



August 2025

**AsIAm Submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development on a new
Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector**

AsIAm, Ireland's Autism Charity, welcomes the opportunity to send a submission to the Department of Rural and Community Development to support their development of a new Strategy to support the Community and Voluntary Sector, succeeding the previous Strategy, *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities 2019–2024*. Drawing on our remit as Ireland's Autism Charity, our advocacy and our work in supporting Autistic people and families, we wish to use this submission to set out our key priorities for the next Strategy to ensure that it more effectively supports both the Autistic and Disabled communities.

This consultation is particularly important considering the need to build more inclusive and empowered communities is stronger than ever. However, through our engagement and work supporting Autistic people and families across Ireland, we see significant gaps in addressing the needs of the Autistic and Disabled communities, and other marginalised communities. Autistic people still face significant barriers to belonging, acceptance and participation in many aspects of community life.

Reflecting our community's concerns, we call on the next Strategy for the Community and Voluntary sector to:

- Reflect that loneliness and social exclusion is a growing public policy concern which affects people's wellbeing and ability to participate in their local community, which the Government should support a community development-led approach to addressing these issues;
- Embed sustained engagement with Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) and Autistic-led and autism groups, making sure that decision-making processes are adequately resourced, accessible and neuroaffirmative.
- Build on the work of the *Autism Innovation Strategy* by legislating for a National Autism Strategy, and increase the capacity of the Autism Friendly Communities initiative as a model of building inclusive local communities which accepts and affirms Autistic people across Ireland;

These recommendations reflect insights community members shared with us in recent Reports such as our recent Report exploring Autistic adults' experiences of loneliness, "*We Just Want to be Included*", and our most recent Same Chance Report. These include:
including:

- 55% of Autistic adults feel lonely all or most of the time - nearly three times the national average.¹
- 69% feel left out of society.²
- 95% say being Autistic is a key driver of their loneliness.³

¹ AsIAM, "'We Just Want to be Included': Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

² AsIAM, "'We Just Want to be Included': Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

³ AsIAM, "'We Just Want to be Included': Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

- 63% of respondents said that there were no social activities in their area that matched their interests.⁴
- 54% report not having the same chance to participate in recreational activities as the general population.⁵
- 48% do not feel safe in their community.⁶
- 44% have experienced discrimination because they are Autistic.⁷

The above insights stress the need that addressing these issues requires a whole-of-Government approach, as well as long-term investment to foster belonging and connectedness, and to ensure that more people feel safe to fully participate in their local community. We will explore these issues in more detail later in this submission.

About AsIAM

AsIAM is Ireland's Autism Charity. Founded in 2014, AsIAM advocates for an inclusive society for Autistic people that is accessible, accepting and affirming. We work to support the Autistic community and our families throughout the lifecycle to fully engage in Irish life and build the capacity of society to facilitate true inclusion. This is achieved through the programmes of support we offer and our advocacy work. AsIAM provides a range of programmes through our national and regional based activities and programmes.

AsIAM is a Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO) as we are Autistic led, informed by the experiences of Autistic people, and more than half of our staff and board are Autistic or have other differences or disabilities. AsIAM's work focuses on advancing the rights of Autistic people

⁴ AsIAM, "We Just Want to be Included": Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper, p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

⁵ AsIAM, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

⁶ AsIAM, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 26 Jun 2025).

⁷ AsIAM, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 26 Jun 2025).

across Irish society. We use a rights-based, Neuro-affirmative approach in all our work supporting Autistic people across all supports within the organisation. AsIAM is also a founding member of the DPO Network - an alliance of five national DPOs who collectively advocate for the rights of Disabled people and to advance the full implementation of the UNCRPD in Ireland, across all our laws and policies.

About Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental difference or disability which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others and how they experience the world around them. In keeping with our community's preferences, AsIAM uses identity-first language ("i.e. Autistic person") throughout this submission to reflect that their experience of autism is a core part of their identity and central to their experience of living in Irish society. Further details about Autistic people's language preferences can be found in our Language Guide [here](#).

