

Dorset Adult Asperger's Support (DAAS)

Directors' Report 2015 – 2016

Despite increasing challenges DAAS has continued to maintain its regular core activities throughout the year 2015 - 2016, providing peer support for people with Asperger's Syndrome and High Functioning Autism as well as for their carers, families, friends and supporters across Dorset. We are now operating with a reduced number of Voluntary Directors who have all had personal challenges to face during this period and yet we have managed to provide a varied and interesting mix of topics for our monthly meetings at two locations and have also given support and assistance on a one to one basis to individual group members as well as to those who seek our advice and guidance by way of our website or phone service. DAAS's presence on the pan Dorset Autistic Spectrum Condition Partnership Board (ASCPB) has been strengthened and we continue to attend relevant meetings, across the county, to represent DAAS members and their concerns. We are particularly proud to have introduced a new series of workshops entitled Socially Wise to address the all too common problems experienced in the field of social communication. The following is a summary of our main events and activities between April 2015 and the end of March 2016.

Meetings & Membership. Our Bournemouth & Poole meetings continued at Bournemouth University in The Retreat and we are very grateful to the University for sponsoring our monthly use of the room. Unfortunately this situation changed at the end of March 2016 when the Retreat closed down, but we have been accommodated elsewhere within the University and are hoping for a more permanent home in the near future. Attendance at meetings was very similar to last year with an average just over 35 with a high of 52 in July when Dr Adrian Edwards spoke after our AGM about Asperger's and Anxiety. One of our main themes this year was Social Communication and we had three sessions under this heading in April, May and September, looking at the frustrations encountered and at personality types and how they communicate. We also covered Staying Safe and featured a talk especially aimed at Carers and their needs. In June we met at the Bournemouth Indoor Bowls Centre for two sessions on Yoga and on Art for All and, instead of our annual break in August, Julie and Carole ran an extra session in preparation for putting on the first full Socially Wise course. In February the group gave feedback to the Chairman of the ASC Partnership Board about performance standards achieved against the criteria set by the Autism Act. Finally we ended the year with a home-grown presentation on Travel & Transport when three of our members spoke about the challenges they had faced and the successes they had achieved. An excellent festive event was held at both our locations in December.

Despite the well attended meetings it is disappointing to note that actual membership numbers have declined since the previous year. There were 67 signed up members with 21 single memberships and 17 family groups. The previous year saw 98 individuals, 32 single memberships and 25 family groups. Some of this effect may be due to the Voluntary Directors having fewer resources and not sufficient time to chase up lapsed memberships, even though many of those people were still attending regular meetings, or to inform new attendees of the benefits. We are very grateful to those who do regularly renew their memberships at the beginning of our membership year and we appreciate their support of DAAS and the work we do. A surge of new members and renewals will enable the group to continue.

We do know that some people initially come to DAAS meetings thinking they will be social occasions and, although we do incorporate some social activities, our key objective is to act as a peer support group, providing information, advice and guidance and sharing our lived experiences of Asperger's/HFA, whether this be from the perspective of those on the spectrum or of their families and friends. It is encouraging to note, however, that people do develop friendships within the group which they then extend and develop in other situations outside the meetings. This is a theme which we hope to build on in the current and coming years.

Dorchester. The running of the meetings for DAAS in the west of the county has now been taken over by Carole Driver, following several years of sterling work by Brian Cox. It was disappointing that a group of Dorchester based members who had indicated they would be prepared to run the group together felt unable to follow this idea through, but we are grateful to Carole for volunteering to travel from Poole to Dorchester each month, ably assisted by Jan and Jason. The meeting dates have now been changed to the 2nd Monday evening of the month and we appreciate very much the sponsorship of our new venue at The United Church Dorchester where we gather in the comfortable

surroundings of the ground floor cafe. This change has given us an opportunity to synchronise somewhat the two meetings in the sense that, when possible, we try to offer the same topics and speakers to both groups. Attendance at Dorchester can be disappointing sometimes although we appreciate the new day does not suit everyone who used to attend on Tuesdays, and we miss their company. We know there is a definite need in the west and north of the county for some sort of focus group and meet up facility for people with Asperger's/HFA and their families etc but understand that transport difficulties may affect people's ability to travel to meetings.

Training. Our major project has been the development and introduction of the Socially Wise programme – a series of 10 half day workshops dealing with the often troubling aspects of social communication. Julie Williams has been instrumental in organising and delivering this, although helped by Carole Driver and Diane Waters and also by Jason Croasdell who video-ed the first course. We have now completed 2 series and hope to arrange a third in early 2017. Feedback from participants has been enlightening with evidence of real positive changes in day to day social interactions.

Funding. The Treasurer's Report sets out the detailed accounts and we are very grateful for the funding received from the Dorset Community Fund of £5000 which enabled us to run two Socially Wise courses (running into the current financial year) We also received funding from the ASC Partnership Board to help with the expenses of running our Dorchester meetings. Unfortunately most funding available is designed to meet the costs of specific projects and there is very little, if any, available to cover core running costs, which is what is needed. This is where we are dependent on income from memberships and donations, including voluntary meeting donations, and where we need to seek to increase the level of contributions.

DAAS Website & phone We continue to deal with enquiries and concerns received via the website and phone and these frequently serve to illustrate the lack of facilities and the poor communication about what services do exist in the county. Diane Waters is chief responder & several enquirers do later attend our meetings which is a welcome return.

Governance. During the year the Voluntary Directors have held 5 Directors Meetings. We continue to manage with only 4 post holders and, as we said last year, this is not sustainable on a longer term basis.

Volunteers. DAAS could not continue without its volunteers. The Voluntary Directors invest a great deal of time and effort into managing and organising our events and activities and we really appreciate the help we receive at the meetings from people who assist with the refreshments, with moving the furniture, with running the equipment and with welcoming new attendees, as well as our regulars. If you can support us by joining a rota for these activities or are willing to venture further and do the occasional hosting of a meeting, or even volunteer to become more involved in the running of the group, this would be more than welcome and enable us to continue a little longer.

Partner Organisations and local influence. DAAS representation on the pan Dorset Partnership Board has been strengthened by the addition of Steve Thornton as a service user representative, joining Nigel Harris in that role. Diane Waters and Brian Cox continue as carer representatives and DAAS is now formally recognised as the official body through which representation take place. We are also consulted through the Board on various initiatives and proposals affecting carers and people on the spectrum.

Strategy, Priorities and the Future. This year the Voluntary Directors spent several meetings identifying and defining a strategy and 5 year plan for DAAS, highlighting our priorities and targets for action. We look forward to working towards these objectives and helping to achieve just some of the improvements which would go towards a more rewarding and fulfilling life for adults with Asperger's and HFA. We also look forward to your continuing support and to working with you to help us all reach our goals. We have already started new initiatives in 2016 – 2017 such as the Drop-In facility at Rossmore library, the ladies group and the carers get-togethers. So there is a clear path forward if we can just establish a firmer foundation of basic resources, both financial and from a growing band of committed volunteers.

Carole Driver, Sandy Teal, Diane Waters & Julie Williams

31 August 2016