

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

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**Held on Saturday 23 January 2021
Via Video Conference**

There were present: 68 Members

1. WELCOME AND ADDRESS BY THE CHAIR OF TRUSTEES

- 1.1 Dr Carol Homden CBE, Chair of Trustees, welcomed members to the first on line AGM in the Society's history. Given the Covid pandemic, moving the event on line had been inevitable but she hoped that this would enable more people than ever to participate.
- 1.2 Dr Homden set out how the event would work and in particular advised members that questions would be received via the messaging function and where possible would then be grouped together to reflect the topics raised. If time did not permit questions to be answered during the meeting itself, then provided they were not asked anonymously, written responses would be provided after the meeting.
- 1.3 Presentations given during the meeting would also be made available via the website.
- 1.4 Dr Homden then went on to describe some of the main highlights from the year to the end of March 2020. This was interrupted when her internet connection failed, illustrating one of the challenges of operating on line, but in due course she was able to reconnect and to complete her presentation. Her presentation focused on how the NAS was continuing to transform lives and to change attitudes, examples including:
 - The continuing growth of the branch network, now with 117 branches. The branch network is run by volunteers and allows us to reach thousands of autistic people and their families. They have also done amazing work to respond to the pandemic.
 - The 'Spectrum Live' broadcast on autism in women and girls had reached 52,000 people. The broadcast brought together professional expertise and lived experience and provided just one example of how the charity provides advice and guidance to millions of people.
 - The 'Moving Forward' service in Scotland had celebrated 20 years of helping young autistic people to find work. We also celebrated another important milestone – our 20-year partnership with international law firm

Clifford Chase, who provide *pro bono* expert legal advice and support to families using our Education Rights Service

- After years of planning and negotiation, we had opened our third free school: the Vanguard school in Lambeth. A programme of expansion for our Cullum Centres, autism units attached to mainstream schools, had also been initiated.
- Our new autism centre in Belfast had been opened. This is a wonderfully equipped facility which had been warmly welcomed, both by autistic people, their families and the Northern Ireland inspectors.
- For the first time, NHS England had agreed to publish autism diagnosis waiting times, a critical step in the drive to improve performance in this area.

1.5 Bringing her presentation to a close, Dr Homden advised that after some 10 years as the NAS chair, she planned to stand down this year. The board had initiated the search to find the right person to succeed her but in any event, she would always be a part of the NAS.

2. PRESENTATION FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

2.1 Dr Homden then invited the Chief Executive, Caroline Stevens, to speak. Caroline spoke about the impact of the Covid pandemic and what the charity had done to respond to the challenges it presented. She described the priorities as being:

- To keeping direct services, such as schools and adult support services going whilst keeping everyone safe;
- To keep fighting for change while also addressing the challenges caused by the pandemic;
- To respond to significant reductions in our income by being both creative and realistic.

2.2 Staff had done a magnificent job not only to keep the schools and adult services going but to keep everyone safe. This has required imagination and initiative to devise new ways of working while coping with all the pressures we have all felt during lockdown.

2.3 Other services, including those provided by our branches, have moved on line and have continued to support families and to reduce their sense of isolation.

2.4 Like most charities, the NAS has lost significant amounts of income with events such as the London Marathon cancelled. Office based staff have worked from home which works better for some than for others and a number of staff have taken advantage of the government's furlough scheme. Nonetheless, we have managed to switch a number of activities, such as conferences, on line.

- 2.5 Throughout the pandemic we have continued to fight for the needs of autistic people, including recognition of the difficulties some autistic people have wearing facemasks and their need to exercise more than once a day. We continue to provide specific advice around the pandemic and the government's rules and regulations on our website.
- 2.6 Looking ahead, the charity continues to face challenges, the principal ones being:
- Continuing to prioritise the quality and safety of our services;
 - Managing our finances by ensuring we work as efficiently and cost effectively as possible;
 - Continuing to push for better funded services and support for autistic people.
- 2.7 Finally, Caroline expressed her heartfelt thanks to members, fundraisers, volunteers, campaigners and all those others who contribute to the NAS for their continuing support.

3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING

- 3.1 The chair then moved on to the formal business of the meeting, inviting those members who were present at the AGM held on 10 November 2019 to confirm via their online voting form that the minutes represent an accurate record of the meeting. This was done and the minutes were approved.

4. PRESENTATION OF THE ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS

- 4.1 Kris Murali, Vice Chair of the board and Chair of the Plans and Resources committee, then gave a presentation on the audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020. He described the key financial challenges the charity is facing as:
- Increases in staff and related costs to keep up with increases in the living wage, competitors and local economic pressures;
 - Continuing pressure from funding authorities in relation to the fees they pay for placements in our schools and services;
 - Adjusting to the Covid-19 Pandemic, including reduced fundraising;
 - The consequent pressures on areas such as marketing, IT, Finance and HR to provide services to the business at a lower cost.
- 4.2 Despite these challenges the NAS continues to be solvent but we need to pursue a programme of activities to address the underlying deficit in our funding model. Accordingly, we have launched a series of efficiency improvement projects and these will continue into next year. Their purpose is to reduce our central costs while continuing to support our front-line services.
- 4.3 Kris advised members that the external auditors had confirmed the charity's going concern status and had not identified any issues of concern. The accounts had been scrutinised by the Audit and Risk committee and had been

approved by the full board. Using their online voting forms, 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 2020.