Background and Context

In recent years, we have seen AsIAm and other organisations within the Community and Voluntary sector offering timely and impactful support to their communities. However, we have seen that key barriers remain to addressing more deep-rooted, structural issues experienced by Autistic people and families. The World Health Organization has identified loneliness as a major public health concern in a recent Report, and warning of its harmful effects both on individuals and with the wider social fabric.⁸ The European Commission has highlighted that Ireland ranks as [the loneliest country in the EU](#), with over one in five adults experiencing loneliness and social exclusion.⁹

Although Irish society is becoming more atomised and with many people experiencing isolation and disconnection from their communities, this sense of dislocation can be particularly pronounced for Autistic people. Rising social fragmentation, limited accessible spaces, and a lack of understanding of autism and neurodiversity combine to create persistent barriers to acceptance and belonging. AsIAm's recent Report, [“We Just Want to be Included”](#) paints a stark picture of the impact that loneliness can have within our community:

- 55% of Autistic adults feel lonely all or most of the time.¹⁰
- 69% feel left out of society.¹¹
- 74% report masking or changing who they are to be accepted.¹²

⁸ World Health Organization, 'From Loneliness to Social Connection: Charting a Path to Better Societies', [Report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection](#) (accessed 18 Aug 2025).

⁹ European Commission, 'Loneliness prevalence in the EU', [Loneliness prevalence in the EU - European Commission](#) (accessed 16 Aug 2025).

¹⁰ AsIAm, "“We Just Want to be Included”: Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

¹¹ AsIAm, "“We Just Want to be Included”: Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

¹² AsIAm, "“We Just Want to be Included”: Autistic Adults and Loneliness: A Position Paper", p. 5, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebf5bd64fee2cfd5af24/688c768187834ccea13b9a13_Ver%204%20We%20Just%20Want%20to%20be%20Included%20-%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio

- 63% say there are no activities in their area that match their interests.

Community members in our *Same Chance* Report and *Loneliness* reports have described loneliness as *“the invisible cloak; no one can see it, but you can feel it”* and as *“watching others form strong bonds that you know you will never have.”* This reflects that for many Autistic people, loneliness is not just about being alone, but more about not being accepted or understood for who they are. Our analysis shows that many Autistic adults have a strong desire to build connections, form friendships, and participate in community life. However, they face structural barriers, including a shortage of accessible and sensory-friendly spaces where they can meet others and feel safe to participate as their authentic Autistic selves. Many also report experiencing stigma and outdated public attitudes that view autism through a medicalised lens, which further shapes and limits their opportunities for acceptance or inclusion.

Reflecting the barriers that Autistic people face in living in their communities, our most recent Same Chance Report found that 54% of community members felt they did not have the same chance to take part in recreational activities as the general population¹³. Some respondents reported a lack of support and awareness from organisers and participants in clubs, leisure facilities, and recreational activities. Community members described situations where staff and fellow participants did not understand their or their child’s access needs, limiting their ability to take part fully in these activities, and from the social and cultural life of their communities more broadly. One community member noted: *“I found it really hard to find inclusive opportunities to join general mainstream type recreational activities - sports/summer camps etc, really hard to find info for activities that are available in our area (city) - it’s feels like it’s preferred if Autistic families stick to the specialist groups to find these types of activities- it’s definitely feels like*

[ed%20-%20%20Autistic%20Adults%20and%20Loneliness%20Booklet.pdf?utm_campaign=linkinbio&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio](#) (accessed 12 Aug 2025).

¹³ AsIAm, ‘Same Chance Report’, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/67e572276f39ff1d6d830135_Version%203%20Digital%20Full%20AsIAm%20Same%20Chance%20Report.pdf (accessed 26 Jun 2025).

mainstream run recreational activities don't want the perceived hassle of accommodating Autistic people".¹⁴

¹⁴ AsIAm, 'Same Chance Report', https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6537ebfefba7b3c24a18e646/67e572276f39ff1d6d830135_Version%203%20Digital%20Full%20AsIAm%20Same%20Chance%20Report.pdf (accessed 26 Jun 2025).

