

Annual Report 2018–19

We have again had a busy and varied year. During the past year our branch membership grew by 72 to 630 families and individuals. Additionally, we circulate information to a further 251 professionals (including 143 SENCOs) – over 880 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. In the past year we have circulated 8 Branch Newsletters plus an additional 7 information update emails.

Autism support group

Our monthly meetings continued with interesting guests, including: Rebecca Brown, an ELTA therapist (Emotional Literacy Through the Arts); Carolyn Elliott, a Specialist Speech and Language Therapist; Karen Prouton, a professional counsellor; Alex Steffel from Argenti Telehealthcare Partnership; Stacey Richards from Adhara Autism Trust; and we also gave an *Introduction to Autism* talk. We have been concerned about low attendance, particularly since September but pleased to report an improvement last month. Attendance has ranged from just 4 to 22. Our evening support group meetings are open to all – parents, carers and family members of autistic children and adults, individuals on the autistic spectrum and professionals who work with them. Additionally we were delighted to welcome Sharon King as guest speaker at last year's AGM, which was attended by over 80 members.

Family Youth Club

We are pleased to report that, following a dip in attendance earlier last year, this club appears to have fully recovered with an average of around 15-20 children plus their families attending. Our thanks, as always, to Anne for liaison with the church and for her ever-present help on club days, Amy for organising activities and to our other volunteers for assisting with the running of this activity. We are still looking for more volunteers to assist with the club on a rota basis.

LEGO Club

Our monthly LEGO club has been running successfully on the same Saturdays as our Family Youth Clubs. We are most grateful to Speech and Language Therapists Jo (club leader) and Carolyn – both are volunteers and, without their time and enthusiasm, the club would not function. We lost our two additional regular volunteer helpers and were therefore unable to increase the numbers attending. However, two volunteers have recently offered their services. We currently have 7 members taking part in the club with a further 6 children on the waiting list.

Partners' Group

We started this new group last year specifically for partners of autistic people (whether the partner is diagnosed or not) and are pleased to report that it continues to grow. A number of attendees have benefitted greatly from coming along and we hope it will continue to be a helpful group for those that attend.

Branch resource library

The Branch library now contains over 440 items. We have 226 library members and since April 2018, over 90 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 and Partner group.

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 with a recent significant increase in the adult group.

Antonia, a member of the children's group, climbed to the top of Snowdon last year and raised £800 for the group – this included a £100 donation from Chris Packham. Well done Antonia! One of the Adult group members, Ian, has again arranged his holiday to walk around Scotland for two weeks – 211 miles this time, beginning on Good Friday and invites members and friends to sponsor him to raise funds for the groups.

In the summer, 14 members had a good day visiting Marwell Zoo. The Adult group, in addition to their weekly meetings, have enjoyed bowling and Karaoke evenings, a musical workshop with a ukulele group plus their annual Christmas meal. The Children's group have continued with a packed programme which they are all enjoying. Members from both group attended the Mayflower Theatre's relaxed pantomime performance. A 'Dad's group' now meet at regular intervals for a chat and a drink at local pubs (in both Southampton and Eastleigh).

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 have included: the Hampshire Newly Qualified Teacher conference; CAMHS PACE event in Lyndhurst; Aspergers Adventures-Minecraft and Meltdowns event in Southampton; plus Autism Hour, Autism Awareness Week and accessibility events at Eastleigh's Swan Centre (and attended the presentation of a NAS Autism-friendly Award to them in November). We have also been pleased to continue to support the evening autism support group at Testwood Baptist Church and jointly supported their event with Ros Blackburn in July.

Autism-friendly performances

We stewarded at the Mayflower Theatre's autism-friendly performance of 'War Horse' last year and joined our friends from *Autism Hampshire* to help steward the theatre's annual pantomime in January.

Autism awareness

We have given numerous autism awareness talks in the past year including to: Hampshire Scouts; Isle of Wight Scouts; Portsmouth U3A; Winchester Science Centre; Marvels and Meltdowns in Gosport; Scottish and Southern Electricity Priority Service Register staff; Southampton Inclusion Conference; Eastleigh Borough Council staff; Chandlers Ford Methodist Church youth leaders; Librarians from Universities across the South and South West in Portsmouth University; Alresford Rotary Club; GoPhysio staff; Hampshire Fire and Rescue staff; University of Southampton staff parent/carer support network; plus staff at Testwood School, Wellstead Primary School, Lydlynch Infant School and Chamberlayne College for the Arts.

