

THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY
2nd Floor, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London, EC2A 3NH

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Held on Saturday 30 November 2024
Via Video Conference

There were present: 45 Members

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The chair of the board of trustees, Dr Steve Ladyman, welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the agenda. He advised that copies of the presentations to be given during the meeting, together with the meeting minutes and a summary of the questions raised and responses given would be published on the NAS website.
- 1.2 Steve then invited the chief executive, Caroline Stevens, to highlight some of the key points from the year.

2. PRESENTATION FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

- 2.1 The Chief Executive, Caroline Stevens, gave a presentation describing the impact the NAS had made over the 2023 – 2024 year. She explained that by ‘impact’ she meant the difference we make to people’s lives, that being the reason we exist as a charity.
- 2.2 We track our impact against our ‘Vision to Reality’ strategy, delivering our vision of a society that works for autistic people. We are guided by three beliefs:
- To support all autistic individuals and their families to live a fulfilled life on their terms.
 - To influence and collaborate with others to improve standards and adjustments.
 - To transform society by building understanding, acceptance and respect for all autistic people.

We then develop a number of ambitions and specific projects and establish a set of measures to track our progress.

- 2.3 Caroline then described a wide range of achievements through the year, notwithstanding the very challenging economic and political background. She noted that it had been necessary to take some very difficult decisions to close a number of services but she emphasised that closure was absolutely a last resort when it had proved impossible to make a service viable for the future.

However, the achievements through the year included:

Under the first belief (Support):

- Over 1 million visits to our website for advice and guidance.
- Over 5,000 people called or emailed our charity for support.
- 670 autistic adults across the UK received expert support in their homes and communities so they could thrive.
- Our Diagnostic and Assessment Service dealt with over 4,000 enquiries and provided expert clinical consultations and enhanced diagnostic assessments for 264 people.

2.4 Caroline went on to demonstrate how the NAS is supporting autistic people across the UK with specific examples in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England.

2.5 Moving on to the second belief (Influence and Collaborate):

- Almost 450 children were taught in our autism-specific schools and our custom-built innovative Cullum Centres in mainstream schools.
- Over 100,000 professionals across education, health and social care received NAS training to improve their autism knowledge and practice and almost 1,000 more people joined our annual conference to develop their insight.
- We worked with over 100 organisations and businesses to embed better autism practice through our Accreditation and Inclusion Awards.

2.6 For the third belief (Transform Society):

- Almost 25,000 campaigners took action with us to support the 'TimeToAct' campaign, demanding crucial reforms to the Mental Health Act in England and Wales and asking their MP to find out more about our 'LetEveryAutisticChildLearn' campaign to fix the education system for autistic children.
- In Scotland, following our campaigning, the public consultation on the Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill included key proposals for mandatory training and a Commissioner for autistic people.
- In April 2023, we worked with local campaigners and successfully reversed the restricted criteria to get an autism diagnosis in Bristol.
- For the general election we launched our 'ChangeTheConversation' campaign which saw more than 800 autistic people share their campaigning experiences.
- With the new Government in place, we are currently campaigning on education, social care and mental health.

2.7 Fundraising supports everything we do and Caroline drew attention to the amazing achievements of our fundraisers and donors through a range of walks, runs, cycle rides, abseils and many other endeavours. She expressed her appreciation for everything that so many people have done and continue to do.

2.8 Finally, Caroline highlighted that this year has been just the start and there remains so much to do to create a society that truly works for autistic people, adding that we have the plans to do it!

3. PRESENTATION FROM THE CHAIR

3.1 Dr Steve Ladyman, the NAS Chair, thanked Caroline for her presentation and then went on to describe our plans for the current year, setting these out under the three beliefs that underpin our strategy.

3.2 Belief 1: Support

- We launched new advice pages on diagnosis, including a huge range of new resources.
- We began work on upgrading our Online Community platform.
- We have begun the construction of our new centre in Randalstown in Northern Ireland

We plan to:

- Continue with refurbishments in our adult services.
- Launch revamped areas of our website, including a new-look Autism Services Directory and a tool to help people find the right advice for them.
- Launch new advice pages on employment, including a huge range of new resources.
- Increase the capacity of our diagnosis and assessment service.
- Deliver our Embrace Autism programme in Scotland to a further 100 people.
- Develop a peer-support and volunteer strategy which includes branches.