Ireland's Policy Commitments to Supporting Community Participation

Ireland has a number of policy commitments which align to its work in supporting the Autistic and Disabled community. Article 4(3) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) states that countries like Ireland should “*actively consult and involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations (DPOs), in the development and implementation of legislation and policies*”.¹⁵ Article 19 of the UNCRPD states that Disabled people, including Autistic people, have the right to live independently and to be included in the community¹⁶, including having the choice in how they wish to engage in the community. Article 30 of the UNCRPD states that Disabled people have the right to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport.¹⁷

The Public Sector Duty highlighted in Section 42 of *the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014* states that public bodies have an obligation to take active steps to address barriers to inclusion and participation and must promote equality and human rights and prevent discrimination in its work.¹⁸

The *Autism Innovation Strategy* contains 83 actions across Government departments, local authorities and state agencies, and includes a number of key recommendations which support Autistic people to participate in the community, including making public amenities like libraries and playgrounds more accessible, training community groups and local organisations like sports clubs on autism understanding and acceptances, and introducing quiet spaces in public buildings, like Intreo offices.¹⁹

¹⁵ Article 4 (3), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [Article 4 – General obligations | United Nations Enable](#) (accessed 20 Aug 2025).

¹⁶ Article 19, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [Article 19 – Living independently and being included in the community | United Nations Enable](#) (accessed 20 Aug 2025).

¹⁷ Article 30, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, [Article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport | United Nations Enable](#) (accessed 20 Aug 2025).

¹⁸ Section 42, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, Section 42](#), (accessed 13 Aug 2025).

¹⁹ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 'Autism Innovation Strategy', [autism-innovation-strategy-august-2024.pdf](#) (accessed 15 Aug 2025).

Finally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals sets out a number of obligations Ireland must follow to build more sustainable, resilient communities. Goal 3 states that countries like Ireland should ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing, including tackling physical and mental health issues like loneliness, Goal 10 obliges countries like Ireland to reduce inequalities within communities and address systemic exclusion, and promote accessible services, such as the use of Universal Design, and Goal 11 obliges countries like Ireland to make cities and human settlements (communities) inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.²⁰

AslAm Initiatives Showing Inclusive Community Development

National policies aimed at reducing the prevalence of chronic loneliness and promoting the work of the Community and Voluntary sector to promote wellbeing and foster community and social connection must be designed to meet the specific needs, communication preferences, and sensory considerations of Autistic people. Our experience at AslAm demonstrates that when supports are designed in partnership with the Autistic community and tailored to their interests and preferences, they can be highly effective in enabling meaningful social connection. Programmes that provide predictable, sensory-friendly environments, activities aligned to individual interests, and flexible modes of participation have consistently proven successful in fostering inclusion and reducing isolation among Autistic people.

Child and Family Support Programme

The Child and Family Support Programme provides Autistic children and young people with opportunities to socialise in environments designed to meet their communication, sensory, and support needs. Groups are built around shared interests, creating comfortable and engaging spaces for participation. Activities include creative writing, coding, LEGO club, general hangouts, history, and fitness. Since September 2024, the Child and Family Support Programme has directly supported 1,467 participants, while a further 6,553 remain on the waiting list -

²⁰ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, [THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development](#) (accessed 17 Aug 2025)

underscoring both the significant demand for these services across Ireland and the urgent need to expand capacity to support more Autistic people and their families. Parents have reported marked positive impacts, with one noting: *"[He] thoroughly enjoyed the group session yesterday evening, resulting in a significant boost in his confidence... motivated him to enter his school class this morning for the first time in about six weeks."*

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Devices and Training

In addition to our Child and Family Support Programme, AsIAM delivers a dedicated initiative providing Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices and training to children with communication differences. This Programme enables children to communicate in ways that align with their primary communication preferences, ensuring they can participate fully in social, educational, and community life. It also equips families and professionals with training to operate and integrate the devices effectively. Since its launch in November 2024, the Programme has delivered 108 devices to children and provided 79 training sessions, demonstrating both the scale of need and the Programme's rapid reach in a short timeframe.

Autism One Stop Shops

In 2025, AsIAM opened Ireland's first Autism One Stop Shop in Tuam, Co. Galway — the first of two hubs to open this year. These dedicated community spaces provide one-to-one support for Autistic people and their families, alongside a range of social opportunities similar to those in our Child and Family Support Programme. Crucially, the One Stop Shops were co-designed with Autistic people and families within their local communities. In consultations, the top priority identified by participants was for the hubs to offer hangout groups and social spaces where Autistic people and families could meet in an accepting environment. By embedding these priorities into the design, the One Stop Shops serve as a model for accessible, community-based inclusion that could be scaled nationally.

