

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO THE 2009 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 14 NOVEMBER 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Annual General Meeting of the National Autistic Society 2009.

This is second year in its new format – where we are making it part of one of our regional members' days. When we did this last year we had a higher attendance than I think we'd had at one of our AGMs for some time, and the feedback we got was very positive, hence repeating the format.

We're a membership organisation so of course we think these events are very important, but we'd like to get your views on what you think of the AGM portion of today. So please do fill out the evaluation forms. This will help us ensure we continue to run a successful event that meets your needs.

It's lovely to be here in Bristol, so close to one of our longest running services, Somerset Court. It's a nice reminder of where the NAS has come from - providing first class support to people on the autistic spectrum and their families and carers. On that note I'd like to take a few minutes of your time to reflect on where we are now and to link that back to our history. We are undergoing some exciting developments, but they are developments that I believe find their roots in the energy, creativity and determination of our founders.

When I spoke last year about the new direction the Board had agreed with our then still new Chief Executive, Mark Lever, I talked about three key themes: providing pioneering services; developing the NAS as a source of information and support; and working with people locally and nationally in a more joined up way. Of course we have done elements of all three of these for some time, but we are now bringing much more focus to these as the way we can help to build a more autism friendly world. We have recently developed a new strategy that highlights exactly how we will take these themes forward and that has set challenging targets for the organisation across service development, awareness, membership, influencing and fundraising.

Let me start with the first of these key themes – pioneering services. As many of you will know we were founded by a group of parents who had been told their children were ineducable. They weren't prepared to accept that, any more than any of us are – and from that refusal to accept indifference the NAS was founded, first running schools, later residential services for adults of which Somerset Court was the first and more latterly providing a whole range of support.

Looking at what we have achieved over the last year, I firmly believe we have built on that legacy. We have continued to invest or have agreed future investment in many of our core services, some of them not far from here. One example is indeed Somerset Court, where we plan to invest over £4.5m to ensure it is the best service it can be. Another example not too far from where we are today, is Broomhayes School in Bideford where a programme of modernisation and expansion is well underway.

While investing in what we have always done, we have also kept that pioneering spirit alive and sought to find new ways to support people in the way they want to be

supported. Again to take a local example, working in partnership with Sarsen Housing Association we have recently opened a new supported living service in Peasdown St John – near Bath. What's particularly exciting about this is the partnership we have developed which has allowed us to expand our reach with a relatively low investment from the Society.

I wouldn't want to give the wrong impression by citing the examples I have, this sort of development is happening across the NAS, not just here in the South West!

Looking at the future for the services we provide – we want to build on our history of identifying and filling gaps in the support available. We will of course continue to invest in our own core services, but increasingly we want to find ways to reach out beyond these. To this end we intend to particularly concentrate on developing our outreach from our own schools, on growing our supported living and on finding new partners to work with to develop new services. And partnership is going to be a key theme for us across all that we do – be it projects such as the Autism Education Trust, which we host or working with others to provide even better services.

Turning to our role as a provider of support and information – I feel this is something that our founders would be proud to have helped lay the foundations stones for. It very much follows in the tradition of not accepting the indifference that society shows to autism at times. We are reaching more people than ever through our Helpline, through our advocacy for education service, through our parent to parent peer support, through our fantastic befriending service and through our new welfare advice service.

But we are also trying to help others to understand autism better. In an ideal world an organisation like ours wouldn't need to exist, mainstream schools would be able to support our children, autism would be more widely understood and adults with autism would be well supported. But they aren't and until they are we will continue to both provide direct support and to work to change the way society responds to autism.

To this end we have increased the amount of training we provide and delivered in excess of 9000 days of training in 08/09, a staggering 2000 days more than the year before. That training was provided to Local Authorities, police and service providers to name just a few. And of course we continue to provide training to families through *Help!* and *EarlyBird* – both of which reached massively increased numbers in the year under review.

Looking forward, a central plank of our new strategy will be to build on this expertise that sits within the NAS. I have often thought we don't make enough of what we know and use that to help others improve what they do. We are planning to bring together the NAS's own expertise in one place and build bridges with others who share our passion for improving services. We plan over the next three years to create a new Centre for Autism. This will have a physical presence, possibly more than one, but the best way to imagine it is as a national resource centre. A resource centre for the NAS, but for others as well. A central way of delivering this will be through our on-line presence and we have already begun work on improving our website to make it much easier to use. We will be inviting some of you to help us develop this further when we launch a 'beta' version of this in November this year.

