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Dear Autism Policy team,

We are James Ong, Evaluation Consultant, and Chris Varney, Chief Enabling Officer, of the Autistic-led social enterprise I CAN Network. On behalf of the organisation, we would like to thank the Federal Department of Social Services (FDSS) for giving us the opportunity to respond to the draft National Autism Strategy (NAS).

I CAN Network is Australia's largest Autistic-led social enterprise that aims to build "a world that embraces Autism" by proving "what Autistic people can do". We do this by:

1. Organising school and online peer mentoring programs for Autistic young people aged 7-22 years to build social connections, improve their self-esteem and develop transferable skills;
2. Running professional development programs to teach school staff and leaders how to build safe school environments for Autistic and neurodivergent students;
3. Providing talks to students and employers on how they can best support Autistic and neurodivergent students and employees respectively; and
4. Giving opportunities for Autistic people to be employed in the I CAN Network as mentors, program facilitators and managers.

Our programs are built on a strong understanding of the types of support and opportunities that Autistic young people need to lead better lives. This is backed by the lived experience of our staff who are either Autistic or know or care for someone who is Autistic, as well as over 10 years' experience directly mentoring thousands of Autistic young people and working with their families and schools.

We have previously written a submission in October 2023 to contribute ideas to the NAS. With the release of the draft NAS, we would like to use this submission to respond to parts of the draft, particularly the commitments under the Social Inclusion and Economic Inclusion areas, using our expertise and programs under I CAN Network.

Responding to the preamble of the National Autism Strategy

Vision

Vision statement

The National Autism Strategy's vision is for a safe, inclusive society. All Autistic people are able to fully participate in all aspects of life, in line with international human rights.

We feel that the draft vision of the NAS is appropriate as it encapsulates the need to build the capabilities of both Autistic people to contribute to society and other members of society to be more accepting towards Autistic people. Although Autistic people have many unique strengths that they can harness to make a positive contribution to society and live a fulfilling life, numerous societal barriers such as negative attitudes towards Autism prevent them from achieving these goals. As a result, they become less confident of themselves, reducing the chances of them participating in society.

Therefore, not only do we need to build the confidence and capabilities of Autistic people to contribute to society, it is also important that society works towards a safer, more inclusive environment where Autistic people are accepted for who they are and are valued for their contributions to society.

Goal

Goal

The goal of the Strategy is to improve life outcomes for all Autistic people.

We also feel that the draft goal of the NAS is appropriate for specifically targeting the strategy towards Autistic people. At the same time, we feel that a guiding principle should be written to define what 'all Autistic people' means.

There are numerous intersectionalities within the Autism community that can necessarily increase the vulnerability that Autistic people face. Examples include, but are not limited to, trans and gender diverse Autistic people, Autistic people with co-occurring disabilities (such as intellectual disability) and mental health conditions (such as anxiety and depression), and Autistic people with complex and high support needs. Overlooking one or more intersectionalities in the Autism community when planning and implementing policies and initiatives can leave out certain subgroups of the Autism community who may not experience improvements in outcomes and who may be angered for not being appropriately consulted and involved.

Therefore, a guiding principle on considering the intersectionalities within the Autism community should be included in the NAS. This will prompt governments and public servants to tailor Autism policies, programs and initiatives that consider the needs of different subgroups in the Autism community so that no one is left out in the policies, programs and initiatives being implemented.

Recommendation 1

Add a guiding principle in the NAS on considering intersectionalities within the Autism community when planning and implementing Autism policies, programs and initiatives.

Guiding principles

Guiding principles

- In partnership - nothing about us, without us
- Accessible based on Universal Design
- Self Determination and Autonomy
- Aligned and Accountable Outcomes
- Acceptance and Inclusivity
- Rights
- Individualised and Holistic

I CAN Network supports the inclusion of all guiding principles in the draft NAS. In particular, we praise the FDSS for including the 'Self-Determination and Autonomy' guiding principle as it recognises the right of all Autistic people to make their own decisions on all aspects of their life. In I CAN Network, we support Autistic people in our programs and in our organisation to pursue ambitions that align to their interests, passions and

strengths. Additionally, in our work, we see increasing involvement from Autistic students in working with parents and schools to craft Individualised Education Plans that best fit their strengths and needs. The 'Self-Determination and Autonomy' guiding principle extends these examples by respecting the rights of Autistic people of all ages to make decisions about their lives that align to what they would like to do.

