



Annual Report 2023

What is Autism?



Autism is a complex lifelong developmental disability that can cause differences in communication, interactions with others and experiences in everyday situations. Although incredibly variable, an autistic person may demonstrate:

- Strength in areas such as attention to detail, patience, technology skills, logic skills or they could have greater memory for particular information.
- Challenges with using and understanding non-verbal communication such as gestures and eye contact.
- A strong passion for interests, and intense focus on particular objects and topics.
- Challenges coping with change and unexpected events.
- Challenges with back and forth conversations, and knowing when and how to join conversations.
- Repetitive behaviours.
- Challenges with developing, maintaining and understanding relationships with other people.
- Challenges tolerating certain sensations or fascinations with certain sensations such as sounds, textures and smells.

While everyone can and will exhibit some of these characteristics at some point or another, it is the pattern of behaviours, their intensity, and the fact they persist beyond the typical age that leads to a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

No two autistic people are the same – each person has their own way of seeing the world, which makes them interesting and unique.

The cause of autism is not fully understood, however, structured early intervention, therapy and education delivered by professionals with expertise in autism can make a significant difference.

It can often be difficult to know where to start if you suspect a family member may be autistic, however, initially we would suggest the following:

If it is your child you are concerned about, discuss your concerns with their teachers, therapists and other professionals who know them.

Share your concerns about your child/partner with the family doctor. They may suggest a referral to a (for a child) a paediatrician or in some cases a child psychiatrist. For adults, this referral may be to a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Due to the complex nature of the disorder and changes in clinical definitions over time, research findings on the prevalence rate of autism varies considerably. Approximately one Australian in every 70 has a diagnosis of ASD, however, the prevalence rate is much higher in young people aged 5–19 years. Increases in diagnoses may be due to an increase in autism awareness and changes to the diagnostic criteria.

Autism Queensland acknowledges individuals and their families determine the language used when speaking about themselves or a loved one. Due to a growing preference for identity-first language (eg autistic person/child/student) Autism Queensland has adopted this language in its documents, promotional materials and other external communications.

Table of contents

Acknowledgement of Country

Autism Queensland (AQ) acknowledges the importance and value of the reconciliation journey with Traditional Owners and Owners of all the lands and waters on which we live and work.

We acknowledge the wisdom of Elders past and extend our respect for the valuable contributions of Elders present and those emerging leaders who willingly share cultural knowledge.

Our teams recognise the significance of connections between country and culture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples as we walk together toward participation, opportunity and choice.

↓ Read our Reconciliation Action Plan



Scan to download or visit:
autismqld.com.au/raq-rap



2	What is Autism?	4	Acknowledgement of Country
6	Our Vision, Mission & Values	7	Our Strategic Goals
8	Chair's Message	10	CEO's Reflection
12	Services Overview	16	Impact/Highlights
19	Our People	20	AQ School
22	Employment	24	Consultancy
26	Thank you for your support	34	Board of Directors
36	Governance	38	Financials

OUR VISION

A life of participation, opportunity and choice.

OUR MISSION

We partner with autistic people, their families and communities to remove barriers and realise potential.

OUR VALUES

Integrity & Authenticity

We are genuine, honest and accountable in all that we do.

Diversity & Inclusion

We respect and celebrate all people and their right to participate and belong.

Strengths Focus

We strive to support the development of every person's potential, recognising that a strengths focus enables growth and empowers decision-making and self-advocacy.

Safety & Wellbeing

We provide and promote safe, respectful, caring and engaging people and environments that support positive development and relationships.

Evidence-Informed Practice

We use professional reasoning to bring together current high quality research evidence and the values, strengths and preferences of individuals and families to optimise outcomes.

Our Strategic Goals

- Provide a suite of services informed by evidence and our clients to meet the diverse needs and preferences of the autism community.
- Develop and retain an exceptional workforce.
- Build an efficient and effective digital eco-system.
- Improve and expand facilities.

Chair's message



2023 was a year of impressive achievements and also some significant challenges. Autism Queensland (AQ) provided high-quality, often life-changing services to hundreds of autistic children and adults across its seven centres (three in SEQ and four regional centres).

Despite the significant challenges AQ shared with all NDIS service providers, it continued to innovate in other areas, while maintaining an unrelenting focus on quality and client outcomes and representing the autistic community robustly as Queensland's peak body for autism and neurodiversity.

The NDS State of the Disability Sector report 2023 exposed increasingly negative sentiment across the sector, with 70% of providers considering that operating conditions in the sector had worsened and 34% reporting a financial loss. Most providers cited pricing as the "root of this problem", with the availability of critical allied health vocations and the disbenefits of registration also representing significant challenges.

AQ's experiences were no different. As one of the large sector organisations maintaining loss-making NDIS services, AQ is painfully exposed to the short supply of key allied health professionals (Occupational Therapists and Speech Pathologists) and the financial and other implications of registration. As the report noted, "registered providers are seeing the inequities of a two-tiered system in which registration brings scant compensation for their pains."

Additional challenges – and financial losses – stem from the financial challenges of operating in regional areas that we know as 'thin markets'.

In simple terms, the loss of \$3.1 million reported in AQ's statutory accounts for 2023 was driven substantially by the \$2.2 million operating loss rooted almost wholly in AQ's NDIS-funded therapy services. (The remainder of the reported loss was due largely to the residual costs of an essential IT modernisation program.)

For reasons well publicised and understood across the disability services sector, the NDIS Review set out to understand and address the failings of the scheme and their impacts on providers and Australians living with disability. While welcome, it will take time – probably years – for the review to deliver the benefits so needed by sector organisations and Scheme participants. Importantly, the Federal and State governments and their partners (including AQ) are working together to ensure the timely and effective delivery of Recommendation 1 of the NDIS Review, which concerns investment in foundational supports. Foundational supports, as we understand them, are vital components of the value AQ provides to autistic people.

In the meantime, AQ has responded positively to these pressures, rationalising its property portfolio to bring cash back into the business to ensure liquidity in the short-term, while planning to make changes to its structure and services over the next 18 months to restore positive cashflow. In practical terms, this will mean optimising AQ's NDIS services to target demand, managing pricing deficits as well as we can, and make best use of our precious allied health professionals.

The other parts of AQ's business are working well, with its school, community services and funded programs remaining financially viable while delivering huge value to autistic children and adults.