Adult Support Programme

AsIAM's Adult Support Programme provides safe, peer-led spaces where Autistic adults can meet, socialise, and engage in meaningful conversations about issues that matter to them. The Programme combines discussion-based sessions with a wide range of activity-based groups, both in-person and online, designed to support wellbeing and foster a sense of belonging. Activities include gaming, arts and crafts, film clubs, and dedicated spaces for women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Feedback from participants highlights the value of this approach: in 2024, 75% of community members said that the conversations and sense of community were the most valuable aspects of their participation, while three in four reported that they were extremely likely to engage with the programme again. These outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of peer-led, interest-based spaces in creating sustained social connections and reducing isolation for Autistic adults.

Autism Friendly Towns

AsIAM's Autism-Friendly Towns is a national framework that has been rolled out to over forty communities nationwide that supports the development of Autistic led committees in their local areas. The committee advocates for their towns, cities, and businesses to become more accessible and welcoming to Autistic people, through training, environmental changes, and co-design with the community. Within this framework, committee members gain valuable leadership skills and sense of belonging through their advocacy work in their area. The framework is recognised as a scalable model that could be embedded nationally through the new strategy.

All of AsIAM's programmes provide autism-specific, evidence-based supports that enable Autistic people to participate in community life in ways that meet their communication, sensory, and social needs. However, current capacity falls far short of demand, with long waiting lists for many of our supports. With sustained, multi-annual funding, these initiatives

could be expanded to reach significantly more Autistic people and families, ensuring equitable access to inclusive opportunities across Ireland.

What are Objectives the next Strategy should address?

AsIAM recognises that many of the goals of the current Strategy remain relevant, particularly those which are focused on strengthening participative approaches, supporting marginalised community to engage in decision-making and service design, and building organisational capacity to deliver services that better support their community. However, the next strategy must be more ambitious in driving accessibility, promoting autism acceptance and understanding, advancing disability inclusion, safeguarding mental health and wellbeing, and centering the lived experiences of the Autistic and Disabled communities. Achieving this will help ensure that more communities actively support Autistic people and families to belong, participate, and be accepted as they are.

To realise this vision, AsIAM believes that the next Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy should:

- Strengthen and develop participative approaches to the development of public policy and services and supports, ensuring that people with lived experience have genuine opportunities to shape supports according to their needs and preferences. This must be underpinned by the expertise of community and voluntary sector organisations, including those representing marginalised communities, taking an intersectional approach to designing and delivering supports.
- Develop and strengthen processes for meaningful support and consultation with communities, including marginalised cohorts within the Autistic community. This should take an intersectional approach, ensuring accessibility, removing barriers to participation, and providing any necessary support for full and informed engagement.
- Develop capacity for Community and Voluntary sector organisations to support their community's participation. This should include providing sustainable funding for Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) and local groups to develop advocacy skills and leadership within their communities.
- Embed accessibility and universal design across all community development initiatives. This should extend beyond physical access to include sensory-friendly environments,

communication supports, and accessibility and predictability in service design and delivery.

- Provide sustainable, multi-annual funding for community groups and organisations to promote best practice in supporting Autistic people across the breadth of support needs.
- Legislate and resource the *Autism Innovation Strategy* to safeguard its commitments and ensure consistent delivery of supports, and that the next National Autism Strategy builds on this progress.
- Address loneliness and social exclusion as a public health and community development priority, with measurable targets to improve wellbeing, foster belonging and reduce isolation among marginalised groups.
- Expand the Autism Friendly Towns Programme to more towns and regions, promoting it nationally as a recognised model of inclusive local development. This should be supported by dedicated resources for accreditation, training, and ongoing monitoring to ensure long-term impact.

Ensuring Consultation and Full Participation of Autistic People

The next *Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy* offers a critical opportunity for the Department to deliver transformative change for Autistic people and the wider Disabled community. By embedding these measures, the Department can ensure that consultation is not only inclusive in principle, but also results in policies and programmes that reflect and respond to the lived realities of the communities they aim to serve.

- Embed co-production and expertise from lived experience from Autistic and Disabled people and communities across policy and programme development, with accountability and monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that Department follows on its commitments to support Autistic people and our wider community.
- Ensure accessibility in all consultation processes, including:
 - Providing information and materials in Plain English and Easy-to-Read formats.
 - Offering visual guides for events and consultation processes.
 - Selecting venues that meet the full range of participants' access needs.
 - Giving sufficient advance notice to allow participants to prepare and decide on supports that meet their access needs and preferences.
 - Meeting diverse communication preferences, including supporting the use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices.
- Offer more financial support for people to participate to DPOs, community-led organisations and Autistic people and Disabled people, so people have opportunities to contribute and have their expertise recognised and valued.

