment staff, and people and culture professionals in effectively employing, recruiting, training, and retaining Autistic people.
- The development of resources and tools for employers to assist those in the workplace to understand Autism broadly. These should include suggested reasonable adjustments in the physical environment and for interpersonal interactions.

4. How would you describe better economic inclusion for autistic people?

Life Without Barriers strongly supports strategies allowing Autistic people to experience improvement towards the descriptions of inclusion outlined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We also understand that these improvements will require changes to the standard practices in workplaces and educational institutions throughout the country in a shift towards embedded disability inclusivity. We recognise that these improvements are imperative towards building economic inclusivity for Autistic people.

Discussion Questions – Diagnosis, Services and Supports

1. Are there other issues about diagnosis, services and supports experienced by Autistic people that you would like to add?

Life Without Barriers is hopeful that the Strategy will comprehensively overhaul the diagnostic process for Autistic people in Australia. We recognise that an Autism diagnosis in Australia is financially unachievable for many Autistic people and understand that Autistic traits may not be understood or recognised by many health professionals, leaving Autistic people without an Autism diagnosis, or in some instances, with a diagnosis other than Autism.

2. How could we improve access to diagnosis, services and supports for Autistic people?

- Targeted Autism training should be implemented for improved recognition of the Autistic neurotype by professionals and frontline staff within public systems and publicly funded organisations.
- Increased access to Autism centred diagnostic and support services within public systems to limit the need for financial means to be a contributing factor to a person's ability to access an Autism diagnosis.
- Advocacy services to provide free or low-cost support to clients through an Autism diagnosis and subsequent access to support.

4. How can we better make sure that diagnosis, services and supports for Autistic people are strengths-based, culturally responsive and trauma-informed?

Life Without Barriers recognises that the trauma experienced by people with disabilities revealed by the Disability Royal Commission also extends to Autistic people. As such, Life Without Barriers would support the targeted training mentioned throughout this submission being co-designed and co-produced by Autistic people, allowing Autistic people to provide guidance on Autism specific supports. This approach coupled with best practice trauma informed care would tailor supports in a more Autism centred way.

Discussion Questions – Health and Mental Health

2. How can we better support health and mental health outcomes for Autistic people?

Further to the points above about targeted training for frontline staff and professionals, Life Without Barriers recognises that an increase in the collective understanding of Autism and the Autistic Neurotype within both public and private health and mental health services would greatly support improved health and mental health outcomes for Autistic people in accessing those services, or in seeking a diagnosis or support.

In Summary

Life Without Barriers recognises that if fully realised and implemented the National Autism Strategy will make enormous inroads to improving the lives of Autistic people and their communities, and also to addressing the concerns highlighted by the Disability Royal Commission. We are hopeful for a greater focus in the Strategy on the overlap of gender identities and Autism, and on the intersectionality between social and economic inclusion, but we believe that the Strategy is an excellent step towards more equitable access to diagnosis and supports for the Autistic community. We are excited to see the positive changes that this Strategy can bring about through a co-design and co-production process and commend the Australian Government on their efforts to bring about such positive changes in the lives of Autistic people.