



Autism Bucks Bulletin is the quarterly newsletter of Autism Bucks, a charity actively working to help adults with autism in Buckinghamshire. It is produced to keep our trustees, volunteers and sponsors informed of our activities.

This first edition includes a much deeper level of detail than our planned quarterly issues, which will mainly be limited to giving an update on our current and planned activities.

Covid-19

In response to Covid-19 we have had to make the difficult decision to suspend our meetings for the time being, in order to safeguard our members. We appreciate that the social distancing and self-isolation measures might involve particular difficulties for some members and have launched an online forum in association with NDSA UK.

We have also introduced on-line video conference meetings for members in place of the original meetings and are pleased to say that overall these have been going well. Attendance is down a little and we are learning as we go. The meetings work better with a 30-minute duration for example, but it might also be useful in future to host some special interest sessions.

Equally we have changed the trustees meetings so that they can maintain social distancing and stay well by using video conference calls here too, during the lockdown period.

We aim to continue to run our website (although we are dependent upon our contractor for that service) and hope that everyone remains safe and well.

Membership and Group Meetings

Current membership stands at around 57 and until the recent lockdown we provided monthly meetings in both High Wycombe and Aylesbury hosted by the trustees and a small group of volunteers (to whom we are most grateful). Since a review earlier in 2019, we took the decision that these meetings must have at least two hosts in keeping with our safeguarding policy. We are very grateful to have a small team of volunteers who help us to facilitate these meetings with sound governance.

In our recent Aylesbury meetings we tried a couple of new and different activities – the trip to the Olympic museum was a success for those who could make it and we would like to arrange a further trip sometime in the future. Sadly our trip to Buckinghamshire County Museum to make wind chimes was cancelled by the organisers as part of the Covid-19 cessation of community events.

A recent meeting that welcomed a representative from the SHED charity was very successful with most attendees trying out drama skills in a format designed to help with personal interaction and communication skills. We look forward to further sessions in the future.

In the coming year and in response to our member survey we plan to introduce more variety in our group meetings and will offer a range of different ‘taster’ sessions, to help members explore and develop coping strategies and communication skills. The recent activities have been well received,

but not all members have been able to attend, possibly because of transport issues. We will continue to seek feedback to help shape our future programme.

Did you know? On average, each of our group meetings in 2019 – 21 costs us around £45 to deliver, which is why we introduced a collection of minimum of £2 each, per session as a step towards meeting these costs.

Trustees and Volunteers

During the past year our team of trustees has remained stable with Martin Hillier, Paulette Hunn, Zita Calkin, Paula Strawbridge and Martin Hollett forming a strong core team. Sadly our former treasurer, Stuart Noble had to stand down for personal reasons and we wish him well for the future. Subsequently we have been joined by Jacqui Fowler and we welcome her and look forward to working together in the coming year. Martin Hollett has taken over the treasurer role and Martin Hillier continues as chairman.

The work of the charity would not be possible without the help and support of our volunteers who help to run our group meetings in Aylesbury and High Wycombe, as well as working in the background on our social media profile.

We are always happy to discuss opportunities for volunteering with anyone who is interested and details of our current opportunities are published on our website.

Finances

With apologies for the lengthy report here – there has been a lot going on in this area!

Autism Bucks currently runs on an annual budget of approximately £4,200 per year. This funding has come mostly from a fund donated when the charity was first set up – a fund that has helped us in the first two years but is now running low so this year has seen us work to become more self-sufficient for our general operation and to create funding for future projects based around improving the quality of the services we provide.

During 2019 – 2020 the trustees have been working actively to reduce our overheads and increase our fundraising activities. To this end we now operate on a purely voluntary basis, with none of our trustees or volunteers being paid other than for necessary expenses incurred. Unfortunately we have incurred some expenses we would have preferred to avoid but have now put in place measures to reduce the risk of such unforeseen expenditure in the future.

We have successfully moved our banking to the Metro Bank and the new arrangement is proving better suited to our needs as a charity.

We operate our small scale fundraising schemes with Aylesbury and High Wycombe lotteries. We also have a small number of collection tins hosted by some local shops and businesses. We are involved with Just Giving and the Amazon Smiles scheme and donations are also possible via Facebook. Note that the Facebook donations are backed by Paypal and incur a small processing charge.