Capacity-Building within the Community and Voluntary Sector

To deliver lasting inclusion, the next *Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy* must prioritise sustained investment in the capacity of organisations that support marginalised communities, including Autistic people and their families. In incorporating these capacity-building measures, this Strategy will ensure that DPOs and organisations like AsIAM will both increase our capacity to deliver services and drive structural change to support our community over the longer term.

Provide multi-annual core funding to community and voluntary organisations, moving beyond short-term, project-specific grants. This would enable organisations like AsIAM to expand and sustain activities, plan strategically, and respond flexibly to emerging needs.

Support the rollout of training and resources that promote best practice in supporting Autistic people, embedding universal design and neuroaffirmative approaches. All training should be led or co-produced with Autistic-led organisations to ensure it reflects their everyday lived experience.

Make equality and human rights training mandatory for all staff, volunteers, and board members in the sector, including specific modules on neurodiversity awareness, autism acceptance, supported decision-making and disability rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD).

Develop self-advocacy training for Autistic and disabled people to support them to advocate for their rights in the community and offer opportunities to support their advocacy and leadership in representing their community.

- Develop the Autism Friendly Towns initiative and build capacity to support more communities across Ireland. This includes supporting local authorities and communities to building capacity in local authorities and communities to achieve and maintain accreditation. This should include:
 - Access to autism understanding and acceptance training.
 - Practical changes to business practices and public spaces.

- Development of accessible communication policies.
- Co-design of all initiatives with Autistic people.
- Offering more leadership and advocacy opportunities to Autistic people

Provide sustained financial support for Autism Friendly Towns to ensure initiatives deliver long-term change, rather than one-off projects. This should include ring-fenced funding for autism-friendly practices within community development budgets for all local authorities.

Develop Sustainable Funding for Community and Voluntary Sector Organisations

Sustainable, multi-annual funding is vital for AsIAM and organisations within the Community and Voluntary sector to support organisations to plan services and supports over the longer term:

- Move towards multi-annual core funding for Community & Voluntary sector organisations, particularly those led by marginalised communities, to ensure stability, retain skilled staff, and allow long-term planning.
- Ring-fence funding for initiatives that promote accessibility, universal design, and community capacity-building in relation to disability and neurodiversity.
- Introduce operational funding for DPOs to support independent advocacy, policy engagement, and the development of accessible and inclusive practices and supports for their communities. Involve DPOs and representative organisations in monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure that these processes are accountable and transparent.
- Ensure that all policies within this Strategy are consistent with the commitments under the *Autism Innovation Strategy* and our obligations under Articles 4(3), 12, 19 and 30 of the UNCRPD.

Conclusion

The next *Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy* is a key opportunity to realise our commitments in building inclusive, empowered, and self-determining communities.

Previous Strategies have not taken sufficient steps to address persistent inequalities faced by Autistic people, Disabled people and other marginalised communities, and have missed opportunities to build truly inclusive communities for all citizens. Social exclusion continues to shape these communities' experiences living in Irish society, and this is reflected in the deeply concerning findings on loneliness within Irish society. For Autistic people, these experiences are compounded by a lack of accessible spaces, public understanding and attitudes towards autism and lack of opportunities to engage in decision-making processes. These experiences also show that many Autistic people face barriers to vindicating their rights under the UNCRPD and feel like they do not belong or feel supported within their communities.

AsIAM are calling on the next Community and Voluntary Sector Strategy to:

- Recognise loneliness and social exclusion as a growing societal concern and public policy issue and a key priority for the Department to address. This should include a commitment to introducing a National Loneliness Strategy with targeted actions to address this issue.
- Embed consistent engagement with Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs), ensuring consultations are accessible, neuroaffirmative, and where Autistic people are supported to share their expertise and experience.
- Integrate and legislate for the Autism Innovation Strategy and expand the Autism Friendly Communities Initiative, ensuring that accessibility, universal design, and public awareness are embedded across all local development policies and practices.

By adopting these recommendations highlighted across our submission, the Government can deliver a strategy that helps to build lasting change in the lives and wellbeing of Autistic people and all who face barriers to participation, and move closer to building a more just, inclusive

society where all Autistic people can belong, and be supported to have the same chance to fully participate and thrive in their communities.