3.3 Belief 2: Influence

In 2024-25, we:

- Will grow our work to upskill professionals and employers on their autism knowledge, skills and good practice.
- Have begun to publicise our new Inclusive Employer Award, encouraging employers to sign up.

And we plan to:

- Promote good practice case studies of inclusive employers.
- Increase delivery of employment training and consultancy.
- Research experiences of autistic people on public transport with funding from Motability.
- Launch and promote the Autism Friendly Award for businesses in Scotland.

3.4 Belief 3: Transform

In 2024-25, we:

- Had a garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, funded by Project Giving Back, to raise awareness of the autistic strategy of masking.
- Conducted research with autistic people and the public about public understanding and acceptance of autism, laying the foundations for a public awareness campaign in April 2025

And we plan to:

- Shift the focus of future World Autism Acceptance Weeks to World Autism Acceptance Month (from April 2025)
- Partner with other neurodiversity charities to pressure the Government to commission a new prevalence study.
- Launch a UK-wide campaign to tackle long autism diagnosis waits.
- Secure autistic people's rights in a new Mental Health Act.
- Launch a project focusing on diversity and barriers to support.
- Develop an autism knowledge strategy.
- Develop and relaunch our Autism Insight Panel.
- Continue to develop and empower our volunteer branches to build and grow support around our vision in their local communities.

3.5 Steve emphasised that to do all this the Society needs strong foundations and we are therefore planning to improve our membership experience through such things as members-only webinars and the development of a new on-line space for members to discuss issues and to share advice and support. We will also develop a suite of resources to help members to campaign and to change their local communities.

3.6 Finally, Steve thanked everyone for all that they have done and continue to do for the NAS.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES, REVISED ARTICLES OF ASSOCIATION AND INTRODUCTION OF NEW TRUSTEES

4.1 Steve Ladyman introduced this item explaining the purpose and nature of the Articles. All companies must have Articles and they set out the organisation's objectives and how it must be governed. However, things change over time and it's important to ensure that the Articles are kept up to date. Proposed revisions that members were asked to vote on covered:

- i. Updates to terminology to reflect current preferred usage when describing autism.
- ii. To take account of the discontinuation of the National Forum. This was an elected body of 42 members whose purpose was to provide feedback to trustees and management on current issues and topics. Typically, it met face to face twice a year. However, the purpose of the National Forum had effectively been superseded by the ability to consult with members online, more extensively and at less cost. It had become difficult to recruit members to the Forum and many found it difficult to travel for an all-day meeting with some needing overnight accommodation.

- iii. The term of office for a trustee is currently set at 4 years. A trustee may stand for a second term and if he or she chairs a committee of the board then they are eligible to serve a third term, making 12 years in total. This runs contrary to the Charity Code of Governance which recommends that 9 years should be the maximum in order to ensure that trustees do not become stale and to bring in fresh ideas and energy. The revised Articles therefore change the standard term of office from 4 years to 3.

- 4.2 Three trustees had been appointed during the year: Alastair Gilmartin Smith, Julian Scholefield and Rachel Bowden. Of these, Alastair was present and introduced himself, describing his background and motivation to join the board, saying that he is father to an autistic daughter. By profession Alastair is an accountant and he chairs the board's Finance Committee.

- 4.3 Julian and Rachel being unavailable, Steve described their qualifications and experience. Julian is an education professional with extensive experience of autism education, both as a teacher and senior manager. Currently he is the chief executive of a multi academy trust responsible for several special needs schools. He is therefore very well placed to give support and guidance to our own schools as chair of the Schools Governance Committee.

- 4.4 Rachel chairs the Audit and Risk Committee. She has extensive experience of internal audit work, including at board level, in both the charity and commercial sectors and is passionate about the work of the NAS.

- 4.5 Steve added that we now have a very experienced board but we are aiming to recruit two further trustees in the new year, at least one of whom should have a declared diagnosis of autism. He reminded members that all trustees are unpaid volunteers and thanked them for their dedication.

