



HAPPIER, HEALTHIER, LONGER LIVES

**ASIAM 2020 GENERAL
ELECTION MANIFESTO**

*AsIAM Policy Office, part of
AsIAM Community Support Department*

Foreword

2020 marks two years since Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The State has a clear responsibility under the Convention to promote and protect the autism community's rights to full equality and to full and equal participation in public life; yet autistic people of all ages and backgrounds continue to experience discrimination across society.

From long waiting lists for assessments to finding appropriate school places, parents are often left fighting for their children's fundamental rights, particularly their right to inclusive education. Autistic adults face huge gaps in the provision of critical public services, particularly in finding work, in accessing social protection, and in accessing the support they need to live independently in the community.

Despite repeated attempts from successive governments to address these challenges under a one-size-fits-all approach, little progress has been made in advancing the autism community's rights. 86% of autistic children attend mainstream schools, yet hundreds are left without any supports, such as Special Needs Assistants or any kind of assistive technology. As many as 85% of autistic adults are either unemployed or underemployed, and struggle to access appropriate support from employers or the State.

To ensure their full and equal participation in Irish society, our community needs a tailored Strategy that delivers on addressing these challenges. Moreover, it needs to actively involve autism community members in the planning and delivery of such a strategy.

Our message to every candidate and political party in this election, therefore, is clear:

Ireland needs an ambitious, comprehensive and fully resourced Autism Empowerment Strategy.

Over the past two years, AsIAM has been gathering support from across the political spectrum. We have been at the forefront of highlighting the challenges facing the autism community; from exclusion from the education system, their difficulties accessing appropriate mental health care and addressing disproportionately high rates of poverty and social exclusion among the community.

A growing consensus is emerging that the next Government should adopt a direct and coordinated approach to supporting our most vulnerable citizens, particularly those with complex needs like autism.

We urge all parties and candidates running in the General Election to set out a coherent, whole-of-government pathway, which aims on delivering an autism-friendly Ireland; not just *for* the autism community, but also *with* the community's involvement.

Any Strategy will take an inter-departmental pathway towards achieving its objectives, where autism is truly understood and approached as a whole-of-life condition - rather than merely siloed into a particular Government department's policy brief. Those areas of public life, we believe, demand an urgent response include:

- **Justice and Equality;**
- **Health;**
- **Education and Skills;**
- **Employment Affairs and Social Protection, and;**
- **Children and Youth Affairs.**

By beginning here, we will have made a crucial first step towards meaningful inclusion and equality for our autism community. From there and only together, we can begin the vital journey in earnest to build an understanding and inclusive society for all.

Department of an Taoiseach

- Legislate for an Autism Empowerment Act to provide for a national, cross-departmental Autism Strategy, aimed at meeting the diverse needs of Ireland's autism community, including improving public accessibility for autistic people and training for all public servants.

Justice & Equality

- Establish a fully funded Disability Law Service based on standards of best practice in other European jurisdictions;
- Appropriately resource the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, with an emphasis on close collaboration between State agencies and civil society;
- Legislate for anti-hate crime and hate speech laws specifically targeting the discrimination against disabled people as a key provision within any Autism Empowerment Act;
- Appropriately resource the National Advocacy Service, with a wider view to commence and resource the Decision Support Service in line with Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD;
- Mandate all public sector and semi-State bodies to recruit more autistic employees, in line with the incremental target of recruiting at least 6% of people with disabilities in the public sector by 2024 set out by the Comprehensive Employment Strategy.

Health

- Publish and fully implement the Autism Plan outlined within the HSE's 2020 National Service Plan, with a view to annually renew the Plan in coordination with other State agencies as part of an inter-departmental Autism Strategy.
- Develop a clinical pathway for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and Adult Mental Health Services for all people on the autism spectrum;
- Reduce waiting times for clinical services (i.e., physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychotherapy, etc.);

- Provide clear pathways of support for autistic individuals and their families, as well as providing a designated key worker throughout the pre and post-diagnostic process.
- Prioritise future funding for providing equal access to diagnostic assessments for individuals and families living in both urban and rural areas across Ireland;
- Set out a clinical pathway for adults on the spectrum to access diagnostic assessments and avail of follow-up services during the post-diagnosis period, in close collaboration with other State agencies as a key provision of any Autism Strategy;
- Work towards actively including members of the autism community in any and all future consultations aimed at improving access to HSE services and supports.

Education & Skills

- Prioritise the development and rollout of a mandatory training programme for all teachers on inclusive education and best practices for engaging with autistic pupils in mainstream schools;
- Reform and fully commence the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, in close consultation with stakeholders, to provide the required resources and supports to students in schools;
- Retain the option for special classes and special schools for parents and families when deciding where to enrol their autistic children, until they can be guaranteed of the same levels of support within mainstream settings;
- Ensure that any reform of the Leaving Certificate provides new opportunities for autistic students with complex needs, particularly for those living with learning and or intellectual disabilities;
- Develop a suite of supports for students not attending school on a full-time basis, including parity of access to educational resources such as books and assistive technology;
- Oblige School Boards of Management to autism-proof their internal policies regarding admissions, expulsions and special education, and to establish best practices in engaging with autistic students and their families;

- Establish an independent review on the availability of placements within autism classes and special schools, with a view of improving their provision across the State.

Employment Affairs & Social Protection

- Increase the Disability Allowance by an additional €20 a week, as well increasing the Domiciliary Care Allowance by the same rate and extend its eligibility to applicants who are at least 18 years of age; seek to address the additional costs of living with a disability in Ireland.
- Establish a disability-wide Access to Work Scheme within the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, in close coordination with similar services from other State bodies as part of an Autism Strategy;
- Commit to raising public awareness of available private sector workplace supports, including the Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Disability Awareness Support Scheme and the Reasonable Accommodation Fund.

Children & Youth Affairs

- Invest an additional €20 million into the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, to further develop the initiative's size and scope into the future;
- Create a policy and resource focus on social and inclusion opportunities for autistic children and young people, with a view to increase community participation and reduce loneliness.