Amaze Position Statement

Accessible environments for autistic people

Key points

- **Autistic people currently face barriers to participation in community life due to a lack of "autism friendly environments" (including across schools, workplaces and public spaces, such as train stations, hospitals and airports).**

- **"Autism Friendly Environments" provide sensory sensitive physical spaces and trained staff who understand and can support the communication and cognitive needs of autistic people.**

- **Building design and tailored resources (i.e. sensory maps and social scripts) improve community access and participation for autistic people, including at school, in the workplace and the wider community.**

- **A number of innovative organisations in Victoria have successfully taken steps to modify their environments and/or develop resources to make them more autism friendly, including Northland Shopping Centre, Museums Victoria, Parks Victoria, Sovereign Hill and Campaspe Regional Libraries, greatly increasing their accessibility to the autistic community.**

- **Amaze recommends that Australian governments work together, and in partnership with autistic people and autism organisations, to:**

  - Review the extent to which environmental barriers continue to restrict access and participation for autistic people;

  - Acknowledge that the majority of autistic people experience co-occurring mental health conditions, particularly anxiety which can escalate in new/unknown environments or situations, or when an unexpected event or sudden change occurs.

  - Consider how Australian governments can lead a universal design approach across public buildings, places and events to better support autistic people, including through the inclusion of quiet spaces;

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- Educate planners and investigate how universal design, planning and building instruments (including legislation, regulations, standards and codes) may be amended to support autistic people;

- Provide funding and/or grants for business and community organisations to develop resources, such as social scripts and sensory maps, and/or modify their environment to support access to venues and events;

- Increase understanding and acceptance across the community of the benefits and need for accessible environments and how to better support autistic people, i.e. through Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the NDIS.

1.   Background.

"Autism Friendly Environments" provide sensory sensitive physical spaces and trained staff who understand and can support the communication, cognitive and commonly co-occurring mental health needs of autistic people. An autism friendly environment attracts, actively seeks and supports participation by autistic people (and their families and carers), including through adjustments to support social interaction, sensory regulation, cognitive needs and minimise anxiety.

While some innovative organisations across Australia have taken steps to create autism friendly environments, autistic people continue to face significant environmental barriers when seeking to access and participate in Australian society. These barriers can grossly limit inclusion and participation across a range of public and private places, including in school, employment and recreational activities.   It is well known that social isolation can lead to poor mental health, education, social and economic outcomes. [1] A comprehensive and government led approach to building and promoting autism friendly environments is urgently needed across Australia.

2.   Current experiences.

The barriers faced by autistic people when seeking to access built and natural environments can relate to:

- **Structural or physical features of the built environment**: including lighting, acoustics, smells, colors, spatial features, flooring and other design elements. They may also include the way information is conveyed, for example a lack of non-verbal communication by event staff or signage. [2]

- **Cognitive and/or social differences**: including a need for routine/predictability, and sensory processing difficulties such as delayed or single channel processing (i.e. not being able to process all sensory input, such as hearing, seeing and feeling where their body is in space, simultaneously).[3]

- **Commonly co-occurring mental health conditions**: in particular, anxiety can escalate in new/unknown environments or situations, or when an unexpected event or sudden change occurs in the environment.[4]

Each autistic person will experience these barriers differently. For example, an autistic person that experiences hyper-sensory sensitivity to noise or lighting may experience sensory overload, anxiety and/or be unable to interact, participate or remain in an environment.[5] A person that experiences hypo-sensory sensitivity may respond similarly if the environment does not meet their sensory needs, i.e. relating to touch or visual stimuli. Furthermore, an autistic person that needs predictability or routine may become anxious and subsequently express anxiety-related behaviors about or toward the environment (i.e. lighting or sound), the people around them and/or the day's schedule if experiencing an absence of predictability or routine.

Approximately 50 – 70% of autistic people experience co-occurring mental health conditions, including anxiety disorders and depression.[6] These conditions can impact a person's capacity to enter and participate in certain indoor and outdoor environments, and/or interact socially. For example, having to enter a chaotic hospital emergency department can trigger anxiety and impair a person's ability to communicate basic information and/or needs. [7] New environments and situations, as well as unexpected events or sudden changes in the environment can also trigger atypical anxiety in autistic people.[8]

While community awareness of autism is high, there is a broad lack of understanding among Australians of what they can do to support autistic people. An online poll of 1,012 Australians, conducted by Essential Research (commissioned by Amaze) in July 2016 found that:

- 64% of respondents were aware that people on the autism spectrum can be over or under sensitive to stimuli like light and noise; and

- 72% of respondents agreed that schools, workplaces and the wider community (retail, recreation, hospitals etc.) need to have a better understanding of how to support people on the autism spectrum.

Yet only 29% of respondents reported having a good understanding of how to support people on the autism spectrum. [9]

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3. What is being done?

