



**REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN**

**TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF MEMBERS**

**HELD IN CARDIFF**

**ON SATURDAY 24<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2007**

*The National Autistic Society*  
*393 City Road*  
*London, EC1V 1NG*

**CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO  
THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF MEMBERS  
24 NOVEMBER 2007 – IN CARDIFF**

Boneddigion a boneddigesau,  
Hoffwn eich croesawi chi yma heddiw, ar gyfer Cynhadledd Flynyddol y Gymdeithas  
Genedlaethol Awtistiaeth dwy fil a saith

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to welcome you here today to the National Autistic Society Annual Meeting 2007.

I am delighted to be delivering my third report as your Chair. It is particularly pleasing to be delivering this here in Cardiff as I feel it underlines the steps we are taking towards being a genuinely UK wide organisation.

I intend to use the next few minutes to give you an overview of the progress we have made since my last report to you and talk about our plans for this year and next.

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism. No-one else has our reach, our breadth of expertise, or the potential to transform so many lives. Yet when I stood before you last year I highlighted that as an organisation we were '*punching below our weight*' in terms of public profile and campaigning.

The Board have plans to build on this work over the coming months, to which I will return later.

Since I last addressed you we have seen a steady increase in both awareness of the NAS and of autism. I am pleased to say that we have built upon the rise in public awareness to achieve real change in public policy and service provision for autism. Last year I reported that we had launched the *make school make sense* campaign and outlined some of the initial successes from that campaign. These successes included ensuring all SENCOs had adequate training in autism and the development of a pack for teachers. We have continued to keep pressure on in relation to *make school make sense*, for example we produced reports on bullying and on transition issues, both of which achieved wide media exposure. As a direct result of the bullying report we are now providing advice to the Department for Children, Schools and Families on developing new guidance on bullying.

*make school make sense* was launched across all four nations. Here in Wales it took centre stage at last year's Eisteddfod with the Children's Minister, Jane Hutt AM and the deputy Children's Commissioner endorsing the campaign. We also took the message directly to the Assembly through an education reception last autumn and by giving oral evidence to the Assembly Education Committee as part of the review of Special Educational Needs in Wales. The campaign also formed the basis for our lobbying work around the Welsh elections. Our subsequent art competition reception in June attracted record numbers of Assembly Members for an NAS Cymru event, providing an opportunity to build relations with new Assembly Members. I am delighted that this has led to widespread awareness amongst Assembly Members of the campaign and its aims.

At a local level, teacher awareness packs have been distributed to every school in Wales and our bilingual DVD for teachers – downloadable free from our website – has proved very successful.

But *make school make sense* has only been one element of our influencing work. We have continued to make strides across the four nations of the United Kingdom in a number of areas. For example, in England significant progress has been made on welfare reform and mental health; in Scotland we have been able to influence the Adult Support and Protection Bill; and in Wales we have been working hard with the Cross Party Group to ensure autism has stayed on the Assembly agenda and to influence the Welsh Assembly Government Autistic Spectrum Disorder action plan.

Our influencing work is not just about policy though. It's also about how we drive up standards across autism services. We have over 45 years' experience of living with autism every day and we use that experience to help improve the work of others. In the year under report we trained over 120 professionals in diagnosis and assessment - increasing the access people have to early identification. This training is internationally recognised and we were delighted to train a group of practitioners from Denmark last year. We were also able to provide training to a number of professional groups that work with people with autism. This included teachers, police, museum staff, and care providers to name a few. In 06/07 we provided over 8000 days of training, nearly a 1000 days more than the previous year.

Another of our internationally recognised activities is autism accreditation. The NAS – through an arm's length body – provides quality assurance for over 300 organisations throughout the UK. The number of accredited services rose by nearly 20% in the year under consideration. We firmly believe that accreditation plays an important role in raising the standard of autism services and will be promoting this service even more in the coming years, while ensuring it maintains the independence from the NAS as a whole that is so vital to its credibility.

As a board of trustees we are very aware of the legacy handed down to us by the founders of this charity. The same drive and passion that led to the NAS being established in 1962 is still very much alive in your current board of trustees and the staff we employ. We never forget the reason we were founded, to provide support to those who were unable to access appropriate services; and we are painfully aware of just how many people are not receiving the support they should have the right to. That is why we continue to grow our services and support.

We were able to increase our school places so that we now provide over 430 places for school children. But importantly we have been expanding the way in which we support children through respite and outreach support. We increased the number of families we supported through respite support from our schools by over a third. We want to grow this service even more in future and have appointed a full time outreach co-ordinator to enable this to happen.

