

Annual Report 2017–18

We have again had a busy and varied year. During the past year our branch membership grew by 53 to 558 families and individuals. Additionally, we circulate information to a further 24 families and 257 professionals (including 146 SENCOs) – a total of 839 families, individuals and professionals receive mailings from us, at least once a month. Information about our Branch is being further circulated by other local support groups and health/social care professionals on a regular basis.

Tony Attwood conference

Highlight of the past year was our sell-out conference with Professor Tony Attwood at Winchester Guildhall in May 2017 attended by 400 delegates. This was a very successful day and we were delighted to be able to fill the hall and keep the cost for parents/carers as low as possible.

Parent/carer support group

Our monthly meetings continued with interesting guests, including: Mary Lilley (Hampshire Specialist Parenting Support Service), Angie Barrett (Senior Educational Psychologist), Alex Kelly (Alex Kelly Ltd), Peter Hull (ActiveNation), Liz Flaherty (Hampshire County Council), Tim Harrison (Southampton General Hospital) and a special 'Preparation for Employment' evening featuring Sonja O'Donnell (the GROW Project), Steve Bond (the PALS Society) and Dr Emma O'Leary (Proctor and Gamble). We also featured a 'World Premiere' showing of a film about our recent Autism and Mental Health consultation! Attendance has ranged from 16 to 23.

Family Youth Club

Numbers for our monthly family youth club took a dip this year and have only just started to recover. We are hoping our recent change of regular date will encourage more to attend – we continue to monitor the situation. Our thanks, as always, to Anne for making arrangements, Amy for helping with activities and to our other volunteers for helping run this activity on a rota basis.

LEGO club

Our monthly LEGO club has been running very successfully on the same Saturdays as our Family Youth Clubs. We are most grateful to Speech and Language Therapists Jo (club leader) and Carolyn who were ably assisted by Charlie and Toby. All are volunteers and, without their time and enthusiasm, the club would not function. We are looking for more student volunteers so we can grow this activity.

New Partners Group

We recently started this new group which now has a regular monthly meeting date. We hope it will be a helpful group for those that attend.

Branch resource library

The Branch library now contains over 440 items. We have 212 library members and since April 2017, 94 individual loans of items have been made. Unfortunately we have had a small number of items not returned on time and it has been very time-consuming to chase these – some are still outstanding. Also some books have been lost. The library is open at our support group meetings and a limited selection available at our Family Youth Club.

Southampton social groups

The Children's group and the Adults' group continue to meet on alternate Tuesdays in Woolston. Numbers attending both groups have continued to be good.

Southampton City Council awarded our Children's Group a one-off grant, through CAMHS, to enable the children to take part in a number of activities during the year, including indoor evenings with bouncy castles and visits to Woodmill Outdoor Activity Centre and a local amateur pantomime. The grant also funded evenings with speakers for parents on subjects relevant to the children's needs. A new group for fathers of our children started up this year.

The Adult group, in addition to their weekly meetings, have enjoyed bowling and Karaoke evenings, plus their annual Christmas meal.

Both groups enjoyed a Picnic at Victoria Park, Netley Abbey, in the summer and a visit to the Mayflower pantomime in January.

CAMHS ASC support group

We continue to attend and participate in the monthly Eastleigh CAMHS ASC support group, run by Autism Hampshire, as part of the Hampshire CAMHS service.

Training

Last year we held two parent/carer seminars. An 'Introduction to Autism' was held in April 2017 for 17 attendees and, in November, The National Autistic Society ran a free 'Managing Anger' seminar for us for 25 attendees.

Facebook page

In October, we finally dragged ourselves into the 21st century and launched our own Branch Facebook page! We regularly post information and news on this page (in addition to our regular newsletters and emails).

Consultation on autism and mental health

Following our 2016 consultation on Autism and Mental Health, funded by Healthwatch Hampshire, we released a 20-minute film in November, featuring some people who responded to the consultation, talking about their issues published in the consultation report. To date the film has received over 530 views. Some good comments and feedback have been received. We look forward to the recommendations being taken on board by autism and mental health organisations to ensure an improvement to services.

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: two Newly Qualified Teacher conferences, CAMHS Young Persons' event in Winchester, Hampshire and Southampton Special Needs Information Days, Aspergers Adventures-Minecraft and Meltdowns event in Southampton and at parents' mornings at Yately School and Wyvern College. We have also been pleased to support the development of a new evening autism support group at Testwood Baptist Church.

Autism awareness

We have given autism awareness talks to staff at Eastleigh's Swan Centre, at a Dementia/Autism event at Colden Common, Education department of Winchester Prison, Ordnance Survey staff, at the launch of Autism-Friendly Fleet, GP surgeries in Woolston and Gosport, staff at Perins School, Alresford, and Emsworth Primary School, *Friends of In Touch*, Hampshire County Councillors at a briefing session, and staff at No Limits in Southampton.

Autism-friendly performances

We were pleased to join our friends from Autism Hampshire to help steward at the autism-friendly performance of the Mayflower Theatre's pantomime and performance of 'The Snowman'.

Grants/Donations

We were delighted to receive another grant from Eastleigh Borough Council (for general running expenses for our Eastleigh-based activities) and Southampton City Council (for our Southampton-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. We continued to benefit from two regular fund-raising initiatives: Terracycle recycling scheme (this has now ended but, thanks to committee member, Gillian, this initiative raised over £2550) and Easyfundraising.

Working with local authorities and public bodies

We continue to be heavily involved in the implementation of Hampshire's Autism Strategies. Rachel and David are members of Hampshire Autism Voice (HAV), the parent, carers and people-with-autism group on the Hampshire Autism Partnership Board, which ensures the full participation of service-users and carers in its work. HAV actively participates in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services for children, young people and adults with autism living in Hampshire. During the past year they have been involved in many initiatives including the HAV Network and running the Autism Ambassador Scheme (in which we also help to deliver the training). Our branch, on behalf of HAV, manages the contract and work of the HAV Network Coordinator.

Additionally we worked with Southampton City Council and Southampton City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) on the development of their children's autism diagnostic pathway.

Contact with other organisations

We continue to keep in touch with other support organisations in the area, notably with 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, particularly since it became a registered charity in 2013. Rachel is a trustee along with David who is also Chair.

Branch administration

The Branch is run entirely by volunteers and the committee meet regularly to discuss the running of the group, look at funding issues and new ideas.

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. Caroline, 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.

Particular thanks to former treasurer, Mel Hickman, who stepped down in September after four years in the post. She did a fantastic job for which we are very grateful.

Our thanks to Gillian, Claire, Linda and Ian for our Eastleigh-based activities, and to Tracey, Sue, Stacey and Emma who run 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.

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, family youth club and LEGO club, at very low cost. Thanks to St Patrick's Church, Woolston, for enabling us to hire their hall for our groups in Southampton. All three allow us to store some equipment on their premises. Most of our equipment is stored, at charity rates, at Eastleigh's Ready Steady Store.

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 autism (in particular, teenagers), transition from primary to secondary education and from secondary education to college/university/work, DLA, PIP and the general lack of support for adults.

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

The Branch committee welcomes 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!