

Nova Scotia Provincial Elections 2021: Autism Nova Scotia Voting Toolkit

Prior to the upcoming provincial election, Autism Nova Scotia reached out to all three major provincial political Parties to seek clarity on their commitment to improving the quality of life of Autistic Nova Scotians and their families.

The federal government recently committed to developing a National Autism Strategy, the first of its kind in Canada. The development and implementation of a National Autism Strategy, which aims to improve the health and quality of life of individuals with autism, will require the collaboration of the federal, provincial, and territorial governments; autistic individuals, families, and caregivers; and organizations supporting the autism community.

The provincial government has a crucial role in ensuring the 27,000 Autistic Nova Scotians and their families are given the opportunity to live their lives fully.

Autism Nova Scotia provided each Party with five areas of focus which the autism community identified as priorities for the next provincial government. Each Party was asked to outline how they will address these issues should they win a mandate in the upcoming election.

As a commitment to our members and our community stakeholders, we are pleased to share each Party's response to the five areas of focus and their stance on issues important to the autism community in the following pages.

As a non-partisan organization, we at Autism Nova Scotia hope this toolkit will help you make informed decisions on election day. Autism Nova Scotia is ready and willing to work with all Parties to make Nova Scotia a better place for our community. We remain steadfast in our mission of building understanding, acceptance, and inclusion for Autistics/individuals on the autism spectrum and their families through leadership, advocacy, education, training, and programming across the life span.

Autism Nova Scotia's five areas of focus gathered from the autism community for our next provincial government:

1: Nova Scotia is in a housing crisis. Investments and strategies in diverse housing solutions must include persons with disabilities, including autism. Nova Scotia needs to expand beyond traditional conversations of small option homes to enhance community living options including: co-operative models, affordable housing opportunities, portable rent subsidies, increased public and private partnerships, support structures, and funding that go beyond bricks and mortar.

Will your government commit to greater investment in diverse housing options and necessary support structures in partnership with the disability and autism community?

2: Delayed autism preschool diagnostic and intervention services are critically impacting child development and access to services for families. There is an immediate investment required in preschool diagnostic and intervention services to eliminate waitlists and give children and families access to critical early intervention that meets their needs.

Will your government make the necessary investment to ensure preschool children have access to timely and integrated intervention services to meet their needs and future goals?

3: The implementation timelines outlined in the Blueprint for Change in the Students First Report are behind schedule. Prioritization of the Provincial Autism Strategy outlined in the Commissioner's report on inclusive education, which includes enhance support for autistic students and aligns with the federal work on the National Autism Strategy, is essential.

Will your government prioritize the development and implementation of the Provincial Autism Strategy acknowledged in the Student's First report (2018)?

4: In Nova Scotia, Autistic adults struggle to access public diagnostic and mental health services with professionals who understand mental health and autism. Currently, Autistic adults are turned away from the public mental health services when they disclose they have autism. In addition, there are no public mental health providers providing adult diagnostics in our province, leaving expensive private service as the only option.

Will your government commit to investing in appropriate mental health supports and diagnostic services for Autistic adults?

5: Autism Nova Scotia has worked hard in partnership with all parties to ensure the needs of Autistic individuals and their families are better understood and have actively worked to enhance needed service delivery.

Will your government commit to current investments in autism service delivery and ongoing collaboration with Autism Nova Scotia and the autism community to ensure equitable access to support and services across the province?

1: Nova Scotia is in a housing crisis. Investments and strategies in diverse housing solutions must include persons with disabilities, including autism. Nova Scotia needs to expand beyond traditional conversations of small option homes to enhance community living options including: co-operative models, affordable housing opportunities, portable rent subsidies, increased public and private partnerships, support structures, and funding that go beyond bricks and mortar.

Will your government commit to greater investment in diverse housing options and necessary support structures in partnership with the disability and autism community?

NS Liberal Party:

Partnering with the Federal Government, our Government committed to the National Housing Strategy that will invest \$105 million over the next three years to increase access to affordable housing and preserve and maintain existing housing stock. This commitment also includes \$70 million over that same three-year period for renewal of existing housing and supports for low-income homeowners. We have also funded \$12 million in initiatives to support those experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness and \$6.4 million for social housing needs in communities across Nova Scotia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Liberal Party of Nova Scotia understands how necessary it is to protect renters against rising prices and address affordable housing in Nova Scotia.

