



22 April 2016

Family and Community Development Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
East Melbourne VIC 3002

**Ask for:** Kathleen McClusky  
**Phone:** 9932 1004  
**Our Ref:** A2306387

Dear Family and Community Development Committee

**Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder**

Hobsons Bay City Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder.

Through Council's Community Health and Wellbeing Plan 2013-17 and Disability Access and Inclusion Strategy 2013-17 Council is committed to working towards achieving a fully accessible and inclusive municipality where all residents, regardless of their ability, can reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives.

Attached is our submission to the Inquiry. We look forward to seeing the outcomes and continuing to work with the Victorian Government to create change.

If you have any questions regarding the submission please contact Kathleen McClusky, Manager Strategy and Advocacy on 9932 1004 or email [kmclusky@hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au](mailto:kmclusky@hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Eddy', written over a white background.

Chris Eddy  
Chief Executive Officer



## **Hobsons Bay City Council's submission for the Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder**

Hobsons Bay is situated on the Port Phillip Bay, approximately seven to 20 kilometres south west of Melbourne's Central Business District (CBD). The current population is estimated to be around 90,000 people, of which approximately 17 per cent have a disability.

People with a disability in Hobsons Bay have told Council that they want the things that everyone else in the community takes for granted. They want to go to school and work, get married, go on holidays, and have access to shops and restaurants. Most importantly, people with a disability in Hobsons Bay want to be accepted and want the opportunity to be spontaneous. They want the chance to participate in and contribute to community life, and require others in the community to share their vision.

### **Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder**

Based on the ABS data released in 2012, autism spectrum disorder affects around 0.7 per cent of Victorians, this equates to around 630 residents within Hobsons Bay. It is suggested that this is an underestimate of the actual number of residents. Locally, the number of people with autism is largely unknown, however the Western Autistic School based in Laverton has recently had to open up additional classes to deal with the demand, indicating an increase in people with autism spectrum disorder as well as an increasing demand for services.

### **Availability and adequacy of services and projected demand**

Local government plays an important role when planning for and working with people with a disability. Local government has the legislated responsibility to achieve the best outcomes for the local community and, as the closest level of government to the community, local government is best placed to know, understand, plan and advocate for local and diverse community needs and concerns.

Council is a planner, resource provider, service provider, partner and broker, advocate and supporter, and community capacity builder. Council implements these roles through functions such as roads, parks, waste, land use planning, local laws, urban planning, personal and home care, early years services, recreation, community development, health protection, emergency management, building and maintaining assets, and advocating for community needs; all of which impact on people with a disability.

Depending on the needs of the community and external influences these roles are not static and Council will move between these to best meet competing priorities.

Council currently builds and maintains infrastructure, runs services, programs and activities that are inclusive of people with a disability. In relation to people with autism spectrum disorder Council currently aims to be inclusive of this community within



existing programs and services. In addition Council supports specific programs and activities for people with autism spectrum disorder. This includes:

- supporting the Laverton Children's Centre PlayConnect playgroup
- partnering with the Western Autistic School to deliver programs
- promoting the Train Supreme, Autistic Physical Development and Exercise Training based in Altona Meadows
- supporting programs such as Inside the Brick at community centres
- supporting Bayfit Leisure Centre who runs classes for children with autism
- supporting Laverton Swim and Fitness Centre which has a strong connection to the Rainbow Club and delivers specific classes for children with autism
- supporting South Kingsville Community Centre to run sessions opening up the Yarraville Special Development School

Williamstown North Primary School has also become one of five schools in Victoria to receive a Certificate of Approval, successfully meeting all of the Autism Standards for Education.

In relation to the gaps within the service system, a Council survey of people with a disability, their families and carers found that people with a disability living in Hobsons Bay would like to have more opportunities to participate in community life by being able to get out more, participate in more sporting and recreational activities and just be able to do everyday things that allow for greater independence (Hobsons Bay City Council, 2012).

People with a disability have far higher rates of poor health and wellbeing than other residents. Hobsons Bay currently has a lack of doctors and specialist health services which has a greater impact on people with a disability trying to access services. In addition allied health services such as speech pathology are often not accessible (due to location and cost) for people over the ages of 12-13 years therefore leaving parents and children with access barriers to key services as they go through adolescence years to 25.

People with a disability want to contribute to the community. While there are several employment agencies providing services to support people with a disability in Hobsons Bay to find work, unfortunately there are very limited employment opportunities for them. In addition there is a general lack of support services and activities for people once they pass 18 years of age, without identified further education or employment pathways.

Council's Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) indicated that a key area of concern was the lack of respite care available for children with autism spectrum disorder over 13 years of age as well as the lack of activities available for this age group, with most programs aimed at children under 13 years.



Recreational activities for people with autism spectrum disorder often need to be tailored to meet their needs. Most recreational activities for people with a disability are focused around public outings, however for people with autism spectrum disorder this can initiate sensory and or anxiety triggers. Given this, more centre based activities need to be funded such as the Yarraville Special School. In addition, services such as these need to be available during school holidays and outside school hours.

