

Our reference: DC06/0480

15 MAY 2006

Mr Bob Buckley  
27 Fairbridge Crescent  
AINSLIE ACT 2602

Department of  
**Communities**

Disability Services Queensland

Office of the  
**Director-General**

Dear Mr Buckley

Thank you for your letter of 30 March 2006 concerning Early Intervention for Autism. I regret the delay in providing this response, however, Disability Services Queensland (DSQ) has contacted other Government departments and our service delivery areas in order to provide a comprehensive response to your request for information.

DSQ provides a range of services and supports to people with a wide range of disabilities, one of which is Autism Spectrum Disorder. DSQ recognises that Autism Spectrum Disorder is a unique disability with wide ranging impacts on individuals, their families and carers. DSQ has framed its response around the following 'themes' as identified in your correspondence:

- o Queensland Government's position in relation to the prevalence of ASD in children;
- o The nature and recognition of ASD as a disability;
- o Evidence of the outcomes for people with ASD receiving DSQ provided services;
- o Types of services provided for people with ASD;
- o Access to ASD specific services; and
- o Research on ASD.

Please find attached Disability Services Queensland's response. If you require any further information or assistance in relation to this matter, please contact Dr Gill Parmenter, Director, Child Safety Unit, Policy Directorate, DSQ on 3008 5187 or 0411 652 788.

Yours sincerely



Linda A Apelt  
**Director-General**

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## **Attachment – Disability Services Queensland's response to submission**

### ***Background***

DSQ recognises ASD as a disability which can have severe and profound effects upon the lives of individuals, families and carers.

DSQ provides and funds a range of services for people with ASD, including:

- Early intervention services to assist families of children with ASD by the Family and Early Childhood Services teams;
- Post School Services;
- Adult Lifestyle Support; and
- Family Support Program – children and adults.

Significant funding has been dedicated specifically to responses to ASD in recent budgets. In terms of funding to non-Government organisations, DSQ provides funding to two major autism-specific services in Queensland – Autism Queensland and the Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Unit.

DSQ is also involved in a significant piece of research which is investigating the prevalence of ASD in the national population. In addition, National Minimum Data Set information indicates an apparent increase in the proportion of DSQ clients identifying Autism as their primary disability.

There are also a range of services provided by the Department of Education and the Arts for children with ASD including services before commencing school and at school including:

- Pre- and preparatory school programs;
- Special education programs and schools; and
- Services delivered by specialist staff.

### ***Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder***

DSQ has the following data on the percentages of our clients with a primary diagnosis of Autism:

- 2001-02: 5.1%;
- 2002-03: 6.8%; and
- 2003-04: 7.3%.

This data was taken from DSQ's contribution to the National Minimum Data Set for each year. It is important to note that the 2001-02 data was collected on a snapshot day, 2002-03 was taken over a six month period and 2003-04 was taken over a 12 month period. It seems superficially that our base of clients with Autism is increasing, however due to the different data collection periods and lack of statistical analysis, it is not possible to state whether this apparent increase is statistically significant.

Queensland Health has advised that they do not hold data on the prevalence of a condition within the general population. Data was not available from the Department of Education and the Arts in time for this response.

### ***Nature of Autism Spectrum Disorder***

DSQ recognises that the nature of ASD is highly variable across individuals and that in some cases the impact on the individual's communication skills, social skills, sensory processing ability and ability to respond to the environment can be severe and profound

DSQ recognises that ASD is distinct from intellectual disability. Collection of data through the Commonwealth-State/Territory Disability Agreement National Minimum Data Set distinguishes between Autism and Intellectual Disability. DSQ does not separate types of disability under the *Disability Services Act 1992* (operative until 30 June 2006) and the recently enacted *Disability Services Act 2006*, however, types of impairment are distinguished (definition below). It is acknowledged that ASD can impair a number of areas including intellectual, cognitive and sensory ability.