We continue to seek out and apply for funding and grants from a variety of sources and have recently been successful with Heart of Bucks, Waitrose and Beaconsfield Freemasons all of which will help to pay our way in 2020 – 21. The Waitrose green tokens scheme has been extremely successful in bringing in almost £1,200 this year from 3 major stores and we await news on our success with 3 further stores in 2020. Applications for grants to Bucks County and Buckinghamshire Freemasonry in the Community are still in flight and we continue to seek out new sources of funding.

Under Covid-19 lockdown we have been able to avoid expenses from cancelling our group meetings but as a result will not receive any income from those meetings. Equally the Waitrose token scheme has been suspended and other sources of income will also be impacted. On balance we should fare far better than other charities as we don't have any paid staff and have been able to scale back our spending through cancelling the meetings.

Website, Facebook and social media

Many of our members rely on our website and Facebook to learn when our meetings are taking place and we use it to issue news of upcoming events of interest.

Our website has had issues on a couple of occasions and this has been a frustration for all. Richard Bateman from the hosting company has been working with us to resolve issues as they are reported but we are disappointed with the level of service at this time, both as a result of these issues as well as the turnaround of updates.

At the time of writing, we have 715 Facebook and 374 Twitter followers and we have recently taken on a volunteer with a brief of looking after our social media profile.

Projects

Growth and development of the charity can only happen with some project based activities on top of our normal operational load. These need to be planned and funded as we would not be able to afford them otherwise. Funding for the most part comes from grants we have to apply for and this activity helps us to define exactly what it is we want to do, how much it will cost and what benefits it will bring. The following is a brief description of the projects we have identified and the current position. Future issues of Autism Bucks Chat will provide updates on the progress of these projects.

Awareness – a programme of awareness lectures with handouts to be delivered members and care workers. This project is part of an application to Bucks Community grants and we are waiting to hear if we have been successful.

Marketing and communications – There are several strands to this project but at the moment we can say that we have begun to produce a quarterly newsletter for our members and sponsors, and we are investigating buying some lanyards and other publicity material. We are working with our Social Media volunteer to improve communications and are working on a publicity flyer that will replace our existing A5 notelet.

Website - Plans to revamp our website are on hold until we can better define the scope of the project and funding required – then we need to find sponsorship to pay for it! Similarly a project to develop our membership list is closely linked to the website and cannot progress at this time.

Training package – linked to the awareness project, it was recognised that we have a wealth of expertise to design and potentially deliver training to the NHS etc. There is certainly an opportunity here but recent dialogue on the matter has identified that it is not quite the right environment for us to get involved with yet, and as a result this project is on hold.

Trustees & Volunteers– the T&V project is an ongoing activity to review our current needs against what our trustees and volunteers have to offer – at times we recognise we aren't up to it, hence the work to identify volunteer roles and recruit individuals to meet those needs. We also collaborate with Community Impact Bucks and have benefitted from several training and coaching sessions from them.

Members Group Meetings In 2020-21 we plan to work towards opening additional groups, with plans to explore potential for groups in additional towns as well as special interest groups (e.g. for young adults, or for women). This work will in part be funded by our Heart of Bucks grant.

Our partners and sponsors

This year we have been lucky to attract significant donations from Waitrose via their green token scheme in High Wycombe, Chesham and Aylesbury. We have further opportunities underway for Beaconsfield, Buckingham and Gerrard's Cross.

We have been working with the National Autism Society branch based in Aylesbury and have recently formed a link with NDSA (Neural Diverse Self Advocacy) and have used their website to host a chatroom forum.

We have applied for a couple of grants and are pleased to report this work has been successful in that we hope to have some funding to come from Heart of Bucks in the near future.

We continue to receive valuable input from Community Impact Bucks and this has greatly helped the Trustees in areas such as fundraising and volunteer recruitment.

Coming up

At this time we should be making plans to host our AGM, but understandably, under Covid-19 our plans are hampered and we continue to follow guidelines set by the charities commission.

We are grateful for your patience and continued support at this challenging time.

The Trustees
Autism Bucks

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