

**SWAN
STRATEGY**

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Introduction

About SWAN

Since SWAN was founded in 2012, both the organisation and the landscape for autistic women in Scotland have evolved. From its beginnings as a small, volunteer-led community group, SWAN has grown into a groundbreaking and award-winning autistic-led charity. For over 10 years, SWAN has delivered services, information and support both for and by autistic women across Scotland, whilst remaining true to its ethos of placing the voices and experiences of those autistic women at the centre of everything we do.

Having gone through a period of significant change and growth in our 10th year, including a new CEO, website and branding, it was important for us to review and clarify our strategy – to ensure we have a clear vision and mission for the future, as well as a clear sense of who we are outlined through a set of core values. In this way we can better communicate who SWAN is, what we do, and how to access our services.

As the only organisation in Scotland focused on the intersectionality of autism and gender, it was also important our new strategy reflects the changes which have occurred in this area over the past 10 years. This has meant the start of a new journey for SWAN – from an autistic women’s organisation, to one where autistic women and non-binary people are equally welcomed, included, and supported by us.



Our autistic-led approach

At SWAN, we are proud to be autistic-led.

We are a Disabled People's Organisation (DPO), as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This means SWAN is led by the very community it seeks to benefit, and that human rights and the rights of disabled people are core to our approach.

We acknowledge not all organisations who work to improve the lives of autistic women, girls and non-binary people are autistic-led or a DPO. There is also still much work to be done to achieve “nothing about us without us” for autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland.

This is where SWAN is committed to collaborating with others, such as the Scottish Government and non-autistic led organisations, to ensure the participation of autistic women, girls and non-binary people and so that our views are always meaningfully included when decisions are made which impact our lives and access to our rights.

Daring to do things differently

In 2018 SWAN was awarded the Scottish Social Services Award “Head above the parapet”. Our approach of being autistic-led, innovative and willing to speak out as, and on behalf of, autistic women and girls in Scotland was key to us achieving this recognition of our work. With this new strategy, SWAN is committed to continuing this approach whilst widening our core beneficiaries to also include non-binary people.

Whilst we will continue to dare to speak out and do things differently, we will do so in line with our values, ensuring others experience us as authentic, empowering and safe. We take this approach because we believe it is the right thing to do, but also because we know this is the most effective way to create the change autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland want and need to see.

Developing this strategy

This strategy was designed and developed throughout 2022–2023 by a subgroup of trustees including the CEO, some of whom have been involved with SWAN almost since its inception and some have also received support from SWAN previously. They were chosen due to their experience facilitating and developing strategy, and their ability to represent staff, volunteer, trustees and core beneficiaries whilst also representing neurodiversity and different processing styles.

As with everything we do at SWAN, our work on the strategy was informed by the priorities, challenges, knowledge and experiences of the SWAN network of autistic women and non-binary people, our autistic staff and volunteers, and wider stakeholders including the people and organisations who refer to our services and attend our training. We gathered information and feedback through online surveys and evaluations, and from our local groups, wellbeing webinars, pre- and post-diagnosis groups, counselling and 1-2-1 support, and our online peer support community.

This process resulted in our new purpose statement, mission, and values, a review of who our beneficiaries are, strategic themes, long-term outcomes and strategic priorities. It sets out the change we want to see over the next 10 years for autistic women, girls and non-binary people across Scotland, and how SWAN will work to achieve that.



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Strategic Context

How far we've come...

This strategy takes into account SWAN's development since 2012, the social, financial and political context that SWAN and our stakeholders are operating in, and the current situation for autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland.

SWAN is now an incorporated charity, with employed staff, a large team of volunteers and a network of over 1,000 autistic women and non-binary people accessing our services. As SWAN develops in response to the needs of this growing community, we must achieve a balance of embedding professional systems and services, fostering a positive environment for autistic staff and volunteers, and maintaining the sense of community and accessibility that is at the centre of SWAN's identity.

Awareness and understanding of autistic women, girls and non-binary people have increased in recent years, as growing numbers are being diagnosed or identifying as autistic. The availability of information and community on social media, positive coverage of well-known figures disclosing their diagnosis, and gradually improving representation of autism in print and on screen are all contributing to a more accurate, positive and diversity-based understanding of autism.

