



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR INCLUSION
AND SOCIAL WELLBEING

RESPECTING DIVERSITY SAFEGUARDING EQUALITY

Malta's 2021 – 2030
National Autism Strategy

An Autism State Support Plan in terms of Article 11 of the Persons
within the Autism Spectrum (Empowerment) Act



AUTISM ADVISORY COUNCIL

RESPECTING
DIVERSITY
SAFEGUARDING EQUALITY

Malta's 2021 – 2030
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Expertise from the disability, education and health sectors was guaranteed through representatives of the relevant Government Ministries, and their corresponding Faculties within the University of Malta. The practical experience of Aġenzija Sapport and the regulatory perspective of the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability were also present, alongside the experiences of persons on the autism spectrum and their families, representing civil society.

However, it was useless to just discuss matters around boardroom tables, and not go out into the real world, and listen to real people and real issues on the ground. After all, it can be quite easy to write up a strategy document. Other countries have done this, and there is a wealth of information out there. Still, we wanted to make sure that the final document was realistic and implementable. It had to address the status quo in Malta, take a snapshot of where we are at, and chart a course of where we want to get to.

This is why, since 2018, the Council has organised a number of outreach events. We have organised meetings for service providers in the autism sector, we have engaged with schools and gone on University campus, we organised town hall and other sessions for persons on the autism spectrum.

We also listened up close to the concerns of persons on the autism spectrum and their families, holding countless one-on-one meetings, to gauge the situation and factor in their experiences and wishes. We also spoke to professionals and practitioners.

While most of this work was done in Malta, we also made sure to factor in a more international perspective, participating in events and discussions abroad, including at European Union and United Nations level, to listen to other views, present our experience, and engage in a mutually beneficial debate.

The result is the document that you have in hand now. We have grouped the concerns put forward through this extensive consultation exercise into 7 main categories, and worked on providing specific action points in respect of each, after laying out a summary of the main concerns raised for every category. What you, the persons we consulted, said, is all laid out, side by side with what we, as the Autism Advisory Council, want to achieve over the next 10 years.

We will work through the National Coordination Mechanism within the Office for Disability Issues (ODI), set up in terms of Article 33(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to ensure a streamlined implementation process for the contents of this document.

The Coordination Mechanism allows for inter-entity and inter-Ministerial coordination within the disability sector, and is best placed to be able to bring together different stakeholders that would be involved in implementing the various, far-reaching aspects of this Strategy.

Given that Malta's National Autism Strategy is an all-encompassing, cradle-to-grave Strategy, making it one of the few such documents internationally – although this document focuses much less on the medical side of things, and much more on the social and empowerment aspects – we wanted to use a system that would be fit for purpose, while avoiding duplication by creating even more bureaucracy.

Monitoring and review of the Coordination Mechanism's work on the Strategy would be then performed by the Council itself, further to the mandate given by Article 10(b) of the Persons with the Autism Spectrum (Empowerment) Act.

It will be a long road ahead – however, a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. I still remember, back in 2015, in the middle of my doctoral studies, and as an activist, pushing for autism-specific legislation. I was glad to see this initiative take traction, and to have eventually contributed to the resulting Act in 2016.

As an idealist, mainly armchair activist, I wanted change, and drastic measures. The process leading up to the Act, and the last couple of years working on this Strategy, have taught me that the reality on the ground is much more complex, and that things are harder than they seem. However, I am thankful to have been part of a process that is every activist's dream.

While I have had a good dose of reality meanwhile, I still believe in achieving the end goals I pushed for initially – those of increased awareness, and eventual total acceptance, inclusion and empowerment of persons on the autism spectrum in Malta. Things may seem hard – but they are not as difficult, if you are all on board. So now, while the Council will continue with its work, we call on you to join us, and let's make real change together.

I would like to thank all of the members of the Autism Advisory Council for their hard work and patience, in making this step a reality, to all those persons who made this initiative possible at both political and technical level and, most of all, to all those who contributed their feedback, shared their expertise, and spilt their heart out, to make sure we could get to this point today.

