OPINION

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**Helen Haines calls on government to support Mansfield Autism project**

By HELEN HAINES MP
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In regional Victoria in the 1960s, few people knew what autism was. For those living with autism and their families there were even fewer services to support them.

Mansfield doctor Joan Curtis was the mother of one such child, her son Jonathan, and searched for support for him. Seeing none, in 1968 she established what went on to become Mansfield Autism Statewide Services (MASS).

Dr Curtis’s philosophy was that the best teacher for the child is the parent and the family, and believed that exercise, nature and healthy eating were vital for children with autism.

Today, with substantial clinical evidence to support her view, MASS provides person-centred, evidence-based holistic care for many Victorian families. But growing demand for MASS’ integrated care that includes day and term placement, respite, outreach, job training and in-home support is pushing the limits of the organisation’s existing facilities at its Highett Street base. It’s the same for autism services across the country.

In May, last year, with the economic impacts of 2020’s horrific summer bushfires and the first COVID lockdown challenging all of us, I was driving the Mount Buller Road for a meeting with MASS director Simone Reeves and strategic projects adviser Judy Dixon.

In a green paddock on a small farm purchased a month earlier, Simone and Judy set out for me a dynamic vision for a project MASS named ‘Operation Gamechanger’. This critical next step is a $30 million plan to develop a therapeutic care farm with a new term school campus, residential and training facilities, equine therapy centre and recreation facilities, including a pool, walking tracks and hard court to meet increasing need.

Improved awareness, recognition and diagnosis led in 2018 to a revision of autism’s rate of prevalence among Australians – from one in 100 in 2014, to one in 70. The roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, enabling people to choose the services that meet their needs, has also boosted demand.

Simone and Judy showed me how ‘Gamechanger’ would transform the organisation’s ability to deliver leading, early health and social intervention and respond to these changes. They told me how children with autism, often in the clinical range of anxiety, become calm and focused in a farm setting when they engage with animals or work in a vegetable garden. Reducing anxiety leads to improved learning.

‘Gamechanger’ will enable MASS to help 480 families, compared with 220 now, offer more than 4000 respite nights per year, compared with 800 now, and create 124 new placements in teaching, allied health and training. The total number of jobs would more than double to 250, equivalent to 165 full time, and generate at least $54 million in construction activity for Mansfield across the next four years. To put that in context, Mansfield Shire Council currently employs 104 people full-time.

Last September, I took the ‘Gamechanger’ proposal for Budget support to then federal Minister for Education Dan Tehan, who grew up in Mansfield. We now have a new Minister, Alan Tudge, and I will be knocking on his door when I return to Canberra next week to lay out the case for supporting the project. I will be asking Minister Tehan to lend his weight to the submission in Cabinet, too.

Mansfield led the nation in 1968. ‘Gamechanger ‘will extend that bold vision and establish a truly world class service. Together with the community, I call on the federal government to come to the table and invest in this important project.

ENDS

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