

Dorset Adult Asperger's Support (DAAS)

Directors' Report 2014 – 2015

This year DAAS has continued to maintain our regular activities, running our meetings, providing advice and guidance both at the meetings and via the website and phone contacts, and participating in the consultation process with the statutory authorities across Dorset. We have done this despite the constraints of very limited funding and a reduction in the number of active Voluntary Directors, although we have welcomed the assistance of new volunteers from within the group to help at our meetings. We have tried to focus on our priorities although it is disappointing not to have the personal or financial resources to be able to carry out and develop all the ideas we have for improving the services we can offer in response to the identified needs of people with Aspergers/HFA and their carers across Dorset.

The following is a summary of our main activities and events for the year April 2014 to March 2015. There are several changes which have occurred since March, both challenging and encouraging. So we look forward to moving forward and building on our core strengths in the year ahead.

Meetings & Membership. Our programme of monthly meetings has continued at The Retreat at Bournemouth University and in Dorchester at the Community Church, apart from our annual August break. This year attendance at the Retreat has averaged 35 with a high of 44 for the post AGM talk in July when Dr Karen Sutton up-dated us about the progress of the Community Adult Asperger Service (CAAS) and its very welcome extension across Dorset. We also held an external event in June at the Bournemouth Indoor Bowls Centre, where we were taught the basics of a new skill, and a Christmas in-house social. We have featured more personal accounts from participating members in events such as “Asperger's and Independence” and the group has taken part in several discussions and a forum about current issues of concern and interest. We also continued the popular DAAS Quiz events and introduced a Top Tips feature for people to share advice and information. At Dorchester numbers averaged 17. There was a particular good turn out in October of 25 to listen to the CAAS presentation by Adrian Edwards and Karen Sutton but towards the end of 2014/15 numbers had disappointingly dropped to 11. Another earlier highlight was the pre-Christmas meeting, organised by the members, and thoroughly enjoyed by all. Brian Cox has resolutely maintained the programme at our Dorchester meetings, despite having retired as a Director, but is now looking for assistance from the group to continue and develop the regular meetings, with support from and in liaison with the current Voluntary Directors. Ideas and offers of help will be most welcome.

A few of our regular members have recently been diverted away some Tuesday evenings and although it's a shame when evening classes clash with DAAS meetings it's good that people feel able to develop their interests in this way. We consistently encourage people to build on their interests and enthusiasms as a foundation for a fulfilling and rewarding life, as well as a source of social contacts. We look forward to welcoming people back once their courses have finished. Other members have new jobs requiring evening work so we hope their employers will be good enough to look at re-scheduling some of their rotas occasionally! We do miss their attendance and contribution. As before we appreciate our core membership of regular attendees & supporters and also welcome those people who come along to just seek advice or information, particularly when newly diagnosed or referred by CAAS and other bodies.

The welcome Tesco grant last year enabled us to buy a DAAS banner and notice boards which have been used for displays at meetings and helped to re-inforce our image and improve communication.

Membership is up slightly from the previous year at 98 individuals, with 32 single members and 25 family groups. We continue to benefit from sponsorship provided by Bournemouth University in the use of the Retreat and from BIBC for occasional hire of their facilities, for which we are very grateful.

Training. In January we ran a pilot course for what we hope will be a series of sessions in a programme called “Socially Wise”. Voluntary Directors Sandy Teal and Julie Williams held an educational workshop looking at issues around personal space. The workshops are based on the National Autistic Society's Socialeyes programme and Julie attended a 2 day facilitator course run by the NAS in London. The aim of the full course is to give people on the autistic spectrum the tools they need to understand and take part more effectively in the social world around them. Funding was not forthcoming this year to enable the full programme to be run but resources are being sought to enable us to continue the series of workshops in the future.

Funding. Our new Treasurer, Julie Williams, took over from Brian Cox in July and successfully applied for a grant of £1500 from Safer Dorset. This enabled us to take the first steps in running the Socially Wise programme and further funding is now necessary to expand and develop the course. We are also grateful to DAAS members such as Steve Thornton and his mother Pam for sterling efforts in raising funds through making and selling handmade cards, and to Jackie Dunning for her cake baking sales. Thanks are also due to members who top up their membership fees with additional donations either in cash or in kind, such as the purchase of items for the refreshment table.

Internet presence and contacts We continue to receive requests for information and advice through our website and on the DAAS phones. We also receive invitations to take part in various activities, conferences, consultations and questionnaires connected with Asperger's. One particular request resulted in several DAAS members volunteering to participate in a new research venture being run by Southampton University investigating eye movement, analysing how people process text and natural scenes and comparing the results between people with Asperger's/HFA and those not on the spectrum. Early results were fed back to the group and the research is continuing. Our closed Facebook page continues to grow and we thank Nigel Harris and Polly Ford for administering this. Thanks also to those people who contribute items and respond to people's queries

Governance. We were sad to lose the valuable services of Brian Cox and Martin Hedley last July as they both retired as Voluntary Directors having served on the DAAS Board for several years. Their contribution has been greatly missed and the last AGM thanked them both for their hard work, commitment and dedication to their roles as Directors, and in Brian's case as Treasurer. Unfortunately we have not been able to find anyone else to take their place and, with only 4 remaining Voluntary Directors, this is not sustainable in the long term. During the year the Directors have held 5 formal Directors' meetings and an additional meeting to discuss Plans and Strategy. We would encourage people who would like to give the role a try to attend our meetings (usually including a delicious buffet lunch) on a trial basis (no commitment) to see how it works.

Volunteers. Thankfully we have received some excellent offers to help at meetings, running the refreshments, assisting on the Welcome desk and greeting newcomers. "Thank You" Gill & Steve Davis and Irene Harris. We are looking to strengthen our team of helpers to ensure cover is always available and, in future, to develop more activities to extend the opportunities we can provide outside the meetings. More volunteer meeting hosts, however, are still urgently sought. Full support will be given.

ASC Partnership Board and local influence. DAAS representation has continued with Nigel Harris and Taz Beedell as self-advocates and Diane Waters and Brian Cox as Carer representatives. Achievements during the year have seen the allocation of an £18.5K grant to the creation of an autistic friendly meeting room at Rossmore library, which will shortly come into operation, and the development of a purpose built sensory integration facility where CAAS will be able to develop this very valuable therapy of benefit to many people with Asperger's. The views of DAAS members have been sought in developing the pan Dorset ASC Strategy, in assessing the performance of the statutory authorities and in identifying priorities for the current Action Plan. Individual Voluntary Directors have also continued to support members in handling a variety of issues, from dealing with bureaucracy to coping with personal situations.

Ambassadors. We were very pleased to award two further DAAS Ambassador badges and certificates, to Steve Thornton and Irene Harris. These two people have shown great commitment to DAAS in a variety of different ways, contributing to the successful running of our meetings and to raising awareness and understanding in the wider community.

Priorities. Our outstanding priority, as last year, is to continue our search for suitable candidates for the role of Voluntary Director. With a limited number of people currently able to commit the necessary time and resources it is becoming increasingly difficult to do more than just maintain the basic provision of holding monthly meetings, running the website and contributing to the pan Dorset ASC Partnership Board. We would like to do so much more and every organisation needs regular injections of new blood to keep it vibrant and responsive to the needs of its core members. So please consider if you, or someone you know, can help us fill this gap and enable DAAS to continue to thrive. The Directors confirm our fundamental belief and commitment to enabling people on the autistic spectrum to do things for themselves and to achieve the goals of a fulfilling and rewarding life. Please help us to make this happen.

29 June 2015

Carole Driver, Sandy Teal, Diane Waters and Julie Williams