Alistair de Gaetano

Chairperson

Autism Advisory Council

YOU SAID:

- “People do not understand what autism is;
- Persons on the autism spectrum are misunderstood and treated unfairly due to this lack of understanding;
- Families of persons on the autism spectrum are often seen as troublemakers because businesses and government departments fail to understand their needs;
- Maltese society still maintains a strong culture of shame, and a wrong view of autism, by businesses, government departments, individuals and even some voluntary organisations, hurts persons on the autism spectrum and their families;
- Malta is also becoming a more multicultural society, so it is important to understand that other cultures might view autism differently, and we need to target them too;
- Autism is not a disease, it is a different way of being – we must ensure that while we are all different, we are all equal – according to the concept of neurodiversity (neurological diversity) mentioned in Maltese law;
- Although some persons on the autism spectrum do not speak, this does not mean that they have nothing to say, and we must make an effort to ensure that they can communicate in alternative ways.”

WE WILL:

- 1.1** Work, together with you, and with other partners locally and abroad, to produce awareness campaigns showing what autism really is and really is not.

- 1.2** Target these awareness campaigns, including, where relevant, in the form of continuing, up-to-date training, to different sectors of society, such as:
 - the educational sector;
 - the health sector;
 - the social care sector;
 - persons on the autism spectrum and their families;
 - support persons and informal caregivers;
 - the general public, through local councils, and social and cultural groups.

- 1.3** Use different methods to spread our message across, such as:
 - in-person visits;
 - social media campaigns;
 - regular print and audio-visual media.

1.4 Make sure that efforts represent different groups within Maltese society, particular when those groups are currently in more vulnerable situations:

- people from different social and economic realities;
- people from different geographical regions in Malta;
- people from different national and cultural backgrounds;
- people of different genders (since many automatically associate autism with the male gender only).

1.5 Ensure that persons on the autism spectrum, their families and significant others are at the heart of developing and delivering these campaigns.

1.6 Make sure this awareness is a step:

- towards the acceptance of persons on the autism spectrum as equal members of Maltese society, as specified in the law;
- towards the inclusion and empowerment of persons on the autism spectrum and their families.

1.7 Make inclusion something that becomes natural for everyone in Maltese society, by working to ensure that when we plan or do anything, everyone can participate such as by:

- making a child feel included in class and in extra-curricular activities;
- designing a building to be accessible for everyone, including people's sensory needs too, and not only their physical needs;
- making public offices, medical facilities and shops welcoming for everyone;
- ensuring that open spaces and venues for enjoying leisure time can be used by everyone.

1.8 Emphasise the need, in such campaigns, to empower persons who make no or little use of spoken language, by:

- also providing them with access to, funding, training and support for using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, such as tablets, as well as other languages, spoken or otherwise, alongside interventions – as and where appropriate – such as speech therapy;
- educating family members and persons on the autism spectrum themselves as to the availability of and possibility to use such alternative methods;
- reaching out particularly to educational establishments and employers, and also public and private service providers such as businesses, hospitals and government offices, and to voluntary organisations, to be made aware of and equipped to interact with persons using alternative communication.

02

Early identification
and autism interventions



YOU SAID:

- “Children are not being identified early enough as being on the autism spectrum, and interventions are not commencing early enough;
- The process of early identification is lengthy, can lack dignity, and can also lead to significant costs;
- The methodology used for early identification needs to be revised, and parents demand more clarity;
- Girls are being missed by the diagnostic system, or not being served well by current available interventions;
- Families and persons on the autism spectrum should be given more guidance when seeking early identification and/ or autism interventions, and also assisted with relevant costs;
- Service providers offering early identification and autism intervention services should be regulated, and follow common standards for the benefit of service users;
- Children on the autism spectrum and their families should be included, as far as possible, in the process of early identification;
- Persons on the autism spectrum and their families, in particular parents and siblings, as well as significant others, should be at the centre of any autism intervention;
- Any autism intervention should be designed specifically around a person on the autism spectrum, and not attempt to change them, but to bring out the best in them;
- Healthcare needs of children and adolescents on the autism spectrum are not being addressed in an autism-sensitive manner;
- There is no appropriate medication that I can find for autism/ one of our biggest problems is overmedication;

- There is not enough information or guidance on alternative interventions for autism;
- It is important that structures and systems are in place to enable persons on the spectrum to receive an accurate diagnosis and the support that they need, thus facilitating their optimal functioning and ability to participate in mainstream activities, within a society that accepts and understands them.”