In 2023, the AQ School provided specialist education and supports to 186 autistic children, the majority of whom also attended their mainstream schools for part of every week. AQ is very proud of its inclusive model. The school currently spans three campuses at Sunnybank, Brighton and Cairns, with planning already underway for new campuses at Brightwater on the Sunshine Coast and potentially in other regional centres.

AQ runs several services and programs that are funded largely through federal and state government grants and other financial allocations. All of these provide value to autistic people, but AQ's employment programs and the consultancy services provided to schools and early childhood settings are worthy of special mention. We are extremely proud of

the work we do on behalf of government and the impact we have on the lives of children and staff across the educational ecosystem.

Additionally, through its community services, AQ runs 11 Supported Independent Living (SIL) settings, in which it provides a range of essential supports to 20 people with autism and complex additional needs.

Throughout the many challenges and opportunities of 2023, the AQ team, led by CEO Pam Macrossan and COO Frances Scodellaro and our excellent team of General Managers, have engaged skilfully with our stakeholders at all levels of government and elsewhere. The respect and admiration that AQ continues to enjoy is testament to their knowledge, expertise and professionalism.

I have been overwhelmed by the resilience, determination and ingenuity of everyone at AQ. Despite the challenges outlined above, it continues to be a strong and capable organisation that achieves extraordinary things, every day. Every member of the AQ team should be very proud of their achievements and unrelenting focus on enabling lives of participation, opportunity and choice for autistic Australians.

Neil Makepeace
Chairman



CEO's Reflection

Navigating the external influences on the disability sector in 2023 was extremely challenging, yet I draw inspiration from the resilience and dedication of our team, supporters, the people we serve and their families.

Throughout 2023, Autism Queensland (AQ) devoted significant resources, expertise and energy to consultations and reviews including the Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect, the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and the National Autism Strategy. It is hoped the recommendations from each will form a positive roadmap for the future of disability services and for autism.

We strengthened our role as the State's recognised peak autism organisation through continued work with the Queensland Disability Network, (QDN), and my role on the Queensland Disability Advisory Council (QDAC) to the 2023 Minister, the Hon Craig Crawford, Minister for Child Safety and Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships.

I continued to serve as a Director of the Australian Advisory Board on Autism (AABA), the national peak body for the not-for-profit sector serving the autistic and autism communities, having stepped down as Chair at the end of 2022. It was an honour to lead this distinguished group for two years through a period of strategic reflection, cementing strong relationships with the other state autism bodies and autism researchers.

October saw us reach the 56-year milestone of our registration as a charity in 1967 and when we opened the first school at Spring Hill, attended by two students and one teacher.

In 2023, we opened our third site in far north Queensland with the purchase and renovation of a property in Cairns, allowing the expansion of the school at our Edmonton Site to offer prep through to year 6.

AQ had the privilege of becoming one of four specialist organisations to deliver the new Queensland Government funded Kindergarten Inclusion Service which aims to increase access for children with additional needs and improve the inclusiveness of kindergarten programs. This initiative is a valuable resource for early years educators across the state and one we are proud to deliver. It sits well alongside the School Advisory Service we deliver through the Specialist Disability Support in Schools Program and annually support teachers and support staff of around 1200 students in Queensland schools.

In the early childhood space, AQ was successful in achieving Australian Government Department of Social Services funding



to lead PlayConnect+, a consortium with the State and Territory Playgroup Associations. This program aims to enable all young children and their families to have access to safe and inclusive activities based around the core characteristics of high-quality playgroups that prepare children for learning environments.

Our commitment to supporting autistic people gain meaningful employment, and businesses to effectively employ them, was further cemented when we received an extension of funding for the Autism EmployABLE program and were awarded Queensland Government Workforce Connect funding for the Neurodiversity Works project that supports, educates and works with employers in south east Queensland.

Two significant projects were in development throughout 2023 in preparation for a 2024 launch: Queensland's first autism-specific Distance Education school, and the final development of the My Sensory Experiences Tool (MYSET). Both projects play, and will continue to play, a critical role in supporting student engagement with education and understanding sensory preferences to support community inclusion.

While AQ may be seen as a specialist organisation outside of mainstream services, its role and purpose is to support community inclusion at any point on life's journey. We

provide specialist, evidence-informed services, co-designed with the autistic community to enable inclusion, and a life of participation, opportunity and choice. For example, our schools offer education where other options have failed, and we work to reengage students with education and their local schools.

Each year I commend our incredible staff for their dedication and resilience – and this year is no different. I am extremely grateful for, and proud of, our remarkable team – the front-line staff who dedicate their days to ensuring the best possible outcomes for our clients, and the corporate services staff who work behind the scenes.

Our dedicated Board, led by Chair Neil Makepeace and supported by Jennie Riley, Company Secretary, has worked diligently with me to ensure AQ adapts to the changing disability landscape and remains sustainable for the future. Particular thanks go to Frances Scodellaro, Chief Operations Officer and the executive and senior managers for their continued support and dedication. I also acknowledge and thank our Advisory Committee, led by Chair Dr Rachele Wicks, for the role it plays in ensuring autism services, supports and products are co-designed with the autistic community. We are committed to bringing deep knowledge, extensive capabilities, and the expertise, passion and commitment of our exceptional workforce to the fulfilment of this mission.

Together, we will continue advocating for the rights and well-being of autistic people, ensuring they have access to essential supports and resources to thrive.

Pam Macrossan
Chief Executive Officer

Services overview

In 2023 AQ continued to draw on our staff's collective experience, knowledge and continued professional development to ensure best-practice and a suite of relevant services informed by research and the people we support.

These specialised supports were delivered by staff based across the country and at our eight Queensland centres – Carrara, Gold Coast, and Sunnybank Hills and Brighton, Brisbane in the south east; Gladstone and Rockhampton in central Queensland; and Mackay, and Edmonton and Bungalow, Cairns in the north. These services were delivered at the centres, at venues in the community, online (teletherapy and online groups), in the home and workplace.



Early Childhood

Early diagnosis followed by structured, individualised services can make a significant difference in the lives of young autistic children. AQ's flexible and individualised EarlyAQtion early childhood services are underpinned by an Early Years Framework that guides our professionals to achieve best practice and maximum outcomes for young autistic children. We support children up to school entry age to develop the skills for successful participation in home and community life in comprehensive and holistic services that recognise parents and carers as crucial members of the team. Services in 2023 included Kindi Groups for children aged 2-6 years, and therapy groups focussing on such elements as behaviour, communication, handwriting and other motor skills, making friends, mealtime anxiety, social participation, transition into Prep and Year 1. Individual therapy, diagnostic assessments, inclusion and transition supports and parent coaching were also available.

