

**THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY
393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG**

**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
AND
FAMILY DAY**

**Held on Saturday 22 November 2014
at the RAF Museum, Hendon**

There were present: 170 Members and guests

1. WELCOME BY THE CHAIR OF TRUSTEES

- 1.1 Dr Carol Homden CBE, Chair of Trustees, welcomed Members and their families to the 2014 Annual General Meeting of the charity. She explained that the official AGM business would be preceded by a Council meeting which would take the form of an open discussion focusing on how Council and Members can support the charity to achieve its strategic plan.
- 1.2 She also expressed her thanks to the RAF Museum for hosting the event. The museum is the first organisation to win an Autism Access Award, signifying that as a public access building it is designed to be welcoming to people with autism.
- 1.3 Looking back at the past year, she was pleased to reflect on the excellent progress that had been made by the charity. In education, Thames Valley School is establishing itself as the Society's first autism specific free school, with another due to open in Cheshire in January and government agreement for a third in Lambeth. There are now 333 school pupils across the NAS and "MyProgress" has been introduced to provide an autism specific framework to assess the outcomes of all our school students. The charity is now focusing on transitions to support young people as they move on from school and the Transitions Service at Sybil Elgar is showing the way forward.
- 1.4 In adult services there have been new developments at Willow House in Somerset, Kingsley House in Devon, Ty Yfory in Cardiff and Linden House in Surrey.
- 1.5 The Centre for Autism has developed autism friendly theatre productions and cinema screenings with the autism friendly production of the Lion King being particularly noteworthy. This year we are even going to have an autism friendly Santa's Grotto in Belfast!
- 1.6 Overall, Carol described the charity's work as being characterised by commitment and dedication and she offered her thanks to the Executive, Councillors and Trustees for their work and support.

2. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S ADDRESS

- 2.1 Mark Lever described the NAS as being effectively two organisations: a service provider selling education and adult care services to (mostly) local authorities and a charity providing support services that are free at the point of delivery.
- 2.2 Tightening local authority budgets are making it increasingly difficult to deliver quality services at realistic prices but those charitable services that are funded largely by fundraising present particular challenges. There will always be limited resources so the need is to prioritise how these are invested and in this we are guided by what you, our Members, tell us. Thus, we are focusing on:
- i. Social change, achieved through raising awareness of autism and improving accessibility to public services. The 'Push for Action' campaign was an example of the work we are doing in this area and we are recruiting and training more volunteers to develop our work at the local level.
 - ii. Improving the support we can provide to those people who access our support and helpline services. Currently, only 25% of calls to the Helpline are actually answered and we are using volunteers to increase our capacity. It's also worth noting that the charity's web site has some 250,000 unique visitors every month. Our aim is to use the information we have to become more proactive by getting to know those people who contact us so that we can predict when they are likely to need our help and advice, making the NAS effectively a 'partner for life'.
 - iii. Professionals who work with people with autism tell us that they don't understand the condition well enough so we aim to increase the training and support we provide.
 - iv. While doing all of this we must ensure that our schools and adult services are consistently excellent, both in terms of their environment and the quality of the support they provide.
- 2.3 Everything we do is underpinned by our staff's expertise in autism so training and knowledge must always be key priorities.
- 2.4 Fundraising is critical to enable us to deliver our plan but the environment is increasingly challenging. Nevertheless, we have had notable successes with initiatives as diverse as 'loom bands' and a growing range of cycling challenges.
- 2.5 Overall, we are working together to deliver our vision of a world where people with autism can lead the life they choose and Mark expressed his thanks to the Chair and the Board of Trustees for their continuing support.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

3.1 The Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Saturday 23rd November 2013 were approved.

3.2 There were no matters arising.

4. FINANCIAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS

4.1 Kris Murali, Chairman of the Plans & Resources Committee of the Board of Trustees, reported on the audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 2014, the salient points arising being:

- Total income for the year had increased by 1% to £93.4m. However, there was an income and expenditure deficit of -£0.2m, down from a surplus of £1m in the previous year. The main challenges had been at Broomhayes, where the decision was taken to close the education aspect and to turn the service into an adult residential facility, and at the new Anderson School. Nevertheless, strong performances at other services had largely offset these losses.
- Adult support and education services continue to dominate income, accounting for 87% of the total. Fundraising net income was slightly up compared to last year – a good result in a challenging environment.
- Expenditure increased by 2.4%, driven by growth in adult and charitable services, as well as by inflation. In July 2013 the NAS went through the process of Pensions Auto Enrolment, resulting in some 1,400 staff joining our defined contribution pension scheme.
- Staff costs remain our largest category of expenditure and are therefore the focus of the Board's and Executive's efforts to reduce overall costs. During the year the Board agreed a new Terms and Conditions Review, to be implemented from 2014/15. There is also a Value for money agenda to review other costs and ensure the delivery of best value.
- 87% of staff work in schools and adult services with 7% employed in the Centre for Autism and the remainder on the various support services, such as Finance and HR.
- £1.6m was spent on capital projects, spread between essential investments in IT and £¼m on each of Somerset Court and Sybil Elgar School.
- The strategy agreed by the Board is that there should be a minimum target for free reserves of £8m with an absolute minimum of £5.3m. During the year reserves had increased by £1m, partly as a result of improvements in the Local Government Pension Funds. Nevertheless, at £6.3m the free reserves remain below the target level and the NAS will continue to do all it can to build them up to the target level of £8m.