WE WILL:

2.1 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies, to ensure a holistic reform of current State and private services in the area of early identification and intervention, by:

- building upon and strengthening already existing State structures, both in terms of clinical area and specialised human resources and training, such as the Child Development Assessment Unit (CDAU), the Children and Young Persons Services (CYPS), the School Psychologist Service and the school Autism Spectrum Support Team, and related services, to ensure timely and effective intervention and support;
- ensuring regular monitoring and review of methods used, to keep them in line with the best international standards;
- the social care sector;
- developing further existing genetic services, both in terms of capacity building and health service development and training, focused on identifying the underlying aetiology of neurodevelopmental disability, while ensuring that data gleaned from such services is used towards appropriate ends;

- Understanding:
 - That many individuals may not present with pronounced or stereotypical manifestations of expected autism symptoms, such as challenges in social communication or interaction, or specific interests, behaviours or activities, but might still qualify for an autism diagnosis, or otherwise for support to address the challenges they face;
 - That diagnostic procedures should be carried out using a multi-disciplinary approach, informed by evidence-based practice, and that even the best of such practices are only as good as the competence of those administering them;
- Understanding:
 - That many individuals with pronounced or stereotypical manifestations of expected autism symptoms, such as challenges in social communication or interaction, or specific interests, behaviours or activities, may exhibit certain key expected symptoms while failing to exhibit others, which could lead diagnosticians to not issue them with a formal diagnosis, and;
 - That individuals in whom such expected symptoms are not pronounced, or those who otherwise present in very different ways to expected stereotypical norms, might also similarly be excluded from formal diagnosis, and;
 - That every effort must be made to ensure that such factors do not impede a person from receiving a diagnosis, as early as possible, to ensure that a person has access to all necessary supports to address the challenges that they face, including those resulting from co-occurring conditions;
- Understanding that the medical model of investigation, formal diagnosis and treatment should never exclude or replace ongoing functional, social and educational supports, and that ensuring these supports should be the primary focus for early identification and/ or intervention, as distinct from striving to produce a dogmatic, permanent, diagnostic label.

2.2 Propose draft legislation that will regulate the provision of professional services in the autism field, and the registration and conduct of service providers, to:

- ensure peace of mind for persons on the autism spectrum and families using these services;
- support regulated service providers who in turn want to support persons on the autism spectrum, their families and significant others;
- put a stop to any negative practices that are not in line with the best international standards.

2.3 Work closely with Government, following the adoption of this legislation, to ensure mechanisms for financial support to persons on the autism spectrum and their families making use of regulated early identification and autism intervention services, while also making sure that there is no duplication of services.

2.4 Maintain an open dialogue with service providers in the field of early identification and autism intervention, including:

- to promote the concept of holistic, person-centred interventions, with a focus on a transdisciplinary approach, bringing together different professionals from across disciplines;
- securing guarantees for continuity and coverage of services, in general, and especially when services are offered by the State, or through the partnership of a private provider with the State;
- ensuring that services are not offered merely to children, and that services are available across a person's lifespan, and delivered in an age-appropriate manner;
- reaching negotiated agreements to tackle the issue of waiting lists.