We also applaud the FDSS for including a statement on neurodiversity in the NAS as that is a concept that is becoming increasingly prominent in society. Within the statement on neurodiversity, the Neurodiversity Paradigm cites strengths-based, rights-based and neurodiversity-affirming approaches that are tailored to individual Autistic people. Linking it to the guiding principles, neurodiversity-affirming is explicitly stated in the 'Individualised and Holistic' guiding principle, rights-based is spun off to the 'Rights' guiding principle and tailored approaches are contained in the 'Individualised and Holistic' guiding principle. However, we do not see strengths-based approaches to Autism in any guiding principle. Considering the focus on strengths-based approaches to Autism in our organisation and our work, we feel that this concept should be incorporated in the 'Individualised and Holistic' guiding principle so that initiatives not only meet the needs of Autistic people, but also leverage their strengths to achieve desired outcomes.

Recommendation 2

Incorporate strengths-based approaches in the 'Individualised and Holistic' guiding principle.

Lastly, trauma-informed approaches to Autism could necessarily be overlooked in the NAS as it is buried as a subsection within the 'content warning' section. We feel that trauma-informed approaches should be incorporated as a guiding principle with a clearer definition of what it means. That is because Autistic people can be traumatised by the difficulties associated with being Autistic, regardless of whether they are formally diagnosed or not. Appreciating the difficulties Autistic people went through in their lives, and tailoring strategies to overcome these difficulties via trauma-based approaches, can increase the chances that Autistic people will continue to engage in programs that will benefit them in the long term.

Recommendation 3

Add a guiding principle on trauma-based approaches in the NAS.

Responding to the commitments of the National Autism Strategy

We commend the FDSS for drafting commitments within the Social Inclusion and Economic Inclusion outcome areas that align with the work described in our previous submission of the NAS. At the same time, our programs highlight a few additional commitments and changes to existing commitments that could be made to better support Autistic young people to live a more fulfilling life. In this section, we will use our programs to praise what the commitments have got right and to suggest some additions or changes to the commitments.

Online mentoring programs filling Autistic young people's needs

Commitment 1c

Increasing accessible and sensory-friendly public and online spaces.

Commitment 1d

Increasing the capability of advocates and advocacy organisations to challenge and reduce stigma of autism.

Commitment 2

Increase opportunities for social connections and peer support.

I CAN Online is our national offering of online mentoring programs, bringing together Autistic young people aged 5-22 years across Australia based on their shared special interests or needs. In 2022, I CAN Online ran 75 online mentoring programs over five six-week cycles during school terms and two six-day cycles during the school holidays, engaging a total of 983 Autistic young people across all states and territories of Australia.

I CAN Online fulfills commitments 1c, 1d and 2 of the NAS. The foundation of I CAN Online rests on a safe, non-judgemental online space that brings together Autistic and neurodivergent young people across Australia. In these spaces, Autistic and neurodivergent young people can share their experiences and special interests with like-minded peers without feeling judged. This non-judgemental environment makes them feel more comfortable to open up and be themselves in the program, exemplified by one mentee who said:

“I have been in a lot of social groups. This is the only one that has actually let me be myself. I had to pretend to be someone else [in other social groups] when I really didn’t want to, which was really hard. With this [I CAN] group, I managed to build that self confidence in order to be myself.”

Autistic and neurodivergent young people can talk about their experiences and special interests around discussion topics and prompts. By engaging in something that speaks to their experiences and interests in a safe online space, they are more likely to socialise and communicate with each other, building their social and communication skills. These provide the foundations for them to feel more confident expressing and talking about themselves to other people, improving the ability to advocate for themselves to obtain reasonable adjustments and reduce the stigma of Autism.

Additionally, bringing together Autistic and neurodivergent young people across Australia gives them the opportunity to build social connections and provide and receive peer support from like-minded peers. By interacting with like-minded peers in the mentoring program, Autistic and neurodivergent young people learn that there are other people who are facing the same challenges as them, validating their experiences and relieving their sense of loneliness. This was exemplified by one mentee who outlined what the online mentoring programs mean to them:

“It means to me that I am not lonely & I can talk to some people like you. The program has helped me to open up. It’s opened up some doors in my head.”