But we also recognise that, for many families, the biggest struggle is to get children into the appropriate school in the first place. We supported around 2000 people through our Advocacy for Education Service across the UK, including a number of people here in Wales – this support ranged from advice to full blown legal backing. Personally I find it a sad indictment of the education system that we have to provide this service at all, but we do. It's

a vital function and we are very grateful to the several firms of solicitors across the UK who provide their expertise pro bono to ensure its continued success.

Of course as we all know autism doesn't just affect children. Children with autism grow up to be adults with autism. Something often not understood by wider society.

For over 30 years we have provided residential homes and day services for adults. We continue to do that today, but increasingly we are providing more flexible approaches to supporting adults. At the heart of this approach are two core elements, taking a person-centred approach and creating local resource centres, developed around local needs. A subtler form of support than our traditional residential care and central support role.

All our adult services now have a person-centred planning champion and as a result we are developing more tailored services. We continue to provide residential services for over 250 adults but are now also supporting 144 adults through a range of supported living options – like Ty Nant, our purpose built scheme for 6 adults with autism, learning disabilities and challenging behaviour, just down the road in Newport, of which we are very proud. In addition we have 177 adults attending our day centres, who we do not support residentially.

To underpin the further growth of flexible locally tailored support we are opening resource centres. These will be developed in areas where there is real need for support and where we think we can provide that support on a financially secure basis. We do not want to open resource centres and then have to close them shortly afterwards. Pilots have been established in Manchester, Godalming, Weston Super Mare, Bristol and London.

In addition to these direct services, we are known for the high quality information and advice we provide to people. In the year under review we took 38,000 calls on our Autism Helpline. If you add to this over 2.5 million unique visitors to our website, over 1,500 calls to our parent to parent support line, and over 9,000 enquiries to our information services, you get a picture of the scale of support the NAS is providing.

I am particularly proud to be able to tell you about the support and advice we are able to provide to families through our *Befriending*, *Help!* and *EarlyBird* services. Altogether these services reached over 4,000 families.

Please, don't misunderstand me. I am of course proud of all we have achieved, but I and your Board of Trustees are acutely aware of how much further there is to go, how many people out there are not getting the support they require, how many people are let down by their local service providers, how many people struggle to get by day to day – how much more there is for the NAS to do.

Take the Autism Helpline for example. Yes, we helped nearly 40,000 people last year, but that is only just over 70% of those who tried to get through. Similarly we help hundreds of children and adults directly, but all too often our Helpline is taking calls from those who are getting no support at all. I know the scale of the challenge, for families as well as for the NAS, is massive; I for one will not be satisfied until we have seen a significant improvement in the support available to people.

It's for this reason I am glad to report that our fundraising efforts are beginning to show signs of working. Last year we finished behind target in this area, this year we are on target and

plan aggressive growth for next year. These vital funds will enable us to provide more support to more people and to campaign even more vigorously for change. I certainly hope you will support us in this effort. There is a virtuous circle between awareness raising, campaigning and fundraising, and we are consciously and urgently seeking to make a serious investment in this area.

Our members and Branches are central to everything we do, both because they support the NAS as a whole but also for the support they provide to each other at a local level. We increased membership by over 20% in the year under report and now have over 80 local branches – five of these in Wales. I feel this reflects the ever-stronger ethos of partnership that underpins the NAS. Through hosting *Partners in Autism*, we work with over 100 other autism organisations in the UK. We are also part of a number of alliances externally, including the Mental Health Alliance, the Every Disabled Child Matters campaign – its sister coalition – the Disabled Children Matter Wales campaign and the Association for Real Change (ARC). We continue to seek ways to work in partnership and have been particularly pleased here in Wales to work with Autism Cymru in running a series of consultation events to inform the Welsh autism action plan I referred to earlier.

So what does the future hold for the NAS? I began by referring to the trustees' ambitions to step up the campaigning and influencing work that we do. We have ambitious plans in this area and intend to invest more in raising awareness, in campaigning, and in promoting good autism practice. We want nothing short of a step change in awareness of the NAS and in the understanding of autism. To help achieve this, the Board has recently approved an increased investment in this area of work. We believe this will underpin a growth in our fundraising forming the virtuous circle of growing income and increased influence and awareness that I spoke of earlier.

