

Annual Report 2014–15

2015 is our 10th anniversary year as a branch of the National Autistic Society and, due to a change in our reporting year, this report covers our activities since January 2014.

During the past 15 months our branch membership has significantly grown to 381 families. Additionally, we circulate information to a further 63 families and 104 professionals – a total of 548 families and professionals. Information about our Branch is being circulated by other local support groups and health professionals on a regular basis.

We continue to be very grateful to Bishopstoke Evangelical Church and Chandlers Ford Methodist Church for their continued support by providing venues for our support group meetings and family youth club/Lego club respectively, and to St Patrick's Church, Woolston, for providing the venue for our two social groups in Southampton.

Parent/carer support group

Our monthly meetings continued with interesting guests, including: Anna Nicholson (NAS Policy and Participation Officer), Luke Syddall, speakers from a local solicitors, Eastleigh CAMHS, Community Wessex, KIDS Face2Face Befrienders, Speaking Space and Healthwatch Hampshire. One evening was a consultation on the Hampshire Children's Autism Strategy.

We have also held some meetings without guest speakers which have given parents a chance to have discussions as a group.

Family Youth Club

Our monthly family youth club continues to regularly attract up to 20+ children and their families. Our thanks, as always, to Jane and Ann for making arrangements, to Karen, our play worker, Richard, our psychotherapist, to other committee members, parent and student volunteers for helping run this popular activity.

Branch resource library

The Branch library now contains 375 items. We now have 163 library members and since January 2014, 165 individual loans of items have been made. Unfortunately we have had a number of items not returned on time and have had to do a lot of chasing to get these returned. The library is open at our support group meetings and a limited library service at our Family Youth Club.

Southampton social groups

The Children's group and the Adults' group continue to meet on alternate Tuesdays at the Woolston venue. The children's play worker has moved on and one of the parents has stepped in with creativity and enthusiasm. We are pleased with the regular number of attendees at both groups and continue to welcome new members. Adult members are actively encouraged to sit on the committee and one member has taken ownership of the library resources. Lloyds Bank kindly donated £3000 and we have spent this on activities comprising bowling, ringos, trips to Beaulieu and Marwell Zoo, Wi games and controller, Woodmill canoeing, a Christmas meal for adults, children's party and entertainer, adult cookery classes with a trained chef, and Halloween and Easter parties for the children. We enjoyed a summer picnic in Netley Country Park which was well attended – children were treated to a trip on the country park railway. We plan another in the summer of 2015. We also plan a trip to the SeaCity museum. Regular pub visits for adults continue and to encourage more independence we hope to organise quarterly trips to the cinema.

Additional activities

Social Skills groups

Our social skills programme has been running for a number of years (subject to the availability of funding). In autumn 2014 and earlier this year we were able to heavily subsidise two 5-week courses (on Saturdays). One was for 8 children (ages 9 to 10), and a second for 9 young people (aged 12 to 14). Our thanks go, as always, to Chris Parsons and her team at *In Touch*, who led these courses in their usual professional manner.

LEGO club

Our new monthly LEGO club is now running (on the same Saturdays as our Family Youth Clubs). Speech and language therapists Jo (club leader) and Carolyn are ably assisted by Leanne and Ian, from the University of Winchester. The club started in February 2015 with a small 'pilot' group for children aged between 9 and 13, so that we can evaluate this activity. We are most grateful to Jo, Carolyn, Leanne and Ian for offering their services and to Sarah-Jane Eades who has made a very generous donation, in memory of her late mother, which has enabled us to purchase a quantity of LEGO and get this long-awaited new activity underway.

CAMHS ASC support group

Since July 2014, we have been jointly hosting a monthly ASC support group with Eastleigh and Winchester Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Paediatric Services (Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational

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Therapy) and the Primary Behaviour Service (Education). The group is specifically for families who are on the waiting list for an assessment of ASC (or related issues) in Eastleigh CAMHS or paediatric services, and those who have received a diagnosis from these services. The group includes families being seen by the Primary Behaviour Service. We have recently heard that CAMHS now intend to extend this initiative to other parts of the county.

Quiz Night

In June 2014, nine teams enjoyed a fun evening at our fundraising Quiz Night.

Other initiatives

We ran a 6-month trial of a Drop-in Centre for teenagers with social communication difficulties and, in partnership with the *Friends of In Touch*, an afternoon parent/carer support group meeting, but, sadly, we were unable to continue with either of these due to lack of support.