At SWAN we focus on making space for the advantages and joys that we experience as autistic people, as well as recognising and responding to the challenges of being neurodivergent in a predominantly neurotypical world.

Today's landscape...

There is, however, a long way to go.

Unhelpful stereotypes and lack of understanding persist. Far too many women, girls and non-binary people are still living well into adulthood without knowing they are autistic. Services and support remain sparse, are ill-equipped to meet the specific needs of autistic women, girls and non-binary people, and there are multiple barriers to accessing diagnosis.

Incidences of associated mental and physical health conditions, eating disorders, suicide, self harm and domestic and sexual violence are significantly higher than the general population, and many autistic women, girls and non-binary people are unable to access their human rights, including education, employment and healthcare provision.

The number of autistic-led organisations in Scotland is increasing and larger 'traditional' autism charities are actively seeking to employ more autistic staff and work in partnership with autistic-led organisations. As this landscape develops, it is vital for organisations delivering services and support for autistic people to work together to complement one another's delivery, to meet the needs and represent the interests of autistic people, and to influence local and national strategy, policy and service-provision.

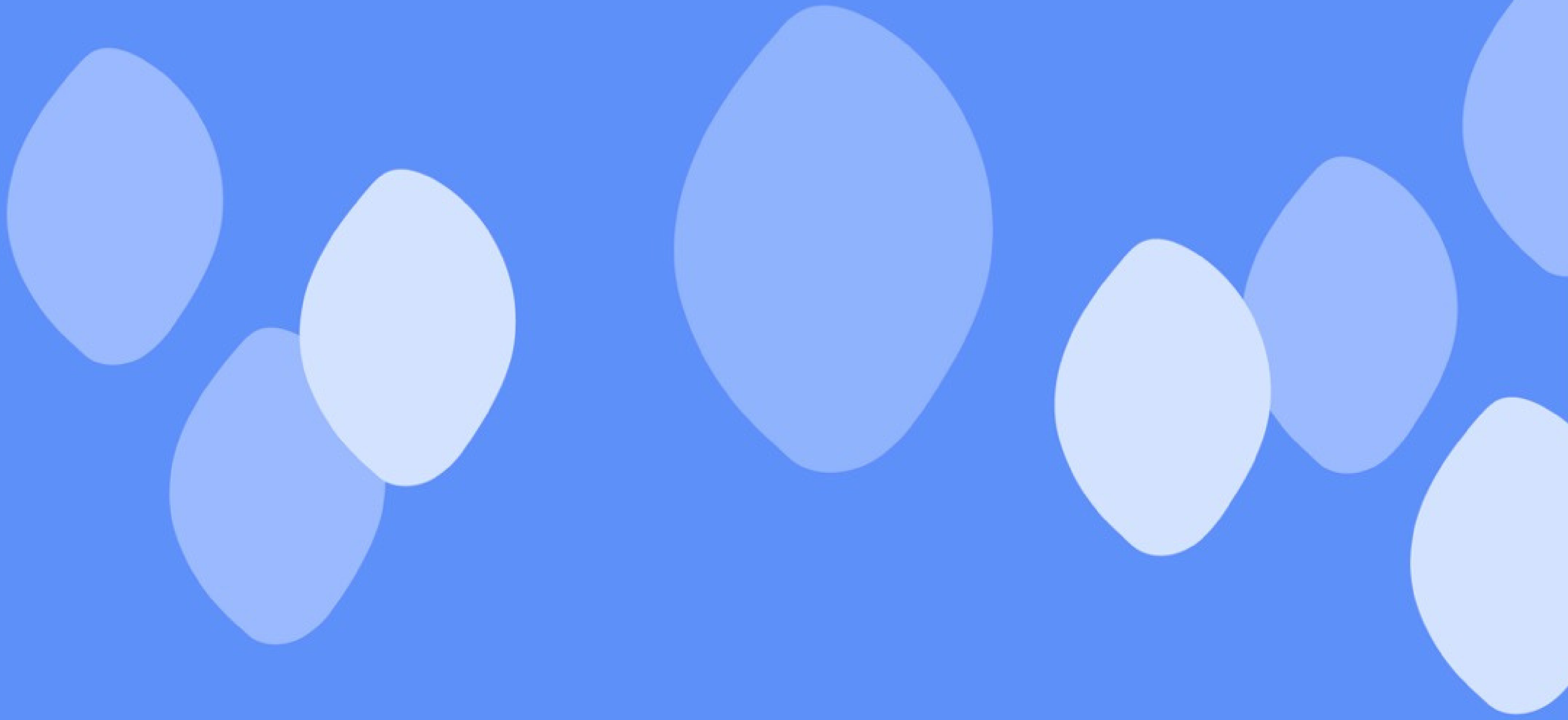
Looking to the future...

