



Cassy O'Connor MP
Member for Denison
Tasmanian Greens

Wednesday, 3 March 2010

Mr Roger Law
Action for Tasmanian Autistic Children
e-mail: atactas@gmail.com

Dear Roger,

Thank you for your e-mail seeking the Tasmanian Greens' views on issues of concern to Tasmanian children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families.

Our responses to the specific points raised are below. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to clarify any of the matters discussed.

1. The American Academy of Paediatricians has just issued new recommendations to its members advising that they should screen all children for autism at 18 months and 2 years. This new policy of AAP recognises the importance of early intervention programmes for children with autism. Will you introduce screening for autism in Tasmania for children at ages 18 months and 2 years?

The Tasmanian Greens recognise the importance of early intervention programmes for children with autism and give in-principle support to the introduction of screening for autism in Tasmania at the ages of 18 months and 2 years. We believe early identification of autism and engagement with children and their families is crucial to achieving the best outcomes.

2. At the moment diagnosis in Tasmania is problematic, with a priority given to children under 7 years of age and with a 3 month waiting list. Will your government establish AUTISM CLINICS in the four major hospital in Tasmania where those who are red flagged by the screening process can be directed for full diagnosis not only of autism, but of the many co-morbidities associated with autism to ensure that a holistic treatment plan that also covers such co-morbidities as well as for autism can be drawn up for each child?

The Tasmanian Greens recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing autism and that autistic children are all different from each other. We recently released the *Effective Disability Services* policy initiative which commits an investment of \$4.4m in a range of targeted programs designed to ensure improvements in the provision of disability services. I have attached a copy of this policy initiative for your information.

Included in this package is a commitment of \$3m over three years (funding four FTEs) to establish two Autism Spectrum Disorder Clinics based at the Royal Hobart and Launceston General

1 of 4

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Hospitals with an additional capacity to cover the North West of Tasmania through dedicated space at the North West Regional Hospital.

The staff at these clinics will build close relationships with medical and allied health staff in the three major public hospitals to ensure that any children picked up for possible ASD in the screening process will also receive a full diagnosis of associated co-morbidities.

3. Will your government build early intervention centres in all regions of Tasmania with the capacity for outreach services so that all autistic children will be catered for?

We recognise early intervention support for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder is crucial. While we have not made a specific funding allocation, we do acknowledge this is a major area of unmet need, and we believe some of the reforms detailed in our policy initiative will assist in redressing this injustice.

We agree that children with autism need to be individually assessed and have individual plans developed to assist them in maximising their potential and learning and behavioural outcomes.

Will you use the well established and most proven by research method of Applied Behavioural Analysis in the early intervention programmes for the children involved?

The Tasmanian Greens give in-principle support for the use of best-practice ABA in early intervention programmes for children with autism. It is our understanding that these methods have been tested and trialled in a number of jurisdictions including Norway, Israel and the USA and those research programs have all found that learning rates are significantly higher in children exposed to the ABA methodology.

We believe that if there is significant research evidence that shows that ABA can have a significant positive impact on outcomes for autistic children then it does need to be trialled with a view to at least offering it across the board in relation to autistic children in Tasmanian schools. It is important to note, however, that there is no single program suitable for all children and families so some children may respond to an ABA program where others do not.

As it is now recommended that behavioural programmes be used before drug therapy for ADHD and the effectiveness of ABA programmes for children with Developmental Delay, will you include these children in early intervention programmes?

As a matter of principle, the Greens will always support the application of alternative behavioural programs over the medication of children, particularly given the growing body of evidence to suggest this approach delivers better long-term outcomes for the child. We therefore give in-principle support to behavioural programmes for children with ADHD and children with Developmental Delay.

4. Will you introduce remedial programmes for school children who have missed out on early intervention programmes? Such programmes to be held in withdrawal areas where special programmes to deal with the core deficits of communication, social problems and narrow interests can be addressed by qualified professionals and specially trained autism aides?

In December last year the Tasmanian Greens released *Retaining the A-Team*, detailing our commitment to ensuring that children living with Aspergers have access to appropriate educational opportunities. The program currently provides specialised education opportunities and encourages social interaction for children with Aspergers. I have enclosed a copy of this policy initiative.

Our commitment includes \$140,000 in recurrent funding for the continuation of the program in its current form at Launceston's Newstead Heights Primary School; and a \$80,000 investment in an independent review exploring the potential to establish a network of A-Team facilities in each of Tasmania's three regions.

This is part of our commitment to supporting Tasmanian children living with Aspergers, their families and school communities.

5. Will your government provide special programmes for adult autistics to remedy the shocking employment prospects for them?

The Tasmanian Greens have committed \$450,000 over three years to the establishment of a Disability Workforce Development Unit in Skills Tasmania. We believe this will go some way to improving employment prospects for adult autistics.

We have also made a financial commitment of \$85,000 to fund the *go.E Pilot Project*, aimed at supporting the transition of young people living with a disability from school into public sector employment.

6. Are there any other initiatives that your government plans to introduce for people with autism?

- The Tasmanian Greens are committed to developing a disability services delivery model focused on the needs of clients, with early intervention and support packages tailored to individuals;
- \$750,000 over three years to establish an independent *Community and Disability Services Commissioner* within the Office of the Ombudsman to advocate for and on behalf of Tasmanians living with disabilities, their families and carers, and ensuring Tasmania is meeting its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and the new Disability Services Act once it is finalised and passed by Parliament.
- \$150,000 to conduct a state-wide audit of Tasmanians living with disabilities conducted by National Disability Services (TAS) in cooperation with the Early Years Foundation to provide a detailed assessment of the current level of unmet need and project future needs to facilitate strategic planning for Tasmanians living with disabilities, their families, carers and service providers.

- \$750,000 funding increase over four years to Autism Tasmania to improve the delivery of early intervention and outreach and support services to Tasmanians with autism and their families.
- The Greens have also long advocated that funding and support for high needs students needs to be increased along with greater support for early identification and engagement with learners with difficulties, and have provided for the construction and/or retrofitting of seven new dedicated centres for students with learning difficulties.

7. Could you provide a timetable for implementation of your proposals for people with autism?

As detailed above.

We believe that the government has an obligation to assist and support Tasmanian children with autism and their families. The current situation is that too many Tasmanian children with autism are missing out on timely diagnosis, early intervention and tailored social literacy and education programs and are clearly not being empowered to realise their full potential as citizens.

The Tasmanian Greens believe that our recent commitments to improve the lives of children with autism are at the core of a genuine social inclusion agenda.

No matter what the makeup of the Parliament after March 20, the Greens will continue to stand up for the rights of Tasmanian children. We look forward to working with Action for Tasmanian Autistic Children to bring about the necessary reforms.

Yours sincerely,



Cassy O'Connor MP
Member for Denison
Greens Spokesperson for Health and Human Services

Encl : *Effective Disability Services : Reaffirming Rights, Redressing Wrongs and Harnessing Ability* – March 2010
Retaining the A-Team : Supporting Children Living with Aspergers – December 2009
Greens Commit \$750, 000 to Autism Tasmania – Media Release, Feb 14th 2010