Kindergarten Inclusion Service

Autism Queensland is a registered provider of this Queensland Government funded service which aims to increase access to kindergarten for children with addition needs and to improve the inclusiveness of kindergarten programs through the delivery of universal (workshops, resources etc) and targeted (individual education support, service visits etc) supports.

Schooling and Education

AQ School

AQ runs three Education and Therapy Centres operating as an autism-friendly independent school with campuses in Brisbane at Sunnybank Hills and Brighton (Prep-Year 12), and Cairns (Prep-Year 6). All students have a diagnosis of autism and verified ASD in accordance with the Queensland Department of Education's guidelines to support students with disability in special schools. A pilot Distance Education program was approved in 2023 to commence delivery in 2024.

School Advisory Service

Funded by the Queensland Government through the Department of Education Specialist Disability Support in Schools (SDSS) Program, this service is delivered by a team of specialist teachers and therapists who visit all schools across Queensland (State, Catholic and Independent) upon request from the school. They provide information, advice, support and individualised strategies to staff, other key professionals and parents to assist support and outcomes for those students they are making the request for.

Vacation Care

AQ's Vacation Care programs are open to autistic children aged 5-16 years and delivered at AQ Sunnybank Hills and Brighton. Attending children receive support as required to engage in the planned activities.



Individual Supports

Comprehensive Assessments

Assessments for children, adolescents and adults to support the diagnostic process and for other purposes are provided by a highly qualified and experienced multidisciplinary team comprising speech pathologists, occupational therapists and psychologists.

Individual Therapy

Speech pathology, occupational therapy and psychology are available for all ages - in person and via teletherapy depending on the needs and location of the client. Our practitioners have a broad range of experience, skills and additional certifications to cater for the individual needs of the person they are delivering the service to.

Therapy Groups

These groups are designed to help with the development of skills necessary for successful participation in home and the community, and to support transition into the next stage of life. While therapy is embedded in these groups, they are participant-led, fun and engaging. When scheduling these groups we consider participant' interests and where possible incorporate this within the setting to further increase engagement and outcomes. Groups for school-aged children may focus on behaviour, social activities, motor skills, communication and anxiety, while those for young people and adults focus more on social interaction, life skills, job-readiness and goal setting.

Behaviour Supports

This service supported people who were using challenging behaviours which impacted on their quality of life. It was delivered by registered behaviour support practitioners who develop or review Positive Behaviour Support Plans for autistic people with behaviours of concern, conduct functional behaviour assessments, provide individual strategy recommendations and train staff and carers to implement plans.

Psychology and Mental Health Support

Assessment and therapeutic supports are available for autistic adolescents and adults requiring mental health support. This team also delivers the Autism and Mental Health project for mental health professionals and organisations, and general practitioners, a special project funded by the Australian Government, Department of Social Services.

Employment

AQ's dedicated employment services team offers a selection of bespoke programs supporting the provision of specialist employment for autistic and neurodivergent adults; and enabling businesses to successfully employ autistic people.



Supported Independent Living and Community Access

We support autistic people to live in their own home in south-east Queensland. These clients receive 24-hour support from lifestyle support workers skilled in developing individual capacity, managing needs including behaviour support and facilitating access to community events and activities that suit their individual needs and interests.



Other Services & Supports

Professional Development and Parent Education

We have a long history of delivering autism-related workshops and webinars for parents and carers, educators, allied health professionals, health professionals, support workers and others supporting autistic people. The team also delivers workshops with individualised content for schools, community organisations, employers and others. In 2023 the team worked with Scouts Queensland to deliver free autism information workshops for their Leaders as part of a project funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

Inclusion Consultancy Services

AQ provides inclusive design solutions that are co-created with early childhood centres, schools, community spaces and organisations to ensure they are meaningful and achievable. This empowers them to take ownership of inclusion by removing barriers and engaging in a continuous process of reflection. Our aim is to ensure all people can access, participate, and feel welcomed in their spaces.

PlayConnect+ Playgroups

The PlayConnect+ Playgroup program for all children with disability and/or developmental concerns aged birth to 8 years, and their families, carers and siblings is delivered by the State and Territory Playgroup Associations as part of a consortium led by AQ. It is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services as part of the National Early Childhood Program (NECP), and supported by the State Autism Associations.

Research and Development

AQ's dedicated R&D team promotes evidence-informed, high-quality practice and conducts research to support the development of education, therapy and support strategies across the organisation and our services. This team developed the Family Goal Setting Tool (ASD Version), Family Goal Setting Tool (Disability Version) and the Adolescent/Adult Goal Setting Tool resources. In 2023 development was also completed in preparation for the 2024 publication of the My Sensory Experiences Tool (MYSET), a resource designed to transform the way people understand and support sensory experiences for autistic and neurodivergent individuals.

Our impact in 2023

3000

Enquiries

Received by our client services and support team.

286

Workshops/Webinars

Delivered to parents, professionals and AQ staff across Queensland.

186*

Students attended our three school campuses.

* AQ School classes support 5-8 students.

14,500

Hours of community access provided for clients.

17

Kindi Groups

Delivered at our centres.

20

Clients supported 24/7

In 11 Supported Living Accommodations.

108

Children attended our Kindi Groups

1617

Participants who engaged directly with PlayConnect+ services.

160

Hours of Individual Supports

Provided each month.

1278

Requests for School Advisory visits.

227

Children (5-16 years) attended AQ Vacation Care.

780

Calls & emails to the Education & Support Line.

1500 + **470**

Students

Schools

Supported through our inclusion services.

4000+

Workshops participants.

392

Kindergartens and Early Childhood Education Centres

Supported through Early Years Inclusion services.



2023 Highlights

- Opened two new centres, Gold Coast and a second site at Bungalow in Cairns.
- Launched AQ Kindy Inclusion Service Online Resource Hub.
- AQ School Cairns welcomed its first full-time student.
- Goal Setting Tools (Adolescent/Adult & Family) remain a popular resource for therapists, educators and other professionals across Australia and internationally.
- My Sensory Experiences Tool (MYSET) prepares to go into production for 2024.
- Green light to deliver pilot of Queensland's first autism-specific Distance Education program.
- Neurodiversity Works Employment Program commences.
- Increased engagement of students in School Advisory Visits.
- Autism Queensland leads new national PlayConnect+ Program.