In relation to respite care, concerns have been raised in relation to the level of staff training and skills available to be able to adequately support caring for people with autism spectrum disorder. All staff supporting people with autism spectrum disorder should be adequately trained. A review of staff training should be undertaken as soon as possible with additional training provided where needed.

In addition the DAC indicated that a key support for parents was the ability to be able to connect with others, find services and supports, as well as information about autism spectrum disorder. Programs and groups which provide this type of support are limited. Additional funding and raising of awareness about these groups is required.

Finally, education and awareness for the community at large including key professions such as teachers, police officers and health provider's needs to be strengthened to ensure people with autism spectrum disorder as well as the community are able to work together.

Given that there is currently a demand and a need to strengthen services to meet community needs, it can be assumed that if this is not addressed the projected demand will continue to grow.

### **The adequacy of services to be provided under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)**

The accessibility, cost and appropriateness of services that might be provided under the NDIS is still largely unknown. Given that the NDIS will likely see an increase in private providers, services that they will provide may or may not include the expertise and knowledge required to support programs and services for people with autism spectrum disorder and their families. It will be crucial to ensure that a mix of high quality services are provided and that they cater for needs across all ages and abilities.

### **Evidence of the social and economic cost of failing to provide adequate services**

Although each person with a disability has different experiences, there are many common issues and barriers faced. When compared to people without a disability, people with a disability generally have less access to housing, education, employment, healthcare, and face barriers to participate in community life.

Complaints of discrimination to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission received from people with a disability cover areas such as employment,



education, housing, transport and access to health services (Victoria Equal Opportunity Human Rights Commission, 2011).

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010), significant gaps exist between the level of education reached by students with a disability and those without. Furthermore, people with a disability experience substantial barriers to finding a place to live, particularly in the private housing market and in neighbourhoods that are well connected to public transport.

Despite having the ability and willingness to work, many people with a disability still do not receive the same opportunity to enter the workforce as the rest of the community. Whether this is as a result of negative attitudes, misconceptions about disability from employers or the lack of opportunity to access meaningful education, people with a disability continue to be underrepresented in the workforce.

The median individual income for people with a disability in Australia is \$343 per week, compared with \$650 for people without a disability (ABS, 2012a). The impact of disability also extends to those who are primary carers, with their median income being \$366 per week compared with \$614 for the general population (ABS, 2012a).

In order to be able to participate in the community, many people with a disability require support. Despite the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (to which Australia is a signatory) and the introduction of legislation such as the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Disability Act 2006*, many people with a disability continue to face discrimination, inequalities and barriers to full participation in their community.

Socialisation is key for young people with autism spectrum disorder to build community connectedness and participation. For people with autism spectrum disorder however this often needs to occur in settings that can provide them with a sense of structure, routine and familiarity to decrease sensory and anxiety triggers. Public places and spaces, if well designed, could provide this need for young people. Resources, design guidelines and standards need to be developed to support local and state governments as well as private developers to ensure infrastructure can also cater for the needs of young people with autism spectrum disorder.

Victoria still has a long way to go in ensuring that people with a disability are able to actively participate and contribute in community life. Furthermore, specific supports for people with autism spectrum disorder are yet to be made widely available. Creating sustainable change requires ongoing commitment and partnerships at local, regional and state levels with a strong understanding of community needs. Until this is reached we will continue to see a loss in economic and social costs.



## **Summary**

Key areas that Council would like to see improved to support people with autism spectrum disorder, their families and carers include:

### **1. Data collection**

1.1 Improve data collection to understand the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder at Statistical Local Areas (SLA) or local government level

### **2. Service needs**

2.1 Increase services in the western region for people with autism spectrum disorder, especially in relation to respite and community activities for children over 13 years and support services for people over 18 years such as ongoing education and employment

2.2 All staff supporting people with autism spectrum disorder should be adequately trained. A review of staff training should be undertaken as soon as possible with additional training provided where needed

2.3 Ensure activities provided for people with autism spectrum disorder are appropriate for their needs, acknowledging sensory triggers can require some people to need more centre based activities

2.4 Fund additional centres and extend existing access to centre based services such as the Yarraville Special School

2.5 Ensure allied health services such as speech pathology go beyond the ages of 12-13 years, providing crucial support through adolescence years to 25

2.6 Funding for additional education and support for parents who have children with autism spectrum disorder

2.7 Funding for education and awareness training and activities for the community at large including key professions such as teachers, police officers and health providers

### **3. Implementation of the NDIS**

3.1 Ensure the implementation of NDIS addresses the needs for people with all abilities and ages and services have the skills and training required to support people with autism spectrum disorder

### **4. Designed spaces and places for socialisation**

4.1 Resources, design guidelines and standards need to be developed to support local and state governments as well as private developers to ensure infrastructure can also cater for the needs of young people with autism spectrum disorder

### **5. Liveability**

5.1 Increase investment in housing, education, employment, healthcare and community recreation activities to ensure they are inclusive of people with autism spectrum disorder to minimise the economic and social costs