

NAS CAMBRIDGE BRANCH

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING REPORT JANUARY 2020

Welcome everyone to Cambridgeshire Branch of the National Autistic Society, Annual General Meeting. Our last Annual General Meeting was January 2019 and minutes from last year's meeting are available here.

I'm Terri Johnston, Branch Chairperson. Our Treasurer is Alan Cross, who will report on Branch Finances. Our Branch Secretary is Cari-lene Mul. All three of us are willing to stand again this year for those positions.

Branch Activities and Future Plans

Over the past year our Branch has engaged in a number of activities and we hold monthly Branch meetings to review these activities and to plan for others. This is my report on those activities.

Helpline: Apart from the NAS National Helpline, our Branch operates a helpline and as volunteers, we share this and try to respond to calls within a day or two, given that most of our committee members are in full time work. Over the year the average number of calls to our Helpline has increased to 18 per month.

Website & Email: Similarly, we offer the same facility in email and try to keep our website updated. Both email and website are maintained and managed by two of our Committee Members, Alex and Emma. The number of email enquiries received in the past year has also increased to an average of 25-30 per month. We always welcome volunteers to the Branch and offers of help specifically with our media work; managing the website, the e-newsletter (a monthly production) and our Branch Facebook Site would be appreciated. We currently have around 250 subscribers to our website.

Please email us if you wish to sign up to our e-newsletter and our Facebook site can be accessed from the Branch website.

Our website has a link to the **Peterborough Branch** site and details of the meetings in Peterborough are available there.

Parent/Carer Support Meetings: This is a monthly evening meeting run by Committee Members Alex, Rachel and Liz, held the first Monday each month 7.30-9.30pm. Numbers attending this group have increased throughout the year and that generates good and informative discussions on a range of issues that concern people.

Adult Social Club: This Club has been run for many years by volunteers. It continues to be held twice monthly on Sunday evenings and is run by Cari-lene who is also our Branch Secretary. Details are on our website, but the Club runs every second and fourth Sunday in the month, except August and over the Christmas period. The actual attendance varies

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monthly, but averages 25 and the Club membership now stands at more than 70 members. The Club enjoys an annual BBQ before the summer break.

Drop In Sessions: These sessions have now been running for over three years in Huntingdon and for the past two and half years in March, Fenland. Alan and I run the March Sessions and our volunteer Andy, helps us at the Huntingdon Drop In. Anna and Joseph, the two NAS Adult Support Officers for Cambridgeshire, are available to offer advice to anyone with an Autistic Spectrum Condition and their family members/carers if required. Details of venue and time for these sessions are on our website and posters are available here. On average we have ten people attending each of these sessions and others 'pop in' to seek specific advice, need to make contact with our Branch and/or to request support. This month we are holding an afternoon tea social in March for those who wish to come.

Gardening Club: Alex started a Gardening Club last year on Saturdays for anyone interested, to maintain the garden here at the Chitra Sethia Centre. This will be starting again from March and anyone interested in gardening is welcome to come along on a Saturday afternoon for a couple of hours from 2.30pm. The Branch will be able to assist with the cost of travel to the Centre if necessary.

We have also held two Gardening Events at weekends, one in August and one last autumn, to welcome families along to our Autism Centre and to enjoy some fun activities while also helping with garden activities. We aim to hold more of these events during this coming year.

Talks/Workshops and Future Plans

'Women & Girls on the Spectrum': Sarah-Jane Critchley delivered another talk for us, to a public meeting we organised on June 26th and due to demand and very positive response, we plan to run a similar event with Sarah-Jane later this year. This is proving to be a subject very much in demand as people increasingly recognise that girls manage their autism conditions differently and often mask their autistic traits.

Communication Cambridge: We arranged more workshops last year with Communication Cambridge, two Speech & Language Specialists who offer training courses and events for parents and young people. These were very successful, so we hope to arrange more this year.

Pinpoint: We have liaised with Pinpoint for a talk last summer and we hope to work with Pinpoint this year on some of our planned activities. They are a parent-led voluntary group but offer support to ages 18-25 as well as the younger children.

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HMP Littlehey: We were invited by the prison to participate in their Wellbeing Day for staff and we attended both days last year – 3rd June and 4th November. This proved to be a great opportunity for us to raise awareness about autism, to give information from the NAS to staff and they were keen to talk about the difficulties they encounter, particularly in the Education Department, when trying to address the needs of those they believe are probably on the autism spectrum. Many prisoners may not have had access to assessment and diagnosis when younger and staff are keen to receive information about learning strategies and learning environments for those with ASC.

Our involvement at these events led to us being invited by the Education Department to return to give a talk on Autism and this will be repeated during the coming year. It recently came to our attention that prison staff are now enquiring about how to achieve NAS Accreditation as an institution that addresses autism for those that it serves. So, our work there will continue.

Military Intelligence Museum, Chicksands: We were contacted by the museum early last year with request for advice on how they could make their museum more autism-friendly. This was really great to find that organisations are now making contact with us to seek advice on this and as a result of our visit there for a morning to talk with them and make suggestions, we then followed this up with a group visit there last August by several people who attend the Drop In sessions. This visit was enjoyed by all and plenty of time is needed to absorb the amount of information and history.