“As a neurodivergent individual, it was refreshing to have training on the subject structured in such an open, accepting and compassionate matter.

— Workshop participant

“I love how you made us understand that there are times when children have neither energy nor tolerance to do activities.

— Kindergarten teacher

“We are new to the world of autism (although have been going through the diagnosis process for about 2 years)... I couldn't fault the content - it was up to date and very relatable. Most useful was the interaction with informed, experienced and approachable presenters.

— Workshop participants



Our people

Marguerite Van Blerk



Marguerite has worked at AQ since August 2017, starting as a teacher in the EarlyAQtion Kindi team in Gladstone and running Social Opportunities Group Therapy sessions for children under 7.

“I absolutely love the variety in my work – I meet amazing families, educators and children all the time, and seeing them achieve success is immensely fulfilling.

Krystal Arthy



Krystal was a teenager when she found her calling in supporting autistic children. Now, as a Senior Consultant in AQ's Client Services and Support team, she's dedicated to helping young children and their families access the support they need to thrive.

“We build strong relationships, even when speaking over the phone. The consultation takes less than an hour, but in that time, you feel a deep sense of connection. It's nice that we're implementing more follow-up calls, so you get that rewarding feeling of checking in with clients and hearing they're doing well within AQ.

Cathy Drummond



When you were in primary school, what did you want to be when you grew up? An astronaut? A pop star?

Most of us are likely doing something completely different from what we imagined. But not Cathy who is now AQ School Principal. She knew from an early age that her future lay in education. Throughout her lengthy career, she's not only created a brighter future for herself but also for countless autistic students.

“Immediately, I knew Autism Queensland was a really good fit for me. It's an environment where you're always learning and problem solving to get the best outcomes for your students. And it's fantastic to work with other teachers who are responsive, solutions-focused and always looking for ways to make things better.

Amber McGregor



Amber's journey with AQ began long before she joined the team. She's worked across multiple roles and locations, but now as our Manager of Early Years Inclusion, Amber has well and truly found her place.

“I'll tell anyone how grateful I feel to have been part of so many children's early childhood years and their learning journeys. However small it may seem, everything you do makes a big difference in the lives of the child and their families. To see my team grow as professionals in the process has been another huge achievement.

Alysia Crawford



AQ School Teacher Alysia first joined the team for a one term maternity contract after leaving the State School system. Almost four years on she is still here, having, “found my people and the place where I fit as a teacher.”

“My favourite thing about AQ is the people. I can't imagine working anywhere else.



AQ SCHOOL

In 2023 the AQ School supported 186 students in 30 classes from Prep-Year 12 across its three campuses at Sunnybank Hills, Brighton and Edmonton, Cairns.

The 2023 AQ School team of 126 (full and part-time) staff included teachers, teacher aides, therapists, wellbeing and behaviour support staff, bus transport and administrative staff, a principal, three heads of Campus.

We provide a range of enrolment needs to support the diverse needs of students and look for inclusive opportunities by providing full and part-time attendance options for students. Our part-time students undertake shared enrolment at their local primary or high school which enables them to maintain their connections with their peers and school curriculum.

Classes are small, with 5-8 students, and the class teacher takes on the additional role of case manager for each student. A teacher aide works with the teacher, and additional support is provided by speech pathologists, occupational therapists, wellbeing facilitators and behaviour support facilitators.

Our interdisciplinary and inclusive approach is underpinned by personalised student programs, and regular collaboration and communication with parents, local school's staff and other related professionals.

Teachers adjust the Australian Curriculum to develop personalised teaching and learning programs that consider students' strengths and interests, their age and individual learning needs.



For what was probably the most difficult and challenging year of our child's education to date, AQ was a shining light. It's reduced curriculum, lower student to teacher ratios and autism friendly practices gives kids like ours an opportunity to participate in an educational environment, building relationships and social skills at the same time.

AQ School 2023 Highlights

- AQ School successfully applied for accreditation to deliver distance education from the Sunnybank Campus as an additional mode of delivery for students in Years 3-6, commencing 2024.
- The AQ School full-time Senior School program that supports students in a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA) pathway and allows them to access a personalised senior program with autism-specific adjustments and supports, completed its third year of operation.
- Our 186 students comprised 76 who full-time and 110 who attended part-time in shared enrolment with another school.
- 100% of parent/carer feedback agreed or strongly agreed that the AQ School team collaborated with them to support their child's stakeholders to provide for their child's personalised learning needs.
- Professional development for Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators and AQ School teachers included a focus on assessment and reporting, preparing for the implementation of a Systematic Synthetic Phonics program, the Disability Standards for Education and NCCD of students with disability, and the revision of the AQ School Educational Program.
- The Cairns Campus added an additional part-time class at the beginning of the 2023 school year and enrolments reached 20, including our first full-time student.
- Early secondary aged full-time classes continue to have substantial waitlists and currently support students in years 6-9 who demonstrate significant challenges accessing and engaging with learning and with others within the high school learning environment.



You have supported our child to be a successful learner, helped her relationships particularly around conflict, social engagement and being confident to communicate with others.

Employment Services

The AQ Employment Services Team delivered three bespoke programs in 2023, supporting the provision of specialist employment services for autistic and neurodivergent adults seeking work and enabling businesses to successfully employ and retain autistic talent in their organisation.

Autism EmployABLE

Funded by the Department of Social Services, Autism EmployABLE is a participant-led, autism-specific employment access program for adults to explore, navigate and sustain work. It incorporates evidence-based autism-specific approaches and works with businesses to build their capacity and knowledge to employ autistic people.

The businesses we work with are shown the benefits of creating a more inclusive and diverse workforce, including the idea of 'jobfit', that is ensuring a potential job is appropriate for both the employee and the employer. The pilot Autism EmployABLE program commenced in late 2019.

2023 was another successful year for the program with 52 employment outcomes achieved from 58 interviews and 8 work trials. These outcomes were the result of 2592 unique employer contacts – a success rate of just 2.2%, but an illustration of the persistence of this hard-working team.

Employers are an integral part of the employment equation, and the team continues to see a growing number of businesses realising the benefits autistic employees bring to their workforce and workplace.