- 2.5** Work with you, relevant government entities, and public and private service providers, to ensure that early identification and autism intervention services are more broadly gender-sensitive and inclusive.
- 2.6** Work with you, relevant government entities, and public and private healthcare providers, to ensure that healthcare interventions offered to children and adolescents on the autism spectrum:
- are both disability and age-appropriate;
 - are delivered in autism-sensitive settings, primarily in familiar environments such as home/ school/ occupational settings;
 - are delivered by staff sensitised to the needs of these children and adolescents;
 - are twinned with awareness and information measures aimed at these children and adolescents and their families, both at the place of intervention, such as the use of clear signage, and outside of it, such as the use of accessible websites.
- 2.7** Work closely with relevant government entities and other stakeholders involved, including the National Statistics Office, towards collating anonymised statistics relevant to the number of persons on the autism spectrum in Malta, with the specific purpose of using such data:
- in line with applicable obligations found in international and national laws;
 - to be able to better map the need for services and supports for persons on the autism spectrum, and deliver such services and supports in line with feedback received.

2.8 Work with you, relevant experts, government bodies and regulatory authorities, to properly examine the issue of medication and autism in Malta, and, in particular:

- Examine the current and possible use of medication, factoring in the rights and input of persons on the autism spectrum, to improve quality of life in relation to specific complaints;
- Look into the issue of overmedication, and tackle any concerns as necessary;
- Examine the issue of alternative medicine and other interventions, offered both locally and abroad, in relation to specific complaints experiences by persons on the autism spectrum, and work to evaluate possible evidence-based benefits and risks should there be evidence for possible effectiveness, and also specific regulation.

2.9 Work to ensure that the input and voices of persons on the autism spectrum, their families and significant others are given utmost consideration, against the backdrop of this Strategy, when planning any further action taken in respect of early identification and autism intervention.

YOU SAID:

- “Students on the autism spectrum are still not enjoying the same treatment as their neurotypical peers, in both the private and public education systems, at all levels;
- While there are many committed educators, such as Administrators, Teachers or Lecturers, Learning Support Educators, and other professionals or practitioners from specialised fields, autism sensitivity still varies largely from school to school at the primary and secondary level, and also in different tertiary-level institutions;
- At the primary and secondary level, the school and classroom environment should be adapted to ensure that children on the autism spectrum are not triggered by elements such as clutter, while rendering the environment also more pleasant for neurotypical children;
- Designing lessons or lectures in a way that better includes both students on the autism spectrum, and neurotypical students, will allow students on the autism spectrum to benefit more widely from mainstream education;
- Further efforts to include children on the autism spectrum into mainstream education, such as support classrooms or units, and further supplementary programmes, should be developed and used as necessary;
- Ensuring that a student’s statement of educational needs is not concept available only to primary and secondary school students, but also to students in post-secondary education;
- We should work closely with educational institutions, at all levels, to make sure autism knowledge is shared with all students – on the autism spectrum and otherwise, families, and educators;
- Support structures should be set up or strengthened in public and private educational institutions, at different levels, following a common design, and with the input and participation of persons on the autism spectrum and their families;

- Transition planning should happen in a more structured manner, particularly between the home or childcare and the educational system, within the educational system, and between the educational system and the world of work.”

WE WILL:

3.1 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, to:

- ensure an updated, streamlined and holistic framework for establishing, reviewing and meeting the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum;
- build upon processes, such as the work of the Statementing Moderating Panel, policies such as the National Inclusion Policy, and toolkits such as the Autism Spectrum Support Toolkit, that are currently in place;
- extend Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) also to students in tertiary education, ensure the involvement of students in the process of their drafting and follow-up, and take measures to ensure that they are implemented and adhered to in the best way possible;
- strengthen existing and develop new support structures across educational institutions, and eventually a common plan for such structures at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

3.2 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, to:

- build upon and consolidate existing schemes, and develop a holistic framework for providing students on the autism spectrum with career guidance and support;

- create internship and work placement schemes for students on the autism spectrum, and encourage potential employers to join such initiatives;
- create a system, based on best practice experiences in other countries, that would ease students on the autism spectrum from educational institutions into the world of work.

3.3 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, to:

- increase content related to autism, including exposure to real-life situations involving autism, in initial and follow-up training, which is delivered to educational professionals, and constantly updated;
- ensure that continuing autism awareness is provided both to all students, and to parents where applicable.