In the last year, we've committed \$25 million to address immediate investments recommended by the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission. This money will directly support new affordable housing units, repairs to public housing and building upgrades that will reduce emissions. It will create an independent housing entity and look at modernizing laws and regulations around housing. An additional \$2.5 million will support a fund, to be co-created with community housing organizations, to help grow the community housing sector and to add more affordable units.

The other parties are running on platforms that address only pieces of the problem we face as a province. We are striving for a balanced approach that lessens the impact on those looking for a place to call home now while expediting the creation of new housing stock for the future to help bring down rising housing costs. We're providing more than 2,500 rent supplements and repairing and adapting almost 1,000 homes for low-income Nova Scotians.

A re-elected Rankin government is committed to expanding the housing options available to include secondary suites and garage lofts, tiny homes and other non-traditional forms of housing. We will explore innovative forms of funding, like forgivable and repayable loans for homeowners that want to add affordable, non-traditional rental and housing options to their existing properties. We will also provide support for single-room occupancies such as boarding houses in areas of need.

The Affordable Housing Commission also said we should look at ways to minimize the impact of renovations and evictions, that is why we have committed to requiring landlords to compensate tenants that are involuntarily displaced from their units for renovations. We will amend the Residential Tenancies Act to require one month of compensation for the tenant for each year they lived in the unit up to a maximum of 6 months rent.

A Liberal Government will immediately begin a comprehensive review of provincial legislation and regulations. We will direct the Department of Municipal Affairs to support municipal governments to complete a targeted assessment of the municipal development process to identify ways we can support local governments in their efforts to combat their affordable housing challenges.

Access to affordable housing is essential to quality of life. Creating affordable housing is a group effort and we remain committed to finding innovative solutions with our partners that help Nova Scotians find an affordable place to call home.

1: Nova Scotia is in a housing crisis. Investments and strategies in diverse housing solutions must include persons with disabilities, including autism. Nova Scotia needs to expand beyond traditional conversations of small option homes to enhance community living options including: co-operative models, affordable housing opportunities, portable rent subsidies, increased public and private partnerships, support structures, and funding that go beyond bricks and mortar.

Will your government commit to greater investment in diverse housing options and necessary support structures in partnership with the disability and autism community?

NS Progressive Conservative Party:

The PC Party acknowledges the difficulties the disability and autism communities experience that compound with the challenges of our housing crisis.

A PC government is committed to meeting with all stakeholders in this sector to prioritize funding to make housing more accessible.

NS New Democratic Party:

The NDP is fully committed to ending the housing crisis that is currently affecting Nova Scotia. Housing options must be truly accessible, beyond conventional definitions of physical accessibility, and investment in supportive options is badly needed. The harms are felt by people of all backgrounds across the province, but especially acutely by people with disabilities or autism. Solving this problem will require a coordinated effort with multiple strategies across all levels of government, not merely creating new tax breaks and handouts for developers and hoping for the best.

Firstly, the NDP is the only party committing to implement permanent rent control in Nova Scotia. This will ensure that everyone who currently has a home where they want to stay may do so without the fear of sudden, unaffordable rent increases. Tenants' rights would also be strengthened through policies like allowing tenants to file group complaints and creating a registry of health and safety violations in rental properties.

Next, the NDP is committed to building 1,000 new units of housing in the next four years by reinvesting in publicly-owned, cooperative, and non-profit housing. We would also support the creation of a permanent Housing Trust where provincial, municipal, and private resources could be pooled to allow non-profit housing providers to quickly acquire and provide affordable housing. Whenever existing affordable housing comes on the market, an NDP government would exercise a right of first refusal to acquire it. We would also enable municipalities to require affordable housing through inclusionary zoning.

We also support the expansion of supportive housing. We have specifically committed in our vision document to integrating mental health services with housing and other related services, including education and family supports.

Lastly, while you rightly identified that small options homes are not a complete solution, we still recognize them as an important part of it. As such, the NDP is committed to accelerating the building of small options homes in conjunction with our other investments in housing.