Scottish Government support for the autistic community and the organisations and services which work with them is centred in the Autism and Learning Disabilities Team, which is tasked with improving the lives of autistic people in Scotland. Recent priorities have included improving autism training and access to diagnosis, services and support, increasing public understanding of autism, and the development of an Autism, Learning Disabilities and Neurodiversity Bill. Scottish Government has also been working to include autistic voices and autistic-led organisations across workstreams. We welcome this, though there is still more to be done in terms of autistic people occupying decision-making and delivery roles and ensuring meaningful consultation and involvement throughout.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'cost of living crisis' mean pressures on the public and third sectors are greater than ever. Demand for autism services exceeds capacity whilst resources are squeezed amidst competing priorities for reduced national budgets. SWAN must plan its development and strategic priorities carefully in order to achieve financial sustainability in an increasingly competitive environment.

More broadly, there is a positive increase in recognition of the value of identity-led working practice and the understanding that there are many skilled and experienced professionals within the autistic community who are able to take a lead on areas of work which affect autistic people.

This, along with the demonstrable quality and impact of SWAN's work, represents an opportunity to consolidate our role as a trusted, autistic-led charity specialising in gender-based issues as we move forward into our next 10 years.



Purpose, Mission & Values

Responding to the needs of our community

SWAN was formed in response to a lack of understanding and support for autistic women, at a time when awareness of autism was focused solely on boys and men. As the picture for autistic women has begun to progress, so too has our understanding of gender identity. Other minority groups within the autistic community are now facing that same lack of visibility and support, including trans women and non-binary people, many of whom are already accessing SWAN as a source of information and support.

We are responding to this by broadening our remit to include all non-binary autistic people, and by actively and explicitly welcoming autistic trans women, while also recognising our responsibility to understand and meet their specific needs and experiences. We recognise that our current language and services are not yet fully inclusive of trans women and non-binary people – we will be proactive to ensure they are included, involved and supported at SWAN.

We remain a gender-based autistic-led charity which focuses on supporting those who, by falling outside of the predominant focus on autistic boys and men, face barriers in their access to diagnosis, information, support and community.

SWAN's purpose statement

“

Autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland feel valued, understood and connected.

”

Developing our mission

As awareness and diagnosis grow, there are increasing numbers of autistic women, girls and non-binary people who need information, support and the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of what being autistic means for them, and to live healthy, happy and fulfilling lives.

Our purpose, in line with our charitable purposes, is to generate those opportunities for all autistic women, girls and non-binary people, both within SWAN and in our wider society in Scotland.

Our mission is to achieve this by bringing autistic women and non-binary people together to meet others like them and access autistic-led services and peer support which respond to their whole life experiences.

We connect and empower autistic women and non-binary people, enabling them to work together with our network and our wider stakeholders to influence policy, strategy and decision-making processes.

Together we raise awareness of issues which impact autistic women, girls and non-binary people's lives, and work directly with organisations to help them achieve greater inclusion and autistic-informed service design and delivery.

SWAN's mission statement



SWAN is an organisation led by autistic women, girls and non-binary people for the benefit of autistic women, girls and non-binary people. We create the change we'd like to see in our lives and in society.

We do this by providing opportunities to connect with and learn from one another through information-sharing, peer support and mentoring. We work in partnership with you and others to drive the change you want to see, and to improve the lives of autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland.