Fundraising: Our first fundraising event this year will be for World Autism Awareness Week, usually the first week in April. We hope to hold High Street collections in the towns of March, Huntingdon and Cambridge - volunteers for this event will be very welcome!

Our other main fundraising event in **October each year is National Autism Hour:** This event aims to raise public awareness of the difficulties people with ASC have and their families, when trying to go shopping – a simple, daily task for some people who may enjoy it, but a task that presents enormous challenges to parents with children on the Autism Spectrum and to Adults on the Spectrum. The NAS has had good responses from retail outlets and individual shops that are willing to lower the noise levels in the stores and lower the lighting. This past year, we received very good interest from the public on these fundraising events; many people who have an autistic family member approached us for more information and many wanted to discuss the difficulties they encounter and to seek advice and support for their autistic family member.

Branch Magazine: At last year's Annual General Meeting I reported that we aimed to produce a magazine for the Branch, to distribute widely throughout the County to inform people of our activities. I am pleased to report now that we have achieved our first magazine during the past year. We hope to make this an annual production and to be able to include many more contributions this year from people attending the Social Club and the Drop In sessions. The magazine was well received by all County Libraries, GP surgeries and Health Centres. Our thanks go to Andy who has steered this production.

CLASS Clinic (Cambridge Lifespan Autism Spectrum Service): On 6th December the CLASS clinic celebrated twenty years of its service in assessment and diagnosis of people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions and invited me to speak about our Branch and about the significance of diagnosis for our son and ourselves. This event was very well attended and had two speakers who have ASC, as well as presentations from Autism Research and from Professor Simon Baron-Cohen who founded the Clinic.

Last, but not least, we managed to meet our aims and beyond for the past year with one exception and that is the workshop that we had hoped to arrange on the subject of Challenging Behaviour. This remains on our 'to do' list and we will focus on it for this year. As always, look out for details on our website.

Campaigns

Health & Social Care Concerns: When issues arise that impact directly on the Autistic Population, we give our support in whatever ways we can. One such issue was a proposal by the Cambridgeshire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) last year, to close all hospital inpatient beds for those with Learning Disability and Autism. We engaged in the consultation, as did many members of the public, to argue that the proposal would leave many families in crisis with their family member, without a resource at that time and likely to result in the family member being transported around the country to a facility far away from their families. The result of the consultation was that the CCG reviewed its proposal and decided to retain ten inpatient beds for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, which we believe is a better position than the one that had been proposed.

Employment & Autism: At last year's Annual General Meeting, I reported on our local campaign to raise awareness at Jobcentres, about the difficulties that people with ASC can encounter when they have to enter the Jobcentre buildings, know how to go about making their needs known and finding the information they need; coping with the stress of it all can be a major difficulty for many.

We pursued our aim during the past year to meet with Members of Parliament for the County and had two very productive meetings last June and July with Lucy Frazer, Conservative MP for Ely and East Cambs. and with Daniel Zeichner, Labour MP for Cambridge City. They each met with us and heard direct from people with ASC about the difficulties they have faced in trying to access help to gain employment. They both agreed to take our two requests directly to the Minister for the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP).

Our requests are; that the Minister and staff consider implementing a more autism-friendly structure that would focus firstly on the skills of the individual and not on how that person presents in interview and other personally interactive processes. Clearly, the current system is extremely difficult for people with ASC who do not generally present at all well in

interview situations and the anxiety that the situation generates for them, inhibits their performance even more. Our other request, but equally important, is that all frontline staff in Jobcentres should have training in Autism Awareness.

We have received a reply from Lucy Frazer MP, enclosing a letter from the Minister for the DWP that acknowledges the difficulties and outlines ways in which his department is now trying to address the needs of vulnerable adults in relation to services from Jobcentres.

In autumn I was invited to attend a meeting at Ely Jobcentre with the Disability Employment Adviser there and we had telephone link with the Strategy Group for the DWP. One of the attendees of our Drop In came with me to offer his comments and opinions about difficulties he has experienced in accessing work. We now have good contact with the Disability Employment Advisers in Jobcentres in Wisbech, Huntingdon, Ely and Cambridge and this is due mainly to our good rapport with the Adviser in Wisbech who has been extremely helpful to our Branch and has often called in to the Drop In at March.

Our local campaign fits with the National Campaign of 'Ten Years On'. The NAS held meetings and a survey last year to review how Autistic people now experience services since the implementation of The Autism Act 2009, ten years ago. From this campaign, the government has given its commitment that all health and social care frontline staff will undergo mandatory training in Autism Awareness and Understanding.

Finally and to conclude this report, I want to acknowledge the time given and efforts made by all our Committee Members and volunteers and thank them all very much for their continued commitment.

Alan will now deliver his Treasurer's Report, unless there are first any questions?

Terri Johnston

Branch Chairperson, National Autistic Society Cambridge Branch