

Joy Burch MLA

Part of Katy Gallagher's Team



Email: bob@buckley.id.au

Dear Mr Buckley,

Thank you for your letter of 30 July, 2012 regarding the ACT Labor Parties support of and commitment to Autism Spectrum Disorders in the ACT. I am responding to you on behalf of the ACT Labor in my capacity as the Minister responsible for Disability and Therapy Services.

Question 1-diagnosis:

Therapy ACT, Autism service provides Comprehensive multidisciplinary assessments for people suspected of having an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), these include:

- An autism assessment for children under eighteen years of age on referral from a paediatrician or psychiatrist's. Children are referred from as young as two years old by paediatricians. Adults need to be referred by a psychologist or a psychiatrist.
- Before the assessment the paediatrician will conduct a medical assessment to eliminate any underlying medical conditions.
- A hearing test is also required before the assessment for children under seven years to preclude any hearing difficulties.
- An up-to-date developmental or cognitive assessment (from a school counsellor or psychologist) is also required.

In keeping with best practice standards in autism assessment, the assessment involves staff from Psychology, Speech Pathology, and Occupational Therapy. Assessment also includes consultation with significant others, such as family members, allied health professionals, Child Health Medical Officers, paediatricians, education staff and others involved with the child/adolescent.

Questions 2- 5-Early intervention and support:

As you would appreciate the range and severity of the difficulties people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience can vary widely and as such the ACT Governments response to ASD services needs to be flexible and responsive to the needs of people experiencing ASD and their families and carers.

The Autism Service, at Therapy ACT, uses an interdisciplinary therapy approach to the intervention of children with autism, under the age of eight years. This is a service delivery model that brings speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and social worker together to provide the child and family with a coordinated effort.

To enable the generalisation of skills and to provide the best opportunity for learning, therapy services are delivered across natural settings (home, school and or daycare), and in collaboration with parents/ family members, teachers and carers. Strategies which are employed by therapists include the use of visual supports, improving functional communication skills, the picture exchange communication system (PECS) and social scripts. Play is used to teach pivotal skills, such as turn-taking, communication & language.

Behaviour management interventions (including discreet trial training, pivotal response training as well as reinforcement strategies) are employed to teach new skills. Sensory issues impacting on behaviour and functioning of the child are also addressed.

With the aim of increasing family resilience and capacity the Autism Service, at Therapy ACT, offers a family group program. The series of six three hour workshops aims to equip parents (and grandparents) with coping strategies such as behavior management, autism specific communication strategies, problem solving, social support and counseling for the family unit. Whereas, Therapy ACT's Autism Service uses a range of interventions (including behavioural) focusing on children under eight years.

A family-focused approach considers the needs of the whole family rather than focusing early intervention on the child alone.

The Commonwealth Government's Helping Children with Autism Package (HCWA) includes a range of initiatives including funding of assessment services through Medicare, funding of up to \$12,000 per year for children under 7 to access non government providers and a number of parent and educator information and professional development initiatives. The Commonwealth Government has included consultation with States and Territories in its evaluation of elements of the package, usually through teleconferencing.

Therapy ACT links with HCWA through referrals to the Commonwealth funded Autism Advisers at Autism Aspergers ACT. Following a diagnosis of ASD, Autism Service staff provide families with information regarding the HCWA package as well the contact details for the Autism Advisers. The Autism Service meets regularly with Autism Advisers to share information.

Therapists in the Autism service wherever possible liaise with private providers in regard to determining current therapy needs and goals for clients. Staff also meet informally with private providers to share service information and issues related to autism. Staff of Therapy ACT's Autism Service have partnered with Education and Training Directorate Staff and the funded non government consortium to provide parent and teacher training through the Positive Partnership initiative.

Questions 6-11 -Education

The Education and Training Directorate provides a range of specialist developmental and educational programs including:

- Communication and Social Awareness playgroup for children aged between two and three years. A diagnosis is not required for this group, but many of the children are considered likely to be diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder;
- children with a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder between the ages of three and school entry are eligible for nine hours of early intervention education per week;
- preschool-aged children are able to access up to 15 hours of mainstream preschool per week, in addition to their early intervention education hours;
- Autism specific Learning Support Units in primary and high schools provide supported educational placements;
- Inclusion Support for students in mainstream settings. This is a combination of direct resources allocated to schools and the support of consultant teachers;
- Specialist school placements;
- Students with ASD are also eligible for placements in general Learning Support Units and Learning Support Centres;
- Technology support from the Inclusive Technology team; and
- Ongoing professional development programs for school staff focussing on ASD

Question 12 and 13-Post School Options and employment

Disability ACT focuses its work on supporting young people who are not ready for the labour market or excluded from it in some way. We offer two main forms of support to young people with a disability, including those with ASD, who have left school and who are not yet able to undertake full-time employment, further study, or access Australian Government employment and services.