Developing our values

Our values are based on the experiences of the SWAN network, staff, volunteers and trustees, as autistic women and non-binary people. We acknowledge that, while we share a neurotype, the identities and experiences of autistic women and non-binary people are as diverse as any other.

We recognise SWAN's role in creating the spaces autistic women, girls and non-binary people need to safely be who we are, understand ourselves better, share our experiences, challenges, interests and joys, and empower our community to drive change.

Our values encompass our commitment to shaping our working practices as an autistic-led charity, in relation to how we design and deliver our services, recruit and support our autistic staff and volunteers, govern our organisation, and embody the change we want to see.

SWAN's values

We are authentic.

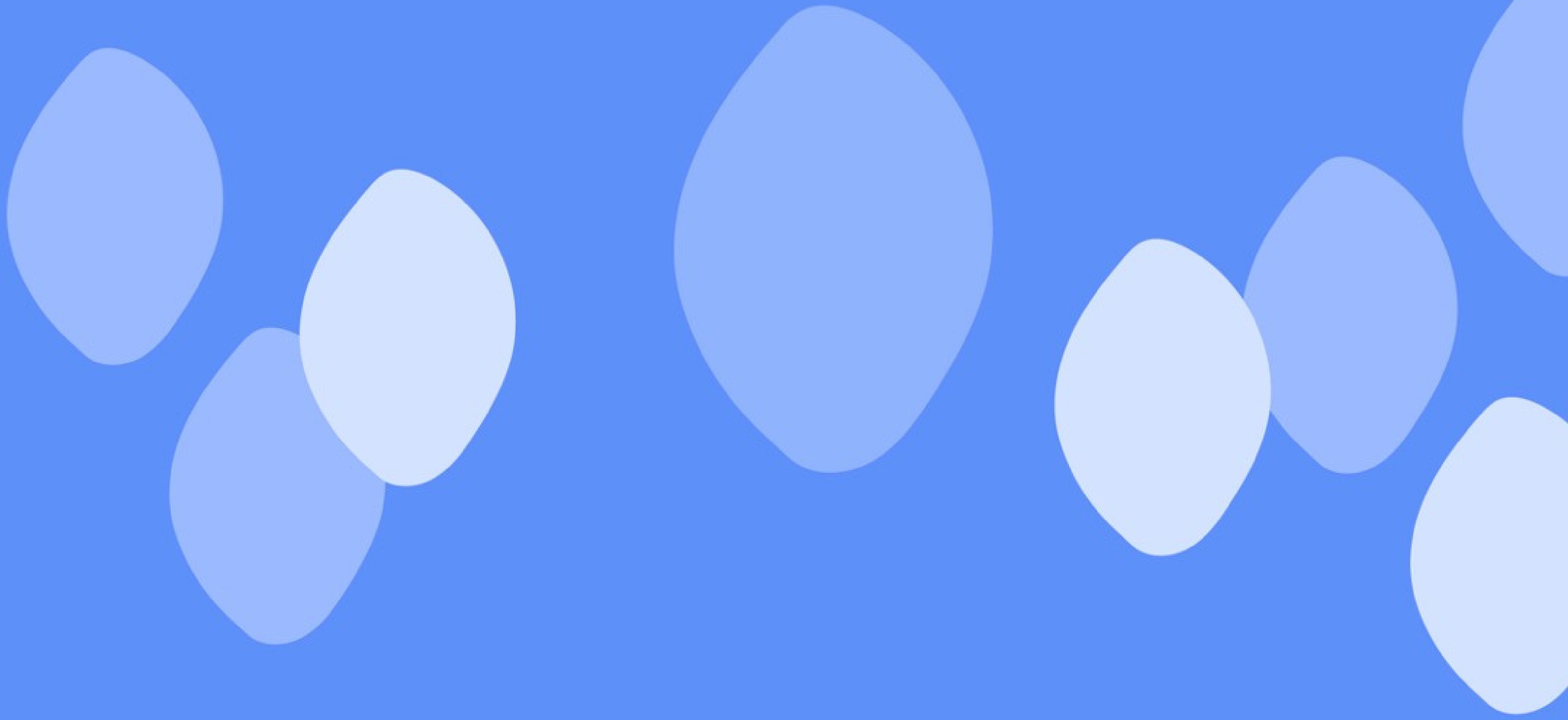
“ We are open and honest and are able to be our whole selves. We honour and share our autistic experiences.