Hence, the Social Inclusion commitments under the NAS largely encapsulates what is being achieved in I CAN Online. They provide a safe online space for Autistic and neurodivergent people to interact with each other in order to improve their social and communication skills, build social connections and give and receive peer support.

Improving the social connections and self-esteem of Autistic students at school

Commitment 1c

Increasing accessible and sensory-friendly public and online spaces.

Commitment 1d

Increasing the capability of advocates and advocacy organisations to challenge and reduce stigma of autism.

Commitment 2

Increase opportunities for social connections and peer support.

I CAN Network also delivers peer mentoring programs in schools across Victoria. We run I CAN School® mentoring programs for Autistic students attending secondary school and I CAN Imagination Club® mentoring programs for primary school students with learning differences and/or social anxiety.

Similar to I CAN Online, our school mentoring programs fulfill commitments 1c, 1d and 2 of the NAS. Both school mentoring programs bring together Autistic and neurodivergent students from one or multiple schools in a safe, non-judgemental space, where they are free to be themselves and socialise with like-minded peers. This provides opportunities for them to build social connections and support networks so that they feel less socially isolated and more supported at school. Interacting with like-minded peers also builds their communication and public speaking skills, boosting their confidence to talk about and advocate for themselves in order to receive reasonable adjustments and to reduce the stigma of Autism.

School mentoring programs also achieve an additional outcome area that is currently not in the draft NAS: improved self-confidence and self-esteem. I CAN Network runs games and activities with Autistic and neurodivergent students to improve their self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-confidence, optimism and mental wellbeing. Our school mentoring programs achieve these outcomes, with our I CAN School® mentoring programs achieving positive behavioural changes among secondary school students. In 2022, compared to before the program (Figure 1), we saw a/an:

- 16% increase in mentees feeling confident in themselves ('self-confidence');
- 9% increase in mentees feeling that good things will happen to them ('optimism');
- 9% increase in mentees giving things a go that they found difficult ('self-confidence'); and
- 8% increase in mentees feeling positive about being Autistic ('self-acceptance').