- **A Transition Service** assists young people to build vocational skills through individual planning, training, and volunteer work as well as developing skills and making connections within their community. This service starts while the young person is still in school and continues for up to three years after the person leaves school.
- **Ongoing Community Access** support assists people with high support needs who require alternatives to employment. This can either be through access to an established provider (such as LEAD or Sharing Places) or through provision of an Individual Support Package (ISP).
- **Post School Supported Employment**-Australian Disability Enterprises-ADE (also previously known as Business Services, supported employment or sheltered workshops) are funded through FaHCSIA. They have a dual focus in that they provide employment for people with disability and operate as a commercial business. Disability ACT does not provide funding towards this nor do they have any influence in who is offered a place. Factors considered by the ADE are the desire of the individual to be employed and the capacity of the ADE to accommodate an individual employee's needs while meeting their objective to run a commercially viable business. To be eligible for the ADE individuals need to be able to work at least 8 hrs a week (with support) and be in receipt of the Disability Support Pension.

In addition to these supports Disability ACT actively works with community providers and the ACT Social Enterprise Hub to increase self-employment opportunities for people with disability, including

those with ASD. The Social Enterprise Hub provides business development support to community organisations or social entrepreneurs that want to develop a social enterprise to create employment for people excluded from the labour market. Some examples of this can be found on the ACT social enterprise hub www.socialventures.com.au/social-enterprise-development/social-enterprise-hubs/the-act-hub

Question 14-Accommodation

The Disability ACT Housing Options Facilitator is available to assist all people with disability, including those with ASD to consider appropriate and suitable supported accommodation options. The Housing options coordinator assists to identify and develop housing options that best suit individual needs by; providing a housing options planning service, providing information and completing referrals to organisations that will work on implementing a plan. Disability ACT and Housing ACT work together with individuals, families and carers to assist individuals to establish housing, tenancy and support arrangements that best suit the physical, cultural and economic circumstances of an individual.

Question 15-Respite

Disability ACT provides and funds a range of different respite services for people with disabilities, including individuals with ASD.

Disability ACT provides centre based respite care as follows:

- Kese House (Kaleen) for young people aged 5-12 years old.
- Teen Hose (Narrabundah) for 13-18 year olds.
- Elouera (Charnwood) for adults with an intellectual disability.
- Hughes for people with physical or mobility difficulties.

In addition to the above, Disability ACT fund a variety of additional centre based, own home and flexible respite options provided by a range of non government organisations including: TANDEM, Carers ACT and Marymead.

Other Disability ACT funded services such as the new afterschool and vacation care services also provide a respite effect for the parents and carers of older children with disability, including those with ASD.

Question 17 and 18 –Autism awareness

ACT Labor is fully supportive of any measure that increases the awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders and the services that are available to those who are diagnosed and their carers. We will continue to work with the community sector and ASD advocates to ensure that the ACT community is aware of ASD and to allow those with ASD and their carers to more fully participate in the community.

Question 19-21-Human rights

ACT Labor is proud of its commitment to Human Rights. We are the party that in government instituted the Human Rights Act and established the Human Right Commission for the ACT. Most recently we have legislated for the inclusion of Education as a right within the Human Rights ACT.

The ACT Human Rights commission also contains within its auspices a Commissioner for Children and Young People to investigate and consider matters in relation to the rights of all Children and Young People and a Health Services Commissioner to consider matters in relation to health services.

Question 22-24-NDIS

As you would be aware the ACT was recently announced as a launch site for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This is an exciting opportunity for both Government and community to work together to ensure we are listening to the needs of people living with disabilities, their families and carers and doing all we can to promote and support inclusive and meaningful contributions for all people living in our society.

There will be numerous opportunities over the coming year for people to comment on and contribute to the NDIS in the ACT. Two town hall meetings have been proposed through Disability ACT, 12.30 - 2.00pm Wednesday 29 August 2012 at the Apollo Room of the Hellenic Club, Launceston Street, Woden and 5.30 - 7.00pm Wednesday 12 September 2012 The Foyer, Belconnen Arts Centre, Emu Bank, Belconnen . We would encourage you to participate in these meetings and share your knowledge on ASD and ways we can improve services through the NDIS and as a community.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to the ASD community in the ACT.

Yours sincerely



Joy Burch MLA
Minister for Community Services
Member for Brindabella

12 September 2012