3.4. Work with relevant government bodies and education providers, to further establish the principle of Universal Design – design that works for everyone – as a core educational value.

3.5 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, to:

- encourage the development and implementation of support classrooms or units for students on the autism spectrum, within mainstream education;
- review and encourage the development of new supplementary programmes, responding to general need, also in collaboration with non-governmental entities and private providers.

3.6 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, to:

- ensure that necessary assessments and follow-up reviews are carried out when children are still as young as possible, and that the State is empowered to take necessary steps in the best interests of the child as part of this process, in order that children would be able to access the most appropriate services and supports as early on as possible, and without delay;
- make further efforts to ensure the inclusion of certain students on the autism spectrum into mainstream education, to ensure they receive their academic entitlement, rather than resorting to methods such as extensive use of withdrawal rooms;
- review the programmes offered by schools, and make recommendations concerning updates to existing programmes, and new programmes.

3.7 Work, together with you, and with relevant government bodies and education providers, on appropriate transition planning strategies at all levels:

- from the home and childcare to compulsory schooling;
- from primary to middle school, middle to secondary school, secondary school to post-secondary education, and post-secondary to tertiary education;
- between formal education and employment.

YOU SAID:

- “We are worried that our children will not be able to find a job anywhere;
- The employment services are not autism-friendly, so there is no way that I can get a job, if I cannot even get through the process that will help me to get one;
- Employers do not know what autism is, or else do not want to employ persons on the autism spectrum;
- I am afraid of disclosing that I am on the autism spectrum at work, because they will fire me on the spot;
- There is no way I will get a serious job if I am on the autism spectrum, I was only ever offered simple tasks because of the way I am, but I know I am capable of doing much more;
- We just wish some people could help us with on-the-job coaching;
- There are job training programmes, but it is impossible to continue in full-time employment with a company after a period of training;
- My employer is refusing to make necessary adjustments I am entitled to due to being on the autism spectrum, or else is threatening to fire me for being difficult;
- We don’t know where or who to turn to for assessment, training or support concerning employment;
- Trade unions should be there to defend the rights of all workers and jobseekers, including those on the autism spectrum.”

WE WILL:

4.1 Work, together with you, relevant government entities, and public and private sector employers, to:

- ensure an updated, streamlined and holistic framework for establishing, reviewing and meeting the employment needs of persons on the autism spectrum;
- devise and deliver presentations highlighting the benefits of employing persons on the autism spectrum;
- devise training on autism at the workplace, for employers and co-workers.

4.2 Further work, together with you, relevant government entities, and public and private sector employers, to:

- strengthen existing programmes offered by the State or by private employers, in areas such as pre-employment training and job placements, aimed at persons with disability, to specifically better include persons on the autism spectrum;
- create proper channels of communication, for persons on the autism spectrum and their families to be made aware of, and be able to reach out to these programmes.

4.3 Engage with relevant government entities and educational institutions, to:

- continue strengthening the national system of job coaching and mentoring;
- create partnerships with foreign entities to address the shortage of job coaches and job mentors in Malta;
- work towards a job retention strategy for Malta, in collaboration with both private and public sector employers.

4.4 Engage with relevant government entities and educational institutions, to:

- encourage new firms, particularly foreign firms with a track record in the autism field, and local startups, to operate in an autism-friendly manner;
- offer guidance, financial incentives and people on the ground to these firms, including job coaches and job mentors.

4.5 Engage with relevant government entities, to ensure that tax incentives offered to employees on the autism spectrum are also extended to persons on the autism spectrum who want to become self-employed.

4.6 Make it a priority to work closely with regulatory authorities, to ensure a crackdown on discrimination related to:

- employees disclosing that they are on the autism spectrum;
- employers not providing reasonable adjustments required by law to employees on the autism spectrum;
- employers threatening employees with negative consequences or loss of employment, for reasons related specifically to an employee being on the autism spectrum.