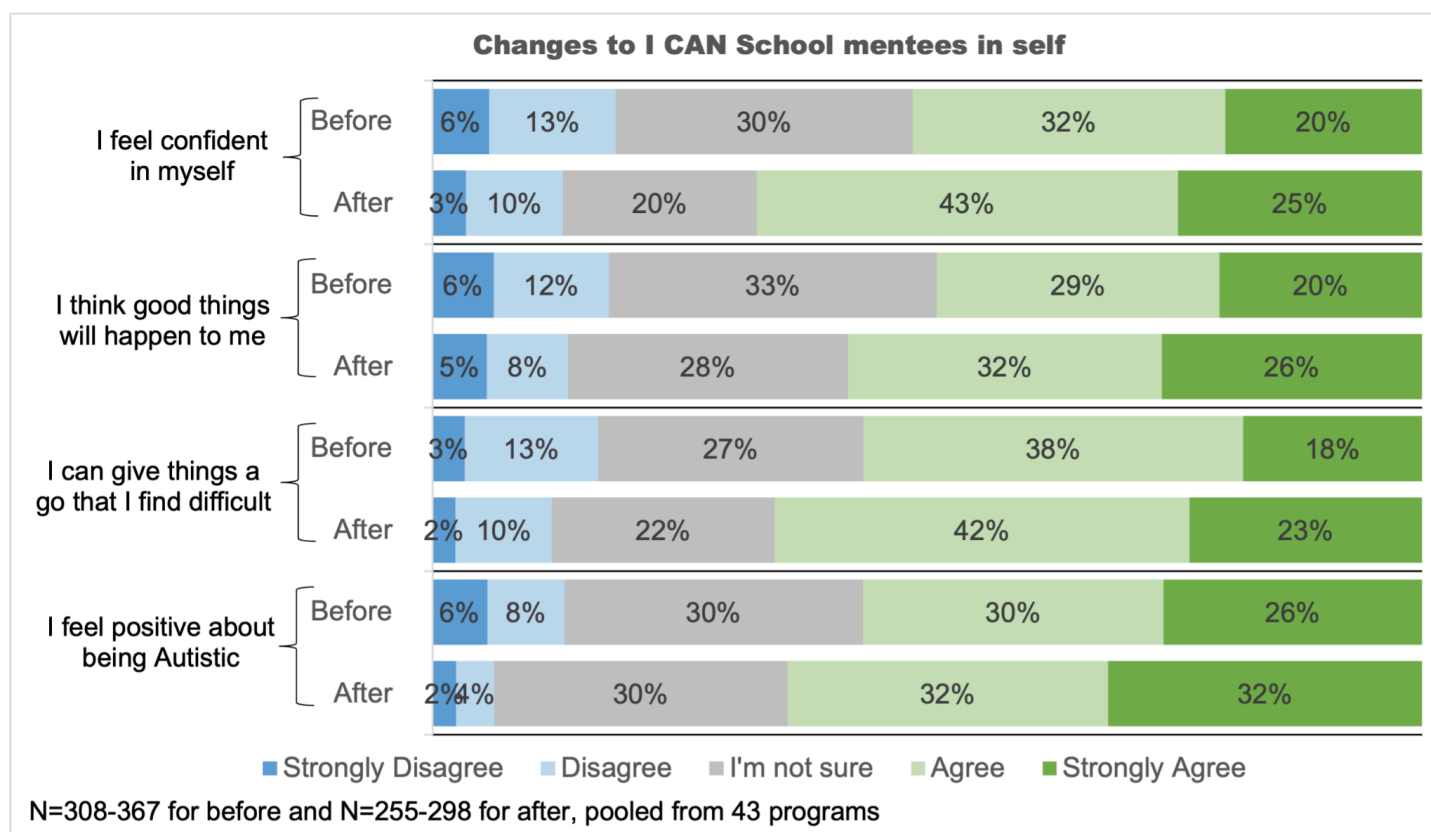


Figure 1: Changes in mentees' self-esteem after attending an I CAN School® mentoring program

Linking it back to the draft NAS, there are commitments relating to improving the acceptance, inclusion and support of Autistic people in society. However, there are currently no commitments focusing on improving the confidence and self-esteem of Autistic people. These are important components to support the 'Self-Determination and Autonomy' guiding principle, particularly in overcoming the challenges Autistic people may experience in life so that they can fulfil what they want to do. Hence, the NAS should also incorporate as a commitment improvements in Autistic people's self-esteem so that they have the belief and motivation to

complete their education, enter and maintain meaningful employment and live the life they want. Incorporating this commitment will allow government departments and organisations to run and support programs such as ours that help Autistic people improve their skills and capabilities, build social connections and enhance their self-esteem.

Recommendation 4

Add a commitment in the NAS to improve the self-esteem and self-confidence of Autistic people.

Raising awareness of Autism among school staff and students

In addition to peer mentoring programs for Autistic students at school, we also deliver professional development programs and student talks to school staff and students respectively. Both programs aim to make schools more inclusive and accommodating to Autistic young people so that they feel safe at school, allowing them to attend and stay engaged at school.

Commitment 1a

Greater public education and awareness including a better understanding of autism within workplaces, and with a focus on health, education and the criminal justice system.

Our professional development programs provide a strengths-based, neuro-affirming view of Autism that is inclusive of the voices of Autistic people. They aim to improve the capabilities of teachers and school staff and leaders to build safe, trusting relationships with Autistic and neurodivergent students at school so that their needs are accommodated, increasing the chances that they will attend and engage at school. Our professional development programs are delivered in different state and territory education systems, highlighting the applicability of our strengths-based philosophy across Australia. Hence, our professional development programs are aligned to commitment 1a as they aim to enhance understanding of Autism within the education system among school staff.

Commitment 11

Build on commitment 5 Improve the safety and welfare of Autistic people through the reduction of all forms of discrimination, violence, abuse, bullying, vilification and exploitation to specifically focus on Autistic students in all levels of education.

