

NAS CAMBRIDGE BRANCH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2021

Chair's Report

Wednesday 7th April 2021

Welcome everyone to Cambridgeshire Branch of the National Autistic Society, Annual General Meeting. Our last Annual General Meeting was January 2020 and was held at our Chitra Sethia Autism Centre, Cambridge Road, Fulbourn. We deferred this year's AGM until April, in the hope that we would be able to actually meet in person if the pandemic lockdown had ended, but as the nation remains in lockdown at the present time, this meeting has to be held online. The minutes from last year's meeting are available at the start of our online presentation.

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

Branch Activities

After last year's AGM, we held our usual activities during February but as the Covid-19 Pandemic spread to the UK and the country was placed under lockdown in March 2020, we had to cancel all our community activities. Consequently, our monthly Drop In Sessions in the towns of March and in Huntingdon, the Cambridge Social Club and the Cambridge Parent/Carer Support Group had to cease. We then held our monthly Branch meetings online and have continued to do so. Our National Autistic Society central office has operated throughout the past year and so, we have been able to benefit from regular communication with advice, information on new developments and updates of issues that impact on the autistic population, especially the impact of the pandemic and lockdown conditions on autistic people and their families. The NAS pursued a number of matters with the Government last year, to campaign for recognition of the need for some exceptions to the rules for autistic people; for example, for some activities to continue in a safe way in order to avoid total isolation and distress to people.

Summer activities; once conditions were eased by the Government and small groups of people were allowed to meet, keeping social distance, we were able to meet for two of our Branch meetings and also arranged a small monthly walking group in Fenland from August until end October, before the second national lockdown became necessary.

We continually reviewed our plans according to covid guidance and worked on an outline of plans for some activities, but of course, the nation remains in lockdown that was imposed last November/December.

Non-Community Activities;

Helpline: Our Branch operates a helpline and the average number of calls for the first quarter of last year, from January to March, had been 10 per month. After the first lockdown was imposed in March, the calls reduced to one and two in May and June respectively. Calls picked up in July to 10 and, again, fewer in August. Unfortunately, our helpline phone suddenly stopped operating in September but we are due to get a replacement as all Branch phones are being upgraded. We apologise that this has taken longer than anticipated.

Website & Email: We continued to maintain our website during the pandemic and the email facility, both being even more important for people to access information and to contact us, given that our phone is not available. The number of email enquiries received also varied greatly during the pandemic.

We welcomed two **new volunteers** to the Branch at the beginning of last year and have recently had two enquiries from volunteers. Help specifically with our media work; managing the website and our Branch Facebook Site would be appreciated. We currently have around 250 subscribers to our website. Our Facebook page can be accessed from the Branch webpage.

Parent/Carer Support Meetings: Our monthly Support meetings ceased of course with the first lockdown last year. Our volunteers have worked towards holding these meetings online and held the first one of these in February. This will continue online monthly for the time being and details can be found on our website for anyone wishing to participate.

More about our Social Activities

Adult Social Club: The Club, run for many years by our volunteers, was able to offer a place for social contact with others and activities to suit different interests twice monthly, on Sunday evenings. The Club has over seventy members and used to have around twenty-five members attend on any night. It has remained closed since last March under Covid guidelines and, until such time as the government considers this kind of activity to be safe again, we are unable to reopen it.

Drop In Sessions: These sessions started nearly four years ago in Huntingdon and in March, Fenland. Our sessions were supported by Anna and Joseph, two Adult Support Officers for Cambridgeshire, who used to be employed by the national NAS but were transferred over to the employ of this County last year. They both continue to offer the same service to autistic people, but they are based within the Adult Social Care and Autism Team and can be contacted via careinfo@cambridgeshire.gov.uk or AAT@cambridgeshire.gov.uk. Our aim is to resume the Drop In sessions as soon as possible when covid safety guidance allows.

Gardening Club: Our volunteer, Alex, started a Gardening Club in 2019, and ran gardening sessions on Saturdays for anyone who wished to attend, to maintain the garden at the

Chitra Sethia Centre. Unlike our other activities, this is an outdoor activity that we may be able to restart when guidelines change.

We keep reviewing what is possible to do and for the most up to date information, please check our website.

Fundraising: The fundraising event that we had planned last year for World Autism Awareness Week in April had to be cancelled, as well as other fundraising and awareness raising events that we had been planning with some local organisations – Barclays Bank and Wyton RAF had offered to run events with us. We hope to renew these contacts as and when permitted to hold such events.

This year's World Autism Awareness Week has just finished and, thanks to our volunteer Dani, we held an online Quiz Night to raise funds for our Branch. Thank you to all who participated in this.

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 and their families have when shopping – a simple, daily task for some people who may enjoy it, but a task that can present enormous challenges to parents with children on the Autism Spectrum, as well as to Adults with ASC. The NAS has previously had good responses from retailers, for example, a willingness to lower noise levels in the stores and lower the lighting. This event is a good opportunity to reach out to autistic people and their families in the community, to engage with them about their concerns. We hope that by this October it may be possible again, but any developments will be posted on our website.

Branch Magazine: Last year's circumstances did not enable us to produce another Branch Magazine to follow our first one in 2019, but we hope to be able to produce a second issue in the future.

Campaigns

Clearly, we have not been able to be active in campaigning since last March.

Health & Social Care Concerns are sometimes brought to our attention via email enquiries and information from central office, so we will continue to participate - and to give our voice to - matters of concern that impact on autistic people.

Employment: We started to work locally on issues in 2018 (for details see Minutes of last year's AGM). We were unable to maintain this last year and to meet with staff in local jobcentres, with whom we had established good contact. However, we will maintain our links with them so that we can follow up this work as and when possible.

Nationally, the NAS does have an **Employment Team** that runs services to support autistic people to find work and to remain in a job, as well as a specific project 'Autism at Work',

that offers training to employers who would like to recruit an autistic person. We will support these projects by informing others about them and details of these services can be found at the national website; www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/employment/autism-work-programme.

Aims for this Year

Our activities will be determined by the passage of the covid pandemic, but aside from wanting to resume all the activities as outlined above, we aim to increase our online events when we can. We used to organise talks on a range of subjects for people to attend so we will aim to hold some **workshops or talks online**.

A Post-Diagnosis Leaflet: We will work on producing one to inform and advise people about available help and services once they have been given a diagnosis. There are now many and varied agencies and groups that offer some help to autistic people, but it is difficult for people to find the specific information they may want following a diagnosis.

'All Ages Autism Partnership Board': This has just recently been set up by Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council with the aim of reviewing all services for autism within their areas. This development follows the government review of autism strategies and services around the country; since the Autism Act 2009 and subsequent to that, the Think Autism strategy 2014, the Adult Autism Strategy 2015 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice 2015 for autistic children and Young People.

We will be participating in the relevant meetings, to keep ourselves informed of local developments and to contribute our views as a NAS Branch on behalf of and with autistic people. To include your opinions about the type of help and services autistic people would like to have and to know is available, we will post questions on our webpage to invite comments. Please also email us or post comments on our Facebook page if you wish to tell us what would be important to you and what would be helpful to you.

Finally and to conclude this report, I want to acknowledge the commitment of all our volunteers who, despite the constraints placed upon us all since last March, have continued to keep an open mind about what is possible for us to do. They are ready and willing to keep adjusting as the covid pandemic conditions change. Thank you to you all.

I will be happy to answer any questions you may wish to ask and then Alan will deliver his Treasurer's Report.

Thank you for joining us for this AGM, we wish you well

Terri Johnston
Branch Chair, National Autistic Society Cambridge Branch