4.7 Initiate a constructive dialogue with national trade unions, with the participation of persons on the autism spectrum and their families, to:

- make trade unions and their officials at all level aware of autism, and the needs of persons on the autism spectrum in the labour market;
- ensure that trade unions become drivers for promoting equality and non-discrimination for persons on the autism spectrum, in all areas related to employment and industrial relations.

The background features a teal gradient. On the left side, there are several overlapping geometric shapes: a large pink triangle pointing right, a yellow triangle pointing right, a smaller pink triangle pointing right, and an orange triangle pointing right. The text is positioned on the teal background.

05

Advocacy, Self-Advocacy
and Outreach

YOU SAID:

- “We do not have a voice (persons on the autism spectrum);
- What about the South?;
- What about Gozo?;
- What will happen to our children when we are gone?;
- Why won’t they listen to us, as parents?;
- How will they listen to us, if persons on the autism spectrum are not taken seriously?;
- If only we were listened to or included, we would not be in this situation right now;
- I want my children to be able to stand up for themselves, and tell their teacher how they feel, the next time around;
- We want to go out there and show Malta who we really are, but it is impossible to do that right now.”

WE WILL:

5.1 Continue working with the Autism Advisory Council working group, set up in terms of the law, for persons on the autism spectrum, to:

- give persons on the autism spectrum the encouragement and necessary support, along with the platform, to seek real empowerment;
- acknowledge that persons on the autism spectrum are different but definitely not less, in the spirit of neurodiversity, allowing them to cultivate a sense of identity and share it with others;
- enable persons on the autism spectrum to coordinate and direct their efforts at the national level, as agents for change, including through the formation of self-advocacy organisations led by them.

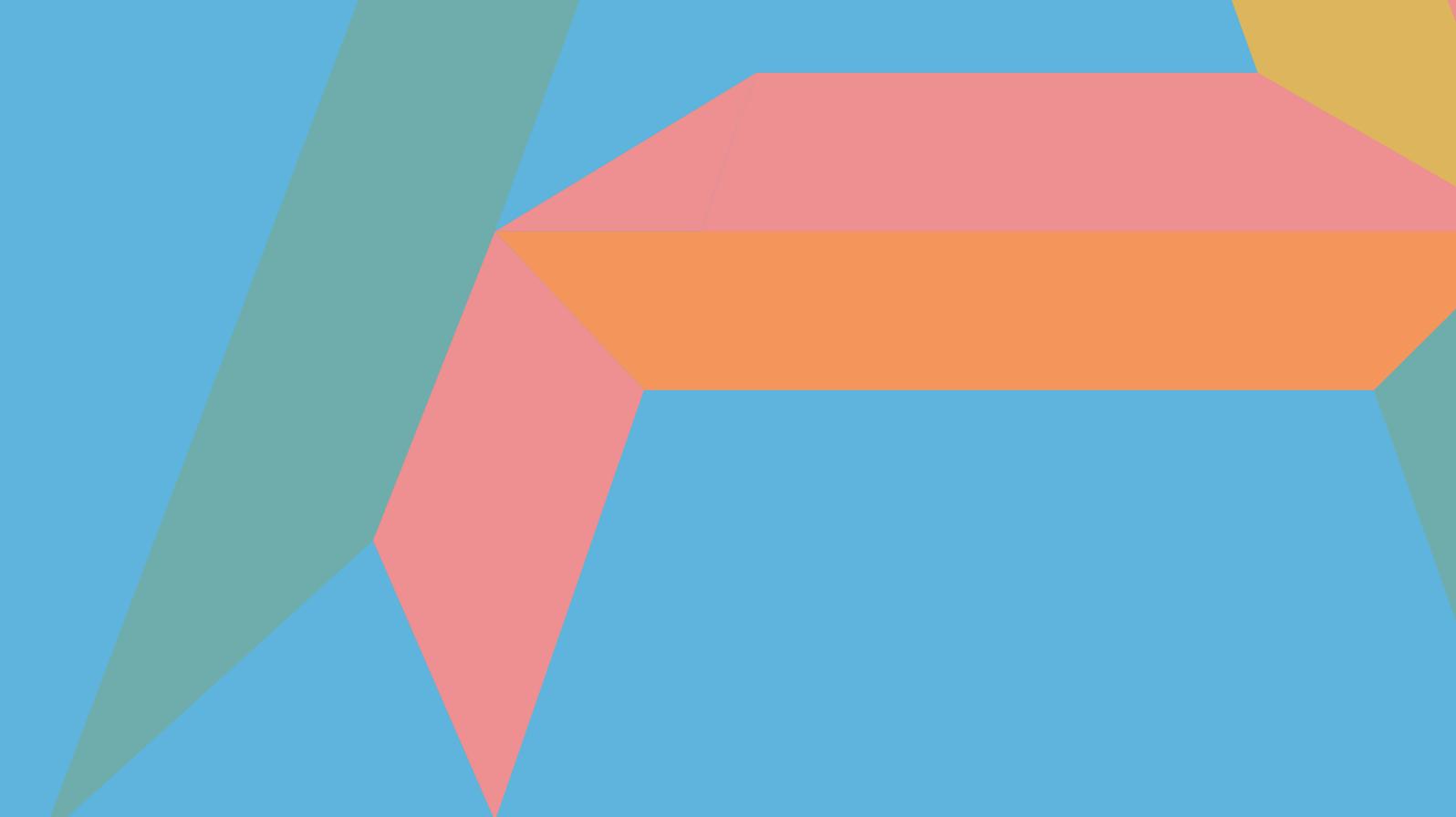
5.2 Create one or more similar working groups for family members of persons on the autism spectrum, paying particular attention to the voices of parents and siblings, to:

- give family members a more unified platform within the Autism Advisory Council;
- be operated in coordination with established, reputable stakeholders already in existence.

5.3 Continue organising the annual Service Providers' Meeting, while exploring further avenues for dialogue with them, recognising:

- the need for their services;
- the role and contribution of these entities;
- the importance of open and constructive dialogue with them.

- 5.4** Engage with all relevant stakeholders, to address the needs and challenges of specific regions in the country, in particular Gozo, as well as other regions and areas that would particularly benefit from such an exercise, through:
- commencing a dialogue with the Ministry for Gozo, to implement the law and this Plan in a more focused manner in that region, while replicating, as far as possible, at the regional level, elements and mechanisms described in this Plan;
 - engaging with regional councils representing Malta's other regions, as well as with local councils, as a means to better reach out to the communities that they represent, and devise more targeted ways in which to implement this Plan at the regional and local levels.
- 5.4** Cooperate with non-governmental organisations and, in particular, organisations of students and young people, to:
- ensure that advocacy and self-advocacy are not merely actions limited to activists or self-advocates in the autism field, but are streamlined into the daily activities of these organisations;
 - empower all their members through ensuring that the organisation practises inclusion in all its processes and activities;
 - encourage participation by and empower actual and potential members on the autism spectrum, having fostered an autism-friendly environment.
- 5.5** Reach out further to education authorities and specific educational institutions, in the private and public sectors, to include advocacy, in particular self-advocacy, and empowerment, as part of school curricula – such as in Personal and Social Development classes, alongside efforts at autism and peer awareness discussed earlier in this Plan.



06

Autism and Adulthood

YOU SAID:

- “Why does everyone just talk about children, but not about adults?;
- Just because I am an adult on the autism spectrum, I am expected to ‘grow up and act normal’;
- What about women? What if I do not otherwise identify as a male?;
- The Maltese system leaves you alone once you turn 16, unless you are really ‘severe’;
- Navigating the healthcare system is extremely daunting once children on the autism spectrum start to grow up;
- Police, employment services, businesses – they are not trained or equipped to interact appropriately with adults on the autism spectrum;
- Adults on the autism spectrum should be involved in efforts for change – as eye-openers, and eventually even role models and success stories;
- Unless we get Maltese society to understand autism, how can it integrate us? If kids on the autism spectrum are ‘naughty troublemakers’, then what about adults seeking jobs and having sensory overloads?;
- It is impossible to access appropriate services and supports – or even diagnosis – for adults on the autism spectrum, or else information is very well hidden;
- We are infantilising adults on the autism spectrum, and as a result, denying them their legal capacity because we presume they are incompetent to make any decisions about their lives;
- Why does the institution I live in not allow me to enter into a relationship, just because I am on the autism spectrum?;