The *Disability Services Act 2006* (operational from 1 July 2006) defines disability as:

- (1) A ***disability*** is a person's condition that—
  - (a) is attributable to—
    - (i) an intellectual, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological, sensory or physical impairment; or
    - (ii) a combination of impairments mentioned in subparagraph (i); and
  - (b) results in—
    - (i) a substantial reduction of the person's capacity for communication, social interaction, learning, mobility or self care or management; and
    - (ii) the person needing support.
- (2) For subsection (1), the impairment may result from an acquired brain injury.
- (3) The disability must be permanent or likely to be permanent.
- (4) The disability may be, but need not be, of a chronic episodic nature.

### ***Outcomes for people with ASD receiving DSQ provided services***

DSQ has researched national and international trends in approaches to supporting people with ASD. No clear evidence has been identified amongst the different competing autism early intervention modalities to suggest that one approach is more successful than another. However there is a broad general consensus evident, that programs need to include the following critical features to promote successful outcomes:

- o A curriculum that focuses on addressing the specific challenges of autism to maximise the child's potential to learn;
- o Family education that supports parents to understand their child's development and create strategies to build family resilience and well-being;
- o Focus on maintaining and generalising learned skills across different settings encountered in daily life to ensure maximum success in integrative environments;
- o Use of functional behavioural assessment procedures to identify situations associated with problem behaviour and teaching alternative behaviours;
- o Development of educational settings that maximise the child's ability to respond positively to visual structure, schedules and predictability; and

- o Programs of sufficient intensity and frequency, ranging from 20-40 hours weekly, and that involve an in-home training component, which increases the ability of parents to serve as an additional source of ongoing intervention.

DSQ incorporates the above critical features in the development of service specifications. DSQ delivers early intervention services based on the understanding that the long term needs arising from disability can be significant for families, carers and the community.

### ***Types of services provided for people with ASD***

#### *Services provided by Disability Services Queensland*

DSQ is responsible for the development of programs and support initiatives for people with a range of disabilities across the State. People diagnosed with ASD have access to both DSQ provided and funded services, including Post School Services, Adult Lifestyle Support and the Family Support Program – Children and Adults. The 2005-06 State Budget allocated funding of \$1M recurrently to implement an Autism Early Intervention Strategy to assist families of children aged under five years with autism.

DSQ's Family and Early Childhood Services (FECS) teams provide a family and child centred service to children from birth to six years of age who have or who are at risk of a significant developmental delay, including children with significant developmental delay and autism. Services are provided using a collaborative team and multi-disciplinary approach to address comprehensively the needs of the family and child. The aim of this approach is to facilitate integrated service delivery and promote a holistic view of the child, their family and their strengths and needs. The child's development is seen as integrated and interactive within the context of the family environment.

Teams are located in 13 key metropolitan and regional areas across the state. FECS teams provide a range of services dependent on the needs of the child and family and include:

- o Family support;
- o Assessment;
- o Assistance with planning;
- o Specialist and therapy services;
- o Assistance to support community inclusion;
- o Consultation and education; and
- o Support to transition to other services.

Services may be home based, centre based or provided as an outreach service from major regional centres.

In the 2004-05 budget, the Queensland Government committed additional funds of \$3.35M over three years to enhance Family and Early Childhood Services (FECS).

DSQ also provides some accommodation support and respite services to adults and children with autism, as part of a broad based service for people with an intellectual disability.

## *Non-Government services*

### Autism Queensland Inc

Autism Queensland Inc (AQ) has been the main service provider for people with autism in Brisbane since the early 1980s. This organisation provides therapy and early intervention programs and a range of intensive individual and group programs, including consultancy within its Therapy and Education Outreach Services for children and their families across the state. The services include centre-based programs at the Sunnybank and Brighton Therapy and Education Centres. Both the Department of Education and the Arts and Disability Services Queensland provide funding to AQ.

In response to a significant increase in the number of requests from families for more intensive early intervention programs, AQ commenced a 12-month early intervention centre-based group program at both its Sunnybank and Brighton Therapy and Education Centres. The programs are conducted over two days per week during school terms for groups of six children under five years of age.