2: Delayed autism preschool diagnostic and intervention services are critically impacting child development and access to services for families. There is an immediate investment required in preschool diagnostic and intervention services to eliminate waitlists and give children and families access to critical early intervention that meets their needs.

Will your government make the necessary investment to ensure preschool children have access to timely and integrated intervention services to meet their needs and future goals?

NS Liberal Party:

In August 2019 the provincial government approved the Inclusive Education Policy as a commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. The guiding principles of Inclusive Education in Nova Scotia include the knowledge that every student can learn with enough time, practice and equitable and responsive teaching, and every student deserves to be affirmed, validated, and nurtured in all aspects of their daily experience.

Regional centres for education (RCEs) and Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP) support staff, such as, but not limited to, school psychologists, speech language pathologists, African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw support staff, culturally responsive and SchoolsPlus teams, consultants, coordinators, and directors provide additional supports to Teaching Support Teams, teachers, students, and families. These professionals work with Teaching Support Teams to support teachers in improving their teaching practices and to provide individual supports to the students that need them.

We will continue to increase support for students.

For our younger Nova Scotians, this year government will invest \$1 billion in public education for P-12 and pre-primary to provide students and educators with the support they need for success. Since coming to government in 2013, the education budget has been increased from \$1.1 billion to \$1.6 billion, 44 per cent in eight years. We are investing in our youth, an investment that will provide a return for decades.

NS Progressive Conservative Party:

The PC Party knows how important these services are. We were extremely disappointed to see the Liberals make cuts to the Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention program last year for children as young as two. We wrote to the Premier and called for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to convene a panel of parents with diverse needs children to determine what can be done to provide them with the most effective education. A PC Government will work with stakeholders to leave no child behind.

NS New Democratic Party:

When we were in government, the NDP invested \$8 million to ensure that every preschool aged child with autism gets the help they need – help that was previously only available to half of them. We still have this same commitment to making sure that early diagnostic and intervention services are available to all children and would make this a distinct priority.

Intervention and support services for families with preschool children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were also a key focus area for the provincial Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan released by the NDP government in 2013. An NDP government would use the recommendations in that action plan as a starting point and is committed to updating and implementing them accordingly.

3: The implementation timelines outlined in the Blueprint for Change in the Students First Report are behind schedule. Prioritization of the Provincial Autism Strategy outlined in the Commissioner's report on inclusive education, which includes enhance support for autistic students and aligns with the federal work on the National Autism Strategy, is essential.

Will your government prioritize the development and implementation of the Provincial Autism Strategy acknowledged in the Student's First report (2018)?

NS Liberal Party:

Our government is committed to working with our partners and Autism Nova Scotia to ensure that there are appropriate supports in place for children and their families. We will continue to support Nova Scotia's Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention (NS EIBI) and believe that giving parents appropriate tools and coaching through our partners at the IWK will lead to even better outcomes for families.

NS Progressive Conservative Party:

When the Student's First Report got to the government, the ball was dropped. At that stage, an arms-length "implementation" panel could have been established to map the way forward. It wasn't and as a result, the government did not implement things like the intensive treatment programs recommended in Sydney and Halifax and a critical recommendation for more psychologists in schools went unfilled. A PC government will recommit to the Report – with proper input from the disability and autism community – and implement the recommendations with an eye on the "wholeness" of the document. Our government will not cherry-pick from these recommendations and falsely claim action.

A PC government will commit to following through on the recommendations outlined in the Report and, just as importantly, to provide a public accounting of our progress by the eight-month mark of forming the government. The implementation of this Report will mean greater accountability within the inclusion model to ensure students have the appropriate supports and Programming.

NS New Democratic Party:

In government, the NDP developed the first provincial Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan. Like several other action plans developed by the NDP government, this plan was largely ignored by the Liberals in favour of doing more consultations and kicking the can further down the road.

People with autism deserve action.

An NDP government will publicly release a plan for implementing the recommendations from the Students First report and report annually on progress. We are also committed to updating the provincial Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan and conducting an audit of services across all departments through an autism and neurodiversity lens.

4: In Nova Scotia, Autistic adults struggle to access public diagnostic and mental health services with professionals who understand mental health and autism. Currently, Autistic adults are turned away from the public mental health services when they disclose they have autism. In addition, there are no public mental health providers providing adult diagnostics in our province, leaving expensive private service as the only option.