Social Skills Course

In November and December we commissioned local autism charity, *Friends of In Touch*, to run a 6-session social skills course for 7 children (aged between 7 and 9). We received very positive comments from parents about this course.

Winchester Science Centre

Last April we held an exclusive evening for 170 of our members and a great time was had by all.

Quiz Night

In November we ran this popular event which attracted 8 teams.

Autism Seminar with Sarah Hendrickx

In March over 115 people attended each of the two talks given by Sarah Hendrickx at our Autism Seminar. Sarah was a very popular speaker – both presentations can be downloaded from the front page of our website. We are pleased to announce that a video of each of the talks will also soon be available on our website. As a result of a questionnaire circulated during the morning talk on Women and Girls, we are now investigating the possibility of setting up a Women's and/or Girls' group. We hope to announce something soon.

World Autism Awareness Week

We were particularly busy during this year's Awareness Week. During the week, we took part in Autism Awareness events at Hampshire County Council's head office, Ordnance Survey and Eastleigh's Swan Centre. We presented 'Introduction to Autism' sessions at Hampshire Fire and Police HQ and at the University of Southampton. Branch members, Clive, Sarah and Sophie Green, took part in the 15k Spectrum Night Walk in London and daughter, Sophie, shaved her head! – all to help raise autism awareness and over £1500 for the NAS.

Rebranding

In October the National Autistic Society was rebranded with a new look and logo. We have now finally completed the rebranding of all our branch materials.

Mayor of Eastleigh's charity appeal

We were delighted when the current Mayor of Eastleigh, Councillor Bruce Tennent, chose our branch as one of his four Mayoral charities for 2018-19. He has been very supportive of our work and we look forward to hearing the result of his fund-raising efforts in the next few months.

Autism and Mental Health

In 2016 we ran a consultation on Autism and Mental Health, funded by Healthwatch Hampshire, and subsequently made a film, featuring some people who responded to the consultation (which to date has received over 780 viewings and is available from the front page of our website). We are pleased to report that the Heads of Mental Health for Hampshire County Council and the 5 Hampshire Clinical Commissioning Groups are working directly with us to review all 27 recommendations in the report. A workshop was held recently with almost 50 mental health professionals and a monthly Task Group (at which we are represented) has been set up to follow up on actions.

Employment support

During the year we have been in discussion with *Autism Hampshire* about issues around the employment of autistic people. *Autism Hampshire* ran a very successful funded project last year, in conjunction with the *Autism Centre for Research on Employment* at the University of Portsmouth, supporting adults to prepare for employment and highlighting the hidden pool of talent of people with autism to local employers. We hope to work with them to fund and undertake some similar work in the coming year. We are also involved in initiatives, along with local Colleges and charities, to support autistic people into employment.

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 members purchasing through *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 autistic people's 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 autistic children, young people and adults 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 share delivery of the training). Our branch, on behalf of HAV, manages the contract and work of the HAV Network/Autism Ambassador Coordinator and the funds which support HAV and the Autism Ambassador Scheme.

Contact with other organisations

We continue to keep in touch with other support organisations in the area, notably with *Autism Hampshire*. We have strong links with many local voluntary and statutory organisations which support those with special needs and regularly promote their activities. One special link is with *Friends of In Touch* with whom we have worked closely for many years, particularly since it became a 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 Chair, is responsible for all aspects of running the Branch. He is fully advised on all matters by Mary Rouse, NAS Senior Branch Engagement Officer – South East. Caroline, the Branch Treasurer, also 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 liaison with the media, running the resource library at our meetings and helping to staff and organise events.

Our thanks to Gillian, Linda, Lisa, Ian and Yvonne for our Eastleigh-based and general activities, Julie and Jenni for liaison with Totton support group, and to Tracey V, Sue, Stacey and Tracey S who run all aspects of our two social groups in Southampton. 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 and Chandlers Ford Methodist Churches for their continued support by providing venues for our 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 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 autistic children (in particular, teenagers), transition from primary to secondary education and from secondary education to college/university/work, DLA, PIP, Employment, Mental Health 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!