Branch attendance at events

During the year we have had opportunities to publicise the Branch's work, be represented at various conferences and seminars, and give information about autism to others. These included: Hampshire Special Needs Information Day in Basingstoke (where we teamed up with the NAS Basingstoke Branch), Child Health Regional Forum in Southampton, South/South East Autism Network in Basingstoke, Wendy Lawson seminars in Hedge End, Hampshire Inspiring Inclusion Conference 2014, University life for young people on the autism spectrum (2 events in Romsey), a number of Hampshire Parent/Carer Network meetings, Empowerment Fayre in Winchester and the National Autism Strategy relaunch event in London. The Branch Officer was also a member of the Eastleigh and Winchester Short Breaks Funding Panel. In addition, he gave autism awareness talks to customer-facing staff at Eastleigh Borough Council, EBC's Countryside Service at Itchen Valley Country Park, staff at Winchester City Council (2 talks) and staff at GoLD (formerly Mencap) in Winchester.

Grants/Donations

We were delighted to receive another grant from Eastleigh Borough Council (for general running expenses for our Eastleigh-based activities). Also, we have been fortunate to receive a number of private donations from members and others interested in supporting our work – for which we are extremely grateful.

Storage support

Much of our equipment is stored, at charity rates, at Eastleigh's Ready Steady Store. Our thanks to Chandlers Ford Methodist Church, Bishopstoke Evangelical Church and St Patrick's Church, Woolston who allow us to store some equipment on their premises.

Hampshire Autism Strategies and the Hampshire Autism Partnership Board (HAPB)

We continue to be heavily involved in the development of the Autism Strategies for Hampshire through Rachel and David who are members of Hampshire Autism Voice (HAV), the parent, carers and people with autism group established from within HAPB to ensure the full participation of service-users and carers in its work. HAV also has the responsibility to ensure Hampshire County Council implement the strategies. During the past year they have been involved in many initiatives including the launch of the Children's and Young People's Autism Strategy, a *Think Autism* Conference in June 2014, the development of a Hampshire Autism Ambassador Scheme (to be launched in May 2015) and the HAV Network. They work very closely with Southampton, Isle of Wight and Portsmouth councils on many of the workstreams. We also, on behalf of HAV, manage the contract and work of the HAV Network Coordinator, funded by a grant from Hampshire County Council Adult Services.

Contact with other organisations

We continue to keep in touch with other support groups in the area, notably the other local NAS Branches and Autism Hampshire. We have good links with many local voluntary and statutory organisations which support those with special needs and regularly promote their activities. One special link is with the *Friends of In Touch* with whom we have worked closely for many years and, particularly, since it became a registered charity in 2013. Rachel is currently Treasurer and David is Chair.

Branch administration

The Branch committee met on a number of occasions to discuss the running of the group, look at funding issues and new ideas, and to attend compulsory NAS training on Health & Safety, Risk Assessments and Data Protection.

David, the Branch Officer, is responsible for all aspects of running the Branch. He is fully advised on all matters by the NAS Regional Branch Support Officer. Melanie, the Branch Treasurer, receives support from the NAS Regional team. Rachel jointly runs the branch with David, handling many of the enquiries received, represents our Branch at events and maintains the library.

Our other committee members undertake a variety of support roles including manning our branch mobile phone and answering all enquiries received, liaison with the media, liaison with the churches we use, running the resource library at our support meetings and helping to staff and organise events.

Our thanks to Gillian, Claire, Jane, Linda and Ian for our Eastleigh-based activities, and to Tracey, Linda, Sally and Sue who are responsible for running all aspects of our two social groups in Southampton, along with their team of helpers. In the past year we have received offers of help from a number of parents, local students and professionals. We are most grateful to them for their support. We would not be able to run any events without the assistance of the whole team – thank you all.

Throughout the year, we received numerous email and telephone enquiries each week requesting advice on many aspects of autism. Some we have been able to answer and others have been referred to the NAS Autism Helpline or other services. The most common topics continue to be diagnosis of children and adults, concerns over the reduction of youth services, strategies for dealing with schools, activities suitable for children with ASD (in particular, teenagers), transition from primary to secondary education and from secondary education to college/university/work, and the lack of support for adults.

We strive to keep our website up-to-date and are always pleased to receive feedback on its layout and usefulness.

The Branch committee welcome ideas and suggestions on how they can continue to make this Branch a helpful resource for those affected by autism. Please contact us with your comments – it is your Branch and we want to make it work for you!