In addition to school mentoring programs for Autistic students, we also deliver student talks to school students to raise awareness of Autism and how to best support Autistic students at school. These student talks aim to empower students to stop bullying of Autistic students and to be more accepting and supportive of Autistic students, doing everything they can to listen to them, accommodate their needs and celebrate their strengths. Although our student talks align with commitment 11 in reducing bullying of Autistic students at school, we argue that commitment 11 should also build on commitment 1 to improve understanding and acceptance of Autism at school. Stopping bullying of Autistic students at school is simply not enough. Students and staff should also be educated on what Autism is, the benefits of engaging with Autistic students at school and how they can help them. This will contribute to a safe school environment where Autistic young people are less likely to be bullied, can be themselves at school and are included in classroom and school activities, improving their school attendance and engagement levels.

Recommendation 5

Link commitment 11 to commitment 1 to highlight the need to improve the acceptance of Autistic students in all levels of education.

Representation of Autistic people in society

Commitment 1b

Increasing visibility and representation of Autistic people in the media, sports and the arts.

Regarding commitment 1b, visibility and representation of Autistic people should be extended beyond media, sports and the arts to represent all fields of life across all ages. Although there are famous Autistic people in the media, sports and the arts, there have also been other Autistic people in history who have excelled in other fields. These [include](#) physicists Albert Einstein and Issac Newton, biologists Charles Darwin and Temple Grandin, the politician Thomas Jefferson and founders Bill Gates and Elon Musk.

In addition to famous Autistic people who have excelled in their field, it is also important that Autistic young people are exposed to role models close to their age group to understand what is possible for them after they leave school. I CAN Network has previously run the *Humans on the Autism Spectrum* campaign which leverages the power of storytelling to celebrate the personal stories and insights of Autistic people in our community. In 2020, we partnered with the National Disability Insurance Agency to deliver [Humans on the Autism Spectrum: School Leavers](#). This is a video series of ten Autistic young adults who are navigating post-school life, including TAFE, university, the workplace and the community. The messages contained in these videos are highly relevant to Autistic young people as they provide real-life, down-to-earth insights of what it is like to live as an Autistic young adult. These videos provide a nice counterbalance to famous Autistic people, giving Autistic young people a more holistic picture of what success looks like across the lifespan.

Hence, visibility and representation of Autistic people should be inclusive of all fields and all age groups, not just the media, sports and the arts.

Recommendation 6

In commitment 1b, replace the phrase 'in the media, sports and the arts' with 'across all fields of life and age groups'.

I CAN Network as a case study of Autistic-led businesses

Commitment 1a

Greater public education and awareness including a better understanding of autism within workplaces, and with a focus on health, education and the criminal justice system.

Commitment 6

Increase meaningful employment opportunities (including business ownership, self-employment, entrepreneurship and social enterprise) for Autistic people.

Commitment 7

Support employers to hire and retain Autistic employees through improving the accessibility of recruitment processes and fostering workplace environments that are safe and inclusive for all Autistic people.

I CAN Network is a great case study of commitments 6 and 7, detailing how Autistic Australians can establish a social enterprise to hire and retain Autistic people in meaningful employment. We employ Autistic people in our organisation to deliver school and online peer mentoring programs to Autistic young people as well as professional development programs and speaking engagements to schools and workplaces. We also employ Autistic people in administrative roles within teams such as Finance and Administration and the Office of CEO to run parts of the organisation. Our employment practices are driven by the 50% Difference, where at least

50% of our management and staff are Autistic. This gives us an incentive to create a work culture that respects the expertise and lived experiences of Autistic people, allowing us to employ and retain Autistic people. With 83 out of 100 people employed in the organisation being Autistic or neurodivergent as of 2024, I CAN Network is an employer that provides meaningful employment opportunities to Autistic people.

In I CAN Network, we hire Autistic people to become mentors in our school and online mentoring programs. These mentors provide their lived experiences to Autistic young people coming to our school and online mentoring programs. These young people often relate to the mentor, contributing to improved outcomes. Often, these mentors are employed from motivated mentees who have actively engaged in past peer mentoring programs and who show the capabilities and motivation to mentor other Autistic young people. We establish career pathways where mentors performing well in their role are promoted to Program Facilitators who plan and run the mentoring programs and then Lead Facilitators who develop content and train other staff. Through these pathways, Autistic people are given more responsibility in running the mentoring programs, further improving their skills and capabilities. The skills and experiences they gain from working in I CAN Network are transferable to other jobs, increasing the chances that they will be able to have a sustainable, fulfilling career.