We are safe.

“ We are non-judgmental and treat everyone with respect and kindness. We listen to and are heard by one another. We offer understanding and acceptance.

We are empowering.

“ We validate and believe in the power of individual and collective growth. We enable autistic women, girls and non-binary people to represent themselves.



Long-term Outcomes

Developing our long-term outcomes

To help us achieve our mission in line with our values, we reviewed our beneficiaries and identified strategic themes linked to a set of long-term outcomes which we aim to achieve over the next 10 years. This process was led by autistic women or autistic non-binary people in our strategy subgroup.

Our core beneficiaries are autistic women, girls and non-binary people. Our mission also supports allies, friends, families and carers of our core beneficiaries, organisations and professionals whose work impacts the lives of our core beneficiaries, as well as our own staff, trustees and volunteers.

From our own lived experience, as professionals in this sector, and mindful of what autistic women, girls and non-binary people have told us over the past 10 years, we have identified four strategic themes where our community wants and needs to see change to help us feel valued, understood and connected.

These themes are: autistic identity, mental health, life stages and transitions, and access and inclusion.

SWAN will create a plan for measuring our performance against these strategic outcomes and develop operational plans to implement actions that will achieve these outcomes.

Autistic identity

More autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland...

- better understand their own autistic identities.
- feel connected to others like them.
- feel more able to unmask should they choose to.
- feel more accepted, understood and valued for who they are.
- are able to explore, engage in, and understand their gender and sexuality in a way which supports their wellbeing.

Mental Health

More autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland...

- know what good mental health means for them and what enables sustainable wellbeing for them.
- are able to access timely and appropriate support for mental health issues.
- feel able to live their life without struggling with suicidal thoughts or action.
- feel validated, safe and believed.

Life stages and transitions

More autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland...

- get the support and information they need to navigate puberty, menstruation and reproductive health.
- get the support and information they need to navigate menopause and later life.
- get the support and information they need to navigate parenting.
- are able to access education.
- are able to access meaningful and sustainable employment.