When our participant joined the EmployABLE program in March 2023, the team worked with him to set goals for skill building and the type of work he might enjoy. School had been difficult and after leaving at Year 10 and not finding work, the participant felt he had little to offer a workplace. When the EmployABLE team discovered his passion for digital design, they reached out to several businesses, finding one specialising in laser cutting and design and who was interested in offering our participant potential employment. Fast forward, and at 27, the participant found himself working at a job he enjoyed and excelled at, working for an employer who was delighted to find he had hired a keen, smart and proactive employee.

Neurodiversity Works

Autism Queensland secured funding through the Queensland Government Workforce Connect Grants for this program that commenced delivery mid-2023. A key aspect of Neurodiversity Works (NDW) is education and training for businesses and their staff about autism, neurodivergence and the creation of inclusive workplaces. A retention service component also supports neurodivergent employees to remain in the workforce through the application of a collaborative communication framework that matches organisational needs with those of the employee.

The AQ NDW team members personalise their approach for each business partner, focusing on specific organisation needs in the neurodiversity space. They review and recommend enhancements to attraction, recruitment, interview, and onboarding practices to ensure a smooth transition for neurodivergent employees joining the business.

The team engaged with approximately 20 businesses following commencement of the program, and at the end of the year they were supporting: Queensland Disability Network (QDN), Brisbane City Council, Redland City Council, Australian Retirement Trust, Flight Centre, Tomra, Kathmandu and Urban Rest.

A volunteer role in a Save the Children Op Shop provided our participant with the perfect opportunity to build the skills and experience she needed to gain work in a retail environment. Tasks such as stock pricing, customer service, point of sale transactions, working with other staff and following workplace health and safety procedures provided excellent on the job training. For our participant, this role was very exciting as it gave her the opportunity to work in a friendly environment while developing her confidence and skills.

EmployREADY

This program commenced in March 2023 due to high demand from autistic adults for a service that supported them to realise their NDIS employment goals to find suitable and sustainable roles they would thrive in open employment. Each participant is supported by an Autism Employment Specialist (AES) whose job is to build and foster the participant's strengths and interests and identify the areas of work-related support they would like to focus on. The participants, depending on their skills and interests, work towards understanding what work is, possible tasks, job roles and exposure to work types/environments. This is achieved through use of AQ's Adolescent/Adult Goal Setting Tool resource, guided sessions with their AES and engagement with local businesses. Participants also receive guidance on understanding their diagnosis, possible impacts, supports and their marketable strengths and skills.

Across 2023 the program supported 24 participants and of these, eight secured employment.



Consultancy

As awareness and understanding of the importance of inclusivity within all spaces continues to grow, AQ increased its work in this space, delivering expert advice to ensure appropriate inclusion supports were offered to the autistic and neurodivergent community.

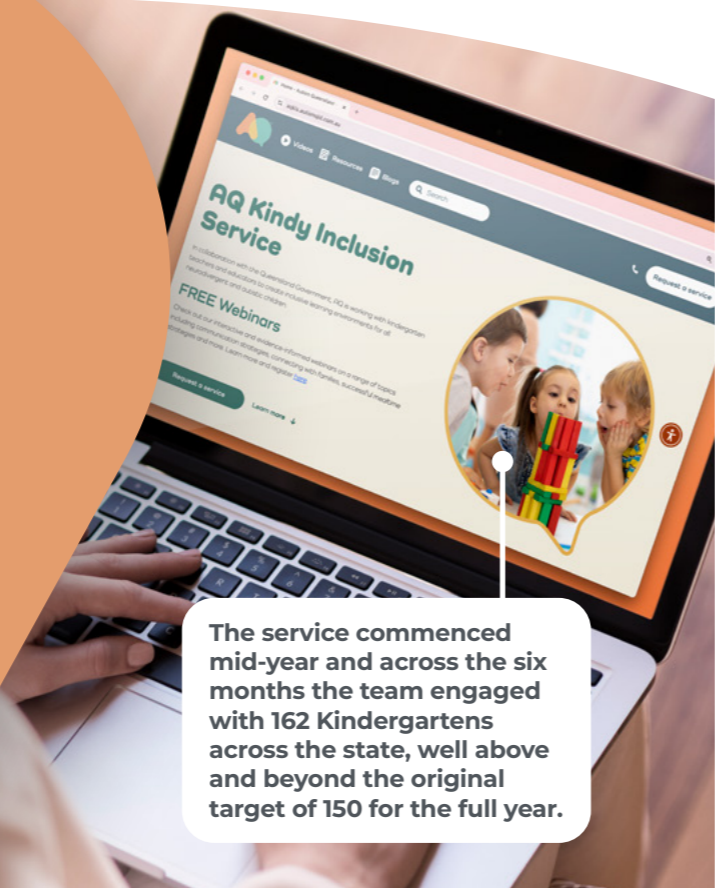
The team operated within three key services areas – Early Years (early childhood centres and kindergarten), School and Education Inclusion, and Community and Corporate Inclusion.



Kindy Inclusion Service

In 2023 AQ was selected as one of four specialist organisations to deliver the Kindy Inclusion Service for the State government. We provide advice and support to build educator capability with Queensland's kindergartens and in turn, enhance the access, inclusion and outcomes of children with additional needs who are attending kindergarten.

The roll out of the program included the development and launch of a dedicated online resource hub through which educators can book visits, seek advice and information, and access a series of resources including videos, tip sheets and information papers. A series of webinars was also developed for launch in 2024.



The service commenced mid-year and across the six months the team engaged with 162 Kindergartens across the state, well above and beyond the original target of 150 for the full year.



Investing in Women Project

This Queensland Government-funded initiative involved the co-production and co-creation of a sustainable group program in which autistic women could share and connect authentically, build and create community, and gain knowledge and empowerment in a safe, supported space. The short-term project ran from July through to December 2023 and included a series of engagement sessions delivered in person and online. They were well-attended and very valuable feedback was gathered to inform project outcomes and future activities in this space.

"I always knew I was different because I never fitted anywhere. I knew I was autistic before I was autistic. It's nice to not feel so alien. In the real world, I feel like I don't belong. Having people to talk to is nice."

"I just want to say how much I appreciated yesterday. Although it wasn't supposed to be a therapy session, today I feel so much lighter. So, thank you for the opportunity."

Accommodate Us Project

This project involves the development of a co-designed resource that will increase the capacity of tourist accommodation providers to provide informed, inclusive experiences for autistic and neurodivergent visitors.