These examples are a sample of how I CAN Network can promote social enterprise, entrepreneurship and business ownership as viable alternative routes to employment for Autistic people who want to build their capabilities in their career or show off their ideas and strengths to society. We use our experiences as a social enterprise to facilitate lunchtime discussions with employers, passing down what works in recruiting, supporting and retaining Autistic and neurodivergent employees in I CAN Network.

At the same time, we feel that the Federal Government should support Autistic people who want to establish and grow a small business or social enterprise. An additional commitment in the NAS to support Autistic-led small businesses and social enterprises would help Autistic people establish a firm footing in their small business or social enterprise. This will increase the chances that they remain viable and self-employed, producing goods and services of economic value to Australia and employing other Autistic people to alleviate high rates of unemployment and underemployment among Autistic people.

Recommendation 7

Write an additional commitment under Economic Inclusion to provide support to Autistic people wanting to establish a small business or social enterprise.

Responding to the commitments on evidence and evaluation

Commitment 23

Develop a National Autism Strategy Evidence Framework, including a Theory of Change, Program Logic, Outcomes Framework, and Evaluation Framework.

Commitment 24

Develop a robust Evaluation Plan and reporting mechanism, co-led by Autistic people and the autism community, for the National Autism Strategy.

We applaud the FDSS for its commitment to develop an Evidence Framework and the accompanying Evaluation Plan and reporting mechanism that will sit alongside the NAS. The Theory of Change and outcome logic chains within the Evidence Framework will help everyone understand the problems Autistic people face in their life and how the NAS initiatives and actions will lead to improved outcomes for Autistic people and their support networks over different timeframes. These will help government departments and non-government organisations plan and implement programs that align with relevant parts of the NAS.

The Outcomes and Evaluation Frameworks, along with the accompanying Evaluation Plan and reporting mechanism, will be helpful in identifying what outcomes need to be measured and how they will be measured. In particular, the inclusion of assessing what, why, how and for whom the Strategy is making a difference will identify areas of the NAS that are producing outcomes, as well as areas that require further work to improve the chances of making a difference to Autistic people and their support networks.

Although the Evaluation Plan and reporting mechanism will be co-led by Autistic people and the Autism community, there is no explicit mention of the NAS Evidence Framework being co-designed and/or co-led by Autistic people and the Autism community. Hence, co-lead and co-design of the NAS Evidence Framework with Autistic people and the Autism community should be incorporated in commitment 23.

Recommendation 8

In commitment 23, state that the National Autism Strategy Evidence Framework is to be co-led and co-designed with Autistic people and the Autism community.

Additionally, given that Theories of Change can be highly detailed, the Evidence Framework and accompanying Evaluation Plan should be communicated at various levels of complexity for different audiences. While some materials should be detailed so that policymakers and program managers can plan programs and evaluations that align to the Evidence Framework, other materials should be simplified so that Autistic people and the Autism community can understand what is being measured and assessed in the programs. This will empower them to provide feedback that is relevant to the development of the Evidence Framework and accompanying Evaluation Plan.

Recommendation 9

Prepare materials on the National Autism Strategy Evidence Framework and Evaluation Plan at various levels of complexity to fulfil the needs of different audiences.

Conclusion

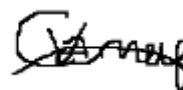
We would like to praise the FDSS for providing a draft NAS that is tailored to the needs and challenges of Autistic and neurodivergent people and that is aligned to the programs that we run. At the same time, we have used our insights and experiences to recommend additions and changes to the draft NAS. Together, these recommendations will broaden the scope of the NAS to better support the diverse needs of different Autistic people and to improve society's awareness of what Autistic people can contribute to society. These will contribute to a society where Autistic people can fully participate in all aspects of life and be accepted for who they are.

I hope that you have enjoyed reading our submission on the draft NAS. Should you have any enquiries on the submission, please contact us at chris@icannetwork.com.au.

Yours sincerely



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