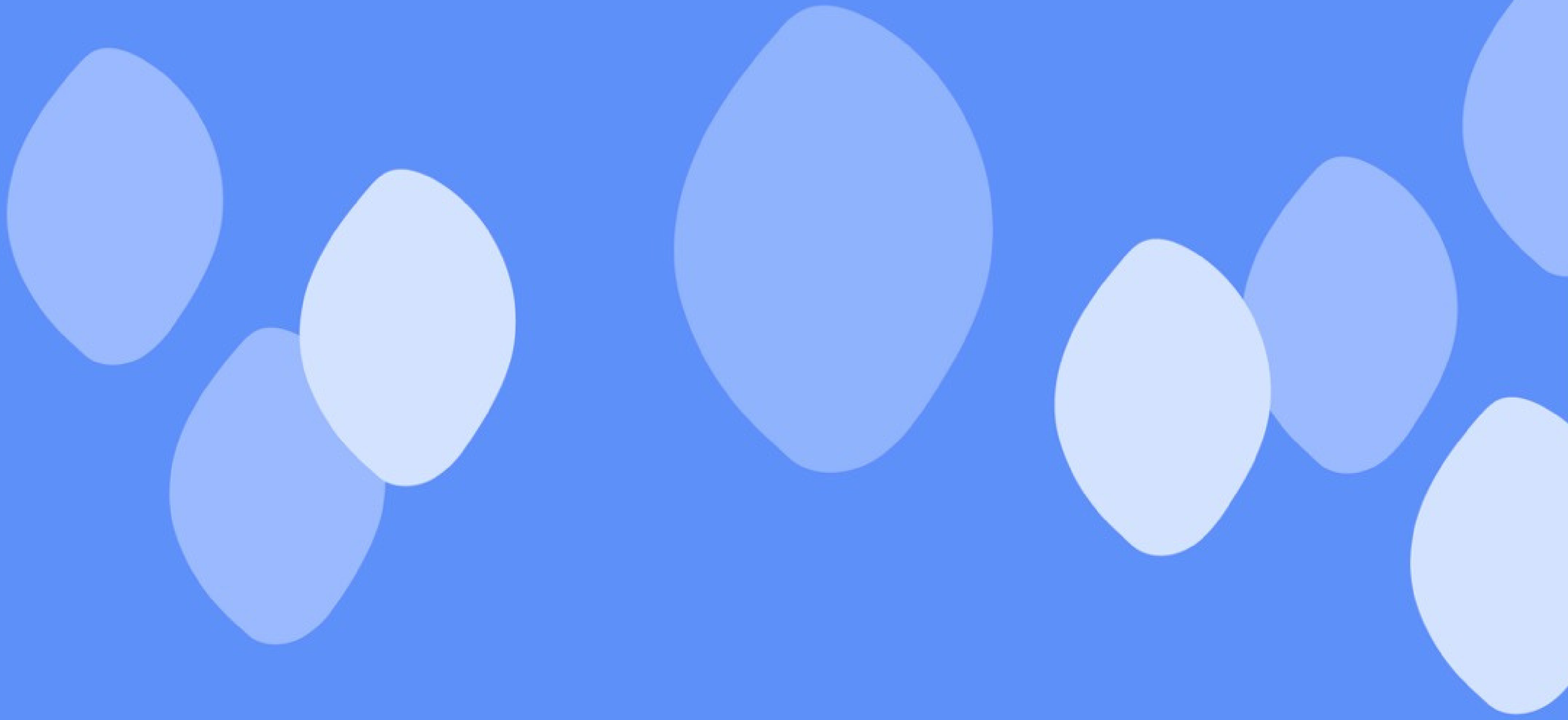
Access and inclusion

More autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland...

- are able to access diagnostic processes which are more aligned with true autistic experience.
- feel equally welcomed, included and supported by SWAN.
- view SWAN as representative of the diversity of autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland.

Outcomes for our other beneficiaries

- SWAN staff, volunteers and trustees feel more supported, empowered and valued in their roles.
- SWAN offers more organisational stability and sustainability.
- People in Scotland better understand the intersectionality of autism and gender, and its impact for autistic women, girls and non-binary people.
- People who support and engage with autistic women, girls and non-binary people in Scotland better understand and feel more equipped to meet their needs.



Strategic Priorities

Strategic Priorities

We determined three strategic priorities because of their urgency, degree of value and how important they are. They are therefore 'near future' and change over time as progress is made, the strategic context shifts, and in response to the availability of resources.

Our strategic priorities are:

- **Safety, inclusion and empowerment**
- **Access to support and health services**
- **Organisational sustainability**

These priorities have been chosen entirely based on what autistic women, girls and non-binary people who connect with us have been saying they desperately need.

SWAN is committed to achieving all our long-term strategic outcomes over the next 10 years, and to using these strategic priorities to guide and focus our use of resources to achieve outcomes in these strategic priority areas first.

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Next Steps

What's next?

The SWAN board will work with our CEO to create a plan for measuring our performance against our strategic outcomes and support the staff team and volunteers to develop operational plans to bring this strategy to life.

As well as evaluation and operational plans, we will develop fundraising and communications strategies to help deliver our strategic outcomes. This strategy also acts as a framework for strategic and operational reporting that responds both to our stakeholders' needs and different organisational needs.

We will co-produce operational plans and service provision that delivers this strategy in partnership with autistic women, girls and non-binary people in our network and continue to collaborate with other organisations that support autistic people.

We will review this strategy on an annual basis to make sure it remains fit for purpose and takes full account of the prevailing context and stakeholder priorities and meets the needs of our community.

We also commit to sharing a narrative with you each year that shares our progress in delivering this strategy, our achievements and challenges, lessons learned, insights and future priorities.

swanscotland.org

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SWAN is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation

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