- 4.6 The meeting would be asked to vote to agree to the minutes from the 2003 AGM and Steve reminded everyone that they should only vote on this resolution if they actually attended the 2023 meeting.

5. VOTING

- 5.1 Members were then asked to vote, using the link that had been emailed to them, to agree the 2023 AGM minutes and to approve the revised Articles.

- 5.2 Later in the meeting the results were announced and the chair confirmed that both the motions had been carried: 100% voting in favour for the minutes and 97.5% for the updated Articles.

6. FINANCE PRESENTATION

- 6.1 As chair of the Finance Committee, Alastair Gilmartin Smith gave a presentation covering the financial performance for the year ended 31st March 2024. He advised that the full report and accounts are available on the NAS website and also at Companies House.

- 6.2 Introducing this item, Alastair said there had been real challenges through the year. Most of the charity's income is derived from local authorities and the NHS for the provision of education and adult social care but as was well known, these organisations are operating under extremely tight budgets. Nevertheless, a great deal of work had been done to increase the fees charged while also reducing our central overheads. Nonetheless, it had proved impossible to turn around a few services which, with great reluctance, had had to be closed.
- 6.3 Income grew 2.5% and expenditure decreased by 0.7%. As a result, the deficit for the year was £752k, compared to £3.7m in the prior year. The deficit includes non-recurring restructuring costs of £782k. The improvement in performance was due mainly to Adult Services negotiating fee uplifts of £4m while being able to hold costs broadly flat, supported by lower spend on agency staff.
- 6.4 Looking at the balance sheet, free reserves are £6m, down from £7.2m the previous year. Cash decreased over the year by £3.3m, the main reason being two annual payments (£1.8m in total) made to the Brent Local Government Pension Scheme to reduce our liability. In addition, actuarial factors in the most recent valuation of the Brent Pension Scheme have further reduced the deficit which now stands at £1.8m (compared to £4m at 31 March 2023).
- 6.5 Notwithstanding these details, Alastair described the balance sheet as remaining strong with robust levels of cash and reserves, ensuring that the NAS continues to be a going concern.
- 6.6 Alastair described the structure of the organisation with three directorates:
- National Programmes, delivering advice, support, help, training, consultancy and diagnosis.
 - Adult Services: residential care, supported living, day centres and outreach.
 - Education Services: NAS independent schools and the Cullum Centres in mainstream schools

The financial performance of each directorate is monitored and assessed.

Looking forward, the charity has a robust three-year plan to drive financial stability over the foreseeable future, while meeting the strategic objectives of the three directorates.

- 6.7 That said, there are significant challenges with income constrained by our reliance on our funders – primarily local authorities – which have cash constraints and limited budgets. Negotiating fee uplifts in line with cost inflation remains a constant challenge.

- 6.8 Our costs have been stabilising through the alignment of staffing levels with the needs of the charity, reducing agency spend. However, we continue to work on our support costs which are still considered to be high.
- 6.9 The budget announcements and changes to NI in particular, add £3.6m to our annual payroll. This will need to be recovered from increased fees.
- 6.10 We have considerable capital requirements, including a rebuild of the Robert Ogden School where maintenance of the current structures is no longer feasible.
- 6.11 Specific actions we are taking include:
- National Programmes investment – significant development of brand and contact databases to increase charitable income.
 - Adult Services growth strategy – offset the pressure on fees by expanding into more specialised care with better margins.
 - The consolidation of support functions into a Corporate Services Directorate to drive efficiency, supported by an independent benchmarking review to ensure that our overheads are in line with or better than comparable organisations.
 - The disposal of surplus assets to help fund the rebuild of Robert Ogden School.
- 6.12 Summarising, Alastair said that 2023-24 had been a transitional year with improved financial performance and a clear path to greater financial sustainability. However, recent announcements in the Budget create further challenges.
- Cash remains strong, as does the balance sheet overall.
 - The reduction in the pension liability reduces the risk to long-term liquidity.
 - However, our charity needs to continue to focus on cost reduction and managing the portfolio of services to ensure adequate contribution to cover a reasonable level of central support costs.
- 6.13 The chair thanked Alastair for his presentation, noting that we face challenges but have a strong base to work from.

7. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

- 7.1 A number of questions had been submitted ahead of the meeting and others were raised during the meeting. The chair advised that as many as possible would be answered during the meeting but as there was a time limit, any

outstanding questions when the meeting closed would be responded to in writing and all questions and answers would be published on the website.

Paul Robinson, Acting Chief Operating Officer, joined the panel in order to respond to any questions specifically around finance.

7.2 *A member asked whether the Articles should be amended so as to require a certain number or proportion of trustees to be openly autistic.*

The board requires a range of experience and expertise. When we recruit to the board we are generally looking for people who can fill any perceived gaps in the board's skills base at that time, for instance this may be social care experience, or financial management experience.

We also recognise that it's important that our trustees have first-hand knowledge and experience of autism, whether that's through an autistic family member, a professional role working with autistic people or because they themselves have an autism diagnosis. Our rules state at least 50% of our trustees must have such a connection. At this time, more than 50% of our trustees have a family connection to autism.

In addition, we have developed and are implementing a number of initiatives we hope will enable us to recruit and create a more diverse organisation, including more autistic people. These initiatives have been driven by our organisational strategy, Vision to Reality 2023-26 which outlines our focus and priorities for the next two years. One of the Foundations is "Making commitments to become a more ethnically diverse and inclusive workplace."

We have launched a programme called 'Pioneer', led by one of our autistic colleagues specifically to focus on this. Our Executive Board and Trustees have put their full weight behind this programme and we look forward to reporting back on its progress this time next year.

7.3 *Ahead of the meeting a member asked that each trustee, during the meeting, set out their personal objectives and areas of focus and to summarise their personal achievements in the year.*

Each of our trustees is listed on our website with a short biography.

When an applicant for a trustee role applies, he or she is asked to provide a covering letter which sets out why they want to take on the role. This enables the appointments panel to understand their connection and experience with autism and their motivation for becoming a trustee. The subsequent interview can then explore this aspect further.

Members then have an opportunity to consider their experience and the contribution they can make to our charity at the AGM.

It's important that our trustees have first-hand knowledge and experience of autism, whether that's through an autistic family member, a professional role

working with autistic people or because they themselves have an autism diagnosis. Our rules state at least 50% of trustees must have a family connection and at this time significantly more than 50% of our trustees do so.

7.4 *What were the targets for the 'email your MP' campaign and were these achieved?*

"Email your MP" wasn't a campaign specifically, it was a single email subject for which no specific targets were met.

7.5 *Do we have plans to invite Kemi Badenoch to the meeting or to some other event to discuss her views on autism.*

Our charity issued a public response to the views of Kemi Badenoch and some of the comments featured in the 'Conservatism in Crisis' pamphlet. The comment is available to read in the News section of our website and on our X channel, and was also issued to media outlets. See: www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/the-national-autistic-society-has-responded-to-kem .

We regularly runs Understanding Autism sessions for parliamentarians and we invite all MPs. We are running two sessions in November and will be running more in 2025.

7.6 *How many undiagnosed adults born before the 1990's has the NAS been involved in positively diagnosing in the past year?*

Our National Diagnostic Centre at the Lorna Wing Centre was set up by Drs Lorna Wing and Judith Gould in 1991 and continues to provide an exceptionally high standard of care and support to those seeking an assessment for autism. The centre assesses both autistic adults and children

We don't have the number of confirmed diagnoses for adults since the Centre began but we will follow up and see if this information is available. It may be of interest to you to know that in 2026 we plan to expand our services and hope to increase the number of assessments that take place.

7.7 *Why will the membership fees for members be changing and going up for next year in 2025?*

Will there be more chances for autistic adults to get involved with the National Autistic Society in 2025 ie by having their say on what works for autistic adults and what can be better and will we get chances to speak up about our experiences of autism at a big event because that usually reaches out to lots of people? Will we get chances to take part in campaigns and this time a chance to have our stories in next year's reports or on the websites? Will there be any events autistic adults can go to?

Thank you, good questions. We raised the price of membership by £2 this year, though this change came in in September, so members who have yet to pay their annual subscription have not felt this change yet.

This was not a quick decision - the driving force behind the change is rising costs, predominantly in producing and sending Your Autism magazine to our thousands of members.

