

Supporting communities

A Year in Review 2020–21



A message from the Chair



A crucial part of our activity during the 2020-21 year was national advocacy, as radical changes to the NDIS assessment processes were proposed which caused wide alarm in the autism community. Amaze played a prominent role in explaining to government the consequences these changes would bring for those affected, and we were greatly relieved when, after lengthy consultations, the Minister responsible for the NDIS the Hon. Linda Reynolds eventually announced the proposals would be abandoned.

Meanwhile, our helpline Autism Connect implemented its national rollout, and we were pleased with the very encouraging words the Hon. Anne Ruston, Minister for Families and Social Services, brought to its public launch. With the substantial support of a major NDIS grant, Autism Connect aims to reach and help autistic people, their families and professionals across Australia, and we are committed to its success.

On 30 June our CEO Fiona Sharkie left after seven years leading Amaze. Fiona had transformed the organisation's mission, its shape and strategy, from a body simply about autism to one that works for autistic people. On behalf of the Board, I want to record here our thanks to Fiona for her years of decisive leadership at Amaze.

On 1 July Jim Mullan commenced as new CEO. Jim came to us with 17 years experience as a CEO in the not-for-profit charitable sector in Australia and the UK, as well as with some family background in autism. A seasoned advocate with

government, corporations and trusts, as well as a very successful fundraiser, Jim will seek to improve outcomes and support for the autism community, and the Board is excited with his fresh vision for the organisation.

The Board farewelled two Directors – Rachel McNamara at the end of 2020 after a very lengthy period as our first autistic Director, and Rob Armour in September 2021, our very able Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee, whose prolonged ill health made him unable to continue. I would like to thank them both for their dedicated and loyal service. In their place we welcomed new Directors Kathy Isaacs, Gavan Nolan, and (from September) Gabrielle Hall.

While pandemic restrictions saw the staff working remotely for much of the year, I was relieved that the transition of leadership was able to be carried out in person at our fine new office in Richmond. The staff have been fortunate to have spent considerable time together

there since moving in late last year. We all look forward to improved circumstances in the coming months that will allow staff to be reunited and make more use of our improved facilities.

We had a year of generous support from donors and our partner organisations, and on behalf of the Board I would like to thank all of them: their gifts help us greatly in our mission to increase understanding of autism and enhance educational and career opportunities for autistic people.

Finally, my thanks to the staff of Amaze for their hard work under ongoing challenging circumstances and for providing support to our community during another difficult year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Warren Bebbington', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Warren Bebbington
Board Chair

A message from the CEO



When I joined Amaze seven years ago, I came with the aim to influence positive change to improve life outcomes for autistic Victorians, to see them able to participate and contribute to society as they desire. Today, the term for that aspiration is 'inclusion', but it is a term that has different meanings for different people. But for me, it meant genuine and supported access to everything life has to offer including education, work and social interaction in all aspects of the community.

There was a lot of work we needed to do, and the first step was to listen to autistic people and their families about what Amaze needed to do for and with them. A survey to which more than 500 members of the community responded, told us they wanted Amaze to provide information and support, to lobby government and to build greater understanding of autism in the wider community. This paved the way for Amaze's 25-year Strategic Directions to 2040, which included measurable outcomes for our community to hold the organisation accountable to autistic people and their families.

One of my major goals was to expand our Autism Advisor service to be a national service. I feel incredibly proud to have been able to achieve this and see the Autism Connect service launched nationwide in June. While we had hoped to celebrate this through an in-person event, lockdown restrictions meant we had to host an online event, MCed by the fabulous Clem Bastow with input from lived experience expert William Ward-Boas and a wonderful video message from Minister for Families and Social Services, the Hon Senator Anne Ruston. I'm grateful to the

more than 100 people who joined us live on Facebook for the event.

As the only autism organisation with a dedicated policy unit, Amaze continued to advocate to government on the priority areas of NDIS, education, employment and mental health by taking the voices and experiences of autistic people and their families directly to policy makers. Community responses to our consultations and surveys fed into submissions, presentations and advisory groups including six parliamentary inquiries and over 20 meetings with government ministers, parliamentary secretaries and opposition held throughout the year. Substantial advice was provided to the NDIA in relation to its proposed changes to the NDIS, most particularly to our community's opposition to Independent Assessments and capped funding; as autistic people comprise 35% of NDIS participants, it was essential their needs would not be compromised.