The individual early intervention programs provided by AQ contain critical elements consistent with best practice in the areas of communication, social and play skills, which are enhanced by weekly speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy. The program promotes a family-centred approach and provides education and support to increase the family's understanding of ASD and strengthen their capacity to provide ongoing care for the child to remain living at home. In recent years AQ has taken a holistic approach by providing support through a range of activities that strengthen the child's participation in family routines and inclusion in other community settings including childcare, preschool and Special Education Development Units.

### Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Unit

The Autism Early Intervention Outcomes Unit (AEIOU) is a new service that formed in November 2003 as an incorporated registered charity. We understand the organisation holds a state child care licence to run a centre-based early intervention group program for children with autism. AEIOU opened a centre in Moorooka in February 2005.

The two-year program provides services for 12 children aged 2.5 years to six years. The program operates during school terms and provides up to 30 hours per week. The model has two groups comprising six participants, with a staff ratio of two children to one teacher.

The AEIOU program is provided to families on a full or part time basis. The 30 hours per week provides 22.5 contact hours and 7.5 non-contact hours, which includes consultation with families and allied health and educational professionals. The model also encourages family involvement through visits to the centre and in-home consultations by professional staff. AEIOU also provides integration support when the child enters mainstream childcare or pre-school settings.

*Services provided by the Department of Education and the Arts*

In March 2002, the Minister for Education established The Taskforce on Inclusive Education (Students with Disabilities). The Taskforce's purpose was to provide advice on how to make the schooling system more inclusive for students at educational risk, in particular students with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The Taskforce undertook consultation with teachers, parents/caregivers, students, administrators, unions, universities, disability groups and their advocates, and other government departments such as Queensland Health, Disability Services Queensland and the Department of Families. As a result of some of the recommendations of this Taskforce, new programs have been established, including the Education Adjustment Program. The Education Adjustment Program is a system of identifying and responding to the educational needs of students with a disability. It identifies the teaching adjustments that are made in a class/school program to provide an inclusive education for students with a verified diagnosis in autism spectrum disorder, hearing impairment, intellectual impairment, physical impairment, speech-language impairment, vision impairment or a combination of these.

For eligible students of pre-compulsory schooling age the following services may be provided:

- Preschool programs;
- Preparatory Programs;
- Special Education Development Classes (SEDC's);
- Special Education Development Units (SEDU's); and
- Access to specialist staff which may include:
  - Guidance Officers;
  - Therapists (Speech Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists and Nurses); and
  - Advisory Visiting Teachers (These may include: Early Special Education, Inclusion, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, and Behaviour).

For eligible students of compulsory age the following services are provided:

- Primary schools;
- Secondary schools, and may also be provided with programs through:
  - Special Education Classes (SEC) located in primary and secondary schools;
  - Special Education Units (SEU's) located in primary and secondary schools;
  - Special Schools;
  - Alternative Education Programs; and
  - Positive Learning Centres.
- Access to specialist staff which may include:
  - Guidance Officers;
  - Therapists (Speech Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists and Nurses); and
  - Advisory Visiting Teachers (these may include: Early Special Education, Inclusion, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, School Transition Officers, and Behaviour).

The array of programs provides a choice of educational settings to meet a student's needs as determined by the Educational Adjustment profile. All additional services provided including teacher aide time, complement the existing teaching staff provided to all students attending Queensland state schools.

The design and delivery of specialist programs for students with a disability in Queensland schools is implemented in line with national and international research and reflects the principals identified in the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and the Queensland Government Strategic Framework for Disability 2002 – 2005.

#### ***Access to Autism Spectrum Disorder specific services***

DSQ's *Eligibility Policy* is used to determine eligibility for DSQ provided services. The seven criteria used to determine eligibility are included in the *further information* section. It is important to note that eligibility for services does not confer entitlement to services. Access to services are determined by target criteria and funding availability.

