

Questions for prospective ACT Politicians on policy relating to people affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders

1. Will your party improve (rationalise) the diagnostic service that the ACT Government offers (funds) for children in the ACT? What will it do to improve diagnosis of paediatric and developmental disorders?

Response

The Canberra Liberals have raised concerns over this at successive Estimates hearings. Despite assurances from the Minister that the service is effective and works well, and that the sector's needs are met and that waiting times are within acceptable limits, discussions with families suggest otherwise. This is an area that demands attention but cannot be assessed accurately from Opposition. In government we would work with families to make services more effective and better integrated across the various diagnostic areas.

2. Will your party develop and fund a therapy model for children with ASD that is compatible with the Commonwealth's national Helping Children with Autism package?

3. Will your party ensure children with ASD can access best practice early intervention in the ACT?

Response

Best practice intervention needs to be early and intensive. Currently there are limited hours of government sponsored support available.

The Canberra Liberals' recently announced Autism school will provide full time intensive autism specific intervention for people aged 2.5 years to 6 years old with a diagnosis of ASD. Eligible families will have access to combined Commonwealth Government funding programs such as, Child Care Rebates, Child Care Benefits allowances, Helping Children with Autism Funding, Carers' Allowance and Carers' Bonus Payments to minimise out-of-pocket expenses. In addition donations and fund raising by dedicated charities, including the Ricky Stuart Foundation, will assist in keeping costs low for families.

*4. Do you accept Therapy ACT's view of early intervention for children with ASD, that "early intervention services can **only** work to provide improved coping mechanisms", that is their claim that early intervention for ASD cannot reduce a child's dysfunction or improve long-term outcomes significantly ... as expressed in advice provided to Ministers and top level staff?*

Response

The ACT Labor Government has been lobbied intensively by autism associations and parents for several years, and little has changed for the better.

The Canberra Liberals believe early intervention can best be delivered through the establishment of a unique, autism specific school. The school is modelled on existing schools in

Queensland, which has a proven success rate of over 75% of children successfully transitioning into mainstream schools. The Ricky Stuart Foundation has come in strong support of the initiative, pledging the proceeds from their annual foundation golf day.

6. Do you have any evidence that outcomes for people with ASD in the ACT are different from the outcomes reported for people with ASD at the national level?

Response:

No, we are not currently aware of any surveys or analysis that indicate that, but believe, given the lack of attention from the current ACT government, that outcomes could be less favourable than elsewhere.

7. Will you or your party improve education services and outcomes for students with ASD in the ACT?

8. What will you do to ensure students with ASD can access an appropriate education setting regardless of location within Canberra?

Response

A key to achieving better educational outcomes for all students is a professionally trained and resourced teaching staff. Through the Canberra Liberals policy that doubles funding (to \$2.5m annually) to the teacher's professional learning fund, teachers will be better equipped to identify and develop better educational outcomes for all students. All students with a range of learning disabilities need additional support to reach their potential and better trained teachers will assist in reaching that goal. Students graduating through the early intervention Autism school will have a higher chance of a successful transition into mainstream schooling than at present.

10. What will you do to ensure students with ASD can access effective education?

11. Will you change the current policy so students with ASD cannot be excluded, suspended or expelled due to their behavioural challenges or other issues that the school should be managing with appropriate services and support?

Response

In addition to the Autism School and a doubling of the teacher professional learning fund, the Canberra Liberals have proposed the number of schools counsellors be increased by 50% to ensure all students with behavioural issues have ready access to the support they need and their behaviours are better understood.

12. Is it your party's intention that parents/carers of people with ASD cease work (or moves to part-time employment) when a student diagnosed with ASD (or any severe/profound disability) leaves school? If not, what will you do so that parents/carers will no longer be likely to need to give up their employment when the person in their care leaves school?

Response

No. However, the issue of appropriate post school choice for students with a disability is complex and no one model will suit every circumstance.

13. What will your party do to improve participation of people with ASD in the labour force?

Current government quotas for employment of people with a disability in the ACT public service are not being met for a variety of reasons but there is no magic bullet. We would work with employment agencies, local business organisations and service providers to better understand what impediments there are to improving current participation rates.

14. What will your party do to ensure people with ASD can access the accommodation support services they need?

15. What will your party do to meet demand for these services?

16. Does your party see access to services for people with ASD as an issue? What will you do to address this issue?

17. What will you do to develop awareness of mainstream service providers and of the community generally as to how mainstream services can meet the needs of people with ASD?

18. Will you take particular steps to inform the health, welfare, disability service and government policy development sectors about specific needs of people with ASD, their families and carers?

19. What will your party do to protect basic rights such as the right to life (health and safety) for people with ASD while they are in the care of service providers?

20. What will your party do to protect rights of people with ASD such as the right to treatment and rehabilitation, the right to primary and secondary education, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to economic security, etc?

21. What will your party do to protect the rights of carers to economic security and participation in the labour force? What will your party do to ensure family carers are not required to work endless hours caring and supporting a person with severe or profound disability in the family home?

24. What will you do to address the substantial unmet service needs of people with ASD in the interim?

Response

The Canberra Liberals are the only party to have considered the specific needs of families dealing with ASD. A specific autism school is a start, not a finish. We recognise that more work needs to be done for people with ASD, as well as those with a range of other learning, physical and intellectual disabilities. Our initiative is a first step in the right direction for children with autism and their families. It is a matter of what is achievable within any budgetary framework.

22. What will you do to ensure the NDIS meets the needs of people with ASD?

23. Do you believe people with ASD need service providers that are locally based and administered? If so, how will you ensure services funded through the NDIS are locally based and administered?

Response

The Canberra Liberals have already indicated support for the NDIS trial that is to be launched in the ACT within the next 1-2 years. Once this trial is underway, governments at both the national and state level and the disability sector itself, will all be better informed as to how the scheme will be implemented.