- Society is holding my children, who will transition to adult life in a couple of years, away from the opportunity of accessing employment, other services, and rights, on an equal basis with non-autistic peers;
- If we don't even talk about autism and adulthood properly, how can we even start to address the existing (but hidden) phenomenon of adults growing old on the autism spectrum?."

WE WILL:

- 6.1** Work with adults on the autism spectrum, through the Autism Advisory Council's specific working group, and through events and initiatives organised, to:
- continue determining the needs and challenges faced by adults on the autism spectrum;
 - increase awareness as a way of increasing acceptance and inclusion;
 - reach out to relevant stakeholders, to contribute to specific initiatives for change.
- 6.2** Engage families – also emphasising the role of siblings – and significant others, to obtain feedback on needs and challenges, and to act as allies in initiatives aimed at reaching out and making a change.
- 6.3** Focus particular efforts on targeting decision-makers and providers – including through updating relevant laws and policies where necessary, and through providing continuing, up-to-date training – in the areas of:
- Employment;
 - Social support and care;

- Healthcare;
- Education;
- Leisure and culture, including outreach to voluntary organisations;
- Justice and law enforcement.

6.4 Contribute, working in particular with adults on the autism spectrum and their supporters, to the discussion on reforming the law, to ensure that:

- adults on the autism spectrum are allowed to be legally capable to make decisions concerning their lives;
- adults on the autism spectrum are guaranteed the support of appropriate and trusted persons, where relevant.

6.5 Work, in particular, to ensure that adults on the autism spectrum are not:

- denied the right to explore and express their sexuality;
- denied the right to make legally available choices about their sexual health and reproductive rights, including about contraception;
- given contraception without their consent;
- forced into medical procedures that will not allow them to have children, or otherwise interfere with their sexual and reproductive development;
- denied the right to have a family and be parents, including the right not to have their children taken away from them, and the right to appropriate support mechanisms;
- denied access to age-appropriate sex education, tailored to their learning needs throughout their lifespan.

- 6.6** Work with you to ensure that due importance is given to addressing transition planning:
- in all areas already discussed elsewhere in this Plan;
 - from paediatric health services, through adolescence, to health services for adults.
- 6.7** Start a discussion, working with you and with all relevant stakeholders, in Malta and abroad, on the topic of autism and ageing, to eventually also explore specific needs and challenges in this area, and start working towards addressing them.
- 6.8** Work with you and all relevant stakeholders, to make sure that a gender-sensitive and inclusive perspective is ensured concerning all areas covered by this Chapter.

YOU SAID:

- “We want a centralised focal point to deal with autism in Malta;
- We would like the Autism Advisory Council to be more involved in the day-to-day work of particular sectors e.g. education or health;
- We would like to see the Autism Advisory Council play a larger role in advocacy;
- We want the Autism Advisory Council to involve our particular group e.g. persons on the autism spectrum/ families/ service providers, more regularly/ deeply in its work;
- We want the Autism Advisory Council to establish a social media presence and provide online resources;
- We would like to see the Autism Advisory Council organise more meetings and events for us.”

WE WILL:

7.1 Continue working with you:

- throughout the process of implementing this Plan, through the National Coordination Mechanism within the Office for Disability Issues (ODI);
- throughout the process of monitoring the implementation of this Plan, and reviewing it at regular intervals, through the Council and its structures;
- to create terms of reference for reviewing and monitoring the progress achieved through the implementation of this Plan.

7.2 Enter discussions with Government, as a result of the consultations that led to the drafting of this Plan, with a view to the possible redimensioning of the Council and of its role.