Another major achievement – four years in the making – was the creation of the Victorian Autism Education Strategy. Amaze persisted in advocating for a specific strategy

for autistic students – impressing the need to the Minister for Education – which resulted in the first dedicated education strategy for autistic students in Australia.

I am so grateful to have been able to achieve these accomplishments and more during my tenure as Amaze CEO, but above all, the thanks and appreciation I received from countless autistic people and their family members when I left Amaze is my greatest reward.

I was delighted to pass the Amaze CEO baton to Jim Mullan to continue Amaze's quest to improve the quality of lives of autistic people and their families, not just in Victoria but across Australia.

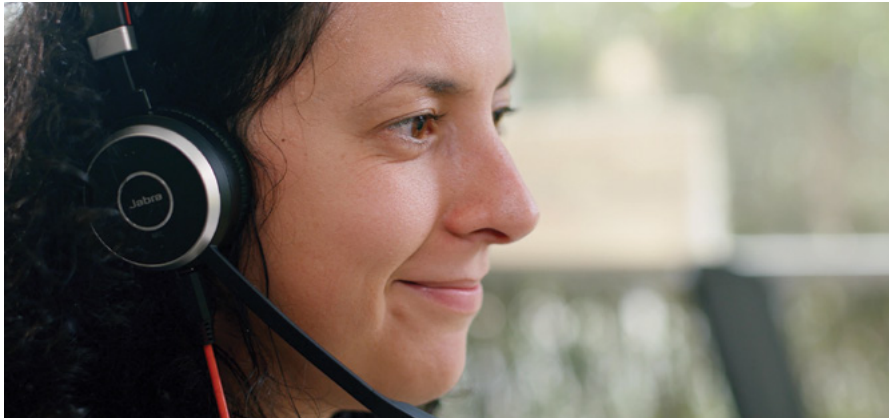
Thank you to our amazing community and my wonderful colleagues for being by my side for seven incredible years together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fiona Sharkie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fiona Sharkie
Amaze CEO
CEO May 2014-June 2021.

Outcome 1:

Building understanding of autism in the wider world



Amaze's Autism Connect Advisors take nationwide calls.



The Change Your Reactions campaign that ran for a second wave featured autistic actors.

Autism Connect launches nationwide

In June, Amaze celebrated the national launch of our autism helpline Autism Connect with an online, live-streamed event. It featured a video message of support from Minister for Families and Social Services, the Hon. Senator Anne Ruston. Expanded from Amaze's existing Victorian advisor service thanks to an Australian Government Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program grant, Autism Connect provides Australians with free, evidence-based autism information and support. Following the launch, interstate cases increased to 42% of Autism Connect's total case numbers and contacts from autistic people rose to 22%, up from 11% the previous year. Feedback about the helpline has been overwhelmingly positive, with autistic people, families and professionals praising the comprehensive and supportive advice provided by Autism Connect advisors.

Change Your Reactions continues making waves

After being delayed due to COVID-19, the second burst of the *Change Your Reactions* campaign ran from April – May 2021, on TV, print,

out-of-home and online. The campaign featured autistic actors in real-life situations demonstrating how simple changes in people's actions can create a more inclusive world for autistic people. The first burst was a resounding success with almost 1 in 5 autistic people and their families having "noticed a change in the way people treated me". Of those who saw the campaign, 90% felt concerned about how autistic people were currently treated and 85% intended to refrain from being judgemental. This year's response has also been remarkable, gaining huge attention on social media. Autistic people expressed relatability to the campaign and the hope that people continue to change how they react towards others.

Celebrating autism acceptance

In April 2021, we ran the Hoodie Up campaign for the third time. It was fantastic to see over 100 schools and childcares, individuals and workplaces register to hold an event and raise funds for Amaze. Over 260 Amaze branded hoodies were sold and organisations such as Coles Express, Bunnings, Aussie Broadband, Transdev, St Kilda Football Club and Scouts Victoria showed their support for autistic people by holding staff events.

There was also great support from Victorian government representatives including the Minister for Disability, the Minister for Training, Skills and Higher Education, the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools, and the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing putting their hoodies up for autism acceptance. The Amaze community raised almost three times the amount of funds raised in previous years.

Amaze and autism in the media

Amaze's media outreach on issues such as education, employment and complex needs received substantial coverage on mainstream media including the ABC, Nine News, The Australian, Herald Sun, The Guardian and SBS. Amaze facilitated autistic voices being heard through many media appearances. Highlights include the launch of Autism Connect, Amaze's *Change Your Reactions* campaign, the launch of the *Going to the GP About My Mental Health* resource, joint advocacy on NDIS reforms, Hoodie Up community participation and the 2020 Learning in Lockdown report highlighting the challenges experienced by students and families while schooling was disrupted by the pandemic.