Activities included site visits with accommodation providers recruited to participate in the project from across the state and from varied markets, star ratings, price points and themes. As a result of this project, team members also had the opportunity to attend Destination Q to further share the idea of inclusion beyond compliance with interested operators in attendance.

This project is funded by the Queensland Government.

While the focus for the first stage of the project was accommodation providers, 2024 activities will involve capturing the experiences of autistic travellers to inform the final resource.



Thank you for your support

Appeals

Tax Appeal

Meet Polly, a shining example of the transformative impact of our programs at AQ. Polly was the face of our 2023 Tax Appeal, through which we shared her journey from when she joined the AQ Teen Tech Shed therapy group at the age of 13 and found a learning environment that was also a supportive community which embraced her for who she was. Through AQ, Polly built confidence, developed creative skills, and formed meaningful friendships with peers who understand and accept her.



Christmas Appeal

Our 2023 Christmas Appeal, "Jaxson's Journey," showcased the inspiring story of Jaxson, a student at AQ School's Sunnybank campus. Despite navigating the challenges of autism, ADHD, anxiety, and sensory processing difficulties, Jaxson's tale is one of resilience, creativity, and unwavering passion.

During the Christmas season, we highlighted Jaxson's remarkable achievement in composing a heartfelt song, a testament to his determination to not let his diagnosis define him. This achievement symbolizes the empowerment and acceptance that AQ School strives to foster in all its students.

The Christmas Appeal aimed to raise essential funds to support AQ School's mission of providing small classes, a consistent learning environment, and personalised support to students like Jaxson. These contributions enable us to continue creating opportunities for our students to thrive academically and personally.

As we look back on the year and celebrate Jaxson's journey, we are grateful for the unwavering support of our community. Your generosity made a significant impact, allowing us to empower young individuals like Jaxson to dream big, embrace their talents, and redefine what's possible. Thank you for being an integral part of Jaxson's journey and for supporting AQ School's commitment to empowering young autistic students. Together, we can continue to make a meaningful difference in their lives.



Major Events

International Women's Day Fundraiser

We were delighted to be chosen as the beneficiary of the Bendigo Bank Italian & Hellenic Business Women's Network Lunch on International Women's Day 2023.

This event celebrated the achievements of women in business and showcased a generous spirit of community support.

Proceeds from the event were generously donated to AQ, reinforcing our commitment to improving the lives of autistic individuals and their families.

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who attended and contributed to this meaningful cause. Your support is invaluable as we continue our mission. We look forward to future collaborations and opportunities to make a difference together.



Autism Month

The more we can spread awareness and promote acceptance, the better we can create a more inclusive and supportive world for autistic people.



Lighting Up Queensland

Across April we liaised with local councils and landmarks around the state who were happy to show their support for AQ and a colourful campaign to let up the State in a spectrum of colours across the month and on April 2, World Autism Awareness Day.

AQ's Lighting Up Queensland campaign is proving an excellent way to spark conversations and create awareness and understanding. The 2023 night time lightups included:

Friday 31 March – Monday 3 April

Fraser Coast

- Maryborough City Hall
- Hervey Bay Esplanade

Saturday 1 April (World Autism Awareness Day Eve)

Brisbane City

- Story Bridge
- Victoria Bridge
- Reddacliff Place



Sunday 2 April

Gladstone

- Regional Council Main Office Building
- Regional Art Gallery & Museum

Townsville

- Victoria Bridge
- Wharton Reef Lighthouse
- George Roberts Bridge
- Old Magistrates Court House
- Flinders Square
- Little Fletcher Bridge
- Central Park Boardwalk

Rockhampton

- Heritage Facade, Rockhampton Museum of Art

Major Events

AQ Sweat Challenge

The AQ Sweat Challenge, held throughout October, was a resounding success, engaging schools, clubs, businesses, and individuals in a celebration of physical activity and community spirit in support of AQ.

We particularly extend our heartfelt thanks to the Brisbane Roar for their enthusiastic participation and support, adding excitement and inspiration to the campaign.

The challenge required participants to set their own unique goals ranging from daily runs and bike rides to hula-hooping contests, showcasing creativity and dedication.

They were encouraged to choose activities that resonated with them, supported by generous donations from family and friends. Comprehensive resource packs provided to schools and clubs simplified the organisation process and included essential tools such as sign-up information, logging sheets, and promotional materials.

The AQ Sweat Challenge was more than just a fitness initiative; it was a testament to the power of community, creativity, and support for a worthy cause. Thank you to everyone who participated, donated, and helped make the AQ Sweat Challenge a memorable and impactful event!



Funding Contributions

Grants

Accessible Tourism Enablers Grant, Queensland Government

Brisbane Airport Corporation

Brothers Leagues Club (Cairns) Limited & Fullers Sports Club Community Grants

Community Gambling Benefit Fund Grants, Queensland Government

Commonwealth Bank Foundation

Digital Mentoring Program, Queensland Government

Investing in Queensland Women Grant

Queensland Government

Kedron-Wavell Community Grants

Lord Mayor's Charitable Trust

Mackay Airport Corporation

Workforce Connect Fund, Queensland Government

Stanmore Resources Community Grant

Stronger Communities Programme, Australian Government

The Cory Charitable Foundation

William Angliss Charitable Fund



Bequests

Leaving a bequest in your will can make a real difference for the future of so many. Parents and carers devote their lives to looking after autistic children. A gift in your Will will provide vital funding that enables AQ to deliver desperately needed therapy, education and other services for autistic children and adults, as well as their families, carers and others who work or support them. We sincerely thank those individuals and families who choose AQ as a beneficiary in their will.

Funding Contributions

Workplace Giving/Volunteering

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated volunteers, many of whom are also Workplace Giving partners, reflecting the strong commitment and support within this community.

Imagine the impact you can make by simply asking a question? Reach out to your Workplace Giving Coordinator or Payroll Officer to inquire if your company offers this facility. If they do, consider choosing Autism Queensland as your preferred charity and decide on your donation amount or sponsorship preference. Your contribution, no matter the size, can make a significant difference in the lives of autistic people, empowering them to thrive and succeed.

If your company does not have a Workplace Giving Form, don't worry! You can still support our mission by completing AQ's workplace giving form and submitting it to your Payroll Officer.