#### ***Research on Autism Spectrum Disorder***

There is an increased interest in the prevalence of ASD, as evidenced by an apparent increase in research in the area. At present DSQ is aware of a study on the prevalence of autism in Australia being undertaken by the Autism Council of Australia. DSQ is participating in this study by providing access to our client base for data collection. The study is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. This piece of research looks at a number of children across Australia, aged from 0-16 years of age with a formal diagnosis of autism to find out how a diagnosis is obtained, and who funds and provides the diagnostic and intervention services in each State and Territory.

The Department of Education and the Arts has a Strategic Policy and Education Futures branch, which oversees internal research projects and applications by external organisations and groups to conduct research in Queensland state schools. In the past 12 months, over 10 applications to conduct research related to students with a disability and their program provisions have been approved by this branch. A provision of access to conduct research in Queensland state schools is a requirement to share research findings with the Department of Education and the Arts to contribute to program enhancement for all students

In addition, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Inclusive Education, established in response to the Ministerial Taskforce (Students with Disabilities) report, is also engaged in negotiations with Senior Education Officers to determine future research directions for the Department of Education and the Arts. This will supplement the research priorities identified in the Department of Education and the Arts Research Strategy 2005 – 2007. This strategy prioritises several topics specifically related to students with a disability (effectiveness of early intervention assessment, effectiveness of inclusive education on the educational, social and behavioural outcomes of students with special needs).

An example of a recent research project which has been facilitated by the Department of Education and the Arts focused on educational outcomes for students with a disability is the Quality Outcomes for Students with a Disability project. This project has been led by Dr Denis Meadows of Griffith University and has involved a comprehensive review of post school opportunities for students with a disability.

***Further information***

*Further information on DSQ provided services can be found at the following locations:*

DSQ provided services: [http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/suppserv/our\\_services.cfm](http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/suppserv/our_services.cfm).

Target criteria for DSQ provided services:  
[http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/suppserv/our\\_services.cfm](http://www.disability.qld.gov.au/suppserv/our_services.cfm).

*Further information on the Department of Education and the Arts policies and services can be found by contacting the Department of Education and the Arts or at the following locations:*

Department of Education and the Arts Research Strategy 2005 – 2007:  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/research/strategy/docs/researchpriorities.pdf>

Ministerial Advisory Committee on Students with Disabilities  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/learning/students/disabilities/min-taskforce.html>

Prep and Children with disabilities  
<http://www.qed.qld.gov.au/office/dg/prepdis.doc>

A preparatory year for Queensland: Students with disabilities 2006  
[http://education.qld.gov.au/tal/curriculum\\_exchange/teachers/epl/docs/swd\\_in\\_prep.ppt](http://education.qld.gov.au/tal/curriculum_exchange/teachers/epl/docs/swd_in_prep.ppt)

CS-24: Early Special Education Procedures  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/doem/curristu/cs-24000/cs-24000.html>

SM-18: The Provision of Special Education Programs and Services to Students with Disabilities  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/doem/studeman/sm-18000/sm-18000.html>

Educational Adjustment Program  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/disabilities/adjustment/>

Inclusive Education (and Students with Disabilities) website  
<http://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/learning/students/disabilities/process/programs.html>

*Eligibility for Disability Services Queensland provided services*

DSQ's *Eligibility Policy* states that a person will be eligible for DSQ provided services where they meet the following seven criteria:

The person is one of the following:

- an Australian citizen, a permanent Australian resident, a Temporary Protection Visa holder, a New Zealand citizen who arrived in Australia prior to 26 February 2001, or a member of a family on a work or study visa sponsored by the Australian Government; and
- The person lives in Queensland; and
- Has a disability that is attributable to an intellectual, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological, sensory or physical impairment or a combination of impairments; and
- Results in a substantial reduction of the person's capacity in one or more of the following areas: communication, social interaction, learning, mobility, or self care/management; and
- Results in the person needing support; and
- Is permanent or likely to be permanent (it may or may not be of a chronic or episodic nature); and
- Manifests itself before the age of 65.