Outcome 2:

Influence systemic change in government, private and social sectors



Amaze representatives appeared before the Senate Inquiry into Autism with advocate Chloé Hayden (pictured left).



Amaze and other disability organisations met NDIS Minister the Hon. Linda Reynolds through joint advocacy efforts.

Autism Education Strategy

In December 2020, the Victorian Government launched Australia's first dedicated Autism Education Strategy. Amaze had long called for a specific strategy for autistic students and produced a detailed report that influenced the strategy's shape. We are now working with government on the design of the Diverse Learners Hub, a centre of excellence in autism and neurodiverse education. This is an important step towards advancing school outcomes of autistic children and young people.

Stopping damaging changes to the NDIS

The NDIS is transforming lives. With autistic people comprising the largest group (around a third) of participants, ensuring the NDIS is both effective and enduring is critical for our community. When the NDIA tried to introduce mandatory "independent" assessments and funding caps for autistic children, the Amaze community mobilised to stop these damaging changes. Together we engaged with the NDIA, government ministers, local members of parliament, the media, the disability sector, and the broader Australian community to share our concerns. Our collaborative efforts had real impact.

Highlighting the circumstances of autistic people before parliamentary inquiries

Amaze has played a leading role in bringing autism issues to the attention of decision makers. We convened an autism delegation to appear before Victoria's Parliamentary Inquiry into TAFE Disability Access. Our submission and the evidence given by the delegation of other autism organisations and autistic people was heavily quoted in the committee's report.

We also convened an autism delegation, which appeared before the Federal Parliament's Inquiry into Mental Health and Suicide Prevention to highlight the need for special measures to tackle the devastatingly high rate of mental ill health within our community. The Inquiry heard from autistic people, autism organisations, researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of autism and mental health.

Amaze continued to advocate for a National Autism Strategy. We appeared before the Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Autism and continue to join forces with autism organisations across the nation via

the Australian Autism Alliance to call for national action on autism.

Advocating for inclusion during a global pandemic

The pandemic has heavily impacted the autistic community. Amaze has been monitoring impacts in real time and feeding these through to decision-makers. Working with the Association for Children with Disability (ACD) we succeeded in having on-site learning options extended to students and families in need when Victorian schools were closed. We also influenced more flexible supports for NDIS participants during the pandemic and the expansion of priority COVID-19 vaccination categories to assist our community.

Second Community Attitudes and Autistic Experiences surveys

Amaze ran follow-up surveys to the landmark 2017 *Community Attitudes and Autistic Experiences* studies, the first ever of their type in Australia.

We were pleased to receive a very strong response from autistic people and look forward to publishing results in early 2022. The results will provide new and vital insights into the experiences, opinions and needs of the autistic community, as well as the experiences and opinions of the broader community about autism.

Outcome 3:

Build the skills of autistic people, their families and the wider world



Emotional Regulation tips and videos created by Amaze were done in consultation with autistic people.

Creating evidence-based resources

Amaze continued to collaborate with organisations including St Kilda Football Club, Transdev, National Disability Services (NDS) and Parks Victoria to create social scripts to improve accessibility for autistic people. Through funding received by the Department of Education and Training Victoria, Amaze developed *Emotional Regulation* tips and videos for autistic teens and *Transition to Secondary School* information sheets to help students, teachers and parents prepare for a new school year. A highlight for the year was the launch of the resource *Going to the GP About My Mental Health*. This resource aims to help autistic women identify and communicate mental health concerns and was developed based on research with autistic women which uncovered barriers to effective engagement with GPs.

Sharing knowledge through workshops and events

This year, Amaze delivered 158 workshops and training sessions to 4,450 participants. Three sessions were sponsored public webinars on the topics: transition to secondary school; autism and employment; and raising autistic teenage youth. All were highly popular webinars

attracting participants from all over the world, and saw a 65% increase in participation this year. There were 56 tailored training sessions delivered to leaders and volunteers from Scouts Victoria, Australian Sailing, Headspace, St Kilda Football Club, and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission among others.