There is robust evidence that a building's design or modification can improve access and participation for autistic people. In particular, sensory regulation can be supported through design/modifications relating to spatial configuration, acoustics, lighting, thermal comfort, materials, air quality and safety. There is also emerging evidence of tools that can be effective to support cognitive differences and reduce anxiety. For example, social scripts and visual schedules can support understanding of what to expect when visiting a place or event and scaffold a person's ability to work through unexpected changes in an environment or situation.[10] Sensory maps can support identification of high sensory (i.e. loud, busy, lots of visual stimuli) and low sensory (i.e. quieter) areas. Designing environments with the characteristics of autism in mind can not only reduce anxiety and increase participation and independence of autistic people, it can also be cost saving and benefit the wider community.[11]

Amaze has collaborated with a number of innovative Victorian organisations who have recognised that autistic people in their community need to be included, and have demonstrated leadership by modifying their environments and/or providing tools to better support them. For example, with support from patrons, staff and Amaze, Northland Shopping Centre took the initiative to create a world first quiet room in a shopping centre for autistic people that may need time out from the noise, crowds and wider sensory stimuli. Amaze has also worked with Museums Victoria and Parks Victoria on their development of social scripts and sensory maps to support autistic visitors.

These initiatives (together with similar initiatives led by Sovereign Hill and Campaspe Regional Libraries) have proven highly successful in creating autism friendly environments in a cost-effective and sustainable way, particularly where a comprehensive approach has been taken (combining resources such as social scripts and sensory maps with structural modifications and staff training) and where the initiatives have been developed and continue to be evaluated in collaboration with autistic people and autism organisations. For example, since the launch of Museum Victoria's comprehensive Autism Friendly Museum Project (AFMP) in 2014, the AFMP homepage had been visited 14,202 times and the social scripts across all three museums had been downloaded 1,874 times by the end of 2016.

Encouraging progress has been made by the Commonwealth, state/territory and local governments towards improving access for people with physical disabilities and sensory impairments (i.e. visual/hearing) under the *National Disability Strategy* 2010-2020, as well universal design, building and planning regulations, standards and codes. [12] However these instruments do very little to support autistic people, or people with intellectual disabilities and mental health conditions.

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In June 2017, the Victorian Parliament released its Final Report from its *Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder*.[13] In its Final Report, the Victorian parliament welcomed many of the isolated initiatives discussed above but recognised the importance of raising community awareness of the environmental barriers faced by autistic people and the need for state government leadership (in close partnership with autistic people and their families and carers). Among the Final Report's 101 recommendations, it recommended that the Victorian government update its State Autism Plan to make provision for:

- a broad and extensive public education campaign to raise awareness about autism and the inclusion of autistic people, their families and carers in the community;
- a strategy for the inclusive education of autistic children in Victorian schools, including by providing funding for sensory and social environments;
- a strategy for the social inclusion of autistic people across all government departments responsible for community, cultural and sporting events.

It also recommended that the Victorian Government:

- draw on learnings from initiatives such as the Autism Friendly Museum initiative, and fund Creative Victoria to develop an autism inclusion strategy for all publicly funded arts and cultural institutions and events in order to facilitate visitation and participation for autistic people and their families; and
- ensure all new and existing public hospitals and healthcare facilities have provision for dedicated quiet spaces for autistic people in emergency departments and other inpatient and outpatient areas.

In its December 2017 response to the inquiry, the Victorian government committed to updating its State Autism Plan, developing a public awareness campaign and providing better support for autistic children in Victorian schools.[14]

In November 2017, the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee's report titled *Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities* recognised the barriers to accessibility that continue to be faced by autistic people. It recommended that the Commonwealth government, in collaboration with people with disabilities and disability advocacy groups, establish an Office of Disability Strategy to oversee the implementation of the National Disability Strategy and strengthen consultation, collaboration, evaluation and accountability when building inclusive and accessible communities. [15]

4.   Key recommendations.

Amaze recommends that:

1. The Victorian government adopt all of the evidence based recommendations in the Victorian Parliament's Final Report from its *Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder*.

2. The Commonwealth government adopt the evidence based recommendations in the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee's report titled *Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities*.

3. Australian governments work together (and in partnership with autistic people and autism organisations) to:

    a. Review the extent to which environmental barriers continue to restrict access and participation for autistic people (in ongoing consultation with autistic people).

    b. Acknowledge that the majority of autistic people experience co-occurring mental health conditions, particularly anxiety which can escalate in new/unknown environments or situations, or when an unexpected event or sudden change occurs.

    c. Consider how Australian governments can lead a universal design approach across public buildings, places and events that support autistic people, including in schools, the public service and on public transport.

    d. Prioritise education and the development of guidelines for people involved in planning phases (of building new or modifying existing environments) on how to incorporate design/modifications that may support autistic people and the broader community. Planners should also be encouraged to consult with autistic people.

    e. Review the extent to which the Commonwealth, state and local government building regulations and standards are effective in supporting autistic people, and how they may be improved.

    f. Provide funding and/or grants for business and community organisations to develop resources such as social scripts and sensory maps to support access to their venues and events (in collaboration with autistic people and autism organisations).[16]

    g. Through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) component of the NDIS, build understanding and acceptance across the community of the benefits of inclusive environments, the barriers autistic people face and how the community (including individuals, governments, public organisations and the private sector) may better support autistic people.

Attribution:

This work should be referenced as:
Amaze 2018, Position Statement – Accessible environments for autistic people, available at
www.amaze.org.au

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5. References

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10 For more information, see Raising Children Network, Changing routines: children and teenagers with autism spectrum disorder, at http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/autism_spectrum_disorder_changing_routines.html

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12 See for example, Commonwealth Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards 2010.

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15 Commonwealth of Australia 2017, Delivery of outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 to build inclusive and accessible communities. Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee. Available at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/AccessibleCommunities/Report

16 For further information, please see Amaze's submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the Delivery of Outcomes under the National Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020, to build inclusive and accessible communities, 28 April 2017.