Let them handle the rest, and together, we can create a brighter future for young autistic individuals. Your generosity and compassion can transform lives and make our community more inclusive and supportive for everyone.

Our volunteers contribute their time, skills, and resources to make a lasting impact on the lives of individuals and families affected by autism. Your combined efforts create a supportive and inclusive environment where everyone can thrive.

Thank you for your unwavering dedication and for being an integral part of the AQ family. All contributions as volunteers and Workplace Giving partners are truly valued and appreciated.

Special thanks

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following funders, organisations and donors for their generous support in 2023. Your support is invaluable!

Australian Government

- Department of Industry, Science and Resources
- Department of Education
- Department of Social Services
- Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and The Arts

Queensland Government

- Department of Education, Early Childhood Education and Care
- Department of Education, Non-State Special Needs Organisations Program
- Department of Education, Specialist Disability Support in Schools
- Department of Justice & Attorney General
- Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport
- Department of Employment, Small Business and Training
- Gambling Community Benefit Fund

Other Partners, Donors and Supporters

- Anthea Polson Art
- Autism CRC
- Australia Piano World
- Autism Hub & Reading Centre, Department of Education
- Bendigo Bank Italian Hellenic Business Network
- Big Rocks Hospitality Group (Beenleigh Bowls Club, Club Hotel Motel, Hotel Lowood, Gympie Sports Club)
- Boost Juice
- Brisbane Roar
- Brothers Leagues Club (Cairns) Limited & Fullers Sports Club
- Brisbane City Council
- Burrito Bar
- Deloitte Impact Day
- Dreamworld
- Friendly Grocer Brighton
- Great Southern Bank
- Goodfellas SMC Brisbane
- Independent Liquor Group
- Kool Beanz Academy
- Knight Frank Real Estate
- Lord Mayor's Charitable Trust
- Martin Edge
- Master Engraving
- Piccones Supa IGA
- Play for Purpose Charity Lottery
- J.J. Richards & Sons Pty Ltd
- The Cory Charitable Foundation
- The Edge, State Library of Queensland
- The John Villiers Trust
- Hart Family Perpetual Trust
- Emma Tomlinson
- Paypal Giving Fund
- Smithfield Shopping Centre
- Sunnybank Rotary Club
- Sunnybank Hoyts Cinema
- University of Queensland
- William Angliss Charitable Fund



2023 Board of directors



Neil Makepeace
Chair

Neil is a passionate leader and director with 30 years' experience solving complex problems in Queensland, around Australia and worldwide. He has a strong track record in governance, executive leadership, management consulting, strategic planning, systems development and operations. Neil is passionate about the power of data and information to give leaders the evidence and confidence they need to make wise decisions and ultimately drive business and social value. Through his socially responsible leadership, he has made a difference in areas like child safety, youth justice, domestic and family violence and the environment. He is deeply dedicated to helping autistic people realise their full potential.



Danielle Butcher
Director

Danielle has over 20 years' experience leading successful teams, programs and specialised projects. She identifies opportunities to obtain efficiencies and drive reform and has a strong understanding of the not for profit sector, government, policy, governance, asset and facilities management, education and awareness, indigenous issues, disabilities, tenancy issues, hardship and concession programs, customer management, complaints management and standards.



Alicia Tuppack
Director, Chair - Growth & Innovation Committee

Alicia has almost 20 years of experience in the Australian Government and over 10 years in Executive Management leading high performing teams to deliver strategic policy and transformation in dynamic risk environments. She has skills in leadership, strategy, risk, governance, quality, compliance, projects, change, innovation and training gained from working across the Government and not-for-profit sectors. Alicia is passionate about ensuring people of all abilities can participate and contribute to society.



Chris Collins
Director, Chair - Finance & Audit Committee

Chris is an experienced corporate and financial services leader with over 20 years of experience across global markets. He is a proven leader with strong technical skills and business acumen and has experience in complex cross-border financing and capital raising, risk, compliance and corporate governance. Chris is admitted to practice law in NSW, England and Wales, a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and has an Executive MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management.



Josh Mennen
Director, Chair - People, Safety & Culture Committee

Josh is a Principal Lawyer and Nation Litigation Leader at Maurice Blackburn. Admitted to legal practice in 2007, Josh has acted predominantly across superannuation, general insurance, life insurance, financial advice and consumer credit disputes in various tribunals and courts. He is a prominent commentator on public policy, having advanced consumer rights through scores of submissions, appearances at parliamentary inquiries and media appearances. Josh provides financial services legal advice to disabled or wronged consumers, disability support groups, charities, State Trustees, financial counsellors, community groups and unions. He is passionate about increasing consumer rights/awareness, and giving voice to those dis-empowered by illness, injury and socioeconomic barriers.