Growth in engagement with autistic people

Amaze continued to engage autistic people in areas of public consultation, employment, advocacy and content contribution. In 2020-2021, Amaze tripled the number of autistic people employed, with 31% of Amaze employees identifying as autistic. This rapid increase was achieved through implementing autism-positive employment practices, such as changes to the recruitment process. Amaze engaged with our autistic and autism communities through surveys and discussion forums for feedback to develop policy submissions. We consulted with our Consumer Advisory Group consisting of autistic people, their family members and stakeholders, during the development of Autism Connect services and its platforms. Across Amaze's channels there has



Young Digby was presented an Autistic Role Model Award for his work in trying to help other young autistic children like himself.

been a substantial increase in autistic written content and autistic voices.

Environmental audits and ongoing partnerships

Amaze's Capacity Building team, which includes autistic consultants, worked with many organisations to conduct audits to review and adapt spaces, making them inclusive and accessible to autistic people. It is pleasing that a wide range of organisations such as ACMI, Parks Victoria, Bunnings, Casey Council Bunjil Place, Eastland Shopping Centre, St Kilda Football Club and V/Line Trains are committed to improving their autism accessibility. Amaze was selected to be one of Transdev's community partners for 2021 and was grateful to receive over \$250,000 worth of free advertising space on billboards and buses. We are continuing to work with Transdev to create social scripts and provide driver training.

Our Year in Numbers

225k
visitors to Amaze websites



6
Parliamentary Inquiry appearances



15
15 submissions and policy papers produced

20+
meetings with Government Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, Opposition, Backbenchers and Crossbenchers.

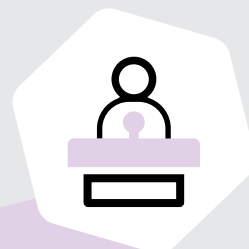
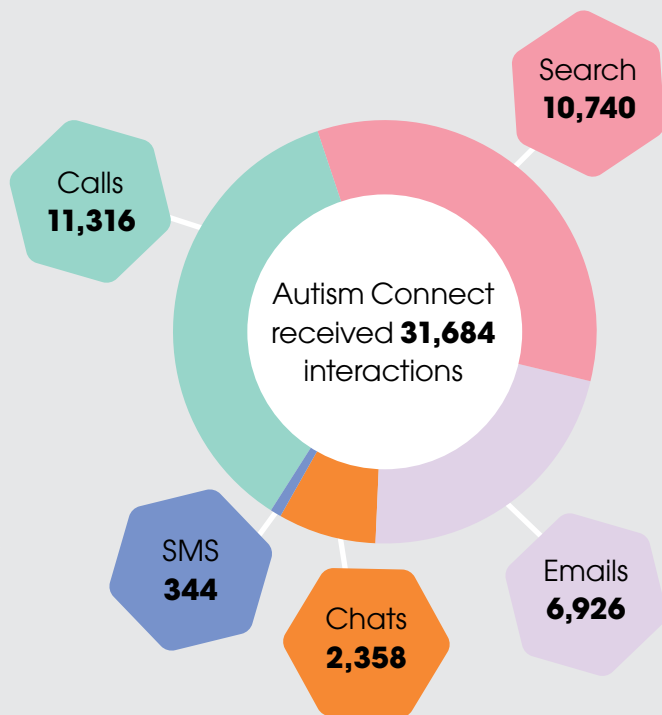
572
Autism Connect: Search resources added

1,135
collaborations and partnerships with other organisations



31,580
downloads of Amaze-developed resources

160
public events, trainings and workshops held



Our thanks

Amaze would like to thank our donors for their generous support in shaping the future for autism and creating a more inclusive world for autistic people and their families.

Thank you to the following organisations for funding and support:

Organisations

Multiplex Construction Pty Ltd
CFMEU
ETU
Commonwealth Bank
Herbert Smith Freehills
ACMI
Bunnings
Casey Council Bunjil Place
Eastland Shopping Centre
National Disability Services (NDS)
Parks Victoria
St Kilda Football Club
Transdev
V/Line

Trusts and foundations

Pethard Tarax Charitable Trust
Norma, Mavis & Graeme Waters
Perpetual Charitable Trust
Margaret Attwood Trust
Giving 4 Tomorrow Foundation
Veith Foundation

Government

Australian Government Department
of Social Services
National Disability Insurance
Agency
Victorian Government Department
of Education and Training
Victorian Government Department
of Families, Fairness and Housing



Amaze Inc.

678 Victoria Street,
Richmond VIC 3121
PO Box 374,
Carlton South VIC 3053
www.amaze.org.au

Phone: 03 9657 1600
Email: info@amaze.org.au
f /autismvictoria
t @AmazeAutismAU
@amazeautism
in /amaze-autism-victoria



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