We have begun this process this year with the development of our brand and the way we look. I know for a lot of people this can seem a strange thing for a charity to do. However, our research told us the way the NAS was seen by some was a real barrier to our future growth. We have introduced new colours and some core messages about autism and the NAS to our communications that we believe will help us stand out and signal that we are an open and approachable organisation. In addition here in Wales, in recognition of our commitment to Welsh language issues and developing our Welsh brand, we now have a bilingual NAS Cymru logo. We didn't want to spend huge amounts of charitable funds on this, so we have kept the name and shape of the logo, which means we can introduce the new look step by step, as materials need to be reprinted anyway – thereby minimising the costs.

That new approach has underpinned our recently launched *Think differently about autism* campaign, which aims initially to get the general public interested in autism by seeing the world through the eyes of those with the condition. As the campaign unfolds it will become focused on adults with autism and the three issues of:

- lack of information on numbers of adults with autism;
- lack of national and local leadership on autism; and
- the resultant lack of support for adults.

We plan to launch this second phase of the campaign early next year in all four nations. I hope you have all seen the supporting material and have signed up to support our campaign ([www.think-differently.org.uk](http://www.think-differently.org.uk)).

We also know that we need to underpin our influencing and awareness-raising with a bedrock of credibility. The NAS supports more people living with autism in more ways than any other charity; we need to use this experience to inform our communications and policy work. We have agreed a programme of work to strengthen our ability to evaluate what we currently do, and to develop new and innovative projects that we hope can help shape the future of autism support. Of course – running through this must be the voice of service users and their families; we plan to do even more to bring their voices into the Society.

This emphasis on campaigning and awareness-raising doesn't mean we won't be continuing to ensure the NAS provides excellent services to even more people. We have plans to continue the roll out of resource centres, including considering opening one here in Cardiff. We will continue to find new ways of supporting others, for example working with colleges, schools and city academies; and we will continue to grow our outreach services. But we can only hope to remain an authoritative voice if the 'bricks and mortar' services we provide are of high calibre. We therefore also intend to ensure our existing services are amongst the best, just one example of which is that we plan to modernise our adult service in Neath.

We recognise that this needs to be supported by us making the NAS more accessible and more supportive of you, the membership. The Board have at their last meeting agreed to invest even more in the regional support we provide. In part, this is because we have made significant savings by looking at how we organise ourselves centrally, but also we understand that to continue growing, requires us to develop even stronger partnerships at the local level – and we need to invest in these alliances.

The NAS is only as strong as its constituent parts. I must express my gratitude to all those others involved in ensuring that the NAS has had another successful year. I include of course our dedicated staff, led by our Chief Executive, Vernon Beauchamp; but also importantly, those volunteers who have given freely of their time and energy – fellow trustees and council members, and the parents, relatives and others who continue to come forward to serve the charity in a wide range of important roles. For example, those who work tirelessly as branch officers and treasurers, as befrienders and parent-to-parent supporters, as advocates or supporters of our service users, as advisers on national and local helplines, as fundraisers, and in many other ways. I pay tribute to them all.

On this occasion I must make special mention that, regrettably, this will be the last AGM attended by Vernon as our Chief Executive. He has undertaken that heavy burden for seven eventful and sometimes difficult years – and he has achieved something for the autism world that is exemplary, guiding and leading the charity with great skill. He has indicated that he plans to retire at the age of 65, which he attains next year. Consequently the Board is engaged in the process of recruiting a successor. There will be other opportunities to pay tribute more fully, but I could not pass up this opportunity to express my personal thanks for his tireless efforts.

I also pay tribute to Jane Asher, our President, whose efforts on our behalf are beyond value, and to our Royal Patron, HRH The Countess of Wessex, who is not just a figurehead, but who continues to take a keen personal interest in everything that we do, and finds time to support us in a number of ways.

In conclusion I hope you will join me in being proud of all our charity has achieved over the last year, but also join me in recognising how much further there is to go. The NAS is accelerating. You will see more evidence of that next year. Our campaigning capacity and expertise, and our local support, are gathering pace and momentum. We are at the end of our period of consolidation and making safe, and we are ready to make even greater progress than hitherto.

We all know Autism is a serious, lifelong and disabling condition; and, that without the right support, it can have a profound – sometimes devastating – effect on individuals and families. There are over 25,000 people in Wales with autism – that's 1 in 100. If you include families, autism touches the lives of around 100,000 people every day.

Despite this, autism is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. This means that many get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need.

*Together, we are going to change this.*

Thank you

Diolch

**Colin Barrow**  
**Chairman**  
**24 November 2007**