As well as this, we have been working hard on improving the membership package, for example, by introducing a new series of exclusive webinars for members. Some of you might have joined the first webinar in August, which featured insight from the designers of our RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden.

With all this in mind, we need to make sure our costs are covered while we continue to provide all this, but we also don't want to alienate our members – an audience that is very important to the charity.

Regarding the other element of your question.

We involve autistic people in all our campaigns. For instance, often we have campaign focus groups or steering groups made up of autistic people. We put callouts for people to join these each time so people can register their interest for them. We ran focus groups just two weeks ago for a campaign we are launching in April that focuses on changing public understanding of autism.

We also have a Young Ambassadors group who direct their own campaigns, such as one happening right now relating to the health care of autistic people.

We have a magazine called Spectrum, by and for autistic people – you can find information on our website about that <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-spectrum>. We're continually gathering the stories from autistic people for our Stories from the Spectrum – also on our website.

Finally, in relation to our events, we do endeavour to ensure we have autistic speakers at each – see for instance the panel for our upcoming Professionals Conference.

- 7.8 *Why can't the minutes, updated articles of association, and annual report and accounts be shared before the meeting? Does the charity not wish to encourage informed debate at its AGMs?*

This information is shared with everyone before the meeting – it is all on the website but I appreciate your feedback and will let the team know that we need to find ways to make this clearer in future.

- 7.9 *Would it Be possible to Send out REMINDERS one month before Membership DIRECT DEBIT is due for those of us who Pay by Direct Debit?? Because i am Autistic Adult and it Came as a shock when you Take My Member DD without Reminding me in Advance. Can You Give Advance Notice please/ Reminders??*

We are so sorry to hear that the recent payment of your membership subscription was a surprise to you. We do send monthly reminders to all direct

debit payers but I am sorry to hear this has not reached you. I'll ask the team to review this and get back to you personally to see what can be done.

7.10 *How do I Refer myself for ADULT SERVICES from NAS, I am the parent of AUTISTIC Young ADULT And OUR Local Authority Are not meeting my social needs and most of my personal care needs are not met. How do I ACCESS NAS Adult Services please??*

Thank you for your question. Referrals to our services are made by the NHS or Local Authorities. I suggest you speak to either your GP or contacts in your local social services first.

We have an enquiry form for service referrals. I should note though that all referrals to our adult services should come from the budget holder or broker who will be funding the provision. The form is on our website at: www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/adult-residential-services/enquiry

7.11 *How many trustees and staff are autistic?*

It is not mandatory for anyone to declare whether they are autistic or not and therefore we cannot give this information. We have recently taken steps to ask colleagues to voluntarily update their personal information and we will use this to improve our understanding of our workforce profile and how we improve our inclusive approach to employment and employee experience.

Please see the earlier answer regarding how trustees are selected and how we look for a connection to autism. It is for trustees to decide if and how to share their personal connections and we would never mandate that anyone does this.

As we said in the earlier answer, we also recognise that it's important that our trustees have first-hand knowledge and experience of autism, whether that's through an autistic family member, a professional role working with autistic people or because they themselves have an autism diagnosis. Our rules state at least 50% of our trustees must have such a connection. At this time, more than 50% of our trustees have a family connection to autism.

We are well aware of the challenges autistic people face in getting and keeping jobs and tackling this is a key part of our Vision to Reality 2023-26 strategy.

We have developed and are implementing a number of initiatives we hope will enable us to recruit and create a more diverse organisation, including more autistic people. We have a programme called Pioneer which will achieve the goal in our organisational strategy to be a better employer of autistic people. The project will seek to obtain the Autism Inclusive Employer Award and is being delivered alongside and with the engagement of autistic colleagues.

All our staff receive training in autism when they join the charity, and we are also Level 2 Disability Confident employers which ensures we take steps to encourage and support people with disabilities, including autism to apply for our roles and to interview disabled applicants who meet the minimum essential criteria for the role. We also make reasonable adjustments for candidates who request them. Where practicable, we will include an autistic colleague on the interview panel.

7.12 *Belief 1 - 5000 calls & emails to ask for support. Would you expect more than 5000 people to reach out to the NAS? Is there enough publicity?*

We try to ensure as many people as possible are able to find their answers directly via our website. We have millions of people who visit our website each year to use this. We also have a very active online community where people reach out.