- Looking at the forecast for the current year, a surplus of £637,000 is predicted. While schools and adult services are performing well, fundraising is down against target and the take up of pensions by staff has been higher than anticipated. Options are being considered to reduce costs for the remainder of the year, including the postponement of maintenance and IT investments.
 - This is the first time that results for the NAS Academies Trust, which operates the free schools, have been included alongside those for the NAS. It should be noted, however, that any surpluses generated by the free schools are ring fenced and can only be reinvested in the free schools programme.
- 4.2 In the subsequent discussion a Member pointed out that the charity side of the NAS is actually quite small but how can we get people to realise that it needs donations? In response, Carol Homden said that people tend to give to organisations they've heard of so in that respect the national profile of the charity was important. However, having a local presence was also very important and we are looking at how best we can support branches with tools and products to make them more effective at fundraising. She added that wherever the money comes from, the NAS is a very cost efficient organisation which prioritises its spending according to need.
- 4.3 Another Member emphasised the importance of staff and ensuring that there is continuity; something that cannot be achieved with the use of agency staff. They also queried the wisdom of cutting back on maintenance. In response Carol Homden agreed that staff are our most precious resource but at the same time we must be able to demonstrate that our services provide value for money if we are to win local authority contracts. There are many competing priorities for investment, including digital investment and the maintenance of our properties, but we can only spend the money we have.
- 4.4 In response to a query concerning the level of professional fees shown in the accounts, Mark Lever explained that these largely relate to conference speakers and professionals such as psychologists and therapists employed in our services.
- 4.5 In a discussion about fundraising a Member asked if we are looking at international and European funding sources. The response was that yes we are but funds from these sources are generally tied to specific projects and cannot be used to fund core costs. It was also pointed out that we often reach the short list for corporate sponsorship, only to lose at the final staff vote stage. It is up to us to exert more influence to overcome this final hurdle.
- 4.6 A Member asked if Continuing Health Care funding was important to the NAS and what impact might it have on our services? In response, it was explained that the NAS does receive some funding from Health Authorities and we are looking at how we can broaden our income streams.

- 4.7 A Member expressed concern about the lack of understanding of autism within Job Centres. Mark Lever responded to say that while the NAS had obtained a government commitment of at least one trained Adviser per Job Centre, in practice it is apparent that this has not yet happened. The NAS is working with the DWP to achieve this goal.
- 4.8 Concern was expressed about the lack of understanding of autism in care homes for the elderly. Carol Povey, Director of the Centre for Autism, referred to the work that is in course on autism and ageing. This is an area that has not previously been researched and is not well understood but we are developing our knowledge and Carol agreed that it is critical that care homes understand how to support older people with autism.
- 4.9 It was suggested by a Member that adults with Asperger's who have been through retirement should share their experiences so that others who are approaching this uncertain time can learn from them. It was agreed that this was a very good idea.
- 4.10 Referring to a question about next year's general election, Mark Lever explained that the NAS is adopting a three level approach:
- i. At a national level, the NAS is working with a group of 80 charities focusing on funding for social care,
 - ii. Locally, branches need to focus on influencing MPs and Councillors while also trying to ensure that as many people with autism as possible vote.
 - iii. Experience has shown that it is more effective to talk to parliamentary candidates before the election rather than afterwards when they are inundated with lobbyists. Human stories from constituents are particularly effective.
- 4.11 Finally, Carol Homden urged everyone to think about the NAS when preparing their will because legacies should play a larger part in the NAS' income.
- 4.12 With no further questions, the Members then approved and adopted the Accounts and Balance Sheets of the Society, and the Reports of the Trustees and the Auditors thereon, in respect of the year ended 31 March 2014.

In bringing the formal business of the 2014 Annual General Meeting to a close, Carol Homden thanked Members for coming and hoped they would enjoy the presentations in the afternoon reflecting the huge impact that Dr Lorna Wing had had on the world of autism. Our president, Jane Asher, would be joining us. The day would then finish with a choice from two seminars. The facilities of the RAF Museum were also available for Members to enjoy.

Members then had lunch.

The afternoon's appreciation for the life of Lorna Wing was introduced by her long standing colleague and friend, Dr Judith Gould, Director of the Diagnostic Centre at the Lorna Wing Centre.

The NAS President, Jane Asher, then paid tribute to Lorna from her personal experience before Sarah Hendrickx, Professor Ina van Berckelaer-Onnes and Michael and Saskia Baron described how Lorna had influenced their lives.

To complete the day, Members then joined one of two seminars covering:

- a) Direct Payments (led by Lesley Waugh) and
- b) Education Care & Health Plans and Personal Budgets (led by Tom Purser).