- 4.4 Finally, having serving on the board of trustees for some ten years, Kris advised that this would be his final presentation to the members as he would be stepping down in a few weeks.

5. RATIFICATION OF NEW TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS

- 4.1 Dr Homden took the opportunity to thank not only Kris Murali but also two other trustees who had stepped down during the year – David Harbott and Pamela Reitemeier – for their long and committed service.

- 4.2 Dr Homden then moved on to introduce two new trustees who had joined the board: Edward Caddle and Helen Howard. Helen was unable to join the meeting but Edward was present and took the opportunity to introduce himself, describing his experience of autism in his family and also his professional experience as an accountant. He would be taking over from Kris as chair of the board's Plans and Resources committee.

- 4.3 In her absence, Dr Homden outlined Helen Howard's experience as someone who has taught autistic children for many years and has also been the managing director of a leading academies trust.

- 4.4 Members were then asked to ratify the appointment of both trustees and this they did, again by using their online voting forms.

5. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

- 5.1 Questions that had been received from members were the read out and answered, either by Dr Homden or by Caroline Stevens.

Q: When will autistic people, including those with a learning disability, receive Covid vaccinations and is the NAS doing anything to persuade the government to give them priority?

A: Caroline Stevens advised that we are holding meetings with government ministers on a regular basis and would be meeting Nadhim Zahawi, the Minister for Vaccinations, the following week and would raise this issue with him. While there is no specific data for autism, it is known that the death rate from Covid for people with learning disabilities is much higher than the average for the population as a whole.

Q: A member said that he had raised the issue of anti-depressant drugs being given to autistic people too readily at the last AGM and asked if there had been any progress?

A: Caroline Stevens said that anti-psychotic medication came into the same category and advised that the NAS was continuing to campaign and was working with the Department of Health to increase the understanding of this issue amongst health professionals.

Q: How does the NAS approach grant funding?

A: Dr Homden addressed this question, advising that we apply for any grant for which we are eligible. However, grants are heavily oversubscribed and the position is more competitive than ever this year, following the impact of Covid.

Q: With a new chair to be appointed, can the person selected be autistic?

A: Dr Homden advised that it is an open recruitment process. The board will lead and their primary concern will be to appoint the best person possible, whether autistic or not. She also noted that in any event, autistic people will play a key role in the selection process with a panel of autistic people interviewing the applicants. Caroline Stevens added that Carol Homden has done an amazing job as chair and has set the bar very high for her successor!

Q: How do I go about finding an NAS branch?

A: Dr Homden advised that the starting point is the NAS website. You can type in your postcode and with 117 branches, there is likely to be one within reach. Should that not be successful, please write and we can send information. She added that we are always keen to hear from any member who might want to establish a new branch.

Q: What services are there in the London area for high functioning autistic people?

A: Caroline Stevens advised that the NAS provides services both across the spectrum and across the UK. Specific services might depend on the age group but she suggested that the best approach is to contact a local branch in the first instance. Alternatively, let us know what kind of support is required and we will advise accordingly. That said, we have to be honest and to recognise that we don't have the resources to meet everyone's needs. We carry out regular surveys to identify the key life challenges but we have to prioritise in order to use our resources to best effect.

Q: Is it not the case that all NAS schools are aimed at autistic children who have additional learning difficulties?

A: In response Dr Homden advised that the NAS offers three distinct types of school provision. The independent NAS schools do indeed support autistic children with learning difficulties. However, the three free schools are aimed specifically at higher functioning autistic children who are expected to be able to cope with the academic curriculum while the Cullum Centres are autism units attached to mainstream schools, providing targeted support to students at those schools. She recognised, however, that each school is essentially

local in its reach. She also referred to the Autism Education Trust, a government initiative which is convened by the NAS and which works to improve knowledge of autism in schools across the country.

Q: What is the future of the NAS head office in City Road, Islington?

A: Caroline Stevens advised that the pandemic had meant that the office had effectively been empty for much of the year with staff working from home. Our ongoing need for office accommodation in London was being reviewed and while there would always be a need for some kind of office space in London, this might not be in City Road. The chair added the observation that the majority of NAS staff are not in London but are spread across the country.

Q: Does the NAS believe that the government's announcement concerning the Skills for Life programme goes far enough for autistic people?

A: Dr Homden said it probably doesn't go far enough but to have this commitment from the government is positive. She could confirm that the NAS is highly regarded within government circles and that our policy team will be providing a further response.

Q: A member referred to their shock having watched a BBC documentary about disability hate crime and asked what the NAS can do?

A: Caroline Stevens said she had not seen the programme but had been horrified by the stories of abuse. She referred to her own experiences with her son and confirmed that abuse is unacceptable at all levels. The NAS has done a lot of work in this area but there remains much more to do. We are pushing the government to take the lead on nationwide campaigns to improve the understanding of the issues. She added that the problems lie not just with the general public but also with professionals who take the key decisions regarding access to services. Dr Homden added that trustees have a good understanding of these issues through their lived experience and an important factor is to ensure that the existing law is applied. Working together, however, we are a community with authority and influence and we can make a difference.

5.2 Time having run out, this brought the meeting to a close. Questions that had not been addressed in the time available would be responded to after the event. Dr Homden thanked everyone for their support and closed the meeting.