We are continuing to grow our online information and resources. You may have seen recently we did a big overhaul of all our information on diagnosis which we publicised heavily on our website, social media and via advertising. Next, we're doing the same for all our information and resources on employment.

In 2026, we also plan to add more advice topics, and also more online tools to help people find this advice more easily as well as routes for them to get more specific support where their questions aren't answered by our online information.

7.13 *Online Community Platform & Autism Services Directory. What is the target date for completion?*

The online community platform upgraded happened in the last two weeks and we are continuing to work on it to sort out some initial glitches which is often the case with new technology. We plan to keep enhancing it. It is very well used and loved by those who use it. I encourage you to visit it.

The Autism Service Directory has also had a revamp of the technology which ensures those adding services now have more control of their listing and are asked to check their listing every year so we are confident they are up to date. We are very soon to publish the other side of the directory - the side you see as a user. That is due early December.

Over the year ahead we will be reaching out to more organisations to add themselves to the directory so it grows and continues to be incredibly useful.

7.14 *How is the sale of the City Road offices progressing?*

The former head office site has been on the market for some two years but during that time the market for office space has been depressed. We have changed our agent and have applied for outline change of planning consent for the site to be developed for residential use and the property will be placed

back on the market in the Spring. It should be noted that when it does sell the proceeds will be reinvested in projects such as the rebuild of Robert Ogden School.

- 7.15 *Will there still be a chance to take part in fundraising if there's a problem with money will we still get a medal and certificate for autism challenges if money tighter?*

Thank you so much for this question. There will always be the chance to take part in fundraising for the National Autistic Society! And we are so very grateful to our supporters for doing so. We really could not do the work we do without the kindness of our donors and fundraisers.

For many of our fundraising challenges, we are delighted to be able to offer medals and certificates to participants. We do this to reward the hard work of our fundraisers but also to incentivise fundraising. We have no plans to stop offering this kind of incentive for a number of our fundraising events and challenges, though we will continue to plan all fundraising activity in light of all costs and other factors driving income and expenditure.

So – we do not expect to have to stop offering medals and certificates in the near future, but we will continue to budget for all fundraising expenditure to enable fundraisers to raise as much as possible, while keeping costs as low as we can.

- 7.16 *I have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I do peer support at Birmingham Mind although I am a service user there. I did a bit of research and there is not a lot of support for people diagnosed with ASD in Birmingham and I was just wondering if there was anything I could do to set up some support groups in Birmingham in line with our visions and beliefs?*

Thank you for your question; please contact our branches team as they may be able to advise you on this or put you in touch with others in your area.

You can have a look at our branches page online too as there may be one close to you already: www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/branches

- 7.17 *Steve Ladyman referred to the “new Mental Health Act” Do you mean the Mental Health Bill 2025 introduced in the House of Lords on 6 November 2024?*

Yes that’s correct.

- 7.18 *Should we have received some documents ahead of the AGM? My “vote” email only had 2 things on it, and it stated that if I had not attended the 2023 AGM that I should abstain. Should there have been some papers shared ahead of the AGM? SL New Trustees for 2025 Publicise to all members in advance?*

This information is shared with everyone before the meeting – it is all on the website but I appreciate your feedback and will let the team know that we need to find ways to make this clearer in future.

7.19 *Which NAS services have been closed in 2023 / 2024?*

This information is in our Annual report which you can find here: <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/who-we-are/annual-reports>

7.20 *Under Belief 2 Caroline Stevens said we worked with 100,000 professionals but only 5000 people with autism. Is this consistent?*

The 5000 referred to people who emailed or called us last year, and does not refer to the only autistic people who have engaged with us. Many thousands more use our services and are among the millions of people each year that visit our website, use our online community, are members, and attend our schools and our services.

7.21 *Is there a list of the 100+ organisations?*

All these organisations will be included in our Autism Services Directory with the relevant accreditation logo when the new edition of the Directory launches <https://www.autism.org.uk/autism-services-directory>

7.22 *Are they publicising their support of employees with autism?*

This is down to individual organisations to decide but is something we would encourage.