Samantha Garbutt
Director

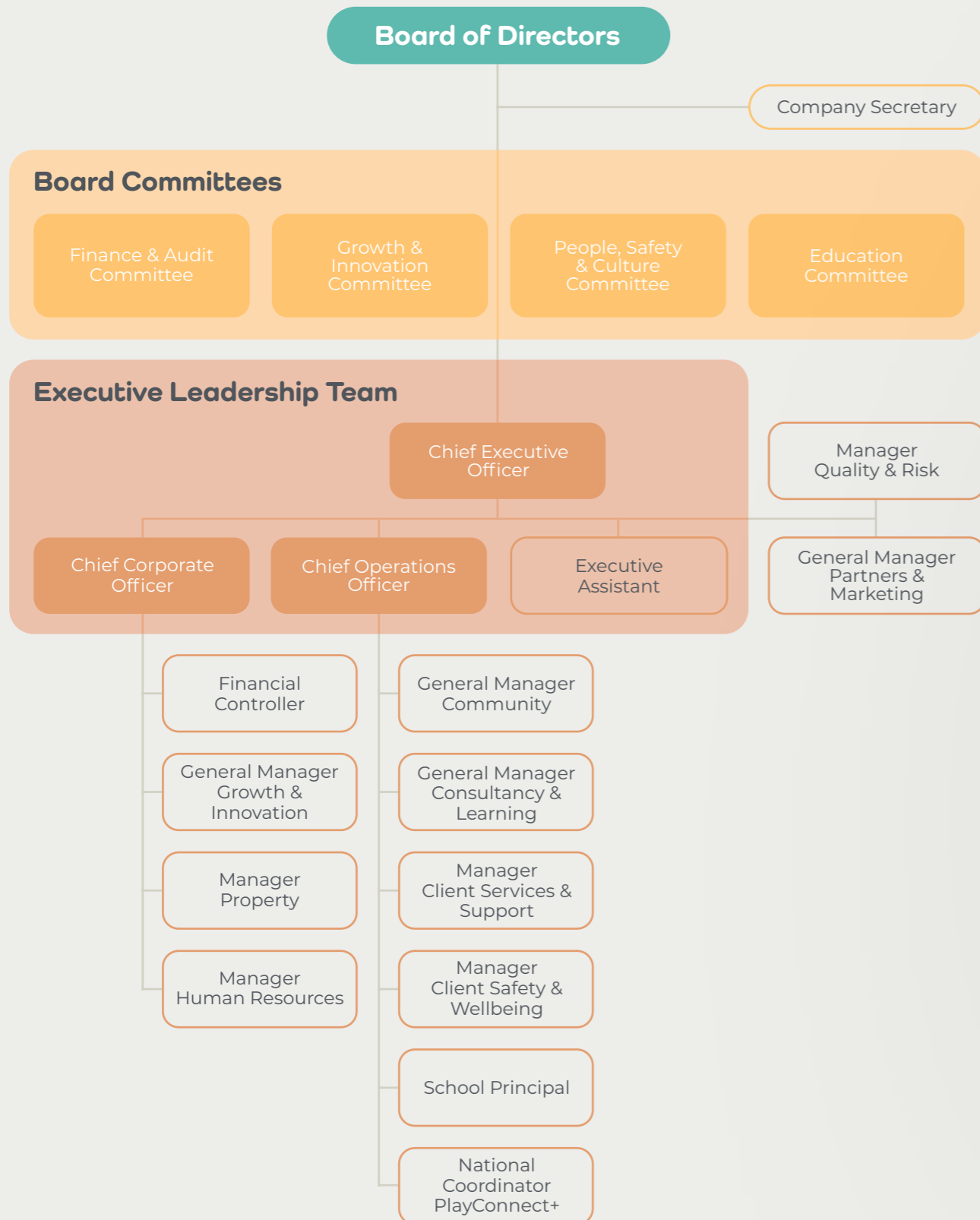
Samantha has over 15 years experience in operations, talent management and leadership development, and is passionate about organisational strategy and processes that underpin building, supporting and retaining exceptional talent. She is Chief People Officer at Australian Spatial Analytics, a data analytics company employing young autistic adults. Through her cross-sector experience in education, technology and not-for-profits, Samantha advocates for wider understanding of autism and acceptance of the distinct cognitive talents of autistic individuals.



Jennie Riley
Company Secretary

Jennie joined Autism Queensland in 2019 as Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive Officer bringing with her a breadth of experience in corporate administration gained from roles in corporate and for-purpose agencies overseas and within Australia. Jennie has extensive governance, executive administration and project management capabilities. She is passionate about ensuring social justice and equity within the workplace and community.

2023 governance structure



Our Patron

Her Excellency the Honourable
Dr Jeannette Young AM PSM
 Governor of Queensland

Autism Queensland are members of the following:



Statement of Financial Position

As at 31 December 2023

	2023 \$	2022 \$
Current Assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	2,042,836	3,964,849
Trade and other receivables	858,649	649,067
Other assets and prepayments	1,155,190	1,041,098
Total Current Assets	4,056,675	5,655,014
Non-Current Assets		
Property, plant and equipment	21,386,826	20,306,442
Financial assets	21,357	21,357
Total Non-Current Assets	21,408,183	20,327,799
Total Assets	25,464,858	25,982,813
Current Liabilities		
Trade and other payables	3,864,454	3,332,214
Financial liabilities	4,245,876	416,036
Lease liabilities	143,936	168,489
Provisions	3,009,546	3,147,345
Total Current Liabilities	11,263,802	7,064,084
Non-Current Liabilities		
Financial liabilities	-	1,828,868
Lease liabilities	555,644	314,242
Provisions	585,733	600,282
Total Non-Current Liabilities	1,141,377	2,743,392
Total Liabilities	12,405,179	9,807,476
Net Assets	13,059,679	16,175,337
Funds		
Revaluation reserves	9,652,714	9,652,714
Accumulated funds	3,406,965	6,522,623
Total Funds	13,059,679	16,175,337

Statement of Comprehensive Income

For the year ended 31 December 2023

	2023 \$	2022 \$
Income		
Government subsidies	16,350,216	13,540,741
Revenue from rendering of services	22,146,368	22,258,609
Capital grants	324,436	230,871
Fundraising activities	302,842	246,821
Interest income	31,576	24,352
Sundry income	56,906	19,947
Total Income	39,212,344	36,321,341
Expenditure		
Employee expenses	35,319,420	33,313,826
Facilities expenses	5,140,170	5,255,855
Marketing expenses	89,493	109,043
Depreciation and amortisation expenses	828,630	672,090
Interest expenses	137,768	113,186
Other expenses	812,521	431,802
Total Expenditure	42,328,002	39,895,802
Net deficit for the year	(3,115,658)	(3,574,461)
Other comprehensive income		
Items that will not be reclassified to profit and loss		
Other comprehensive income for the year	-	-
Total comprehensive deficit for the year	(3,115,658)	(3,574,461)

How to support Autism Queensland

- Donate at autismqld.com.au
- Consider a corporate partnership
- Become a regular donor
- Join your workforce giving program; establish one at your workplace
- Leave a bequest for Autism Queensland in your will
- Buy tickets in our charity raffle
- Support our annual appeals
- Participate in our major events

Learn more about Fundraising at our website

autismqld.com.au/fundraising



Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible.

We welcome all conversations about how we can work with you to create better outcomes for autistic Queenslanders and their families.

Please contact us at:

✉ fundraise@autismqld.com.au

BRIGHTON

136 North Rd
Brighton QLD 4017

CAIRNS

15-17 Marr St
Edmonton QLD 4868

11 Cava Close
Bungalow QLD 4870

GLADSTONE

803 Glenlyon Rd
Glen Eden QLD 4680

GOLD COAST

338 Nerang Broadbeach Rd
Carrara QLD 4211

ROCKHAMPTON

373 Lakes Creek Rd
Koongal QLD 4700

MACKAY

10 Macrossan Street
Mackay QLD 4740

SUNNYBANK HILLS

327 Hellowell Rd
Sunnybank Hills QLD 4109



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