I mentioned three themes. I'd like to turn to the final one which is about working with people locally and nationally in a more connected way. At the Board we have talked about this as creating a networked autism community.

As you will doubtless be aware, we have recently made a historic breakthrough in our campaigning work with the Autism Act that received royal assent this week. The act, which will require the government to issue an adult autism strategy and to create statutory guidance for Local Authorities in England, is groundbreaking – make no mistake about that – but it was only achieved by us working in partnership. We had the support of many other autism charities and, critically, literally thousands of individuals who helped drive the message home to MPs, Peers and Ministers that they had to do something. But we also worked in partnership with Cheryl Gillan – to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude – who took forward our bill amongst the literally hundreds she could have chosen when she won the ballot to do a Private Members' Bill.

We intend to build on that success by working with people even more closely at a local level to help you achieve change in your area. We want to help you turn the national policy breakthroughs into local change, be that through supporting people to develop new local services, to raise awareness or to campaign.

Over the recent past we have been doing more to support our local branches, for example offering training, support with the media, fundraising ideas such as Train Walk. Our new strategy makes it a prime objective for the future to ensure we do more of this kind of thing. We will be working with our regional staff so that they are focused on how they support people to make a difference locally, on how they bring people together at the local level and how they develop really strong relationships with local authorities and primary care trusts.

An exciting new project in this vein is the launch of the Autism Action Network. Initially working very closely with four local groups, we will develop support and tools around local campaigns that can then be used to help other branches that want to campaign. This is real grass roots campaigning. You may be interested to know that one of the groups selected from those that applied to take part was based in the South West. Personally, I was sorry that we couldn't support all the groups that applied to take part, but we will be rolling this project out more widely in future.

I have not as yet touched on the topic of devolution. Veterans of our AGMs will know that I usually include a few examples of what we are doing from across the nations. Well there are many of those – for example the work we are doing in Scotland on an autism bill – but I wanted to highlight something else. We are changing our approach to the devolved nations. In the past what goes on in campaigning and pr has been led from London. Well, as I said, we are changing that. In future the leadership is going to be provided by national directors who are the face of the NAS in Scotland, NI and Wales. England will be the responsibility of the chief Executive and me. Don't worry, this isn't about creating lots of new posts, we'll be funding this from our existing regional structures – but we want to signal that the NAS is a truly devolved organisation.

As I said at the beginning – we have set ourselves ambitious targets in the areas of service delivery, membership growth, campaigning, branch support and awareness. We can only achieve these if we break the cycle we have of under performance in our fundraising, which stops us investing in new activity as much as we would like, which in turn makes it harder to fundraise. We are a big charity, but in fundraising terms we are small, and smaller than our peer group. This really limits our ability to deliver the things you all want of us. While we are good at some sorts of fundraising – notably raising money from companies and trusts and raising money through events – we need to get much smarter in some other key areas.

The Board are going to keep the pressure on staff over this. We have changed the structure recently to give fundraising more prominence in the organisation, but we all need to keep reminding people that the NAS is a charity and it can only provide its helpline, advocacy, befriending and all those other services if people are prepared to donate to us.

This does mean you will see us reminding people of this more in future. Inevitably some people will be unhappy with the way we do this. Well I make no apology for that. Like many of you I am frustrated at the indifference shown by society, like you I want to change that. Increased fundraising income is the only way we are going to be able to achieve this.

In conclusion, the NAS is a changing organisation. But I believe it is changing in a way that builds on the legacy of our founders. We are continuing to provide direct support to people with autism through high quality expert services, but increasingly we will work to change the way the world responds to autism. We will do this by providing expertise and information about autism, by campaigning for change and by supporting people locally to achieve what they want.

I need to finish by thanking some key people. Firstly, our Patron HRH Countess of Wessex – who has done so much for us over the years. Secondly, a big thank you goes to our President Jane Asher, who is a tireless champion of the cause and who gives us so much of her time, energy and dedication.

I'd like to thank my fellow trustees for all they do, they give up their time to ensure that the charity is effectively run – but also contribute across the piece to all we do. Also our Advisory Council who have the important role of electing our Board and of advising them on the future direction for the charity – I'd particularly like to thank our Senior Councillor – Pamela Reitemeier who has provided clear leadership and chairing to the council.

I'd of course like to thank Mark Lever and the staff team at the NAS for all their hard work. But most importantly I'd like to thank all of you and our other supporters, it is because we have you supporting us every step of the way that we are able to make progress on milestones like the Autism Bill.

Thank you and I look forward to working with you to make the future even more successful than the past.