7.23 *CS Belief 3 Contact your MP. 25,000 responses. How many did you expect before you started? Any response from any MPs? How many are needed to achieve anything?*

We use a variety of different tactics to influence government policy. Sometimes we set up campaigner actions giving people the facility to email their MP with a message. This is sent from the individual and so we do not receive any reply from the MP, as it is correspondence between the campaigner and their MP. Although it is out of our control, most MPs will prioritise responding to their constituents. Sometimes people share their responses with us. However, this is only one tactic and what our Policy and Campaigns team work on is developing what asks we can put on MPs, for example, through:

- Writing letters to the relevant minister
- Speaking in debates
- Asking questions in Parliament
- Meeting with constituents
- Meeting with ministers
- Attending an event to learn more about an issue.

Our campaigning goals are achieved through a mix of all these things, alongside direct engagement with civil servants. We don't set numerical targets for our campaigner actions and it depends on the scale of the issue what response we get from our campaigners. However, if an action attracts a lot of campaigners, we will often reference large numbers, as it helps highlight the importance of an issue.

7.24 *Which ministers has Caroline Stevens met with?*

As Chief Executive of the National Autistic Society, Caroline Stevens meets with a variety of senior and high-profile stakeholders, including ministers. Which ministers she meets with will depend on the issue. Key ministerial relationships for the National Autistic Society include the Minister for Social Care, who oversees the national autism strategy, and the Minister for Disabled People and Social Security.

7.25 *Is there a danger that the message is lost in amongst other topical issues such as Assisted Dying?*

We are unsure as to what this question refers

7.26 *People with autism locked up. Close to your heart. What actions have you and the NAS taken to publicise and ask for this scandal to end?*

It is not quite clear if this question relates to autistic people in prison or in inpatient mental health hospitals. We will provide more information about both:

Prisons: Over a number of years our Autism Accreditation Team developed standards and rolled out a programme of accreditation for prisons. This was important as we knew that autistic people in prison were often having worse experiences than their non-autistic peers, due to poor understanding and support. We continue to offer this accreditation to prisons willing to do the work to achieve the status.

We are also commissioned by HM Prison and Probation Service to provide a neurodiversity probation advice service for neurodivergent people on probation. This service works with Probation Professionals to adapt their practice and also directly supports neurodivergent people.

Inpatient mental health hospitals: The latest monthly Assuring Transformation NHS Digital data shows that in October 2024:

- In total 2,050 autistic people and people with a learning disability are in inpatient mental health hospitals in England
- 1,410 (69%) of these people are autistic
- There are 215 under 18s in inpatient units that are autistic or have a learning disability. Of these, 95% are autistic.

We are very clear: this is a scandal and it has to end. It is widely recognised that for most autistic people, care in an inpatient unit is rarely helpful – in fact, it can be deeply damaging.

The average length of stay is around 4.9 years and we continue to hear alarming cases of overmedication, seclusion and unnecessary restraint. The overwhelming majority (92%) of autistic people and people with a learning disability who are detained in hospital are put there using the Mental Health Act 1983. We and hundreds of thousands of campaigners have been calling for changes to mental health law for years, so it respects autistic people's rights.

In June 2022, the former government published a draft bill to reform the Mental Health Act which could stop people being sectioned just because they're autistic and make it easier for autistic people in hospitals to leave. This was a big step forward, but delays in bringing the Bill to Parliament meant it was not passed into law.

However, after including the Bill in this year's King's Speech, the new Government has now introduced the Mental Health Bill to Parliament. The First Reading of the Bill was held last month in the House of Lords, and it will now go through the Parliamentary process where it can be scrutinized and strengthened.

We are working hard and meeting with parliamentarians from all parties and government officials to make sure this Bill is as strong as possible and comes with the funding that is needed to make sure autistic people can get mental health support in their community when they need it.

7.27 What is the NAS actively doing (or planning to do) to minimise its energy consumption.

National Autistic Society initiatives outlined in our Annual report include:

LED lighting: Whenever feasible, contractors and staff are encouraged to replace outdated, inefficient lighting with LED alternatives as part of regular maintenance, especially when existing lamps reach the end of their lifespan.

Electric vehicle introductions: We have begun to electrify our fleet. While the impact has been minimal this year, we are committed to significantly expanding this initiative in the future.