Will your government commit to investing in appropriate mental health supports and diagnostic services for Autistic adults?

NS Liberal Party:

The Liberal Government made significant investments to expand and enhance mental health service delivery throughout the pandemic, including the recent establishment of the Office of Mental Health & Addictions. Budget 2021/22 contributed \$1.5 million to support the new office and hired Nova Scotia's first Chief Officer of Mental Health & Addictions to oversee the deployment of \$336.5 million to sustain our mental health services and supports.

A re-elected Liberal government will invest \$4 million annually to launch 8 new mental health walk-in clinics to ensure that Nova Scotians struggling with mental health issues can receive timely, appropriate, and dedicated treatment from a team of specialized professionals.

The clinics will be staffed by interdisciplinary teams of mental health practitioners and clinicians trained to provide culturally competent, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, and 2SLGBTQIA+-aware care so that individuals who experience systemic oppression feel safe when seeking care.

Our government is open to dialogue on how to further improve diagnostic supports for adults and children to improve outcomes for all people with autism and their families.

NS Progressive Conservative Party:

Healthcare, including mental health, is without a doubt the most pressing issue facing Nova Scotians right now. After 8 years of neglect, our wait times and lack of accessibility for almost all health services have risen to levels that are having deadly consequences. Wait times for mental health care were unacceptable before the pandemic, and due to the massive increases in need for services over the course of the pandemic, access to mental health services has only gotten further out of reach for Nova Scotians.

A PC government will not ignore the mental health needs of Nova Scotians any longer.

The PC Party is the only party to put forward a universal, publicly funded solution for our mental health crisis. If elected, a PC government will immediately introduce Universal Mental Healthcare. This will allow every Nova Scotian to access the mental health services they need when, where, and how they need them. This will allow anyone, including adults with autism, to receive the services they need at any psychologist's office without having to worry about how they will pay for it.

By removing the financial barrier and months-long wait times that discourage many Nova Scotians from receiving the care they need, every Nova Scotian, regardless of status or income, will have equal access to these essential services.

NS New Democratic Party:

The provincial Autism Spectrum Disorder Action Plan released by the NDP government in 2013 focused on five key focus areas that contemplated the full, complex lifespan needs of people with autism spectrum disorders:

- Intervention and Support Services for Families with Preschool
- Children Diagnosed with ASD
- Supports for School-Aged Children with a Diagnosis of ASD
- Supports for Adults with ASD and Their Families
- Skills Training and Awareness
- Partnerships to Support Programming and Services

Particularly within the final three of the five focus areas listed above, the action plan laid out a number of actions the provincial government needed to take in order to fully support adults with ASD. An NDP government would use these recommendations as a starting point on the path to updating and implementing necessary changes to government services. We would also conduct an audit of services across all departments through an autism and neurodiversity lens.

5: Autism Nova Scotia has worked hard in partnership with all parties to ensure the needs of Autistic individuals and their families are better understood and have actively worked to enhance needed service delivery.

Will your government commit to current investments in autism service delivery and ongoing collaboration with Autism Nova Scotia and the autism community to ensure equitable access to support and services across the province?

NS Liberal Party:

Yes. We are committed to working with our partners and Autism Nova Scotia to ensure that there are appropriate supports and that we are best meeting the needs of children with autism and their families.

NS Progressive Conservative Party:

Similar to the answer to the previous questions, the PC Party is the only party to have put forward a thoughtful, compassionate, universal solution to the mental health challenges facing Nova Scotians.

Equitable access is a core objective of our healthcare solutions as we emerge from the pandemic while ensuring that nobody gets left behind.

As shown through our investments into healthcare, and in taking the lead on becoming the only province in Canada to have universal access to mental health services, we hope you can see how committed a PC government will be to continuing a productive collaboration with Autism Nova Scotia and the autism community.

NS New Democratic Party:

Autism Nova Scotia is a critical voice in advancing this work. The NDP recognizes the need to maintain constructive, collaborative partnerships with all service providers and stakeholders to make sure that people with autism get the support that they need.

We look forward to continuing to work with Autism Nova Scotia as one of these crucial partnerships.